

**Theatre and *Impegno*:**  
**Commitment, Struggle and Resistance on the Italian Stage**

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the development of Italian political theatre between 1968 and 2010. It analyses the relationship between political theatre during the 1970s and politically engaged practice in the following decades in terms of continuity rather than rupture, thereby challenging recent theatre historiography and criticism which interpreted the two periods as diametrically opposite: one characterised by profound political engagement and the other by a widespread retreat from the political (*riflusso*).

The analysis of the case studies is grounded on a rigorous contextual approach which places theatre practice in relation to its social and cultural context. Chapter One reviews the current debate on theatre and politics, reassessing the terms of its discourse and evaluating their potential and shortcomings. Chapter Two introduces two examples of engagement before 1968, namely the birth of *teatri stabili* and the linguistic research of the theatrical neo-avant-garde. Chapters Three, Four, and Five are dedicated to the analysis of the case studies. They are structured as a comparative analysis of significant examples of politically engaged theatre practice between 1968 and 2010 and include the work of Dario Fo, Marco Baliani, Marco Paolini, Giuliano Scabia, Franca Rame, Laura Curino, and Compagnia della Fortezza.

The analysis highlights how Italian practitioners moved beyond modernist forms of political performance and restructured their political and aesthetic strategies in response to changing political, economic, and cultural contexts. The findings point to an original approach to political engagement on stage which articulates itself around two main elements: on the one hand the interconnectedness of the ethical and the political, and on the other an understanding of political resistance no longer as the fight for a working-class cultural hegemony but rather at the creation of a post-hegemonic cultural landscape open to multiplicity and difference.

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# Introduction

In this thesis, I analyse the development of Italian political theatre between 1968 and 2010. I focus on three strands of politically engaged theatre the origin of which can be traced back to social movements in Italy in 1968. I shall focus on three of these movements: the first one is the extra-parliamentary Left, which includes a significant part of the workers and the students movement; the second is the anti-authoritarian movement that contested and attempted to reform some of Italy's public institutions, such as the asylum, the prison, the school, and the university; the third is the feminist movement, which openly challenged the boundaries of political discourse. Each one of these movements had its moment of greatest visibility during the 1970s and transformed in the following decades. I will analyse how political theatre changed in response to the movements' priorities and approaches to struggle, and how the transformations set in motion during the 1970s developed in the subsequent decades.

This thesis aims to answer a precise set of questions. What is the relationship between the social movements from the 1970s and the development of politically engaged theatre in Italy? How did political theatre change after the end of mass mobilisation? What aesthetic and political strategies were subsequently retained, modified or abandoned?

The relationship between theatre and politics evolved through time and articulated itself differently according to social and economic circumstances. This relationship has often been articulated according to a deep-seated binary which opposes a period rich of politically engaged theatre, between 1968 and the end of the 1970s, to



a prolonged moment of crisis in which not only its tools and strategies but political theatre itself seemed to be an inadequate and outmoded type of performance (Mango, 2012; Ponte di Pino, 2003 and 2010; Palazzi, 2003: 19). In this thesis, I question this narrative and I look at political theatre in Italy not in terms of crisis, but rather in terms of transformation and development. I shall argue that Italian theatre responded to the social movements' revolutionary approach to politics by incorporating the new political concerns into its practice and by modifying its aesthetics and production patterns. I will also argue that some of the new approaches to political theatre developed along with the social movements' struggles are still visible in the practice of the subsequent decades up to the late 1990s and early 2000s.

My choice of periodization is dictated by my central argument. The years going from the students' uprising in 1968 to the end of the 1970s are among the most problematic and contradictory in Italy's recent history. John Foot argues that "Italy had a 'long May' [...] with no one insurrectionary moment, but a prolonged series of struggles, debates and movements which lasted for over a decade" (Foot, 2010: 105). During this period, the country went through a rapid cultural modernisation while the political landscape saw mass mobilisations on several fronts, most notably by students, factory workers, and feminists. Although Italian social movements were not a unitary front, they shared few key elements that allow us to look at them as one movement, as one generational shift. Firstly, they all shared a total challenge to hierarchy and authority, and they all rejected authoritarianism and oppression within human relationships, both in the private and in the public sphere. Secondly, great part of the social movements had in common a radical questioning of capitalism and liberal democracy and a political practice that expressed itself outside of the sites,

temporalities, and dynamics of liberal democracy's institutions. This shift naturally invested theatrical culture, and the theatre actively endorsed and fuelled radical political practices.

The decades that followed have been interpreted by a great part of Italian culture as years of cultural crisis and political disengagement. The last thirty years, and especially the 1980s, have been inserted in a descending parable, a narrative characterised by crisis and decline. The main cultural narrative of the 1980s is that of *riflusso*, a word that means 'ebb tide', and refers to a perceived recoil from active political engagement. Historian Paul Ginsborg defined *riflusso* as "the great retreat into private life, the abandonment of collective action, the painful coming to terms with failure" (Ginsborg, 1990: 383). As early as 1980, the new decade had been heralded as 'the triumph of the private' (Galli della Loggia et al., 1980), a period characterised by a shift from collective action to the re-emergence of the individual and her needs (Crainz, 2003: 555-561). Several assumptions inform this narrative. One of them is present in Ginsborg's definition: the notion that the end of mass mobilisation can only be interpreted as the movement's failure. Ginsborg's mentioning of a "coming to terms with failure" also implies that the *riflusso* narrative<sup>1</sup> has been developed by the same generation that lived the 1970s and did not take into account the perspective of the generations that followed. My concerns with Italian culture's overreliance on the concept of *riflusso* are essentially two. Firstly, the idea of *riflusso* tends to flatten complexity upon the image of an apathetic country

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<sup>1</sup> From the perspective of Italian intellectuals, Pierpaolo Antonello argues that the image of inexorable decay depicted by intellectual elites can be ascribed to a prejudice towards theories of postmodernity and to a widespread refusal to recognise postmodernity's political potential (Antonello, 2012: 30).

that abruptly dropped political commitment to embrace nihilism and consumerism.

Secondly, reducing the period to a moment of *riflusso* can prevent us from recognising forms of engagement other than those we inherited from the 1970s social movements.

This thesis' primary concern is with Italian political theatre and its transformations. I will leave a more thorough analysis of the literature on the topic to Chapter One.

However, before we proceed further, it is worth clarifying what I mean by 'political theatre'. Although all theatre, like all cultural practices, has political implications and can, therefore, be analysed from a political perspective, I understand a theatre production or practice to be actively political if it questions or challenges power structures within social arrangements, discourse and culture, and within artistic practices, structures, and institutions. This questioning of power structures is usually articulated as reflection, critique, or as proposal of an alternative model. This definition informs my choice of case studies and my analysis.

In terms of methodological approaches, I look at theatre in relation to ideology rather than to direct political confrontation. That is to say, I assess the political implications of a practice/production not only against specific issues or a specific political agenda but also, and most importantly, against the ideological underpinning of political confrontation. Consequently, my analysis does not aim at assessing the efficacy of a certain piece or practice. Rather, I analyse theatre's relationship to the political and cultural landscape in which it develops. In doing so, I soon realised that theory of political theatre alone cannot account for my case studies' political aspects. Theories of political theatre have been a constant point of reference throughout my research; however, by relying only on theoretical frameworks, I risked forcing the analysis and superimposing theory upon the material. I believe that if we separate the theatre

from its specific ideological horizon we would be in danger of falling into substantial epistemic incoherencies. As Baz Kershaw put it, when it comes to tackling the relationship between theatre and the political, research should

consider performance as a cultural construct and as a means of cultural production. It also follows that particular performances, as far as possible, have to be seen in their full cultural milieu: in relation to aesthetic movements of which they are a part; in relation to the institutional structures of the arts; in relation to the cultural formations which they inhabit (1992: 5-6).

In this thesis, I approach theatre as a set of practices and cultural products that acquire meaning only in relation to one another. Rather than filtering the thesis through one particular theoretical framework, I look at the theatre as a site of production of cultural meaning inserted within a particular cultural landscape.

My methodological approach is indebted to cultural studies and allows me to look at cultural objects, including theatre productions and theatre's creative practices, as social practices that are not transparent or neutral, but inextricably implicated in social conflict. The political question also required from me an effort to think beyond the paradigms of a single discipline. Yet, as Graziella Parati argued, although a cultural studies perspective requires a multidisciplinary approach and the researcher's openness to different types of discourse, "the work done in individual disciplines cannot be discounted" (Parati, 2012: x). This thesis is firmly rooted in theatre studies and makes use of some of the tools of theatre studies, such as close textual and performance analysis on primary sources. My primary sources include scripts, videos, and documentation material. The analysis is supported by secondary

sources that include interviews, reviews, and research published primarily in Italian and English. In order to place the practices in relation to their political and cultural context, I draw upon publications in contemporary Italian history, oral history, cultural studies, and contemporary philosophy. A substantial part of my primary and secondary sources is in Italian: all translations from Italian are my own unless otherwise stated.

### **Structure and Rationale**

This thesis develops a comparative analysis of political theatre during the 1970s and politically engaged theatre in the following three decades. I divided my analysis into five chapters.

Chapter One provides a review of the existing literature on theatre and politics and political theatre. The first section looks at the international debate and pays particular attention to the United Kingdom and the United States. In this body of literature, I identify three main strands of practice and critical enquiry. The first one refers to political theatre based upon a Marxist ideological framework. This type of theatre, which developed during the interwar period but arrived in Italy only after the fall of the fascist regime, bridged the avant-garde's formal research with an overt allegiance to the working class and its struggle. The second strand starts from the questioning of orthodox Marxism developed in the post-war years and then moves on to review the approaches to political theatre developed during the 1960s along emerging political movements in Europe and in the US. In particular, the multiplication of political perspectives beyond class brought about by the rise of identity-based civil rights movements reconfigured the allegiance between the theatre and left-wing politics. Within this shift, radical theatre embarked on a

thorough questioning of its language and its production structures. The third strand revolves around the challenges and opportunities posed to politically engaged theatre by theories of postmodernity, which offered a set of tools to debunk hegemonic discourses and grand narratives but rejected the overarching teleological narratives typical of emancipative models. I selected these three strands over other approaches to political theatre because my case studies operate at the intersection between these three positions, at times getting closer to one or the other, but always within this triangle. For instance, I did not include one of the most articulate philosophical approaches to art's political potential (and indeed one of the most influential among theatre scholars in English-speaking countries): the one developed by Jacques Rancière (2006; 2010; 2011). Rancière's vision of political art's function as 'dissensus', as disruption in the 'distribution of the sensible', has great potential for our field; yet, as Janelle Reinelt pointed out, in Rancière "the distribution of the sensible cannot be modified or improved; it can only be ruptured so that a new possibility can appear" (2015: 246). Even though elements of Rancière's 'dissensus' are recognisable in my case studies, I believe that these practices go beyond disruptive strategies to include collective action and even utopian discourse. Identity politics relative to culture and race, postcolonial perspectives, and LGBT and queer politics have also been left out of this thesis simply because they were not part of the Italian social movements' main concerns. Italy experienced a considerable influx of immigrants only since the 1980s and cultural production tackling race, migration, and multiculturalism is a more recent phenomenon. In a similar vein, LGBT and queer politics came to the forefront of Italian cultural debate only during the 1980s; as far as postcolonial analysis is concerned, Italy's colonial past remained a blind spot in

the country's memory and consciousness for decades, and only very recently it emerged in public discourse (Mellino: 2006).

The second section of Chapter One zooms in to look at the political theatre debate in Italy, highlighting its peculiarities and its points of contact with the international debate. Here, I analyse how the Italian literature on the topic is characterised by a marked caesura; where the literature published up until 1980 still engages with the term political theatre, with its history and legacy, the most significant publications in the following three decades reluctantly refer to political theatre and when they do so, it is to declare it obsolete and inadequate both as a practice and critical category. Preference has been given, especially during the nineties, to another category, that of *teatro civile* (civil or civic theatre). In this section, I will argue that *teatro civile's* eagerness to dismiss the vocabulary of the political led the Italian debate to neglect contemporary theatre's ability to engage with deep-seated power relationships in public and private life. This section also highlights the fact that scholarship so far has not looked at the continuities and developments between 1970s militant theatre and the politically engaged theatre of the following decades. This is precisely the gap in the literature this thesis intends to fill.

The third section of Chapter One will introduce the concept that constitutes one of the kernels of this work, that of *impegno* (translated as commitment or engagement). *Impegno* is a fundamental category in Italian post-war culture and it traditionally refers to the relationship between politics and intellectual production. Usually, it is an author-centric concept strictly linked to written culture – literature and journalism especially. In recent years, however, Italian studies in Britain (Burns, 2001; Antonello and Mussnug, 2009; O'Leary, 2007) rearticulated the concept to include a wider range of practices and media. The concept is not usually applied to theatre (a

notable exception is Antonello [2009]), yet I argue that the debate on *impegno* can deepen our knowledge of artistic practice's role in ideological production and political struggle.

Chapter Two looks at forms of politically engaged theatre practice in Italy between the end of World War II and the mid-sixties. In this particularly fertile moment, the Italian scene developed creative practices and production patterns that shook theatre's structures and aesthetics. I will focus on two fundamental developments: the first one is the founding of the first public repertory theatres (*teatri stabili*), based not on the model of the European national theatres, but on a politically charged model such as the *Théâtre National Populaire* in Paris. *Teatri stabili* played an important role in the growth of director's theatre (*teatro di regia*), and, crucially for the destinies of political theatre, in the reception of Brecht's work in Italy. The second development examined in this chapter is the growth of the Italian independent scene and the birth of the theatrical neo-avant-garde which, in the 1960s, set itself against the *teatri stabili* and against mainstream theatre and its language. These developments will have an enormous impact in the political theatre of the seventies; whether embraced or fiercely opposed, they will remain fundamental points of reference for all the practitioners included in this thesis.

Chapter Three, Four, and Five are structured as a comparative analysis of politically engaged theatre in the 1970s and in the following decades. Each chapter is divided into two main subchapters: the first one looks at a particular example of political theatre during the 1970s and the second one at politically engaged practices between the late 1980s and early 2000s. Each subchapter is preceded by a section that introduces the political and cultural context in which the practices developed. This structure will allow me to articulate not only the relationship between political



theatre and the social movements but also to highlight the breaks and continuities between the militant theatre of the 1970s and the politically engaged practices developed between 1980 and 2010.

Chapter Three begins with the most visible of the Italian social movements, the extra-parliamentary Left. It analyses how the Left represented itself onstage, and how the theatre articulated the Left's identity and agenda. The first section looks at Dario Fo's theatre during the 1970s, his so-called 'revolutionary period'. I will analyse how his theatre looked at past struggles in order to place the 1970s radical Left within a precise historical continuum and to appeal to his audience's sense of identity. In this section, I will analyse three plays from Fo's most explicitly militant work that best illustrate his approach to political commitment as an effort to strengthen working-class awareness. These three plays engage with an audience of militants and sympathisers not by directly looking into current political concerns, but rather by looking at the history of revolutionary movements. I shall argue that this search into the history of the Left serves a double purpose. It strengthens working-class awareness, but also searches the past for conflicts that can shed light on present struggles. The first play is *Tutti Uniti! Tutti insieme! Scusa ma quello non è il padrone?* (*All United! All Together! Hang on, Isn't That the Boss?* 1971), a play about the early socialist struggles in northern Italy; the second is *Vorrei morire anche stasera se sapessi che non è servito a niente* (*I Would Rather Die Tonight if I Had to Think it Had All Been in Vain*, 1970) which juxtaposes the Palestinian armed resistance to the Italian Resistance of 1943-1945. The third is *L'operaio conosce 300 parole, il padrone 1000 per questo lui è il padrone* (*The Worker Knows 300 Words, the Boss 1000, That's Why He's the Boss*, 1970). In order to clarify Fo's approach to commitment and his vision of the role of culture within class struggle, I will look at

two monologues from *Mistero Buffo* (1968): *Le nozze di Cana* (*The Wedding at Cana*) and *La nascita del giullare* (*The Birth of the Jester*). I shall argue that Fo proposed an approach to commitment that compelled the artist to become a militant, to radically modify his practice in relation to the struggle, and to take upon himself the task of shaping and strengthening working-class consciousness. Fo's *impegno* is explicitly Marxist and it acts not within direct political confrontation, but rather in relation to ideology and political identity.

The second section of Chapter Three analyses how the theatre responded to the crisis of the European Left after the end of the Cold War. I analyse two *teatro di narrazione* productions (storytelling theatre), a genre hugely popular during the 1990s and greatly indebted, from an aesthetic point of view, to Dario Fo's solo shows such as *Mistero Buffo*. The first one is *Corpo di Stato* (*Body of State*, 1998) by Marco Baliani, and the second one is *Aprile '74 e 5* (*April '74 and 5*, 1995), by Marco Paolini. Both shows look at the 1970s as a foundational and yet profoundly traumatic moment. If Fo used the past to nourish working-class awareness, Baliani and Paolini look at the past not as a model, but in order to come to terms with it. I will argue that these two artists propose a different type of *impegno*, one that does not address a specific class but a wider public and that can no longer rely on teleological frameworks. Within this model of *impegno*, the artist does not offer solutions, but rather shares doubts and questions.

Chapter Four looks at theatre practice that exits the traditional sites of production and fruition and confronts the total institution, entering two spaces usually closed to the public: the asylum and the prison. I will analyse how entering the total institution set in motion a complex set of contradictions, challenging both the institution and theatre practice. Part one will focus on Italy's antiauthoritarian movement and on

anti-psychiatry in particular. I will analyse the experience of Laboratory P, one of the first workshops in an Italian psychiatric hospital, developed by Giuliano Scabia in January-February 1973 in Trieste asylum. Trieste asylum was at the time an institution at the vanguard of the struggle for a different mental health care model and my analysis investigates how Scabia's work inserted itself in the institution's struggle, focusing in particular on how theatre practice unsettled and problematized the relationship between inside and outside. The second part of Chapter Four analyses the work of Compagnia della Fortezza (Company of the Fortress), a company composed of prisoners who has been regularly operating in Volterra prison since 1988 under the direction of Armando Punzo. Fortezza is an unusual company in the panorama of Italian theatre in prison because it approaches theatre practice as a professional activity and aims at becoming the first *teatro stabile* in prison. I will analyse two productions of theirs, the first one is *I negri* (*The Blacks*, 1993) inspired by Jean Genet's *The Blacks*, and the second one is *Pescecani, ovvero quel che resta di Bertolt Brecht* (*Sharks, or Whatever is Left of Bertolt Brecht*, 2003), a devised piece loosely based on Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*.

Laboratory P is a foundational moment in a very fertile strand of politically engaged, process-focused theatre which is close to what British scholarship would place under the umbrella term 'applied theatre'. Italian scholarship, however, refers to these practices usually as *teatro sociale* (social theatre) *teatro delle diversità*, (theatre of diversity) or *animazione teatrale* (theatrical animation). Compagnia della Fortezza, on the other hand, represents a further development: a practice outside of the theatre which places production and the encounter with the audience at the core of its practice. I look at these practices not from an applied theatre perspective, but rather from a cultural point of view. Although I share with applied theatre a strong

interest in the political implications of theatre practice, what interests me here are two aspects that only tangentially pertain to applied theatre as a field. The first one is Giuliano Scabia's and Armando Punzo's rejection of mainstream theatre and avant-garde theatre and their decision to develop their practice elsewhere. This is the first politically charged act. The second is the encounter with the total institution: an encounter that for Scabia was conceived as a moment of political struggle in solidarity with the ambitious project of Italian anti-psychiatry, but that had profound implications for theatre practice too. For Punzo, this encounter develops as an artistic struggle to rebuild theatre practice. His choice was to engage in this endeavour not within the sites traditionally dedicated to theatre production and fruition, but in one dedicated to detention. Moreover, where applied theatre would focus primarily on the participants, I look at Laboratory P and Compagnia della Fortezza from the outside, analysing how their practice engages with discourse, that is with our understanding of the institution's image, place, and function on our ideological horizon. In analysing Giuliano Scabia's and Armando Punzo's role within the institution, we shall see that neither of them defines himself as a facilitator. Instead, both retain their identity as artists who enter the institution with the intention of making art, even when the institution profoundly transformed their practice and their concept of theatre. Through the analysis of Laboratory P and Compagnia della Fortezza, I will argue that this particular type of politically engaged theatre incorporated the concerns of the anti-authoritarian strand of the Italian social movements. Firstly, both deserted the sites traditionally dedicated to theatrical production and fruition. Secondly, they created liberated, utopian spaces in which the asylum and the prison recede to make room for a time and relationships other than the institutional ones.

Chapter Five is dedicated to the theatre that stemmed from the movement that most thoroughly challenged our understanding of the political and its boundaries: feminism. The first section opens with 1970s feminism's critique of patriarchy and its reconfiguration of the boundaries of the political to include power dynamics within the private sphere. My case study is one of Franca Rame's most popular shows, *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa* (*All Home, Bed, and Church*, 1977), a show that best exemplifies how women's theatre during the 1970s thematically engaged with the issues brought forward by the movement. In Rame's theatre, we can also see how *impegno* modified in relation to the feminist movement, with a practitioner not only sympathetic but also personally involved in the politically issues she tackles. The second section of Chapter Five analyses how Italian feminism moved from critique of patriarchy to the positive search for a feminist horizon capable of giving meaning to women's experience. I will then proceed to analyse two autobiographical performances by Laura Curino, one of the most representative artist of a generation of Italian women practitioners that developed an explicitly gendered practice. The two shows, titled *Passione* (*Passion*, 1990) and *L'età dell'oro* (*The Golden Age*, 2003) interweave Curino's autobiography with events which are very much part of Italy's collective memory, staging a markedly gendered perspective on recent Italian history. Curino's autobiographical practice, therefore, shows us a type of *impegno* in which the practitioner exposes herself and her life experience, yet this exposure is never self-referential but rather it connects the practitioner's biography to her community.

My choice of practitioners and performances does not intend to be an exhaustive sample of contemporary Italian theatre. However, I believe the artists and productions I selected are representative of three important tendencies and

indicative of three significant traditions of politically engaged theatre in Italy between 1968 and 2010. The strong presence of solo shows and storytelling performances – in Chapter Three and Chapter Five – is due to the fact that this type of performance enjoyed particular fortune on the Italian stage, because of its versatility, its adaptability to different context, its immediacy and its ability to engage an audience wider than that of frequent theatregoers.

One of the premises of my research is that the theatre is not a transparent or neutral practice; rather, like all cultural activities, the theatre is embedded in political, cultural, and affective relationships. Scholarship is no different. This thesis is one milestone in a longer intellectual journey, a journey made of study and experiences, rationality and affects. Professional background, personal interests, and political allegiances contribute to shaping a doctoral thesis as much as data, methodological approaches, and analysis. As far as my political allegiances are concerned, I can state that I refer to the global Left and the feminist movement as ideological and existential horizons that guide my choices and allow me to make sense of reality. Beyond the divisions, debates, conflicts, and thorny theoretical questions, to me being a leftist and a feminist simply means looking at the world from the point of view of labour, of gender, and of non-hegemonic groups.

In this respect, it should be no surprise that contemporary feminist and Marxist philosophy, Italian feminism of difference and autonomist Marxism in particular, influenced my work. This body of political philosophy provided me with a vocabulary and with important conceptual tools, and it contributed to shaping my understanding of the political in relation to the arts above and beyond the thesis. Although it does not explicitly feature in this thesis, it deserves a mention here, and I hope this brief summary of my philosophical passions would shed light on my thinking process.

One element, in particular, helped me rethink the parameters of the political: subjectivity. Italian feminist philosophy has been the first body of theory I encountered that clearly pointed towards the necessity to rethink subjectivity, agency and, as a consequence, what qualifies as a politically charged act. During the seventies and the eighties, thinkers and activists such as Carla Lonzi (2011) or the collective of Milan Women's Bookshop (Libreria delle Donne di Milano, 1987) unpacked the modern concept of the subject to uncover its shortcomings. As we shall see in greater detail in Chapter Four, Italian feminist thought placed the materiality of the sexed, embodied self at the centre of its research, in open contrast with the disembodied and allegedly genderless subject of modern political thought. Going beyond the humanist subject was the only possibility against the epistemic violence of a philosophical and political practice that had placed man (white, heterosexual, non-disabled, property-owning) at its centre and branded everything else as 'other'. Rosi Braidotti's philosophical project also influenced my thinking. Through the years, her work postulated a nomadic (1994), posthuman (2013) subject in constant flux, freed from binary oppositions and based on a positive notion of difference: a subject that constitutes the foundation of a new politics and a new ethics.

Contemporary autonomist Marxism also contributed to shifting my understanding of political subjectivity. In particular, I am indebted to the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2005), and Paolo Virno (2004). If feminist theory unmasked the fraud behind the humanist subject's supposed neutrality, reclaimed difference, and articulated the subject as dynamic and in flux, the most recent autonomist Marxist thought proposed a concept of political action based on the antagonistic and creative potential of the multitude in contrast with the homogeneous subjects postulated by

modern political thought (the people, the proletariat, the state, etc.). Deterritorialized and fluid, the multitude is composed of singularities who retain their difference whilst working towards to a common constituent project. A multiplicity capable of acting politically.

To me, postulating alternative types of political agency means rearticulating political action. What many Italian commentators branded as *riflusso*, as the triumph of disengagement was, in fact, a paradigm shift; it was the gradual emerging of new political subjects and of new forms of struggle and resistance. Recalibrating my approach to the political in relation to these relatively recent philosophical contributions compelled me to open up the range of possible interactions between political and artistic practice.

Lastly, the interest in the interaction of art and politics that informed this research owes much to my background as a practitioner. I had my political and theatrical apprenticeship in what can be considered a periphery: a provincial town in Sardinia, geographically and culturally distant not only from the great theatres or the prestigious drama schools of continental Italy but also from the national political arena. Between the age of eighteen and twenty-four, I worked with a local *teatro stabile* as a performer, facilitator, and assistant director. The in-house company, *La botte e il cilindro* ('The barrel and the top hat'), was founded in the early eighties by a group of Sardinian practitioners who decided to dedicate their commitment to the micro-political. Equally uninterested in mainstream theatre or in producing shows with an explicitly political content, they grounded their practice in the local community. The revolution they imagined was of a different kind. Right from those early years, the company's work was informed by a precise choice: addressing an audience overlooked by mainstream theatre and by mainstream culture in general:



children and young people. A significant part of our daily work was dedicated to running theatre workshops with children from all economic backgrounds, in state schools, community centres, small rural villages, and working-class neighbourhoods. We developed a rich programme of theatre for children, with children, and by children, nourishing fruitful collaborations with teachers and education professionals. We recovered significant parts of Sardinian cultural heritage, such as folk tales, and elaborated it in ground-breaking pieces of theatre for young audiences performed in Sardinian and Italian. In our work, I recognised the necessity of developing a language capable of bridging aesthetic research with popular fruition and of engaging the spectator intellectually and emotionally. I encountered a practice that stretched further than the stage to include the community beyond the company. This type of theatre practice demonstrated the possibility of another politics. This is the *impegno* I learned during my formative years, the practice that made me think of art and politics as inseparable. Yet, at the time, the exact terms of this relationship eluded me. What drives this research is a very personal necessity to pin down the relationship between theatre and politics and to articulate the dynamics, strategies, and aesthetics of political theatre.

# 1. Political Theatres: Shifting Paradigms in Practice and Scholarship

The debate on theatre and politics spans the entire twentieth century. Although it was initially set off in relation to Marxist theatre, through the decades it started including other theatrical practices close to the political Left. Among the elements of the debate are not only the political topics brought on stage, but also production and distribution values, language, relationship with the audience, efficacy, and the status of the theatre as an art form with a direct referent in an 'external reality' and a tangible impact upon it. Throughout the twentieth century, both theatre practice and theoretical discussion went through a profound transformation and they are still developing now along with new political priorities and struggles. Perhaps more than in other fields of inquiry, when it comes to theatre and politics, practice and scholarship intertwine, overlap, and feed into one another. The field can feel overwhelmingly vast. Although the most significant contributions come from theatre practitioners, critics, and scholars, the debate around theatre and politics was, and still is, shaped by elements that go beyond the scope of theatre studies such as political theory, activism, or government policies.

In this first chapter, I would like to look into some different definitions and approaches to the relationship between theatre and politics, paying particular attention to the approaches we will encounter more often in the analysis of the case studies. I divided this chapter into two main subchapters. The first one will introduce some key definitions of political theatre provided by recent scholarship and will then move on to analyse three main strands in the development of the relationship

between theatre and politics in Europe (especially in Britain) and in the United States. The first one revolves around Marxist and socialist theatre; the second refers to the critique of orthodox Marxism developed after World War II and the multiplication of political perspectives brought about by identity politics; the third is concerned with the impact of theories of postmodernity upon our understanding of the theatre's political function. These three strands have been selected for their close relationship to my case studies, which move at the intersection between them. The second part of the chapter will take a closer look at the Italian debate and at the categories that inform it.

At the core of the theatre and politics debate is the concept of 'political theatre', a practice that stirred enthusiasm and heated diatribes. In its modern form, political theatre developed at the beginning of the twentieth century and is certainly one of the concepts that characterised an important part of dramatic literature and theatrical practice. If we look at possible definitions in isolation, we find that scholars and practitioners are often divided on the grounds of its efficacy, ideological framework, aesthetic choices, and production strategies. Other scholars are sceptical and even dismiss the possibility of political theatre altogether, suggesting that the practice ultimately failed<sup>2</sup>. In the best case scenario, the very idea of a political theatre seems to be going through a profound crisis, and the exact terms of this crisis are

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Joe Kelleher talks about the "dream of a 'political theatre' that haunted so much twentieth-century theatrical experiment" (2009: 11); a sentence that suggests a mildly patronising attitude towards decades of political theatre all over the world. In the same publication Kelleher draws upon a 1968 article by Peter Handke, and argues that: "[t]he problem, in short, is that theatre's instrumentalism, its use as means of guiding our actions and changing the world, does not work – never did, never will" (Kelleher, 2009:57). Alan Read is less dismissive but just as radical. To him "the error has precisely been to leave these two terms [theatre and politics] bonded in a fantasy of expectation and hope while patronising them both with the commiseration of failure" (Read, 2009: 7).

diverse. If we look at some of the most common definitions of political theatre as a practice, we will soon realise every definition entails an ideological approach, a particular understanding of what politics and power are, and sometimes a preference for a definite aesthetics. Although the umbrella term 'political theatre' includes a remarkably vast range of diverse practices, some scholars attempted to step back and provide general definitions. One of such definitions is offered by Patrice Pavis in his *Dictionary of the Theatre*. This type of publication does not allow the scholar to account fully for theoretical complexity. However, Pavis' definition summarises a few characteristics usually associated with political theatre and includes some enduring stereotypes:

"[e]tymologically speaking, all theatre is political, as it presents protagonists within a town or group. The expression more properly refers to agitprop theatre, popular theatre, Brechtian and post-Brechtian epic theatre, documentary theatre, mass theatre, Boal's theatre of political therapy [...]. All of these share a desire to impose theory, social belief or philosophical project. Aesthetics is thus subordinated to political struggle, to the point where the theatrical form may simply break down into a debate of ideas" (Pavis, 1998: 278).

Interestingly, the entry opens arguing that 'all theatre is political'<sup>3</sup>, a statement that could potentially undermine any discussion on what criteria can be used to define the

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<sup>3</sup> Joel Schechter approached the issue from a performance studies perspective. In a 1986 conference paper he argued that "theater is always political", but his reasons are different from those proposed by Pavis: "I want to propose that at present theater and politics are inseparable; that at times it is redundant to speak of "political theater", that politics has become theater and theater is

genre. Although Pavis' list of practices gives a sense of the genre's richness and complexity, the entry reiterates some of the most enduring stereotypes related to political theatre: obtrusive and propagandist genre that preaches and even imposes 'a theory, social belief or philosophical concept' upon the audience. That aesthetics is subordinated to political struggle is another oversimplification, and is certainly not applicable, for example, to a practitioner like Brecht, who was extremely concerned with the formal and aesthetic side of his work. As we shall see in the second half of this chapter, the notion of a preachy, didactic, and aesthetically unsophisticated political theatre is also present in the Italian debate.

Narrower definitions of political theatre establish clear boundaries and shape a more manageable and coherent field of enquiry. Michael Patterson, for instance, defines political theatre as "a kind of theatre that [...] implies the possibility of radical change on socialist lines: the removal of injustice and autocracy and their replacement by the fairer distribution of wealth and more democratic systems" (Patterson, 2003: 3-4)<sup>4</sup>. Michael Kirby, in a 1975 article, contends that "[t]heatre is political if it is *concerned with the state or takes sides* in politics" and that the phrase 'political theatre' can only be referred to a performance that is "intentionally concerned with government, that is

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always political; that if politics has become inseparable from theater, the foremost practitioners of the art are not actors or playwrights, but statesmen [...] While the term "political" theater once referred to a theater of a political nature, it is now just as applicable to a politics of a theatrical nature (Schechter, 1989: 61).

<sup>4</sup> In his book on post-war British drama, Patterson also identifies two main strands of political theatre: the 'reflectionist' tradition, which "asserts that the main function of art and indeed theatre is to hold up a mirror to nature and to reflect reality as accurately as possible", and the 'interventionist' mode, which asserts that "even if it were possible to reflect reality accurately, the undertaking is futile, since it is the task of the artist and playwright to interpret reality and to challenge our perception of it" (Patterson, 2003: 15).

intentionally engaged in or consciously takes sides in politics” (Kirby, 1975: 129 italics in original). Where Patterson cuts out some deeply political questions that go beyond “the possibility of radical change along socialist lines”, Kirby confines the political to government politics and excludes power relationships at play beyond the reach of government politics.

In 1985, Eric Bentley did the opposite, opening up the scope of what could legitimately be considered political theatre. In an article published in *Performing Arts Journal*, he states that “[i]t would be sensible [...] to limit the term political to works in which the question of power structure arises” (Bentley, 1985: 48), and adds that “what makes the politics of a play can be the precise moment at which it is performed and the precise place where it is performed” (Bentley, 1985: 50).

Bentley’s choice of looking for power structures, rather than for an explicitly socialist agenda opens new possibilities for the concept of political theatre. The shift from ‘government politics’ to ‘power structures’ reflects a radical development in our understanding of politics, and yet, it is precisely this development that seems to undermine the very concept of political theatre, a field of enquiry that has by now become so vast to the point of being almost unmanageable.

So far the range of possible definitions oscillates between ‘socialist politics’ and ‘power structures’; between a socialist perspective on one side and a crisis in the very possibility of a genuinely political theatre on the other. One of the reasons for this wide range of possible definitions is that ‘the political’ is an external category that develops beyond the boundary of theatrical practice. Moreover, it is a polysemic and often contested concept. The relationship between art and politics is, therefore, a dynamic one, constantly changing and adapting, crucially marked by historical and cultural contexts. The twentieth century, in particular, was a period of turmoil, social

unrest, rapid changes, and fierce political struggle. The rise and fall of state socialism, the transformation of imperialism into a more subtle and equally violent economic control, the rise of multinational capitalism, and the battle for long overdue civil rights in the West, only to name a few major political developments, are bound to impact how political performance is thought and practised. As a consequence, every definition of what is political on stage is provisional or partial. In the following section, I will look at theatre practice and scholarly discourse within a historical framework, albeit a loose one, in order to highlight lines of development in a vast and rich field of inquiry. I will focus on three stages of development of political and committed theatre in the West. The first one can be loosely located in the period between the two World Wars. At this stage, political theatre explicitly sides with the working class and evolves in its modern form, detaching itself equally from agitprop<sup>5</sup> and from avant-garde theatre while preserving elements of both. Interestingly, it is during this period that European Marxism starts moving away from the Soviet Union's line. In the second stage, which approximately goes from the end of World War II to 1968, the fracture between European Marxism and the Soviet Union widens. By the 1960s, it was clear that although Marxism still provided a useful method of enquiry, the focus on class struggle and economic determinism did not account for other crucial issues such as patriarchal oppression, post-colonial politics, or racial discrimination. Simultaneously, counterculture rediscovered radical elements already present in the avant-garde, such as the rejection of the bourgeoisie

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<sup>5</sup> In their excellent study of workers' theatre, Alan Filewood and David Watt provide a detailed overview of workers' theatre in Europe, Australia, and the United States, and of its general lines of development. In their survey, agitprop theatre emerges as "the small tip of a large iceberg of labour movement theatre" and they rightly warn the reader against "the supposed homogeneity of working class culture at this time" (Filewood and Watt, 2012: 31).

and of its way of living, working, and consuming. The third historical development begins to emerge after 1968 when the US and a significant part of European countries witnessed a true paradigm shift. The new postmodern sensibility, its “cultural and ideological reaction against the ethos of modernity itself, with its authoritarian overtones and cult of ‘progress’” (Sim, 2000: 119) challenged the approach to the political proposed by traditional Marxism and by the New Left. The next three sections are going to illustrate this development in order to lay the foundation for the following analysis. Although this broad cultural context only partly mirrors the development of political theatre in Italy, it provides an important framework that will allow the reader to understand better the practice and theoretical debate in Italy.

The common association of political theatre with Marxist politics is justified by historical facts. Since the Russian Revolution, a significant thread of left-wing theatre developed in Europe and in the US, fostering ideological debates and aesthetic experimentation. For the purpose of this thesis, I will focus on few fundamental aspects of Marxist and left-wing theatre. I will look at some elements of Brecht’s and Piscator’s practice that had an impact on contemporary Italian theatre and I will then move on to analyse what factors contributed to the crisis and transformation of left-wing theatre in the second half of the twentieth century. Marxist politics played a crucial role in contemporary Italian theatre and before we proceed any further it is important to clarify that the relationship between Marxist politics and the stage is not as straightforward as it might seem at first glance.



The work of Brecht<sup>6</sup> and Piscator sets up some of the terms of our discourse, but also defies some enduring stereotypes commonly associated with political theatre. In particular, their line of materialist and rationalist theatre brought about a significant development towards to a concept of the stage as a vehicle not of propaganda, but of analysis. As the following chapter will illustrate, Brecht's work, in particular, enjoyed great popularity in Italy in the immediate post-war years. As soon as Italian translations became available, his plays at first and his theoretical writing later had an enormous impact.

As Pavis' definition testified, one of the most enduring stereotypes associated with political theatre is the subordination of aesthetics to political struggle "to the point where the theatrical form may simply break down into a debate of ideas" (Pavis, 1998: 278). And yet, if we look at Soviet agitprop<sup>7</sup> or at Brecht's and Piscator's work, we find artistic practices that matched an intransigent popular and revolutionary vocation with an uncompromising reform of theatrical language. Modern political theatre developed, after all, in a historical moment that witnessed a widespread urge

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<sup>6</sup> Brecht's practice and writings soon became a fundamental point of reference for political theatre in Europe and in the US. In this respect, it is significant that the special issue of *The Drama Review* (Vol. 19 n. 2) dedicated to political theatre – edited by Michael Kirby and published in 1975 - includes three articles about productions of Brecht's plays.

<sup>7</sup> Brecht had words of appreciation for agitprop theatre. In an article written in the late thirties and published posthumously, he argued that when the workers "wrote and produced for the stage they were wonderfully original. So-called agitprop art, at which people, not always the best people, turned up their noses, was a mine of new artistic methods and modes of expression. From it there emerged magnificent, long forgotten elements from genuine popular art, boldly modified for new social aims: breath-taking contractions and compressions, beautiful simplifications, in which there was often an astonishing elegance and power and fearless eye for the complex" (Brecht, 2003: 84).

to reform the arts, to rid the stage of what were felt as obsolete and mannerist clichés. As Christopher Innes reminds us in his book on Piscator,

“[t]o reform the drama [...] to make the theatre the cultural centre of a society once more - was a common factor shared by many of the theatrical innovators between the wars. It unites Piscator with such different figures as Yates, and Antonin Artaud and Gordon Craig” (1972: 25).

In this artistic context, the profound epochal crisis brought about by World War I markedly shaped political theatre as well (Holderness, 1992b: 102-103). Writing in 1988, Raymond Williams identified political theatre as one of two possible answers to this crisis. He calls the first one ‘subjective’, and the second one ‘social’. These two perspectives on the crisis differed radically, but they both voiced an inflexible opposition to bourgeois values.

[O]ne tendency was moving towards that new form of bourgeois dissidence which, in its very emphasis on subjectivity, rejected the discourse of any public world as irrelevant to its deeper concerns. Sexual liberation, the emancipation of dream and fantasy, a new interest in madness as an alternative to repressive sanity, a rejection of ordered language as a form of concealed but routine domination: these were now seen [...] as the real dissidence, breaking alike from bourgeois society and from the forms of opposition to it which had been generated within its terms. On the other hand, the opposite, more political tendency offered to renounce the bourgeois altogether: to move from dissidence to conscious affiliation with the working

class: in early Soviet theatre, Piscator and Töller, eventually Brecht  
(Williams, 2007: 87-88).

This split in modernist art is of fundamental importance. The two strands of modernist theatre identified by Williams separated, overlapped, and diverged again throughout the twentieth century. Even when the gap between the two seemed irreconcilable, these two sides of modernist theatre often influenced one another<sup>8</sup>. Looking at political theatre and theatrical avant-garde as the products of the same crisis can contribute to a much-needed reassessment of the entire debate on political theatre and shed light on contemporary examples of engaged art. In the following chapters, I will argue that politically engaged theatre in contemporary Italy will also move along this continuum between avant-garde aesthetic research and political theatre.

If we look at the practitioners that are generally considered the founding fathers of political theatre in Europe, we can see that their work was greatly indebted to German Expressionism, at least from an aesthetic point of view. However, their reaction to the trauma of World War I and the failure of the Spartacist revolution was more markedly political than that of Expressionism. Whilst Brecht matured a conscious affiliation to the working class only towards the end of the 1920s, “Piscator entered the war thinking of himself as an artist, [and] emerged from it convinced that art is inseparable from politics” (Holderness, 1992b: 102). Right from his first revues,

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<sup>8</sup> As Maria Di Cenzo argues, this split is also present in alternative British theatre, and it “is based on the prioritizing of artistic/theatrical issues over political functionalism – avant-garde versus grass-roots movement” (Di Cenzo, 1996: 18-19).

politics<sup>9</sup> represented the creative centre of his work (Piscator, 1971a: 45). His aim was to take politics to the people and to destroy “the ivory tower which had been the refuge of art for too long (Piscator, 1971c: 63-64). As John Willett argued, Piscator made his novel contribution in “using the stage as a vehicle for Marxist analysis rather than for mere revolutionary exhortation or the more or less lifelike exposure of social abuses” (Willett, 1971: 11). As we shall see, this shift from Socialist propaganda to Marxist analysis of society is still present in a practitioner like Dario Fo, whose theatre ranges from ‘throw-away’ plays of direct political intervention to Marxist analysis of society and reflection upon the identity and legacy of the revolutionary Left.

The idea of theatre as a forum, attention to the popular element, willingness to engage with a working-class audience are elements of Piscator’s work also present in Brecht’s practice. Both practitioners conceived the stage as a catalyst for social change, and yet, this approach did not entail preaching or imposing Marxist ideology upon the audience. Along with Piscator’s, Brecht’s work is often proposed as the prime example and even the blueprint of engaged theatre. His name seems to be indissolubly linked to Marxist theatre, and yet his approach to Marxism evolved

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<sup>9</sup> However, later in his career his idea of political theatre evolved and his style changed to the point that his use of the expression ‘political theatre’ is often ambiguous. As Innes reports, after the Second World War Piscator’s perspective on political theatre shifted again as “he described his position in terms of the Greek ‘polis’. [...] This confusion between the narrow and the sociological sense of ‘political’ was accentuated by the fact that Piscator had publicized his new techniques as Marxist and they therefore became identified with Communism” (Innes, 1972: 64-65).

through time and was often unconventional<sup>10</sup>. As Willett said, “Brecht has always represented an awkward problem for the Communist Party and for Communist critics, just because he digested Marxism in his own way instead of accepting the politicians’ ready-made aesthetic line” (Willett, 1971 [1959]: 101). What interests me in relation to my thesis is to review one aspect of Brecht’s reflection on aesthetics and politics that anticipates a major fracture between committed theatre practitioners and orthodox Marxism. I am referring to Brecht’s scepticism towards socialist realism<sup>11</sup>, a feature that we shall find in Italian political theatre, which often rejected realist aesthetics in favour of other forms. György Lukàcs, the philosopher who better articulated socialist realism in art, famously dismissed expressionism as a reactionary and decadent phase of European art (Lukàcs, 1963: 104). And as late as 1956 he stated that

For the Marxist, the road to socialism is identical with the movement of history itself. [...] Thus, *any* accurate account of reality is a contribution – whatever the author’s subjective intention – to the Marxist critique of capitalism, and is a blow in the cause of socialism (Lukàcs, 1963: 101, emphasis in original).

Brecht’s uneasiness with this aesthetic line is a reaction against orthodox Marxism as a philosophical and economic model that, in dividing human society into base and

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<sup>10</sup> It is also important to stress that we should not look at European Marxism as a unified whole, but rather as a complex galaxy of ideological positions and that Brecht’s approach was only one among many (McCullough, 1992: 125).

<sup>11</sup> Socialist realism became official policy in 1934 at the First Soviet Writers Congress (see Livingstone, 1980).

superstructure, conceives of culture only as a reflection of economic and political structures. As Graham Holderness explains,

The crucial theoretical problem with this philosophical model, as Brecht appreciated and as most Marxist cultural theoreticians have subsequently confirmed, is simply that it denies the 'material' nature of art and culture. In this theoretical problematic art can never be regarded as 'real', can never be more than a shadow of reality. [...] However much literature is valued in Lukács' theory, it is always perceived as a second-order imitation of the real. Brecht was more interested in the *analogies* between art and reality, in culture as a sphere of social activity; and, as a theatre worker rather than a literary critic, he was much more inclined to see art as a process of cultural production, always experimental and provisional, never finalised and complete (Holderness, 1992b:113, emphasis in original).

This is a significant fracture in our concept of political art and our understanding of the relationship between art and struggle. Brecht, who considered himself a realist<sup>12</sup>, recognised the antagonistic nature of expressionism<sup>13</sup>. Epic theatre was a bridge

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<sup>12</sup> In Brecht's words, "[r]ealistic means: discovering the casual complexes of society / unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power / writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up / emphasizing the element of development / making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it" (Brecht, 2003: 82).

<sup>13</sup> "This artistic trend [expressionism] was contradictory, erratic, confused (it even made a principle of this), and it was full of protest (mainly that of powerlessness). Its protest was aimed at the

between Modernism's defamiliarizing strategies and Marxist socio-economic theories, a powerful synthesis of politics and aesthetics that will characterise his entire work (Kuhn and Giles, 2003: 206) precisely at the time when Lukàcsian theories of socialist realism were gradually gaining popularity in the Soviet Union, later becoming the official socialist aesthetic. The debate over socialist realism is the first crack in the unifying vision proposed by traditional Marxism. This is the first crack in the allegiance between political theatre and Marxist parties, and it is not only a disagreement over form, but it is also a fundamental difference in the concept of the role of art within class-struggle. This allegiance will be profoundly restructured in the following decade.

The immediate post-war years brought about a significant change in the approach to politics in the West. As the world polarised into two spheres of influence, a great part of European socialism gradually distanced itself from the Soviet Union, the theoretical foundations of orthodox Marxism had been systematically reviewed and reassessed. The Frankfurt School, for example, was especially critical of traditional Marxism's theories of history and its economic determinism, and although still indebted to Marxist analytical methods, it problematized some crucial gaps left by traditional Marxism. The theoretical development introduced at this stage had enormous implications for the arts. According to Graham Holderness,

this revised Marxist position justified, from the late 1960s onwards a shift of emphasis away from the direct analysis of society as economic and political organisation, and towards the analysis of a

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nature of artistic representation, at a time when what was represented itself invited protest. Its protest was loud and unclear. The artist continued to develop in various directions" (Brecht, 2003: 213).

society's *ideology* [...] Marxist theories [...] began to acknowledge ideology as a much more substantial and concrete element of social organisation and development and to conceive the task of Marxist philosophy as the critique of ideology as much as (or even rather than) the analysis of social, economic and political organisation (Holderness, 1992a: 8, emphasis in original).

This shift granted some degree of independence to the cultural sphere without renouncing the possibility of political engagement altogether. In Chapter Three we shall see the influence of a thinker like Antonio Gramsci on a Marxist practitioner like Dario Fo, on his approach to political theatre and on his vision of the artist's role in class-struggle. In this new framework, theatre becomes a cultural practice capable of contributing to political struggle and resistance on its own terrain, by questioning and exposing hegemonic ideologies and dominant cultural forms.

In this period, political theatre's historical referent began to change and the notion of a cohesive and clearly defined industrial working-class began to fade. Subaltern groups other than the urban working class emerged, vocally demanding their right to self-determination, and putting forward a set of problems traditional Marxist theory was unable to tackle. Marxist emphasis on class did not account for forms of social and political exclusion beyond class divides. The American civil rights movement and the feminist movement are among the most visible examples of grassroots movements that brought to the forefront forms of discrimination that could not be reduced to economic relationships. Our understanding of politics began to change. For example, Kate Millet, writing from a feminist perspective, argued that politics is not "that relatively narrow and exclusive world of meetings, chairmen and parties"



(2000: 23). Instead, politics refers to “power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another” (2000: 23). For Millet it is

imperative that we give some attention to defining a theory of politics which treats of power relationships on grounds less conventional than those to which we are accustomed. I have therefore found it pertinent to define them on grounds of personal contact and interaction between members of well-defined and coherent groups: races, castes, classes, and sexes. For it is precisely because certain groups have no representation in a number of recognised political structures that their position tends to be stable, their oppression so continuous (2000: 24).

The consequence of identity politics’ new approach to the political is that “[c]lass, instead of being the focal point, was just another site of resistance” (Filewood and Watt, 2001: 8). The move from economic relationships to a wider field that includes “personal contact and interaction between members of well-defined and coherent groups” (Millet, 2000: 24) broke the barrier between the private and the public sphere and demonstrated that discrimination, oppression, and subordination are present not only in government politics but also in “structures of injustice and exploitation built into the practical arrangements of society, built into political systems, built into cultural apparatuses like education and language (Holderness, 1992: 13).

In light of these new political priorities, the theatre as a practice and product came, once more, under scrutiny. While embracing new political priorities, the very nature of the theatre as an art and as a cultural product, its function in society, and its

language were thoroughly questioned. In this context (particularly visible in the US during the 1960s but also present in Europe, albeit with substantial differences) modernist forms of Marxist theatre explicitly affiliated with working-class struggles are no longer representative of a much wider spectrum of political priorities. Radical and alternative theatre practices emerged on both sides of the Atlantic<sup>14</sup>. In Arthur Sainer's words,

Everything came into question: the place of the performer in the theatre; the place of the audience; the function of the playwright and the usefulness of a written script; the structure of the playhouse, and later, the need of any kind of playhouse; and finally, the continued existence of the theatre as a relevant force in a changing culture (Sainer, 1997: 12).

If theatre is to be a force in a changing culture, it must question its structures starting from the work hierarchies that frame the creative process, up to the relationship with the spectator and the very concept of theatre as a product to be sold and consumed. This theatre went, in Sainer's words, "beyond the reach of drama" (1997: 12) both in political terms, reaching out to new audiences and new communities, but also in aesthetic terms, challenging the boundaries of theatre as a defined art form. This challenge to the theatre's boundaries, to its customary sites, language, and hierarchy

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<sup>14</sup> Stuart Cosgrove rightly noted the existence of a strong link between 1960s radical theatre and early Marxist performance: "[i]t could be argued that agit-prop did not die in the thirties but merely retired. It was regenerated in the sixties, when the Vietnam War and America's proto-imperialist policies created the ideal political climate. By this time the name agit-prop had become anachronistic and the term Guerrilla Theatre was invented. The name was new but the style and themes were time honoured" (Cosgrove, 1980: 212).

is an important element of Giuliano Scabia's and Armando Punzo's practice, as we shall see in Chapter Four.

Although up until the 1968 uprising a utopian hope in a revolutionary change was still present, the following decades demonstrated that unitary, all-encompassing frameworks, such as that of revolutionary Socialism, did not account for complex and pervasive power structures. The reconfiguration in the allegiance between theatre and left-wing politics did not necessarily imply the crisis of political theatre. The multiplicity of perspectives proposed by feminism, postcolonialism, the civil rights movement, gay rights movement challenged the domain of the political and our understanding of what can legitimately be considered a politically charged act. From a cultural point of view, the phenomenon can be described as a fragmentation of progressive politics and a multiplication of alternative perspectives in place of the unitary vision provided by Socialism. As Kershaw argued, since the 1960s "the political has found its way into almost every nook and cranny of culture. [...] the political is now ubiquitous and can be identified in all theatre and performance" (1999: 16). This proliferation of the political, or, in Kershaw's words, "promiscuity of the political" (1999: 16), enriches and at the same time complicates the picture, and has often been interpreted as a crisis. Philip Auslander, for example, articulates the crisis of political art in terms of a lack of a vocabulary capable of articulating the relationship between art and politics.

If there is a crisis in the theory and practice of political art at present – and there clearly is – it is a historical crisis, brought about by uncertainty as to just how to describe our cultural condition under multi-national capitalism, by the obvious inappropriateness of the political art strategies left over from the historical avant-garde of the

early twentieth century and of the 1960s, and by a widespread critical inability to conceive of aesthetic/political praxis in terms other than these inherited ones (Auslander, 1987: 21).

Hans-Ties Lehman goes further and argues that poststructuralist articulation of power not as a defined structure but rather as a mobile web, or, in Michel Foucault's words, a micro-physics (1991: 139), highlights the complexity of political conflicts, but at the same time those "political conflicts increasingly elude intuitive perception and cognition and consequently scenic representation" (Lehmann, 2006: 175). From an aesthetic point of view, this promiscuity or proliferation of the political seems to run parallel to the dissolution of the dramatic form or, at least, to its radical questioning. As Janelle Reinelt noted,

[t]heater in the United States and the rest of the West has tended to reflect these tensions, contributing to a perception of crisis by staging it. Postmodern dramaturgy has decentered the subject, fragmented narrative, refused closure, and foregrounded the instability of its own signifying process (Reinelt, 1998: 285).

The instability of drama's signifying processes, which already was a feature of the historical avant-garde, returns in another moment of perceived crisis, namely the passage from the relative stability of modernity's epistemological and political framework to the shifting, fluid paradigm of the postmodern condition.

Postmodernity is often considered to be the cause of this state of affairs. As Kershaw put it, "the impact of the post-modern unfortunately demands that we develop quite complicated theoretical explanations for effective radicalism in drama and theatre" (1998: 49). Despite the common confusion between cultural categories

(postmodernity or the postmodern condition) and aesthetic movements (postmodernism), the body of theory that refers to postmodernity had a tremendous impact on the arts in general and on the theatre in particular. It often divided scholars, thinkers, and artists into two opposing camps, those who embraced the postmodern condition as an inevitable development and those who opposed it as a justification for ethical relativism and political disengagement. However, as a philosophical category, the postmodern, far from being a threat, can provide an essential theoretical framework for political and aesthetic analysis.

There certainly is a destabilising element in the postmodern replacement of master narratives with micro-narratives (Lyotard, 1984) and in its preference for a 'weak thought', provisional, unstable, ever-changing, liberated from ties to universal categories (Vattimo, 1988). Nonetheless, the postmodern challenge to modern cultural constructs also has political potential. The postmodern can provide the tools to "deconstruct the teleological and dualistic narratives of modernist discourses" (Chinna, 2003: 41), but it also de-naturalizes foundational elements of our culture, pointing out that "those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' (including capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us" (Hutcheon, 2002: 1-2). By restoring critical distance and questioning hegemonic discourses and 'natural' categories, the postmodern, on the one hand opens up space for minority, underrepresented, or non-hegemonic discourses, and on the other it challenges the categories that informed identity politics. In a postmodern cultural context categories such as gender, nationality or ethnicity are fluid, no longer stable. From a postmodern perspective, identity can be analysed in

its performative aspects, but it can no longer be seen as a stable or definite category<sup>15</sup>.

Beyond the challenge to grand narratives, including those that informed radical politics in the previous decades, there is one particular aspect of postmodern theory that has significant implications for political theatre as a genre. Postmodern discourse pushes to the extreme consequences the crisis of representation that started with the avant-garde, questioning the very foundation of the relationship between image and the real. As Chinna reminds us, despite its radical aesthetic choices, modernist theatre "was seen as mimetic of, and secondary to, a more primary reality [...] and saw itself as representing and reflecting both an external ontological reality and an internal psychological 'reality'" (Chinna, 2003: 47). This perspective implied not only the existence of an ontological real but most importantly a real that we can understand and interpret.

Thus articulated, the relationship between art and the real represented a stumbling block in the political art debate, rendering any claim of efficacy ultimately flawed.

"'[R]eality', in being 'outside' of its representations is beyond the reach of intervention, and [...] the spectator is, therefore, powerless to effect change in that reality" (Chinna, 2003:197). Postmodern thought's restructuring of the relationship between reality and image liberates political art from the necessity of referring to an

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<sup>15</sup> Some found this aspect to be a limit of postmodern thought. Among theatre scholars, Janelle Reinelt argued that "[a] politics that strives for the analysis and remedy of injustices cannot ignore identity (2015: 243), whilst Geraldine Harris commented that "postmodern discourse has not solved, finished with, done away with or said the last word on the problem of the 'subject', and identity politics remains a central political concern and even increasingly a central political problem" (Harris, 1999: 18).

outside reality whose boundaries are becoming more and more imprecise, and to directly tackle the cultural aspects of advanced capitalist societies<sup>16</sup>.

Within the postmodern condition, the artist's positioning also changed. If the politically engaged artist could attempt to detach herself from the structures of oppression she wanted to attack, in the contemporary context, this has become increasingly difficult. According to Auslander,

the role of the political artist in postmodern culture [...] incorporates the functions of positioning the subject within dominant discourses and of offering strategies of counterhegemonic resistance by exposing processes of cultural control and emphasizing the traces of nonhegemonic discourses within the dominant without claiming to transcend its terms" (Auslander, 1987: 23).

As the following chapters will demonstrate, counterhegemonic resistance and positioning of the subject in relation to competing hegemonic and non-hegemonic discourses are all strategies present in this thesis' case studies.

Postmodernity did challenge the certainties of Marxist discourse, but also offered some tools to analyse power structures and the cultural constructs that support and endorse them. Postmodern politics relies on dissidence and resistance but it does not take dissidence further; it does not turn it into struggle. Dissidence, however, has

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<sup>16</sup> The relationship between social reality and the theatre also emerged in many of the contributions to the volume *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political*, which analyses how a theatre beyond drama and its structures (representation, linear narratives, characters with more or less formed or coherent psychological development) can include the political and what can be considered political of postdramatic forms (Jürs-Munby, Carroll and Giles, 2013).

an important advantage: the awareness that culture is not merely 'superstructure' but a crucial battleground. The postmodern does not propose an alternative discourse *per se*. Rather, it provides theoretical categories to deconstruct hegemonic discourses. It provides instruments, not answers. At the same time, the way postmodernity problematizes representation and the relationship between art and reality offered an extraordinary theoretical challenge to the very possibility of a political theatre. Postmodern theatre is aware of being a cultural construct irredeemably compromised with networks of power and even oppression. Nonetheless, it can deconstruct and question power relationships, language, ideology, and, therefore, contribute to modifying them.

In this thesis, I will analyse how the approaches to the political on stage and around the stage developed in the Italian context. We shall see how Dario Fo and Franca Rame questioned the structures of the theatre on economic terms and how Giuliano Scabia and Armando Punzo embarked on the same questioning of the theatre's structures starting from aesthetic concerns but ultimately developing profoundly political practices. I will also analyse how Franca Rame and Laura Curino foregrounded a gendered perspective which cannot be subsumed within class struggle, and how Marco Baliani and Marco Paolini can no longer refer to Marxism's grand narrative of progress but can only rely on their own, limited perspective upon reality.

## **The Political Theatre Debate in Italy**

In this section, I would like to take a look at the Italian debate on theatre and politics, and at the developments and categories that characterised it. This will give us a



better understanding of the practices I am going to analyse in the following chapters, allowing us to understand them in their own terms. We shall see how, with few exceptions, the most recent literature on the subject ultimately looks at the political in isolation, often failing to link the political to its cultural landscape. This is precisely the gap in the literature this thesis wants to address.

There are many common elements between the Italian and the international debate on theatre and politics, and yet the Italian discussion developed somewhat autonomously and responded to specific historical contingencies. If we look at the present situation, one of the most striking elements is the fact that the very term 'political theatre' does not seem to be particularly popular. Lorenzo Mango noted that many practitioners no longer recognise themselves, their practices, or their aesthetic choices in the term 'political theatre' which refers to a specific history, a definite ideological approach, and a certain theatrical practice. (Mango, 2012: n.p.). As we shall see in the following sections, the reasons are multiple, and often go beyond the scope of theatre studies: they are historical, cultural, and, indeed, political. For a start, the passage from the 1970s to the 1980s as one into *riflusso* or at least as the end of radical politics and mass mobilisation is also present in theatre scholarship and criticism. This narrative is often accompanied by a profound mistrust of postmodernity, considered, in Italy perhaps even more than in other countries, the philosophical backing of relativism and nihilism. After the 1970s, the political theatre question has been articulated for the most part in terms of crisis, and scholarship has therefore neglected the elements of continuity between political theatre during 1970s and other examples of politicised theatre practice in the 1980s and 1990s. The following section will look at the most significant contributions in Italian and it will provide the necessary theoretical and historical points of reference.

Up until the mid-sixties, the political theatre question in Italy seemed a problem exclusively pertaining to the political Left, and we had to wait until 1968 for the issue to come to the forefront of the theatre debate (Vicentini, 1981). The first major publication on the topic is Massimo Castri's 1973 book *Per un teatro politico* (For a political theatre). Castri is the first Italian scholar to provide a thorough introduction to the basic elements of the international debate. Interestingly, as early as 1973, at a moment when political theatre was, supposedly, thriving, Castri already notes a certain difficulty in defining political theatre. A difficulty which, he argues, is a typical feature of periods of rapid social transformation, when every definition can potentially generate a spiralling of contradictions (Castri, 1973: 9-10). His contribution is very much focused on theory and theatrical practice, but he is also aware of the historical contingencies that shaped both the practice and the critical debate. The book identifies three main historical stages: the work of Piscator as first theoretical and practical articulation of modernist forms of political theatre; the link between Brecht and Piscator which provides a methodological approach to Marxist theatre that Castri considers still valid; and the work of Antonin Artaud, which shifts the emphasis on the theatrical event and on the relationship between performer and audience.

Castri's research is based on a profound scepticism towards strict interpretations of historical materialism, and he openly refuses to grant realist aesthetics *a priori* political value. He acknowledges the contradictions and inadequacies of an orthodox Marxist approach to theatre and politics, and points at the dogmatic adherence to realism and rationalism as the principal theoretical problem political theatre must address (1973:14). For Castri, the main problem with orthodox Marxist aesthetic is its emphasis on political content and its resistance to attributing political value to linguistic experimentation. This is because it does not distinguish between formal

experimentation - primarily interested in theatrical form and style - and linguistic experimentation, which focuses on communication (1973: 141). Accordingly, Castri sees the relevance of Brecht and Piscator practice in terms of a profound transformation of theatre's language<sup>17</sup> and communicative structures in order to translate 'theatrically' the new materialist and dialectical vision of society (Castri: 1973: 119). In the development of political theatre, he points to the functional progression of two key elements: on the one side aesthetic experimentation, along with innovation in the choice of content. On the other hand, he sees theatre's most profoundly political aspect in its going beyond the division between production and fruition, artist and audience; a division that is at the basis of our concept of the theatre as a product to be sold on the market. This chasm is bridged by a progressive opening of theatrical structures in the moment of creation, production, and fruition (Castri, 1973: 19). For Castri the ultimate aim of any kind of political theatrical practice is to transform the theatre into a "site/instrument of collective elaboration of culture [...] that is to say, the community's complete 'social' appropriation of the theatrical instrument" (Castri, 1973:18). Compared to the ones on Brecht and Piscator, Castri's intervention on the Artaudian model is less clear and less cohesive. However, he does highlight some elements of Artaud's writings that not only were relevant for experimental theatre during the 1970s but also enrich the discussion and challenge some problematic aspects of Marxist theatre, for example

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<sup>17</sup> According to Castri, in Brecht "we are already very far from a simplistically thematic concept of political theatre: it's the theatre itself as an instrument of communication and elaboration of culture that can and must function 'politically'; not in the sense of making itself useful by communicating revolutionary content, but in the sense of being 'structured' in such a way as to modify the spectator's mental habits and behaviours in order to make her politically active" (Castri, 1973: 136).

by redefining the division between performer and spectator. Moreover, Artaud's emphasis on individual liberation as the necessary requirement for any revolution can productively challenge Marxist reliance on the materialist concept of history<sup>18</sup>.

In 1981, Claudio Vicentini published the second major contribution to the debate. His book is in part a response to Castri and focuses on political theatre's main theoretical problems. Two elements in Vicentini's work are of particular importance. Firstly, he highlights for the first time some crucial problems in the way scholarship often articulates the political theatre question, and he does so through what might seem a motley selection of case studies: Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Bertolt Brecht, The Living Theatre, and The San Francisco Mime Troupe. Secondly, he is the first Italian scholar to pay attention to the relationship between the New Left and political theatre. Writing in 1981, Vicentini is able to step back, evaluate the existing scholarship, and identify a major historical milestone in the productive encounter between the New Left and American experimental theatre in the 1960s (Vicentini, 1981: 40). In his reassessment of the political theatre question, he focuses on theatre's relationship with struggle and ideology, and particularly on one of the thorniest theoretical problems, that of efficacy. Building his argument upon a rejection of economic determinism and a concept of culture as independent from the economic base, Vicentini argues that political theatre's value should be measured against ideology rather than against immediate political confrontation (*scontro*

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<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that in 1973, when Castri's book was published, this was a relatively novel element in the Italian debate. The first translations of Artaud's writings were published in the mid-sixties, and a complete translation of *The Theatre and its Double* was published only in 1968. Moreover, despite Castri's attention and the influence the Artaudian model had on Italian practitioners, Artaud's writings never fully entered the political theatre debate in Italy.

*politico*). Political confrontation is, according to Vicentini, only one aspect of class struggle (*lotta di classe*), whilst ideology is a weapon of class struggle but not necessarily of political confrontation. As a cultural product, the theatre's political function can only be assessed in relation to ideology, that is, in relation to the working class' values and cultural points of reference (Vicentini, 1981: 22).

Vicentini's argument, which attempts to liberate theatre theory from the trap of 'efficacy', implies that what matters in the assessment of a work of art's political function is its ideological alignment, the set of values it endorses, stands for, or opposes, whether consciously or unconsciously. Vicentini's argument had profound implications, even if he did not fully articulate them. If we assess the theatre's political value against ideology instead of political confrontation, the most immediate consequence is not that all theatre is political because it endorses or opposes a hegemonic force, but rather that *all theatre can be analysed politically*. The debate over efficacy can be recognised for what it is, a dead end that blocks any further analysis of the relationship between theatre and the political.

Ultimately, Vicentini identifies the key element of political theatre in its awareness of its own function and positioning. Therefore, political theatre can be defined as:

A theatrical product that possesses an awareness of its own political character and often manifests it in the features it assumes. In many cases we can, in fact, establish that a show has been intentionally built as a political weapon on the basis of its internal organisation, the themes it tackles, the mechanisms it utilises, and the context in which it places itself (Vicentini, 1981: 22).

Although not fully developed, his attention on the relationship between theatre, ideology, and its historical context aims at pushing theory towards a more thorough analysis that would push the political theatre debate out of its standstill. Ultimately, for Vicentini, “theatrical activity acquires meaning only in relation to other activities” (Vicentini, 1981: 43).

Castri’s and Vicentini’s contributions deserve our attention for several reasons. Whilst Castri focuses on practice and language and introduces the Artaudian model as a challenge to Marxist and left-wing theatre, Vicentini adds a good understanding of the politics of the New Left and develops a solid, alternative argument on the relationship between art, politics, and ideology. Unfortunately, the debate after Vicentini did not succeed in developing a coherent theory of political theatre that could account for both modernist Marxist theatre and more recent forms of political performance. The discussion in Italy was pushed to one side at the end of the 1970s, and when it was resumed, during the 1990s, it struggled to engage fully with the theoretical categories elaborated after the 1970s. Incapable of conceiving politically engaged performance beyond the boundaries of Marxist theatre, recent theatre criticism often articulated the political theatre question either in terms of ‘crisis’ (crisis of Marxist theatre, end of 1970s political movements, political disengagement and retreat into the private, etc.), or as an old problem that no longer concerns theatre practice or scholarship. In Oliviero Ponte di Pino’s words “an explicitly political theatre seemed to be confined to an ‘adolescent phase’ of aesthetic development, when it was still possible to confuse art with propaganda, to subordinate aesthetic to ideology” (Ponte di Pino, 1996-1999: n.p.). Here we find some of the generalisations already reviewed at the beginning of this chapter, such as the hierarchical structure based upon art’s supposed superiority to other aspects of social life, or an

understanding of aesthetic autonomy as a dogmatic isolation from other cultural or political discourses.

In the 1990s, a new strand of engaged theatre practice emerged and became hugely popular. For Ponte di Pino, writing on the theatre monthly *Hystrio* in 2003, during the 1990s there is a return to an explicit thematic engagement with the political. In this historical moment, the theatre started tackling political and social problems that “seemed to have been previously abandoned in the name of aesthetic autonomy” (Ponte di Pino, 2003: 15). In the same article, he argues that the political tendencies within contemporary Italian theatre can be divided into two main strands. On the one hand, we have a strong attention to the national past, which “re-establishes a relationship with a collective memory that had been cancelled by the social body’s fragmentation, by public education’s aboulia, and by mass media’s forgetfulness” (Ponte di Pino, 2003:16). On the other hand, we encounter a theatre that leaves its usual sites and “works in the areas social marginality” (Ponte di Pino, 2003: 15). These two main strands of politically engaged performance are indeed clearly visible in contemporary Italian practice. However, in Ponte di Pino’s article the exact terms of this representation of the past remain vague, and the uncritical use of the word ‘marginality’ avoids questioning the relationship between theatre practice and the supposed areas of social marginality. Ultimately, Ponte di Pino still sees political theatre as a possible practice if the theatre stays true to a Western tradition that conceives the stage as

the site where the divisions that run through the social body [...] can come to light and become object of experience, awareness, and collective reflection. [...] Political theatre’s function is to place conflict once again

centre stage, so that it can find an outlet and a political expression (Ponte di Pino, 2003:16).

The 2012 collection of essays on theatre and the political edited by Stefano Casi and Elena Di Gioia collects contributions from scholars, theatre critics and practitioners that map the breadth of approaches to the problem. In his contribution to the volume, Lorenzo Mango looks at how the relationship between theatre and politics developed in recent years and argues that the new political theatre

abhors the consolatory and catastrophic umbrella of ideology, [...] repudiates dogmatism and certainties and prefers a dialectics of doubt; [...] rejects modernity's 'grand narratives' and seeks [...] postmodernity's 'small narratives', local, partial, but living (Mango, 2012: n.p.).

Interestingly, here Mango acknowledges postmodern politics' potential, and yet, his words seem to imply that any ideological framework is by definition dogmatic.

Building on these premises, Mango broadly defines political theatre in terms of critical narrations and critical discourse: "the signs of a possible political character of the theatre" can be found when performance presents "a critical narration of the world and manifests a critical discourse upon the world, in the perspective of its change" (Mango, 2012: n.p.).

As we can already see, the scholarship developed between the 1960s and the 1970s seems to have scarce resonance in the contemporary debate, which engages only at a superficial level with categories such as ideology or hegemony, seen as heritage of the Marxist Left rather than shared theoretical point of reference. But it is the very term political theatre that has fallen into disrepute. In a recent article, Ponte di Pino



looks at Italian practitioners' and critics' attitude towards political theatre and reports that often "political theatre appears outdated due to its ideological premises, and it is suspected to be vehicle of propaganda and indoctrination, [...] of a rigid, ideologically predetermined interpretation of the world" (Ponte di Pino, 2010: 12). Focussing on scholarship rather than artistic practice, Marco De Marinis argues that as the umbrella term 'political theatre', which includes practices as diverse as Piscator's theatre, agitprop, Brecht's epic theatre, and Soviet mass theatre, might actually be counterproductive. The risk of relying on this category is

to cover up the diversity of issues and experiences, reconstructing a neat landscape and a linear, unitary development where there were, for the most part, contrasts, contradictions, polemics, breaks, and often irreconcilable needs (De Marinis, 2012: n.p.).

De Marinis is right in warning that the careless use of such a wide umbrella term can be detrimental to both scholarship and practice. However, he does not consider the necessity to historicize the term, to place it in its context, and to look at it with perspective.

In the last twenty years, another category superseded 'political theatre' in Italian scholarship and criticism, that of *teatro civile*, which can be translated as 'civic' or 'civil' theatre. The term is widely used and several publications survey and analyse the practices falling under this broad category. *Teatro civile* is a category that tries to account for all the politically committed theatre that cannot be directly referred to Marxist politics. Ponte di Pino explains the difference between political theatre and *teatro civile* in terms of the artist's positioning in relation to the audience and the material.

[D]irector and actor in a *political show* consider themselves a vanguard because they possess a truth they have to present to the public in the most convincing way. Those who make *teatro civile*, on the other hand, want to place themselves at the spectators' level: her [the practitioner's] search for the truth is [...] a *work in progress*, a process always in becoming (2010: 12 emphasis in original).

Ponte di Pino identifies here a shift in the practice's relationship with its public, a shift from a theatre at the vanguard of a struggle, to another that more humbly places itself within the conflicts that run through the social fabric. In the following chapters, I will analyse this aspect in greater detail, especially in the work of Baliani, Paolini, Curino, and Compagnia della Fortezza.

In 2010, journalist and performer Daniele Biacchessi published a review of the phenomenon which focuses on performances that address social issues or narrate significant episodes of recent Italian history. Biacchessi's emphasis is on collective memory, on the political value of the act of remembering and on *teatro civile's* thematic engagement with history. In 2013 performer and author Giulio Cavalli and his company *Bottega dei Mestieri Teatrali* (Theatre Crafts Workshop) founded the *Centro di Documentazione Teatro Civile*, (Civil Theatre Documentation Centre), a private centre that aims at becoming a platform for discussion, analysis, and sharing of creative practices. The founding document states that

*teatro civile* is a theatre of memory that [...] digs to reach the depth of recent history's unclear events, to narrate them to those who had no knowledge of them, those who forgot them, and those who did not want to listen to them (Bottega dei Mestieri Teatrali, 2013: n.p.).

A definition that confirms an explicit thematic engagement, and a strong relationship between a specific aesthetic - narration - and a shared methodology characterised by in-depth research into primary sources usually associated with documentary theatre.

Letizia Bernazza's 2012 monograph on *teatro civile* also places a strong emphasis on identity, on memory, and on the relationship between artist and community. She explicitly conflates *teatro civile* with storytelling theatre - thereby pairing political function with a specific aesthetic form (2012: 25). According to Bernazza *teatro civile* is

a medium to understand reality, to subtract from oblivion facts that marked and still mark contemporary society; and it is the place where we can penetrate conflicts emerging from fears and uncertainties. *Teatro Civile*, by presenting the spectator with narrations of events that concern her, [...] ties once again the link between individual and society (Bernazza, 2012: 25).

Interestingly, Bernazza's definition places particular emphasis not only on narration and memory but also on the live encounter, on the relationship established by the sharing of an aesthetic experience. And yet, she describes a one-way relationship whereby the performers are the bearers of truth presented to the audience, in contrast with the definition of *teatro civile* offered by Ponte di Pino. Bernazza's definition also betrays a prejudice against postmodernity. For Bernazza *teatro civile* can be defined as a form of communication that

goes beyond the fragmentariness, the speed, the synthesis of the present, imbued with plurality and chaos, typical connotations of the

*postmodern*. That is, of that most mobile, ephemeral, deciduous part of modernity, not regulated by metaphysical foundations and universal laws (Bernazza, 2012: 28, emphasis in original).

Despite her acritical and often rhetorical use of words like memory and history (capitalised in her book) or *polis*, Bernazza's book makes one very important point. It highlights that *teatro civile*'s emphasis on history and collective memory and the huge popularity that this type of performance enjoyed for over fifteen years are a response to a widespread necessity of engaging with an often contested past (Bernazza, 2012: 32). In a recent essay she articulates this aspect further and defines *teatro civile* as a cultural phenomenon rather than as a theatrical genre; a phenomenon constituted by "several attempts to contrast the political and cultural status quo, a status quo which tends to exclude the problematic aspects within our communities and to remove chunks of past and present History" (Bernazza, 2012: n.p.).

Recent Italian scholarship and criticism highlighted many important features of politically engaged theatre in the last thirty years, such as the attention to collective memory, the popularity of storytelling over other forms, and the rejection of all-encompassing ideological frameworks. It has been, however, too quick in dismissing the categories and vocabulary of political theatre. *Teatro civile*, although an almost ubiquitous label in Italian theatre criticism throughout the 1990s and 2000s, is now less popular both as a genre and as a theoretical category. This decline in popularity is perhaps a consequence of the limited analysis dedicated to its most interesting aspects. Beyond collective memory and national history, little attention has been dedicated to other aspects such as agency, subjectivity, or relationship with the audience. In this thesis, I will analyse contemporary political theatre acknowledging

the changes and developments that occurred since the end of the mass movements without forsaking altogether the categories and vocabulary that informed the debate up until the beginning of the 1980s.

## **Intellectual Commitment in Post-war Italy**

As the section above illustrates, the Italian debate on theatre and politics developed somewhat independently, incorporating part of the international debate whilst developing categories and theoretical approaches specific to the Italian context. Before we proceed any further, I would like to look into another category specific to the Italian cultural debate which can shed light upon the transformations of politically engaged theatre in the last three decades: *impegno*. *Impegno*, which can be translated as engagement or commitment, has been since the post-war years a fundamental category within the Italian cultural debate<sup>19</sup>. The *impegno* debate places the relationship between the intellectual, cultural production, and society on a markedly political terrain. Theatre scholarship and criticism traditionally preferred categories specific to the field, such as political theatre. Nonetheless, I believe that incorporating the concept of *impegno* in an analysis of political theatre in Italy can provide a useful theoretical tool to reframe the political theatre question and to redraw its boundaries.

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<sup>19</sup> In his contribution to the Cambridge Companion to Modern Italian Culture, David Ward argues that the close relationship between Italian intellectuals and politics “comes from a long tradition going back to the Middle Ages” (80). This relationship is characterised by the difficulty of bridging the gap between intellectuals and civil society. This failure is, according to Ward, the object of Antonio Gramsci’s reflection in prison (Ward, 2001).

The concept of intellectual commitment is by no means unique to the Italian debate. Several Western cultural traditions refer to commitment or engagement as categories that embody the link between culture and politics<sup>20</sup>. In different cultural traditions commitment usually refers to an active, conscious support to left-wing values. Graham Bartram argues, “left-wing artists and intellectuals who have made political *engagement* an explicit theme of their artistic theory and practice” whilst “intellectuals that identified with the values of the right – Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot are two notable examples – have not on the whole seen their function as artists as one directly linked to their political beliefs” (Bartram, 1982: 83 emphasis in original).

In the Italian context the concept of *impegno* is “normally associated with a specific historical period – from the late 1940s to the 1960s – in which cultural and political actors converged on a communal project based on strict ideological premises and tied to emancipatory and potentially revolutionary action” (Antonello and Mussnug, 2009: 9). The publication of Antonio Gramsci’s prison notebooks in the late 1940s fuelled the discussion, by placing culture at the heart of political struggle and by highlighting the intellectual’s role as that of an agent whose work operates at the intersection of cultural and economic relationships, holding together or questioning the hegemonic ideology<sup>21</sup>. The importance of Gramsci’s contribution to Italian

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<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of the British context see Stefan Collini’s *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (2006). For the French context, Sunil Khilnani’s book *Arguing for Revolution: The Intellectual Left in Postwar France* (1993). For the American context, Russell Jacoby’s *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of the Academe* (1987) and Richard Posner’s *Public Intellectuals: a Study of Decline* (2001). Interestingly, all these publications draw the picture of a decline, an absence, or a withdrawal from politics.

<sup>21</sup> In a recent article, Aldo Tortorella effectively summarizes Gramsci’s fundamental contribution to the debate: “Each class assuming a ruling function in society finds and forms its own intellectuals who are organic to that particular class and to its system of human relationships. They

cultural debate lies in the fact that his writings looked at cultural production in relation to class struggle, without subsuming culture under economic structures. What cultural production does is fostering and perpetuating the system of values that legitimates economic arrangements and class divisions. We can, therefore, assess its political quality – reactionary, resistant, revolutionary, etc. – only within those systems of values and not against the priorities of direct political confrontation. As we shall see in Chapter Three, not only his theories, but Gramsci himself remained a fundamental point of reference for great part of the Italian Left and he greatly influenced Dario Fo's understanding of theatre's contribution to class struggle.

Left-wing writers and artists constituted an intellectual elite by definition counterhegemonic which “derived much authority and vitality from its status as a culture of opposition and critique” (Gordon, 2000:199). However, the relationship between public intellectuals, committed artists and parties of the Left was far from straightforward. The Italian Communist Party (PCI) often exerted direct control over cultural activities, leaving limited freedom to intellectuals and artists. A quarrel between writer Elio Vittorini and PCI secretary Palmiro Togliatti on the pages of the journal *Il Politecnico* is considered the first rupture between public intellectuals and parties of the Left and became emblematic of an often conflictive relationship<sup>22</sup>. On the pages of *Il Politecnico*, Vittorini - who was close to the PCI – defended

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build, through their work, a cultural hegemony which contributes to holding that particular system together. If another class raises to power - as it was the case with the merchant and industrial bourgeoisie against landed aristocracy - the new class aspiring to hegemony will bring a new culture, that is another way of conceiving human relationships, and will therefore produce new intellectuals organic to that class” (Tortorella, 2006/2007: 186).

<sup>22</sup> For a thorough introduction to the Vittorini-Togliatti polemic and its implications, see Piero Lucia (2003: 81-92).

intellectual autonomy from the party against Togliatti's claim that the communist intellectual's duty is to conform to the party line. Although controversial, Togliatti's position was highly influential, to the point that within the Italian Left, anchored to the conflation of the working class and the party, the Gramscian notion of organic intellectual was often bent to indicate alignment not to working class values but to the party itself (Antonello, 2012: 45-46).

In the post-war interpretations of the concept, *impegno* revolved around two main elements: the intellectual and the written word. Historically, *impegno* has been strongly author-centred, with the artist/intellectual, his<sup>23</sup> individuality, and his explicit political positioning placed at the source of his authority. His persona, perhaps even more than his production, was the catalyst in the struggle for working class cultural hegemony; his task was "to co-opt individuals into a communal project of global transformation" (Antonello and Mussnug, 2009: 10). The centrality of their persona was such that their influence derived not only from their literary work but in great part from their personal commitment. *Impegno* became "a validating token" that allowed scholars and literary critics "to bypass the formal, stylistic, and aesthetic shortcomings of a given work of art" (Antonello and Mussnug, 2009: 9).

Secondly, the concept of intellectual engagement granted unquestioned primacy to the written word over other media. Culture was seen almost exclusively as literary culture<sup>24</sup>. Idealistic and romantic thought (and Benedetto Croce's influence in

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<sup>23</sup> My use of the male pronoun here is deliberate, public intellectuals in the post-war years were for the most part men.

<sup>24</sup> This supposition was rooted even among theatre practitioners, who often granted higher status to literary culture. For example, Giorgio Strehler famously stated that "[i]n theatre there is only



particular) ingrained in Italian culture the assumption that “literature, better than other discursive practices, represents the preferred intellectual modality for the understanding of phenomena” and that “beyond the literary field exists only technical and instrumental knowledge” (Antonello, 2012: 50). In addition, popular and mass culture’s pernicious role under Fascism caused Italian left-wing intellectuals to become “deeply suspicious of what they considered to be the conservative agenda lying behind mass culture” (Ward, 2001: 90). This emphasis on written culture and on literature especially is one of the reasons why the theatre has been left at the margins of the *impegno* debate. Recent scholarship, however, included other media into the picture, not only cinema, but also the web (Antonello, 2012), and Italian storytelling theatre (Antonello, 2009).

Since the end of the 1970s, the role of the intellectual in Italian cultural life and the very concept of *impegno* evolved rapidly. Similarly to what happened with political theatre, the slow disappearance of overtly Marxist forms of engagement has often been explained in terms of crisis rather than as an adaptation of old forms of artistic and intellectual commitment to a different historical context<sup>25</sup>. This strand of cultural and literary criticism focused its attention on the demise of post-war forms of

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one artist: the author of the dramatic text. Only one vocation: that of the poet. Everything else [...] is a matter of craft, not of art” (Strehler, 1974: 162).

<sup>25</sup> The publications that articulate this change in terms of crisis are many. Among them I would like to mention Simonetta Fiori’s book-length interview to Alberto Asor Rosa, one of the most distinguished Italian literary critics (2010). In a recent special issue of the cultural bimonthly *MicroMega* (6/2013) several contributions articulate the transformation of *impegno* in terms of crisis, including those penned by Paolo Flores D’Arcais, Andrea Camilleri, Salvatore Settis, and Ermanno Rea.

commitment and overlooked alternative forms, not immediately connected to clear ideological positions.

More recently, Italian studies in Britain tried to move beyond the crisis paradigm and to expand the area of research beyond the literary field. This new strand of research paid closer attention to how *impegno* has changed in the last three decades in relation to the economic, political, and social context and to how it responded to the swift development of mass communication and new media. This new form of intellectual commitment is usually detached from strictly Marxist frameworks, it includes a multiplicity of political perspectives, it productively engages with different media, and has a more articulate relationship with readers and audiences.

If we take few definitions of *impegno* in recent scholarship, we can almost immediately perceive the absence of fixed ideological underpinnings. For example, film scholar Alan O’Leary defines engagement “as the political or civil action [*azione politica o civile*] of an intellectual who realises that abstention is a stratagem, a giving in to the status quo, and opts for the conscious choice of entering the arena, without ever abandoning her own critical judgement” (2007: 186). O’Leary’s definition of *impegno*, although still author-centred, is flexible enough to be applied to contemporary cultural practices, and has at its heart public engagement and critical judgement. *Impegno* is an action, not a tag or an attitude. In a more recent publication, O’Leary takes his reflection a step further and provides a definition of *impegno* which brings forth a crucial change in our approach to the debate. He defines commitment not as “an attitude deliberately taken on by the artist-intellectual” or as a “tag for the political or social concerns of the individual auteur-director” (2009: 215) but rather as a *discourse*,

in the sense the term is used in the social sciences. In other words, I will characterize *impegno* as a set of conditions (with both a structure and a history) that facilitate but delimit particular utterances and representations, and which find their medium in a range of individual functions from academic to public intellectual to *engagé* director (O’Leary: 2009: 215-216).

This definition of *impegno* as a *set of conditions* shifts the emphasis from the author to the context in which the public intellectual operates and allows O’Leary to analyse engaged cinema as a cultural product that exists in, refers to, and dialogues with a precise historical and social context. My strategy for the analysis of political theatre in Italy is in alignment with O’Leary’s.

Jennifer Burns’ *Fragments of Impegno* dismantles the concept of *impegno* as uncritical alignment to a singular political framework. According to Burns, the very notion of *impegno* is a grand narrative, and as such, in postmodern culture it is either likely to succumb or be bound to change. In her analysis of contemporary Italian fiction, *impegno*, liberated from ideological straitjackets, evolves into new dynamic form: the “single, overarching agenda” that informed the work of committed intellectuals in the immediate post-war years, broke up into “a fragmentary attention to specific issues” (Burns, 2001:1). The result is a move from the macro-political to the micro-political, to a diffused, self-questioning type of engagement, which replaced adherence to an ideological model with a heightened sense of civic responsibility. The purpose of this contemporary type of *impegno* is “discovering the place of literature within culture and of culture within society, and then of promoting the use of culture as an inclusive and multi-referential area of exploration in which all classes in society can participate” (Burns, 2001: 14).

Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug explicitly place contemporary *impegno* in a postmodern framework, thereby challenging the idea that political commitment would be incompatible with a postmodernity. In their introduction to the edited collection *Postmodern Impegno* (2009), they build on Jameson's definition of the postmodern as "a cultural dominant: a conception which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate features" (Jameson in Antonello and Mussgnug, 2005: 5). Within this cultural dominant, engagement is indeed still possible, but it mutates from hegemonic to post-hegemonic. Where in the post-war years the "*engagé* writer or filmmaker had to shape collective consciousness" (10) and, in a Gramscian sense, strive towards working-class cultural hegemony, *impegno* in a postmodern framework "is not defined as a struggle for a new hegemonic affirmation – the transformation of plurality into a new *habitus* – but as a challenge to any form of hegemony" (Antonello and Mussgnug, 2009: 11).

Recent research highlighted another problematic aspect common to both artistic/cultural practices and critical analysis. The post-war author-centric forms of *impegno* often considered audiences and readers as homogeneous, abstract entities: the 'working classes', the 'masses', the 'people'. Pierpaolo Antonello interprets the post-war relationship between intellectuals and the public in terms of a 'deficit model' "that is to say, on the premise that there is an intrinsic lack in terms of knowledge in the so-called 'subaltern classes'" (2012: 58). Within this model, the extensive use of the term 'people' (*popolo* in Italian) was symptomatic of Italian leftwing culture's elitism. The people was "never considered an autonomous interlocutor, a 'public', but always a subaltern social aggregate, to be conceptualized and confronted through a paternalistic attitude not immune from a sense of aristocratic contempt" (Antonello, 2012: 57). The theatre, as I will explain in Chapter

Four, has been by no means immune from this paternalistic attitude. However, the radical Left during the 1970s criticised this position and from the late 1970s, with the crisis of Italian industrialisation and the gradual disruption the radical Left, the concepts of proletariat, class, and class struggle, and indeed of people<sup>26</sup> were no longer representative of the complex social reality of late capitalism.

During the 1980s and 1990s engaged theatre moved away from Marxist politics and looked out for a different interlocutor, for diverse communities and audiences no longer bound to class affiliation. Contemporary forms of commitment are characterised by a more sophisticated relationship between intellectual and the public. Recent scholarship analysed this different approach to audience and readership and reframed the concept of *impegno* to account for this new attitude. Jennifer Burns, for example, proposed an approach to *impegno* that dispenses with the old author-centric concept and moves towards a more reader-centric approach. In this framework the writer does no longer perceive herself as part of an intellectual class in relation to society, a specific class, or the *popolo*, but simply as an individual who, through writing, communicates with an individual reader and has a precise ethical commitment to her. Pierpaolo Antonello notices that contemporary intellectuals have gone beyond literary culture and are now trying to reach the public

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<sup>26</sup> The notion of *popolo* (people) and of *popolare* (popular) and their evolution through time played an important role in the development of post-war artistic practices, but it is a concept characterised by an inherent ambiguity. The term is, according to Giorgio Agamben “amphibious”, a polar concept that does not have a unitary referent (2008: 31). Instead, *popolo* stands for a “dialectical oscillation” which moves between inclusion and exclusion; the body politic, the citizens on one side and the poor, the disenfranchised, the marginal on the other: “there, inclusion without exceptions; here, exclusion without hope. On one extreme is the State, the sum of all citizens, integrated and sovereign; on the other the banned, the miserable, the oppressed, the defeated” (Agamben, 2008: 31).

through a variety of media, including television and social media. This shift also encompasses a different relationship with the audience. He, therefore, rearticulates engagement as an approach to intellectual practice that places individual responsibility and critical awareness at the centre. He then refers to Avishai Margalit's concept of 'thick relationship' (2002) to explain what significance the 'public' has in this post-ideological, post-hegemonic type of *impegno*. He notes that "[e]ngagement and commitment possess relational and passional connotations, more strictly linked to the private sphere than to the public one" (Antonello, 2012: 143). Commitment no longer addresses the collective or the old uniform categories beholders of revolutionary political agency: the people, the working class. Rather, commitment, in its relational and passional aspects, defines forms of 'thick' relationships' that hold 'the other' as their referent and interlocutor. An other to be intended not as the 'Other' with capital O, a generic object of difference, but rather as the neighbour, the near and dear, a specific reader, spectator, or interlocutor. The 'thick relationships' as articulated by Margalit "depend upon an ethical disposition and not upon moral impositions, they are grafted upon proximity and relational constancy rather than upon abstract forms" (Antonello, 2012: 143).

Antonello, Burns, and in part O'Leary describe an ethical turn that renounces revolutionary discourse, but that exposes the intellectual to a greater individual responsibility. This ethical turn productively rearticulates the relationship between intellectual and public but does not address the question of power, which, as I hope to demonstrate in the following analysis, is more pressing than ever. Nonetheless, all the elements mentioned above, the attention to the micro-political rather than to the macro-structure, the inclusion of several perspectives in lieu of a Marxist unitary interpretation, and the renewed relationship with the public are indeed present not

only in contemporary literature but also in contemporary theatre. Reframing the theatre and politics question in terms of commitment can provide a new perspective on theatrical practice. I believe that the concept of *impegno* can help theatre studies reassess and redefine the concept of political theatre, whilst theatre studies can productively widen the boundaries of the *impegno* debate by analysing how engagement can be articulated within different media, within collaborative creative processes, and through a form that incorporates the textual, the visual, the aural, and the performer's live presence.

## 2. Before 1968

In this chapter, I will be looking at the political question in Italian theatre, at the historical contingencies and artistic practices that influenced it, focusing on the years between 1945 and 1967. I will focus on two examples of theatre practices that put forward important political questions that will inform my case studies. The first example is that of the birth of *teatri stabili*, publicly funded institutions conceived as a public service. The second example focuses on the Italian alternative scene and the neo-avant-garde between the 1950s and the 1960s, which represent the first radical break from commercial and state-funded theatre.

The period between 1945 and 1967 corresponds to the first twenty years of the republican era and represents a crucial moment in Italian history. Similarly to most historiographic conventions, the dates are only indicative, and yet significant. They mark respectively the end of World War II and the beginning of the wave of political protests that exploded in 1968. Moreover, in 1967 a group of prominent theatre critics and practitioners, along with artists and intellectuals linked to the 1960s neo-avant-garde, gathered in Ivrea, in north-west Italy, for a conference that aimed at analysing and defining radical, alternative, and avant-garde theatre in Italy. The conference became a landmark moment in Italian theatre historiography, the moment that assessed the neo-avant-garde's research and harboured a new season.

The birth of the *stabili* model and the neo-avant-garde's linguistic research are two good examples of how Italian theatre started engaging with important political questions before the outbreak of 1968. The *stabili* were, and in part still are, the



model of a public theatre that exists outside of the market and that attempts to reach the popular audience, even if often with problematic results. In the following chapters, we shall see how the *stabili* production model became a fundamental point of reference for future practices, whether rejected, as in the case of Dario Fo, or reclaimed as with the work of Compagnia della Fortezza. The *stabili* also played a fundamental role in shaping the reception of Bertolt Brecht's work in the country, with productions that will be forcefully questioned by the radical Left. The neo-avant-garde, on the other hand, proposed a challenge not only to production structures but to language and aesthetics. As we shall see in the following chapters, going back to drama after the neo-avant-garde's work will be increasingly difficult. All the practices included in my case studies will bridge commitment to an aesthetic research that moves beyond the reach of drama.

### **The *Teatro Stabile*: a Theatre for the People**

At the end of World War II, Italy was a country economically and politically in ruins. Great part of its infrastructures, its political and cultural institutions, its very social fabric needed to be rebuilt almost from scratch. However, the democratic state guaranteed almost complete freedom of expression and the generous financial support granted by the Marshall Plan promoted fast economic growth. From a political point of view, the first few years of the Republic were characterised by the necessity of working towards national cohesion and every sector of Italian society was called to contribute to the effort. The theatre was not an exception. After twenty years of dictatorship, the theatre endeavoured to become a cultural institution capable of playing a key role in the country's democratic life, an art form able to

unify, inspire, and educate the nation. The historical accounts of this period, such as Tessari's (1996) or Meldolesi's (2008) draw the picture of an Italian scene composed for the most part of touring companies, some of them receiving limited state funding, many struggling to survive in the hardships of post-war Italy. Another element of discussion was the fact that Italian practitioners had been almost completely isolated from the rest of Europe for twenty years. European developments, such as director's theatre, arrived only after the fall of the regime. Also, more than other arts, Italian post-war theatre seemed fossilised in nineteenth-century forms, plagued by amateurism and lack of funding. In the immediate post-war years, Italian theatre practitioners faced some significant challenges. The first one was political: the necessity to relate artistic work to the national effort, finding a place for the arts in a country that was on its knees. The second was aesthetic: after twenty years of isolation, Italian artists were finally able to confront themselves with the rest of Europe. The third question was related to the public: Italian practitioners of the late forties had to find a new audience and had to build a new bond with theatregoers and with the larger community. In this context, one artistic project stood out for its ambition and vision: the Piccolo Teatro (Little Theatre) of Milan, the first *teatro stabile* in Italy. In the post-war years, the Piccolo developed the most articulate and comprehensive answer to the pressing questions listed above. Highly influential and fiercely debated, Piccolo's work between 1947 and the end of the 1960s left a long-lasting legacy that goes beyond theatre practice and touches the relationship between arts, society, and politics. This section will look into Piccolo Teatro's first fifteen years of activity, examining its political commitment, its organisation, its intended relationship with the audience, its aesthetic choices.

Piccolo Teatro was founded in Milan in 1947 by Paolo Grassi (1919-1981), a theatre critic for the socialist newspaper *Avanti!*, and actor and director Giorgio Strehler (1921-1997). Grassi was in charge of production and administration whilst Strehler became the theatre's artistic director. Grassi and Strehler conceived Piccolo Teatro as a publicly funded<sup>27</sup> venue with its company, primarily concerned with in-house production; an institution firmly rooted in the context of post-war Milan, but able to spread its influence at a national level (Hirst, 1993: 6). Inspired by Jean Vilar's *Théâtre National Populaire*<sup>28</sup>, during the early 1950s Strehler and Grassi developed the Piccolo to be a 'theatre for the people', an institution that mirrored the ideals of the Resistance and of the new democratic republic, capable of gathering a wide and diverse audience. In terms of production and administration, Strehler and Grassi's choices were all oriented towards building a permanent institution capable of providing the audience with affordable tickets and the artists with a freedom from the market that the traditional touring company never enjoyed. Piccolo's administrative model was soon exported outside of Milan, becoming the blueprint for the contemporary *teatro stabile* (which can be translated as 'stable theatre' or

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<sup>27</sup> For an analysis of state funding of the theatre in Italy, see Franklin (1977).

<sup>28</sup> Vilar was a great influence for Strehler and Grassi, not only in his approach to theatre as a public service, but also in his restructuring of popular theatre's repertoire. In their study of popular theatre, David Bradby and John McCormick thus summarise Vilar's approach: "His aim, as we have seen, was not revolution but reunion. He consistently held out against the suggestion that popular theatre must dispense with the classics, regarding this as a position of cultural terrorism. He described the director's job as that of throwing away the bourgeois wrappings around the great cultural monuments. He felt it was quite false to claim that the works of Molière and Shakespeare were part of the bourgeois heritage: they were plays which could speak directly to a popular audience if stripped of their middle class cultural accretions" (Bradby and McCormick, 1978: 127).

'permanent theatre') an autonomous public institution strongly linked to its local community, a venue with its own permanent company.

Post-war Milan's vibrant cultural environment played a fundamental role in the birth of the Piccolo and in the development of its innovative approach to the politics of the theatre. Strehler's writings (1974) and other sources (Guazzotti, 1965; Hirst, 1993; Tessari, 1996) agree that the Piccolo was a direct product of this environment and that Strehler and Grassi's enterprise would not have been possible in another context. The founders of the Piccolo played an active part in the heterogeneous community of young antifascist intellectuals that gathered in Milan straight after the war. Within this cultural circle, the organisation of culture was considered an essential component of democratic life, and they conceived the intellectual and the artist's role as an integral part of antifascist, progressive political process (Guazzotti, 1965: 26). At the core of Strehler and Grassi's artistic project lay precisely the conviction that cultural activities needed to become an active component of the new democratic sociality, of the individual's development, and of the community's life. The development of adequate cultural policies was integral to their vision. The theatre in particular needed "updating, in-depth reflection, social commitment, and a new audience" (Guazzotti, 1965: 27).

More specifically, Strehler and Grassi often refer in their writings to two concepts strictly linked to one another: the first one is that of 'theatre as public service', the second one that of 'theatre for the people'. According to David Hirst, Strehler and Grassi considered the *teatro stabile* as an institution providing a public service for the entire community, a service as important as education or public health (1993: 6). A definition that implies state backing and "the citizens' awareness – and, therefore, commitment – to organise adequately even the cultural aspects of their social

experience” (Guazzotti, 1965: 31), in this case, the fruition of theatre as a cultural product. Hence, theatre as public service is the endeavour of an entire community, a communal effort whereby the spectators are not only consumers of a cultural product but active participants to a secular social practice. Linked to this concept is the one of ‘theatre for the people’ which implied the theatre’s commitment to promoting and producing art for a wide audience, beyond the restricted group of habitual theatregoers. Since the beginning of its activity, Piccolo Teatro aimed at becoming integral part of the city, drawing to the theatre “people who were either uninterested or who seemed determined to stay away” (Strehler and Grassi, 1964: 29), and nurturing an audience that cut across class subscriptions, for example via specially priced tickets for workers and students, tickets sold in factories, and special performances<sup>29</sup>.

The 1974 collection of Strehler’s writings titled *Per un teatro umano* (For a Human Theatre) sheds light on the Piccolo’s ideological foundation. Strehler and Grassi’s theatre wanted to be an occasion for the community to gather, an event where the community celebrates itself. In their view, the theatrical event should celebrate sociality, strengthen community’s unity, and shape its identity. Interestingly, in his writings Strehler uses the phrases *teatro del popolo* (people’s theatre) and *teatro popolare* (popular theatre) almost as synonymous, two terms that indicate:

[t]he dream of popular theatre as theatre of unity: great place where  
the community gets together to celebrate, united, its myths, its

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<sup>29</sup> In an article published in 1964 the two founders summed up the results of this politics and proudly stated that workers made up “from fifteen to twenty per cent of our public” (Strehler and Grassi, 1964: 42).

tragedies, its deaths, its joys, and its struggles, and where it rediscovers itself in a secular sacrality (Strehler, 1974: 23).

A utopian vision, as Strehler himself later recognised (Strehler, 1974: 146) that inspired many artists and intellectuals in the first few years after World War II<sup>30</sup>. Strehler's theatre of unity is a classless space, even though he professed himself a socialist. What emerges from Strehler's writings is an approach to *impegno* not dissimilar to the top-down approach based upon what Pierpaolo Antonello called "deficit model" (2012: 57-58). Strehler and Grassi did not grant intellectual autonomy to the people. They conceive the working class as subordinate in economic terms but their understanding of the cultural aspect of subordination, which includes the bourgeoisie's gaze that objectifies them as other, was limited. As we shall see in Chapter Four, practitioners and critics close to the radical Left will question this model.

In terms of artistic choices, the Piccolo embarked in a radical renewal of the traditional repertoire. The end of the dictatorship meant having for the first time free access to a wealth of contemporary foreign playwriting that was not available in the country during the fascist period (Tessari, 1996: 82). The Piccolo's efforts split on two fronts, the necessity of opening up to European and American contemporary

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<sup>30</sup> In his book on Italian twentieth century theatre, Tessari quotes the manifesto *Per un teatro del popolo* (For a People's Theatre), published in Rome 8<sup>th</sup> August 1943, only fifteen days after the fall of Mussolini's regime. The manifesto is significant because it expresses ideas later developed and put into practice by the Piccolo. The manifesto stresses moral and social mission of the theatre and hopes for "the Nation to consider the theatre as the place where the people convenes for a work of spiritual uplifting" (Tessari, 1996: 77) and that as such, "it would promote its development, as it does for the school" (Tessari, 1996: 77). It also hoped for the people to have access to the theatre through popular policies and low ticket prices. Among the signatories were Orazio Costa and Vito Pandolfi, exponents of the young generation of directors that will reform Italian theatre in the 1940s and 1950s.

playwriting, and the rediscovery of the Italian tradition. If we look at the Piccolo's first fifteen seasons, we notice that its research is extensive at first, presenting a wide and often eclectic range of works by playwrights such as Maxim Gorkij, Armand Salacrou, Alexandre Ostrovskij, T.S. Eliot, Thornton Wilder, Albert Camus, Georg Büchner, Ernst Töller, and Federico García Lorca (Strehler, 1973: 346-347). As far as the Italian repertoire is concerned, the Piccolo proposed both works by playwrights who are very much part of the national tradition, such as Vittorio Alfieri, and new writing by authors such as Alberto Moravia, Dino Buzzati, and Massimo Bontempelli (Strehler, 1973: 346-347). During the 1950s, Strehler's choices became more selective and he started an in-depth research on the work of three Italian dramatists, in particular, Luigi Pirandello, Enrico Bertolazzi<sup>31</sup>, and Carlo Goldoni; interestingly, the latter two wrote in Milanese and Venetian language respectively, rather than in standard Italian. According to Guazzotti, the necessity of keeping a strong connection with a wide audience compelled Strehler to address the popular roots of Italian drama and to deepen his research of Goldoni's and Bertolazzi's work (Guazzotti, 1965: 96-97).

Few years after the foundation of the Piccolo, Strehler encountered Brecht's work. Epic theatre and dialectical materialism produced an important development in the director's thought and practice. Strehler's interpretation of Brecht's work was and still is enormously influential in Italy, and had a great impact not only on the reception of Brecht's theatre in the country but also on the Italian understanding of the relationship between theatre and politics. The reasons for Strehler's influence are

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<sup>31</sup> Strehler's staging of Enrico Bertolazzi's *El Nost Milan* (Our Milan) will be famously analysed by Louis Althusser's *The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht. Notes on a Materialist Theatre* (2005), in which he analyses *El Nost Milan* as a critique of the melodramatic consciousness.

many. He introduced the Italian audience to Brecht's work, directing between 1956 and 1963 the largest number of Brecht's plays in the country. He spoke fluent German and had access to Brecht's writings before the publication of Italian translations, while his friendship with Brecht and Helene Weigel strengthened his link with the Berliner Ensemble. Moreover, as Arturo Lazzari and Lina Vincent report in a 1967 article on TDR, following his staging of *The Threepenny Opera*, Brecht entrusted his work in Italy to Strehler with the result that the Piccolo Teatro alone could authorise any staging of Brecht's plays in the country. This monopoly meant that great part of the Italian audience got to know Brecht's work *through* Strehler (Lazzari and Vincent, 1967: 151). Beyond the enormous influence of Strehler's stagings<sup>32</sup>, what is particularly interesting is that his research on Brecht's work allowed him to reconsider the concept of 'theatre of unity' that had previously informed his practice. Rather than a theatre that celebrates the unity of the people, Strehler's work moved towards a dialectical theatre: an art form that acknowledges contradictions, stirs debate, and divides the audience; a theatre that wants to become an instrument of reason. According to Strehler's interpretation of Brecht's thought, dialectical theatre can be defined as

[a]n open, democratic theatre where we can discuss, where we don't  
'act' the dominant class' ideology, where methods, texts,

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<sup>32</sup> Not everyone appreciated Strehler's directorial work. The radical Left was especially critical of the extreme attention to the aesthetic and the visual element typical of his shows. Franca Rame in particular argued that in Strehler's stagings, the subversive potential of Brecht's plays had been watered down, "weakened, mystified, and filled with hedonistic decorations" (Rame, 1977: 146). Cino Capitanio, in his 1971 book on political theatre argues that within the structure of Piccolo Teatro, Strehler "realised great shows but using actors [...] anything but convinced of his political ideas" (Capitanio, 1971: 191) a situation which led to dubious political results.



relationships, and the audience are inclined to question and critique the society they are part of. A theatre that becomes a place of confrontation, entertainment, and discussion for an audience as wide as possible (Strehler, 1974: 147).

Strehler's research begins with his first, hugely successful staging of *The Threepenny Opera* in 1956. In his writings, this particular production emerges as the one that prompted his reflection on dialectical theatre as a politically charged methodological approach to his practice. Strehler took the decision to stage *The Threepenny Opera* after several years of careful study of Brecht's work. *The Threepenny Opera*, a text in which the epic element and the ideological discourse are less coherent than in the works of maturity, represented for Strehler the first step of a long process, the basis of a study of epic theatre that he developed during all his career and through many plays, from *The Good Person of Szechwan* (1958) to *Schweik in the Second World War* (1960) and *Life of Galileo* (1963)<sup>33</sup>. In 1956, Strehler eventually felt he possessed the necessary aesthetic and ideological awareness (and the essential funding, see Rossanda, 1956) to embark in the staging of Brecht's work.

In terms of the relationship between politics and aesthetics, Strehler was particularly interested in *The Threepenny Opera's* ability to convey its political analysis through irony, comic analogy, music, and other aesthetically pleasing forms (Strehler, 1974: 289) that never become an end in themselves but rather support a political

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<sup>33</sup> Strehler began his work on epic acting with the students of the Piccolo Teatro School in 1955. The school final essay was a staging of *The Measures Taken*. See the chronology of Strehler's shows up to 1974 (Strehler, 1973: 345-352).

provocation. In Strehler's view, his task as a director was to find a balance between aesthetic pleasure and social criticism (Strehler, 1973: 289-295). In his notes, Strehler uses *The Cannon Song* as an example of how the aesthetic input should foster and complement the political element. By the end of the scene, the audience can say to have heard a violent war-song which ends with a chorus and a dramatic crescendo. At the same time, the aesthetically pleasant elements highlight

a demystifying of the mythology of war, of the alienation of warlike action, a revelation of the shameful involvement of ordinary people in the absurdity of war; even the priest becomes a bloodthirsty military chaplain who blesses both flags and torturers (Strehler, 1973: 294).

Dialectical theatre represented a tangible methodological approach to the creative process, to the text, and to the work with his actors. Most importantly, dialectical theatre allowed Strehler to articulate his perspective on theatre's political character and the politics of performance. The turn from the inspiring utopia of the theatre of unity to dialectical theatre entailed a different outlook on theatre's function: no longer a community's secular celebration, but rather a practice that points to reality's contradictions, provokes doubt, and poses questions (Strehler, 1973: 65-66).

Piccolo Teatro's production model, its intended relationship with the audience, and its approach to director's theatre left a long-lasting legacy. Its influence was perhaps even more pervasive because Strehler and Grassi's project was ambitious but not revolutionary, and its strength laid in a pragmatic approach to production and artistic practices<sup>34</sup>. Piccolo Teatro's founders aimed not at revolutionising Italian theatre, but

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<sup>34</sup> The first season's programme, for example, clearly rejects any form of artistic experimentation for its own sake: "Open to the new culture, willing to bring the products of new artistic

rather at a “radical structural democratisation and qualitative adjustment” (Guazzotti, 1965: 32).

However, in the 1960s, this production model began its decline. Because financial backing came from local and national public bodies, the *stabili* became dependent on party politics and Government’s priorities. From the beginning of the 1960s it was clear that what once was an inspiring and ambitious project, an institution that in its early years endorsed an innovative approach to production was now merely fighting to defend its positions, to “safeguard the destinies of a sector that both political power and market economy were pushing to the extreme margins of culture” (Tessari, 1996: 87). Theatre critic Franco Quadri, who was close to the Left and to the neo-avant-garde, even argued that their relationship with political power was similar to the political patronage typical of fascist bureaucracy (Quadri, 1976: 106-107).

Between the end of the war and the mid-sixties, the *stabili* became the hegemonic voice on the Italian scene, promoting an aesthetic, a mode of production, and a theatrical culture that by the 1960s had become normative<sup>35</sup>. As Marco De Marinis argues, the *stabili*’s crisis was not only the crisis of a production model but also the crisis of an aesthetic one: despite some remarkable productions, the *stabili* hid their

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customs into our own practice, we hope that the new authors will join us [...]. Not an experimental theatre, open towards infinity, towards what is possible and what is impossible; nor an elitist theatre, closed but to a circle of initiates. Our ambition is being exemplary” (Grassi and Strehler in Tessari, 84).

<sup>35</sup> Writer and director Italo Moscati argued that during the 1960s Italy’s *teatri stabili* were not merely production and receiving houses, but they existed as a cultural discourse, as production of theatrical culture. The *teatro stabile* “was also an ideological line that dragged behind it a series of structures” (Moscati in Bono, 2001: np); that is to say, companies and practitioners beyond the *stabili* tended to follow the *stabili*’s aesthetic line.

decadence by “sheltering behind gigantism, in the search of the ‘great spectacle’, or behind figurative mannerism and the preponderance of decoration” (De Marinis, 1987: 52). The *stabili*, once innovative institutions became the epitome of political patronage and conservative culture. For a younger generation of theatre-makers, director’s theatre, once innovative, was slowly turning into trite mannerisms, and the creative process based on the polarity between text and *mise-en-scène* was becoming a straightjacket. The contradictions of 1960s Italy were calling for a ‘new theatre’.

### **The 1960s: The Search for New Languages**

The *teatri stabili*’s aesthetic model, based on director’s theatre, was firmly anchored to mimetic acting and the text’s primacy over any other element. The hierarchy that saw the playwright as the only authoritative voice and the director as the dramatic text’s sole interpreter was still in place. The most innovative European playwriting did not gain much recognition in the immediate post-war years. As Mario Prospero commented in 1978 “[t]he French absurdist period [...] was ignored. So was Artaud. The eventual discovery of Ionesco, Beckett and Genet had a definite impact on the cultural policies, which were based on programmatic optimism and persuasive rationality” (Prospero, 1978: 18). A distinct reticence was also perceptible towards the historical avant-garde, and futurism in particular. As Lorenzo Mango commented, the avant-garde’s discourse, closed during the 1930s, was entirely wiped away by the tragedies of World War II (Mango, 2010: 11). The legacy of futurist theatre was especially problematic. Major figures such as Filippo Tommaso Marinetti were too compromised with Fascism, and their political affiliation to the regime cast a shadow

on their entire artistic production. Overall, the post-war years were characterised by a left-wing, neorealist aesthetics, by rationalism, and by a narrative of progress that supported the community's cohesiveness in times of reconstruction.

However, this situation started changing towards the end of the 1950s, and by the beginning of the following decade some of the historical avant-garde aesthetic and political concerns, such as its dissatisfaction with bourgeois culture and its interest in language, became once again of topical interest. In stark contrast to the stage, Italian visual arts, music, literature, and poetry developed tremendously since the post-war years and were far more vital and open to experimentation than mainstream theatre was. A new generation of artists, filmmakers, writers, and critics, most of whom had been educated after the fall of fascism, started working at the end of the 1950s and launched a confrontational attack on neorealism and its aesthetics. The best-known example of this new attitude in Italian culture is the work of *Gruppo 63* (Group 63) a group of poets, writers, scholars, and critics which aimed at recovering the lesson of the avant-garde and firmly opposed the ideology of neorealism that dominated Italian culture. The group was active for just less than a decade, but its reflection on language left an important mark on Italian culture. The theoretical debate promoted by *Gruppo 63* contributed to highlighting the inadequacies of Italian neorealism, an aesthetic paradigm that could no longer grasp the complexities of contemporary Italian society. This literary neo-avant-garde gathered a significant part of Marxist intellectuals who, dissatisfied with the crisis of the PCI and with left-wing intelligentsia's cultural strategies (Antonello, 2012: 52), turned their attention to what Marxist theory considered 'superstructure': language, communication, narrative techniques. For neo-avant-garde writers, commitment was "a linguistic question; notwithstanding the statement's real critical content, speaking

the language of the status quo meant backing the reproduction of that status quo” (O’Leary, 2007: 192).

In 1962, one of *Gruppo 63* members, Umberto Eco, elaborated a theoretical approach to the politics and aesthetics of art based on the concept of *opera aperta*, which can be translated as ‘open work’. Eco identified a series of characteristics common to a great part of contemporary art, from music to literature, such as multiplicity, plurality, polysemy, non-linear narratives. For Eco, the contemporary work of art is not a unique and unchanging entity and it does not communicate or represent a distinctive message. Rather, contemporary art provides the reader/viewer/listener (and sometimes the performer, as in the case of contemporary music) with an open structure and a range of interpretative possibilities, relying on the reader’s active participation in the meaning-making process. For Eco, the open work not only compels the addressee out of her passivity but can be considered an epistemological metaphor. Through its lack of conventional order, meaning, or narrative, contemporary art represents *by analogy* the disorder and discontinuity of the modern world. It represents the contemporary experience of the world through the way it organises its constituent elements rather than through what the constituent elements represent (Eco, 2006).

Between 1959 and 1967 Italian theatre also went through a period of intense linguistic research and reaction against the aesthetic canons promoted by the *teatri stabili*. Similarly to the intellectuals of *Gruppo 63*, the new generation of theatre-makers was characterised by a strong interest in language and by the search for a radical renewal of theatre-making, a renewal in stark contrast with the “official scene’s crystallised conventions” (De Marinis, 1987: 1). Some cultural and structural factors contributed to this need for renewal and to the intense research into theatrical

language that followed. On a structural level, up until 1962 precautionary censorship compelled theatre-makers to submit a script to the authorities before the start of rehearsals. The end of such censorship allowed greater freedom in terms of content and gave practitioners the possibility to explore different approaches to the creative process and to focus more on image, movement, and space rather than text. Theatre criticism's attention towards this new phenomenon was also of primary importance. The critics Franco Quadri and Giuseppe Bartolucci played a fundamental role in this process. The new artists found in them two active interlocutors who nourished new talents and articulated the new theatre's aesthetic and political concerns. Franco Quadri in particular, as chief editor of the monthly *Sipario* (Curtain), drew the attention of scholars and practitioners towards experimental and radical theatre developed in Europe and the US. Significantly, it was *Sipario* that published the first excerpts of Artaud's writing in Italian translation in 1965, introducing theatre of cruelty and Artaudian theatricality into the Italian critical debate<sup>36</sup>.

Two important developments left a long-lasting legacy and were particularly important for this research. The first one is a definite split between mainstream theatre (also often referred to as *teatro ufficiale*, 'official theatre'), which included commercial circuit and *teatri stabili*, and alternative venues that were operating in

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<sup>36</sup> As far as the origins of the Italian neo-avant-garde are concerned, scholars are divided. Christopher Cairns argues that the neo-avant-garde was partly a reaction to movements that had begun abroad (Cairns, 1992: 114), whilst De Marinis contends that the external influences had only a limited impact on the new theatre in Italy. Looking at the dates, he argues that American experimental theatre started to be known in the country only around 1967-1968, and that the main figures of the Italian neo-avant-garde, such as Carlo Quartucci, Mario Ricci, and Carmelo Bene, started their research at the end of the 1950s (De Marinis, 1987: 161).

the years between 1959 and 1967; a division that became even more radical during the 1970s and in part still exist to this day. The second one is the establishment of a wider notion of the theatrical event, which includes not only the performance-as-product but also the production structure and the relationship with the audience. Although both these elements have implications for the politics of the theatre, they were, as Vicentini noted, separate from the themes promoted by political performance in the previous decade (Vicentini, 1981:11).

From an aesthetic point of view, the most prominent characteristic of the Italian theatrical neo-avant-garde is that unlike, for example, “the French avant-garde of the fifties, it did not originate in playwriting, but directly in the *mise-en-scène*” (Prosperi,1978: 18). The innovations developed during the 1960s can be traced back to two main elements. On the one hand, a reconfiguration of the performance outside of the polarity between text and *mise-en-scène*, and on the other, greater attention towards creative processes. In this respect, two critical categories, developed simultaneously between the 1960s and the 1970s within Italian practice and scholarship, can help us understand this shift. The first one is the concept of *scrittura scenica* (scenic writing), the second, that of *teatro laboratorio* (laboratory theatre). The concept of *scrittura scenica* (scenic writing) was developed by Giuseppe Bartolucci during the 1960s and articulated in his 1968 publication of the same name. With this term, Bartolucci referred to a critical attitude on the performance as a whole, an approach based on an awareness of theatrical art’s autonomy and specificity and set in contrast to traditional dramatic writing and textual analysis. It is based on an equalitarian structure whereby “text, space, objects, sound, words, and performers are on the same level” (Visone, 2010: 87), and it entails an attitude towards theatre practice that shifts the emphasis from meaning-



making and representation to a metalinguistic reflection (Mango 2003), thereby undermining the hierarchy that places the script at the centre of both creative process and critical analysis, and recognising that all the elements of the performance are part of the meaning-making process<sup>37</sup>.

If the concept of *scrittura scenica* was primarily concerned with the theatrical event, the concept of *teatro laboratorio* (laboratory theatre) looked at theatre not as a product or as a performative event, but rather as a creative, existential, and political process. The term entered the critical discourse in the mid-sixties<sup>38</sup> and became the basis of widespread performance practice during the 1970s. It emphasizes the creative process, and it pays particular attention to the time dedicated to research and work on the self, in contrast to the tight rehearsals patterns common in commercial theatre. *Teatro laboratorio* indicates an approach to theatre practice capable of questioning its own structural elements, its instruments, and its language, along with collective creative processes which restructure the relationship between

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<sup>37</sup> The concept of scenic writing as articulated by Bartolucci (1968) stems from his observation of both Italian and international theatre. His case studies include several Italian practitioners such as Carmelo Bene, Giuliano Scabia, and Carlo Quartucci, but he also includes The Living Theatre, Jerzy Grotowski, The Open Theatre, Eugenio Barba and the Odin Teatret. Bartolucci's emphasis on the breaking of the text-*mise en scène* dichotomy in favour of a non-hierarchical approach to theatrical signs has much in common to Lehmann's articulation of postdramatic theatre's "palette of stylistic traits: parataxis, simultaneity, play with the density of signs, musicalization, visual dramaturgy, physicality, irruption of the real, situation/event" (Lehmann, 2006: 86).

<sup>38</sup> Recently, laboratory theatre has been the centre of a very interesting historiographic debate which focused primarily on the relationship between laboratories, studios, or atelier in the first half of the twentieth century and the laboratory theatres of the 1960s and 1970s. Beyond the history of the term and of the diverse practices associated with it, Mirella Schino argues that 'laboratory theatre' is a flag term that usefully refers to "anomalous theatres" (2005: 200) and to "a form of rebellion which is at once technical and existential, and that goes far beyond the refusal of forms of hegemonic theatre" (2005: 204).

performer and her practice and between performer and audience. Perhaps the strongest political element of Italian experimental theatre lays precisely in this attention to group work, which, as Mango noted, challenges western fetishism of creation, while improvisation contradicts established aesthetic formulas. For Bartolucci and for Mango, it is precisely the emphasis on the collective creative process which forced experimental theatre out of “narcissistic complacency of a form [...] that risks resolving itself uniquely in an updating of theatrical language, but not in its upturning” (Mango, 2003: 107).

One significant example of theatre work developed outside of and independently from the mainstream circuit is the group of artistic practices that in Italian historiography go under the name of *cantine romane* (Roman cellars). The term is currently used in Italian theatre historiography to refer to a group of independent, self-funded, small venues that started operating in the early 1960s. The new venues were, for the most part, set up by young artists who, dissatisfied with the politics and aesthetics of mainstream circuit, felt the necessity to work independently. Working outside of the mainstream circuit was for many of them partly a choice, partly a necessity. Although examples of alternative performance spaces could be found in several Italian cities<sup>39</sup>, in Rome they became a cultural phenomenon: not only spaces for theatre-makers, but real cultural centres, where an exclusive audience of artists, intellectuals, and theatre critics gathered. By the mid-sixties the term *cantina* (cellar) became synonymous with this type of space: cellars, garages, old

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<sup>39</sup> Small independent cabaret venues, for example, were popular all over the country and they often were far more open to formal and linguistic experimentation than mainstream theatre. Among the most popular cabaret venues were the Derby Club and the Nebbia Club in Milan, founded in 1963 and 1964 respectively (Visone, 2010).

warehouses reconverted for live performance. Among the most important were Carmelo Bene's *Teatro Laboratorio* (Laboratory Theatre), Mario Ricci's *Club Orsolina 15*, Antonio Calenda and Virgino Gazzolo's *Teatro dei 101* (Theatre of the 101), Claudio Remondi's *Teatro del Leopardo* (the Leopard's Theatre) in the Roman suburb of Monteverde, or the *Teatro del Porcospino* (The Porcupine's Theatre) which was characterised by a strong interest in new writing, staging texts by contemporary writers such as Dacia Maraini, Alberto Moravia, and Enzo Siciliano<sup>40</sup>. The venues cherished their autonomy and never formed a cohesive group or a school. As private, self-funded clubs; they were free from bureaucratic encumbrances. At this stage, the question of the audience is not a major concern for the practitioners who operated in the *cantine*. The size, the private club status, the type of work proposed all contributed to render these spaces somewhat exclusive. The small audience was mainly composed of young, educated people, regular theatregoers searching for new work, intellectuals, and artists. An elite "which is no longer an economically privileged class, but simply a group of spectators who chooses this type of experience for cultural, generational, or other types of affinity (Ponte di Pino in Gallina, 2007: 105). Breaking with the mainstream circuit means claiming a separate space where research could take place in front of an audience already familiar with the innovations of contemporary art, music, and literature. It is only after 1968 that the political potential of this rupture with mainstream theatre will be fully articulated. Theatre work outside of the mainstream will become one of the

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<sup>40</sup> For a thorough historical account of the *cantine*'s development and of their artistic research between the late 1950s and 1967, see Daniela Visone's book on the topic (Visone, 2010).

main characteristics of Italian theatre during the 1970s, with important repercussions on aesthetic and on administrative choices.

The formal research carried out in the *cantine* was, for the most part, concerned with image, movement, and space. Where text was present it was often fragmented, it eluded signification and focused on the musicality of spoken word rather than on meaning-making<sup>41</sup>. Franco Quadri sums up this set of innovations in terms of a radical and systematic breaking down of the dramatic text, and a total use of scenic elements, from sound to lighting, a fragmentation of diction into almost pure sound (Quadri, 1984: 309). This research on language questioned the pillars of dramatic art, such as representation, text as carrier of meaning, the authority of the director as sole interpreter, spoken word as the main vehicle of signification. The influences and contaminations from other art forms were so radical that, as Bartolucci stated, they aimed at going beyond the theatre:

In the *cantine*, they made art, not theatre. They tried to kill theatre through art. Old theatre received a fatal blow; its tradition was devoured and torn to pieces, its conformism and ineptitude were exposed to public shame (Bartolucci, 1988: 27).

The irreversible crisis of representation that started almost forty years earlier with the historical avant-garde and was momentarily slowed down during the forties and

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<sup>41</sup> Oliviero Ponte di Pino argues that the main strategies of the Italian new theatre during the 1960s present a number of similarities with those of the historical avant-garde. The appropriation of the other arts' structures, strategies, and aesthetic principles (the visual arts, cinema, and music in particular) was already present, for example, in the theatre of the Bauhaus (Ponte di Pino, 1988: 19).

fifties, gains momentum during the sixties and will eventually exercise its influence on director's theatre as well.

This period of experimentation ends symbolically in 1967 with a conference held in Ivrea and hosted by the Olivetti Foundation. The call was published on *Sipario* in 1966 in the form of a 'Manifesto for a new theatre' signed by theatre-makers, critics, and intellectuals. They were a heterogeneous group for interests, background, and political orientation, but they all shared a profound dissatisfaction with the methods and the politics of mainstream theatre. The manifesto acknowledged their difference and called for the cohesion of all theatre-makers operating outside the official theatre. It identified the causes of *stabilì*'s decline in the meddling of party politics, in their bureaucratic apparatuses, and in their resistance to innovations coming from visual arts, music, and literature. It also lamented mainstream theatre's inability to interpret and support Italy's thriving alternative scene. The manifesto closed eloquently, with a call for a theatre capable of embracing and reflecting the complexities of the contemporary and capable of actively engaging its audience:

We do not believe in purely formal contestation. We believe that it is possible to use theatre to instil doubts, to break up perspectives, to take off masks, to foster thinking. We believe in a theatre full of questions (Augias, Bartolucci et. al., 1967: n.p.).

The three-day conference in Ivrea gathered a heterogeneous group of artists, critics, and intellectuals - among them Carmelo Bene, Dario Fo, Eugenio Barba, Leo de Berardinis, Perla Peragallo, Carlo Quartucci, Sylvano Bussotti, Cathy Berberian, only to name a few - who shared their practice, their doubts, and their concerns. It was, however, an opportunity that the participants did not fully exploit. Putting differences

aside resulted impossible. The conference had ambitious aims, which included the project of an alternative circuit of small independent venues, but they were never realised. However, as the quote above testifies, a new approach to the politics of the theatre was beginning to emerge. During the second day of work, the delegates embarked on heated discussions precisely on this aspect. They eventually split into two groups: those who practiced a militant, Marxist theatre, and those who opposed the idea of the stage as a tool of political propaganda and focused on the invention of a new of theatrical language capable of reflecting the contemporary world's intricacies (Visone, 2010: 241-245).

The term *nuovo teatro* (new theatre), introduced by the Ivrea conference, remained in Italian historiography and it is still widely used by practitioners, critics, and scholars. In a recent publication, Lorenzo Mango argues that the Ivrea conference should not be considered the beginning of Italian new theatre, but rather its filter. The artists, critics, and intellectuals active in Italy's alternative scene were before Ivrea an indefinite and incoherent group brought together by a common dissatisfaction with mainstream theatre. It was only after the conference that they acquired a more precise group identity (Mango, 2012: n.p.). Mango also explains that from 1967 onwards, Italy's new theatre identified especially with the neo-avant-garde, with a theatre of aesthetic experimentation and linguistic invention which overturns categories and rejects representation<sup>42</sup>. However, "that invention, that overturning,

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<sup>42</sup> The aesthetic experimentation of the neo-avant-garde will also have enormous impact on the post-avant-garde generation. Among them groups such as Carrozzone, Magazzini, Gaia Scienza, Societas Raffaello Sanzio that will carry the *cantine's* experimentation forward. Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s they will investigate the theatre's communicative means, the relationship between the real and the virtual, and they will heighten the neo-avant-garde's tension towards interdisciplinarity,

which were primarily linguistic, were read and presented in a political perspective. They were thought as a political gesture” (Mango, 2012: paragraph 22).

Towards the end of the decade the increasing social conflicts in the country, the emergence of the extra-parliamentary radical Left, the mounting workers’ movement shifted the attention from linguistic research to the search for a theatre as an instrument of social progress and class struggle. By the end of the decade, the firm stand against bourgeois aesthetic, against the *teatri stabili* and commercial theatre was accompanied by a greater awareness of the theatre’s place in contemporary society, and often by radical political demands. As Vicentini contends, from the end of the 1960s the relationship between political struggle and theatre practice was so intense that experimental theatre assimilated themes and operative forms that belonged to the contestation movement’s strategies (Vicentini, 1981:39). Although the phenomenon was for a long time exclusive, its importance in Italian theatre history and its relevance to this research are due to the fact that for the first time after the war, Italian practitioners developed an original reflection on language that had repercussions on the politics of the theatre and the relationship between artist and audience. Against the *stabili* that claimed commitment towards the masses whilst endorsing bourgeois aesthetic and receiving their financial backing from the capitalist state, Italian new theatre shifted the power relationship between artist and spectator, between sender and receiver by devising a theatrical language that determines “a new relationship between stage and audience, no longer based on a passive communication, but on an active and participative one” (Visone, 2010: 63).

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contaminating theatre with other media such as film, visual art, and performance art (Giannachi and Kaye, 2002).

Franco Quadri argues that when the Italian neo-avant-garde entered a crisis, this manifested itself primarily in the necessity to get out of the exclusivity of the *cantine*, in the need to go beyond “a stage that was felt, even if not by everyone, as a sentence to a life in hiding” (Quadri, 1977: 20). According to De Marinis, an important branch of Italian neo-avant-garde evolved into an often radical political commitment and into the search for a wider community of spectators and participants (De Marinis, 1987: 180). Its heritage was embodied in few elements that will characterise alternative, independent theatre in the following decade. Among them, a shift from the product to the process, a movement beyond representation and interpretation, a critique of director’s theatre, a widening of the actor’s function, and rejection of an idea of the audience as indistinct and homogeneous groups of passive consumers (De Marinis, 1987: 235).

As we have seen, before the storm of 1968 hit Italian culture, the theatre scene was already questioning its practice and trying several different routes to renew the theatre and turn it into a cultural practice capable of interpreting the contemporary world. In the following chapters, the *stabili*’s and the neo-avant-garde’s impact on my case studies will become clearer. We shall see how Compagnia della Fortezza, for instance, critiqued and at the same time reclaimed the *stabile* model, with the aim of becoming the first *stabile* inside a prison, an institution capable of bridging two communities, the one inside and the other outside.

The neo-avant-garde’s challenge to theatrical language gave a fatal blow to the dramatic form. Operating within the boundaries of drama will be increasingly difficult. Not only the post-avant-garde will further this research focusing primarily on the visual (Giannachi and Kaye, 2002), but those practices that still engaged with the spoken word, such as Baliani’s, Paolini’s, and Curino’s, will move their research



towards pre-dramatic forms such as storytelling matched with a strong dramaturgy of the body. All the practitioners I examine here work through a form or another of devising. Even Dario Fo, the practitioner closest to traditional playwriting, prefers forms such as farce and elaborates solo works such as *Mistero Buffo* in which narration, voice, and the performer's physicality supersede drama.

Finally, in the Manifesto for a new theatre's call for "a theatre full of questions" capable of instilling doubts we already see the certainties of master narratives crumbling down along with the linguistic structures that supported them, which includes representation, mimesis, linear narratives, cohesive characters. The social movements and the theatre that developed alongside them will push this critique of even further.

### 3. Theatre and the Left

In this chapter, I will examine the theatre that developed alongside the most visible of Italian social movements, and the one most often associated with political theatre: the radical and extra-parliamentary Left. In particular, I will focus on an aspect that the existing literature on the subject has so far neglected, namely how the Italian Left represented itself on stage and what type of intellectual commitment it embraced or proposed. I argue that one element of continuity between the militant theatre of the 1970s and the theatre that followed, especially during the 1990s, is a reflection on the Italian Left, its values, and its history. A reflection that is at times celebratory and acquires almost epic tones but does not shy away from contradictions and problems. Through the analysis of three plays and two monologues from Dario Fo's revolutionary period, I will argue that this unearthing of the Left's identity and cultural heritage developed in relation to a specific audience of militants as an attempt to build a stronger class awareness. I shall explain how Fo refers to key historical milestones in the history of the Italian Left (the early socialist struggles in 1919-20 and the partisan Resistance in 1943-45) to draw the picture of the Left's revolutionary vocation. During the 1990s, on the other hand, we can recognise the same necessity to reflect upon the identity of the Left, but the approach to past struggles is characterised by a painful, and yet necessary, coming to terms with a problematic past. I shall analyse two monologues, one by Marco Baliani and the other by Marco Paolini, which focus on the heritage of the 1970s. Their work highlights the political enthusiasm that made the 1970s such a vibrant moment, but also pays attention to the circumstances that brought the extra-parliamentary Left to

its end. The model of commitment that emerges from these case studies is still one of an active, militant, engagement. However, whereas Fo's commitment develops in function of present and future struggles, Baliani's and Paolini's work tries to come to terms with the past but cannot foresee the future shape of the Left.

A historical introduction will provide the political and cultural context in which the practices developed. The first section will focus on the workers' and students' movement between 1967 and 1969 and will then introduce the birth and development of the extra-parliamentary Marxist groups. Knowledge of this context will allow me to analyse how Fo's plays engaged with the extra-parliamentary movement and its ideological foundations. The second introductory section will look at the crisis of the Italian Left during the 1990s and at how the legacy of 1970s radical politics, and of political violence impacted on this crisis. We shall see how, if inserted in this specific cultural context, the monologues by Baliani and Paolini can be regarded as reflections upon the country's past and as a search for the identity of the Italian Left, in a historical moment that forced the global Left to reassess its values and its priorities.

## **Towards Revolution: Italy's Extra-parliamentary Left**

The wave of protest that swept Italy between 1967 and 1969 and that heralded an entire decade of radical politics was the product of a complex set of economic, historical, and cultural factors. Here I would like to introduce two fundamental elements that triggered the initial protests: on the one hand Italy's post-war rapid and imbalanced economic development, and on the other the inadequacies of a static and outmoded university system that fuelled students' outrage. The mix of these two

forces will be the base for the formation of the Italian extra-parliamentary groups, which will characterise the entire decade.

The years between 1950 and 1965 brought a sustained period of economic growth, the country's GDP doubled in less than fifteen years and material living standards greatly improved for the majority of the population. Boosted by the Marshall Plan's aids, the shift from a country in ruins to an industrial country was so phenomenal that historians and mass media still refer to this process as *miracolo economico*, the economic miracle. In the meantime, living conditions and per capita income grew exponentially. Such a fast industrialisation process, however, came at a cost. In the second part of the decade, the disparity and imbalances in Italian society became more and more marked. A powerful insurrectional wave was mounting and eventually hit the country between 1967 and 1969<sup>43</sup>.

The Marshall Plan aids account only in part for this exponential economic growth. The end of protectionism and, most importantly, the availability of cheap labour heavily contributed. This last aspect is the one that deserves closer attention in relation to the birth of the movement. Throughout the 1950s and the 1960s enormous numbers of workers relocated from the rural areas of the South to the cities of the North, Milan, Turin, and Genoa in particular. In the post-war years, factory workforce was mainly composed of the specialised workers, highly skilled, aware of their condition, unionised. This type of worker formed a great part of the Italian Communist Party's voters. During the 1950s and the 1960s, a new type of worker arrived in the factories of Northern Italy, the so-called *operaio massa*, the

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<sup>43</sup>For an introduction to the developments that fuelled the 1968 protests in Italy, see Lumley (1990: 9-46) and Ginsborg (1990: 210-253).

mass worker. This new group was primarily composed of unqualified migrant workers, who, for the most part, did not engage with the traditional structures of factory politics, trade unions, and parties of the Left. With the increase in mechanisation and the introduction of the assembly line, the mass worker became the majority of the workforce in most Italian factories. Silent for years, this new subject became the protagonist of the workers' protests between 1969 and 1970, which developed autonomously from and often in open contrast with unions and parties of the Left (Balestrini and Moroni, 2011: 128-130). The rapid changes in the workplace and in the urban environment had contradictory effects: they "provoked fractures between the parties of the Left and the unions and their constituencies, and made their analysis of social realities hopelessly inadequate" (Lumley, 1990: 33). At the margins of the Left, dissatisfaction grew.

Discontent was mounting in the factories, but the students were the first to rise. The student protest began in 1967, and it was soon to join forces with the workers' movement. The initial revolt was fuelled by a mix of factors that were bringing Italian universities to breaking point and increased political awareness in the student population. The 1960s saw the beginning of mass education in Italy, with school leaving age raised to fourteen and the number of students going into higher education growing from 268.000 in 1960 to 450.000 in 1968. The university system was, however, not prepared to cater for such rapid growth. Lack of structures, spaces, teaching staff, outmoded curricula, lack of innovation contributed to fuel the students' dissatisfaction. Moreover, the absence of scholarships or financial support meant that the system fit the needs of students coming from privileged backgrounds, giving poorer students – about half of the student population - no other choice than going into paid employment to fund their education (Ginsborg, 1990: 298-307). The

first university occupations started in November 1967 in Trento, Milan, Turin, Genoa, and Cagliari. In December Salerno, Napoli, and Padua. In January 1968, the student movement was a national phenomenon. The students recognised themselves as a subject in open struggle. The occupations challenged every aspect of the Italian university system, its structures and its approach to teaching, contents and curricula, and the role of the university in capitalist society. Interestingly, contrary to what happened in France in May 1968, the vast majority of professorial staff did not back the students' protest.

The movement ideological base was much broader and aimed at a challenging bourgeois society in its entirety, in its values, behaviours, and institutions. In 1967 and 1968 the movement was based on an uncompromising anti-authoritarianism. Any centre of authority from the university and the school to government and party politics, down to the family was systematically critiqued and ridiculed. The students' cultural and political points of reference were at varied: from Mao Tse Tung and Lenin to Ernesto Guevara; contemporary activists and movements such as the American Black Power, Rudi Dutschke and the SDS in Germany also had great resonance in the Italian movement. From the Catholic front, an important text was *Letter to a Teacher* (Scuola di Barbiana, 1967). The book was written by pupils of a small rural school under the supervision of Father Lorenzo Milani and denounced the inequalities of the Italian school system, turning teaching into a political issue<sup>44</sup>. In broad terms, and notwithstanding the often complex internal differences, the

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<sup>44</sup> *Letter to a Teacher* denounced the selective and discriminatory nature of the Italian education system, which favoured the children of the bourgeoisie and systematically let down poorer children. It was published by a small publishing house in 1966 and it sold over a million copies by 1972 (Balestrini and Moroni, 2011: 179-180).

movement was based upon a Marxist analysis of society and production. The students' and the workers' movements practices were often in open contrast with those developed by the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano*, commonly referred to as PCI). Refusal of hierarchies and bureaucracy, refusal to delegate decision-making (*rifiuto della delega*), direct democracy based on the general assembly, critique of the separation between private and public were all practices in direct opposition with the centralised and hierarchical parties of the Left (De Luna, 2009: 183). In addition, the dissatisfaction with unions and the Communist Party's inability to harness and channel growing dissatisfaction and the events of August 1968 in Prague contributed to pushing great numbers of left-wing militants away from the Soviet model, or at least compelled them to problematize that model (Rossanda, 1968).

The main occupations ended in the summer of 1969. The student protests got out of the university to meet the factory. Discontent in the factories eventually exploded in industrial action and mass protests at the end of 1969, a period often referred to as 'Hot Autumn'. Out of the control of parties and unions alike, the workers' movement, similarly to what happened with the students, transcended immediate demands and "questions of pay and conditions turned into sources of a more general attack on social injustices" (Lumley, 1990: 167).

Numerous independent political groups sprung up between 1968 and 1969, and most of them operated up until the end of the 1970s. It is within these political groups that the alliance between the student movement and workers took place. Some acted locally, and others were active in several areas, but they were all characterised by a critique of the parties of the Left and the necessity to organise political activism

inside and outside the factory independently from unions, party bureaucracy, and rigid hierarchies.

Among the principal groups were Lotta Continua (Permanent Struggle), which was founded in Turin in 1969 and departed from positions close to *operaismo*<sup>45</sup> but later spread its action outside of the factory. It was the most eclectic of Italian extra-parliamentary groups very active in the factory and the community. Potere Operaio (Workers Power) was the most representative group of the *operaista* Marxist tradition, which promoted a radical rereading of Marx's Capital and saw in the mass worker a potential revolutionary subject in contrast not only with the bosses but also with the immobility of unions and parties. Avanguardia Operaia (Workers Vanguard) was active in Milan. It focused on the centrality of the factory in the workers' struggle and the wider revolutionary processes. The extra-parliamentary groups were largely composed of intellectuals, students, and factory workers, a mix that allowed the movement to spread outside of universities and factories and into vast sectors of society. The economic crisis, the end of full employment, recession, and the housing crisis stirred further protests: frequent occupations of social housing and auto-

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<sup>45</sup>*Operaismo* (workerism) is one of the richest and most original currents of Italian Marxism. In *The Left Hemisphere*, Razmig Keucheyan thus summarises *operaismo*'s main political tenets. *Operaismo* "refers to the revolutionary spontaneity of fractions of the dominated classes that are not (yet) organized. *Operaismo* regards the factory as the 'centre of gravity' of the class struggle. The confrontation between workers and employers is held to occur at the very point of production, without the mediation of trade unions or parties. *Operaismo* is an anti-trade union, spontaneist current. Even if they often referred to Lenin, and although the issue of organization was central to their debates, its representatives were hostile to Leninism as traditionally conceived. The latter argued that the subjectivity of the working class must be completed or enriched by the party. Left to itself, it tends towards class compromise. The *operaisti*, by contrast, believe that the raw subjectivity of the workers contains the 'truth' of the class struggle" (Keucheyan, 2013: Chapter 4, section 1).



reductions of rent, transport fares, and retail prices became common forms of protest.

The state's reaction against protesters was often brutal. Lavabre and Rey report that according to data from the Italian Ministry of Interior three thousand students and seven thousand workers faced charges following the 1968 university agitation and the factory mobilisations in 1969 (1998: 109). But there had been more ominous attempts at containing the mounting protest that deserve to be mentioned here because they greatly impacted the movement and the perception of the 1970s in the following decades.

The so-called 'strategy of tension' can be briefly described as a plot linking several neofascist terroristic attacks during the decade, mainly directed at containing communism in Italy. It aimed at stirring insecurity and fear of political instability, "so as to promote a turn to an authoritarian type of government" (Cento Bull, 2007:19). According to historian and former Lotta Continua activist Giovanni De Luna, the strategy of tension is composed of three main elements:

*neofascists as executors, state apparatuses in an ambiguous if not even conniving role, terroristic attacks that uniquely aimed at killing indiscriminately with the ultimate goal of spreading a feeling of lack of security and social disorder which would be attributed to the weakness of the democratic state*" (De Luna, 2009: 31 emphasis in original).

The first of such terroristic attacks was the 1969 bombing in Piazza Fontana in Milan. The event represented a turning point for the movement; the moment of a loss of innocence in which many militants realised how high the stakes were. As John Foot

argues, “[a]fter Piazza Fontana [...] the idea that violence was legitimate became far more widespread (in theory and in practice), the groups began to take control, and many were attracted to terrorism” (2010: 106). Despite the frequent clashes with the police during rallies or occupations, the movement had been largely peaceful. But the strategy of tension and other major political events such as the 1973 coup in Chile stirred real fear of a possible authoritarian reaction. For some militants, the groups’ activities were no longer enough, and when the widespread and largely legal action of the years between 1968 and 1973 started losing momentum, a ‘qualitative leap in the struggle’ seemed necessary.

Until the early 1970’s violence was mostly restricted to police assaults and to small-scale provocations by right-wing groups. Part of the movement rejected the use of violence altogether but other groups were willing to use it for self-defence, and in the process of radicalisation of the conflict a few of them chose to translate their political fight into organised violence. This is the context in which underground groups such as Brigade Rosse (Red Brigades), Prima Linea (Front Line), and the NAP, Nuclei Armati Proletari (Armed Proletarian Units) were born, founded by those militants who chose direct, armed attack against the bourgeois state (Della Porta, 2006: 27-31).

These groups soon became self-referential, claiming the right to attack the capitalist state on behalf of the workers’ movement. Violence was no longer considered a necessary evil, it became the only strategy that could be considered truly revolutionary (De Luna, 2009: 92). No more than a few hundred people got involved in the clandestine groups. Despite much dissatisfaction, distrust of state apparatuses, and little faith in the parties of the Left, very few believed that ambushes and kidnappings could undermine state power or lead the people to a revolutionary insurrection. As Paul Ginsborg argued,

[f]or all their faults the revolutionary groups realised that any transformation of Italian society had to derive from action in civil society, from the building of a mass movement, from changing popular consciousness. Success or failure was to be measured on those terms alone (Ginsborg, 1990: 362).

Despite the fact that great part of the movement condemned the use of violence, it was often accused (along with fringes of the PCI) of 'contiguity' with left-wing terrorism. The Left was at times too soft with the armed groups, for example when euphemistically defined terrorists as *compagni che sbagliano* (mistaken comrades). The famous slogan *Né con le Brigate Rosse, né con lo stato* (Neither with the Red Brigades, nor with the state) had been the shield of all those left-wing activists that considered the bourgeois state undemocratic but also disapproved of the Red Brigades' methods. It became, however, a sign of impotence (Baliani, 2003: 57-58).

The turn to violence was not the only element that brought the movement to an end. While some militants turned to armed struggle, other groups dissolved or broke up because of internal crisis, as in the case of Potere Operaio in 1973 and Lotta Continua in 1975. As the movement lost momentum and the extra-parliamentary Left fragmented even further, the void left by the movement was filled with the struggle between the armed groups and a state eager to close a decade of agitation using any possible means, including a judiciary which-hunt often based on limited evidence. The most famous example of this repressive bent is the mass arrest of the leaders and activists of Autonomia Operaia (Workers Autonomy) on 7<sup>th</sup> April 1979, accused of being the political wing of leftist terrorism in Italy. Among those arrested were many intellectuals and journalists, including Antonio Negri and Oreste

Scalzone. The trial was largely based on shaky evidence and the vast majority of the charges were dropped years later<sup>46</sup>.

The extra-parliamentary Left shaped political commitment during the entire decade. The other movements we will encounter in the following chapter, such as anti-psychiatry and feminism, developed to some extent autonomously but in dialogue with the groups of the radical Left. For example, in Chapter Four we shall see how Giuliano Scabia and the medical staff at Trieste psychiatric hospital looked at the asylum from a materialist perspective and were very much concerned with the asylum's role within capitalism. Italian feminism, on the other hand, was often in conflict with the revolutionary Left that frequently dismissed feminism's political priorities. Franca Rame's theatre bridges the radical Left and feminism, claiming the private as a political issue, but also aware of woman's exploitation within capitalist production. As we shall see in greater detail in the second part of this chapter, the end of the extra-parliamentary Left will leave a long trail on Italian politics. The strategy of tension, in particular, raised the stakes for the entire movement, undermining the state's authority. The opposition against capitalism was total and intransigent, as it will become clear from the following analysis of Dario Fo's theatre.

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<sup>46</sup> In relation to the trial against leaders and militants of *Autonomia Operaia*, Paul Ginsborg argued that "[t]he authorities were all too willing to organize witch-hunts and hand out sentences which neither aided the fight against terrorism, nor guaranteed impartial justice [...]. The '7<sup>th</sup> April' group languished in prison for a period of years before being brought to trial. One by one the most serious charges against the majority of them were revealed as false, either at the original trial or on appeal" (1990: 386-387).

## Shaping Working-Class Culture: Dario Fo's Revolutionary Plays

In this chapter, I will examine how the Left has represented itself, how it staged its history and its cultural points of reference. I will also analyse how this representation changed in the passage from a markedly Marxist-Leninist perspective to a contemporary context where the Left is reconsidering its heritage, its priorities, and its language. The following section will focus on Dario Fo's practice between 1968 and 1978. I will analyse how Fo's theatre engages with the identity of the radical Left through narratives, images, cultural points of reference, and production practices. I will also analyse how Fo's theatre articulates commitment. Through this analysis, I shall argue firstly that Fo's reflection upon the identity of the Left developed in function of class consciousness rather than direct political confrontation; secondly, that this reflection articulates itself in epic tones and looks at the past to strengthen present and future struggles; and thirdly, that the type of *impegno* proposed by Fo's theatre in this period is a militant one, an *impegno* that operates from within the struggle, and that, although still informed by meta-narratives of progress, strives to detach itself from the top-down approach to commitment that was characteristic of post-war engaged culture.

Dario Fo is the artists who best elaborated the possibilities of Marxist political theatre in Italy. With the fundamental collaboration of Franca Rame (actor, editor of his work, and co-author of a significant number of plays), Fo developed the most articulate and original experiment of political theatre in Italy. The strength and originality of his practice lay in several interconnected factors. For a start, Fo significantly detached himself from the examples of political theatre developed in the inter-war period, albeit keeping them well in mind. Rather than looking for new forms, Fo aimed at retrieving tradition and at searching the theatrical past for forms that could serve the present

struggle. As Scuderi and Farrell noted, Fo “has had no truck with the avant-garde, ever” (Scuderi and Farrell, 2000: 7). His attention to *Commedia dell’Arte*, satirical drama, and farce allowed him to develop a form of political performance that inhabits and reinvents a long theatrical tradition. This search for a popular theatrical tradition aimed at reconstructing theatrical practices liberated from aristocratic and bourgeois hegemonic influence, and at promoting a theatre that is an integral part of working-class cultural history. By doing so, he questioned the boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, highlighting the ideological underpinning of such division. Finally, his focus on the figure of the jester provides a historical answer to the question of intellectual’s role and her relationship with the working class.

Fo and Rame’s political awareness grew slowly but constantly<sup>47</sup>. Since their early career, they had been close to left-wing politics<sup>48</sup>. Their early work ridiculed political and economic elites and, throughout the 1960s, their critique became increasingly sharp. At this stage, Fo’s satire is not yet conceived as a weapon of political struggle, and it is only in 1968, following the students’ uprisings, that Fo and Rame reconsidered their theatrical practice and completely detached themselves from bourgeois theatre. The 1968 climate compelled many artists and intellectuals to take a clear stance, to “leave their gilded ghetto and to put themselves at the service of the movement” (Fo in Behan, 2000: 21). As Chiara Valentini noted, Fo and Rame’s decision was “a precise choice that reflects not only the moment’s political climate, but also a specific debate within the theatre which included European theatre’s most

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<sup>47</sup>For a complete account of Fo and Rame’s life and career see Farrell, (2001), Rame and Fo (2009), and Jenkins (2001).

<sup>48</sup>Franca Rame had been for a long time a member of the PCI, but she left the party in the early seventies (Rame and Farrell, 2014: Ch 6 n.p.)

prestigious names” such as Giorgio Strehler or Peter Brook (Valentini, 1977: 11). Fo and Rame felt that their work within commercial theatre was in open contradiction with their political beliefs and that their attacks on bourgeois society had little or no effect. In a 1970 publication, Fo admitted that they had only been “the jesters of the bourgeoisie” and that their work did not challenge the elites, but rather amused them and made them feel ‘democratic’ (Fo in Nuova Scena, 1970: 239). Lambasting the hypocrisies of cultural and economic power was no longer enough. The bourgeoisie was willing to accept the most violent critique as long as the attack arrived from within its own structures. In Fo’s view, a definite political commitment in favour of class struggle was not compatible with the structures of bourgeois theatre, one of many institutions through which the bourgeoisie preserved its cultural hegemony. Not only its aesthetics and its artistic choices were reactionary, but also its structures of production and distribution, the division of labour between performers, technicians, and producers, the very sites of performance, with the separation of spectators according to their economic means, were inherently discriminative. Ultimately, in the radical Left’s perspective, bourgeois theatre was a decadent art that deliberately sought and fostered the audience’s passivity. By leaving the bourgeois circuit, Fo and Rame aimed firstly at reaching a working class audience that had limited access to bourgeois cultural institutions; secondly, they wanted to regain control over the production process, aware that the product’s political management determines the product itself. “If the boss manages your work” Fo argued, “you can rest assured it will be the boss’s work. When it’s the working class that manages it, this work, no matter how contradictory and incomplete, becomes the proletariat’s work” (Fo, 1992: 342).

In 1968, Fo and Rame abandoned commercial venues and founded the theatre collective Nuova Scena (New Scene), which performed in workers' association halls (in Italian called *case del popolo*, 'houses of the people') and community centres run by ARCI (*Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana*), a recreational and cultural association affiliated to the PCI (Farrell, 2001: 80). Fo and Rame worked with Nuova Scena until 1970, when conflicts with ARCI forced the group to split. It is at this point that Fo and Rame detached themselves from the Communist Party and moved closer to the extra-parliamentary Left<sup>49</sup>. They founded the collective La Comune (The Commune) and, in 1974, they occupied an abandoned building in Milan, the *Palazzina Liberty*, where the collective worked until 1980<sup>50</sup>. By the end of the 1970s, when the extra-parliamentary Left had ceased to be a driving cultural force, the network that supported La Comune's activity withered rapidly, and Fo gradually returned to mainstream circuits<sup>51</sup>. As Tom Behan said, "Fo's return to the commercial

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<sup>49</sup>Valentini, who provided one of the most accurate and balanced accounts of this period, reflects on the break with the PCI: "On Fo and Rame's part, the choice was not only based upon the possibility of incorporating heterodox contents in their theatre. The main motive was, I believe, the audience. No longer spectators you could reach through the channels of the historical Left and its structures, ARCI and the 'houses of the people', but a new public they could build, placing themselves as the cultural instrument for the new Left and its revolutionary utopia" (Valentini, 1977: 118).

<sup>50</sup>Politically, Nuova Scena and La Comune were equally radical in their outlook and purpose. In a document published in 1970, Nuova Scena defined itself as a "collective of militants at the service of revolutionary forces not to reform to the bourgeois state [...] but to favour the growth of a real revolutionary process that would effectively bring the working class to power" (Nuova Scena, 1970: 14). In a similar note, La Comune's work "inserts itself within the political movement which holds as tactical objective the creation of the Marxist-Leninist party, and as strategic objective the destruction of the bourgeois state and the construction of socialism" (Collettivo Teatrale Nuova Scena, 1973: 8).

<sup>51</sup>The exit from the bourgeois circuit was made possible by the capillary presence of ARCI first, and of independent spaces close to the extra-parliamentary Left, an active base of party sections, trade unions, and cultural clubs. Without this structure, the construction of the alternative circuit wouldn't have been possible.



circuit took place without any ideological explanations or justifications.

Circumstances slowly forced it to happen” (Behan, 2000: 113).

Within Nuova Scena and La Comune, theatrical practice as a whole – creative process, production, distribution - became markedly political. Although Fo and Rame were prominent, both collectives aimed at building an egalitarian structure: everybody received the same wage, the billing was in strict alphabetical order, and company’s policies, new productions, and artistic choices were discussed with all members (Nuova Scena, 1970). Establishing an alternative circuit was, therefore, a matter of control over spaces and productions processes, but also implied a different approach to artistic practice as completely embedded in political struggle. According to Fo, leaving the bourgeois circuit to perform in workers’ association halls is not a revolutionary act *per se*. The most important thing is that the theatre maker “is first and foremost a *militant* who changes his approach to his work” (Fo, 1977b: 93, emphasis in original).

Nuova Scena and La Comune conceived their work as a small and yet fundamental gear in the much larger mechanism of proletarian revolution. Their idea of the role of art and culture at large was greatly influenced by Gramsci’s writings. In their interpretation of Gramsci’s thought, a genuinely working-class culture must debunk the strategies through which capitalist bourgeoisie imposed its hegemony. We have already seen that, at an organisational level, this meant working independently from structures of bourgeois culture<sup>52</sup> within a collective of militants rather than a

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<sup>52</sup> In a 1977 publication, Lanfranco Binni recognises that, once abandoned the ARCI structures, the organisation of the alternative circuit was somewhat chaotic. “The tumultuous external growth of La Comune is not matched by internal growth within the collective and within the project of building an alternative circuit: the collective’s production activity (but also its political intervention) is

traditional theatre company. After the 1970 break with the PCI and with ARCI it was also clear to Fo that true working-class culture should also develop independently from the mass parties of the left. Fo had often been very critical of the party's tendency to meddle in cultural production. In an explicit reference to the Vittorini-Togliatti debate we have seen in Chapter One, he called The PCI's approach to culture 'Togliattism': an approach whereby the PCI uses art for its ability to communicate with wide audiences while preventing artists from criticising the party's political line (Fo, 1985: 134).

In terms of performance, Fo and Rame's militant practice translated into a series of thematic and aesthetic choices that are in part due to the practicalities of performing outside traditional theatre spaces, and partly a development of Fo's previous work on popular genres such as variety theatre and farce. During the 1970s, his research moved in two parallel directions (Fo, 1985:136). One important strand of Fo's production was concerned with issues of immediate interest, current news and events. This group of shows includes texts such as *Morte accidentale di un anarchico* (*Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, 1970), about the death of anarchist rail worker Giuseppe Pinelli during interrogation at Milan's police station; *Non si paga! Non si paga!* (*Can't pay! Won't Pay!* 1974), a farce about the struggle of two proletarian families amidst skyrocketing prices; or *Guerra di popolo in Cile* (*People's War in Chile*, 1973) about the 1973 *coup d'état* in Chile. This group of shows is mainly concerned with counter-information about current events. This first type of

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essentially based upon Fo's individual work" (1977: 67). Binni also argues that the relationship between Fo's collective and political groups was often an instrumental one, whereby the groups used the performance to gain visibility and finance their political work and the collective tended to relate itself more with group leaders than with the base of militants (1977: 67).

show is what Fo himself defined “a throw-away theatre [*teatro da bruciare*], made to be consumed at the moment, according to the situation” (Fo, 1992: 334). This corpus of texts, written and played in function of current struggles, retains only part of its power if taken in isolation from their political context. Perhaps with the notable exceptions of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* or *Can't pay! Won't pay!* (accomplished farces, less didactic than other works of this period) the texts are now scarcely performed and, without contextualization or substantial adaptation, they may have little resonance with contemporary audiences<sup>53</sup>.

The second group of shows is concerned with the discovery of and reflection upon the culture of the Left and the culture of the working class in particular. These shows are based upon two important premises. The first one is that art and culture are never neutral. In a 1985 interview, asked if it would be correct to say that his work was subordinate to ideology, Fo argued that the separation of art from ideology

is a truly dangerous concept... it is dangerous to separate art from politics, from philosophy, from ideology, etc... as if art was something completely detached from other things, pure and uncontaminated. Pure art does not exist at all because art has to have a relationship with the facts of life (Fo, 1992: 373).

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<sup>53</sup>Joel Schechter argued that “[n]ow that the Pinelli case is past history [...] the facts are not so urgent or controversial. Yet the play still functions as a complex, comic statement on state secrecy and abuse of power” (Schechter, 1985: 153). Sandy Craig, commenting on *Accidental Death's* West End run, noted that “*Accidental Death* is not, strictly speaking, directly relevant to the British situation. Its importance lies in the fact that it acts as a model for left-wing comedy – fantastical, absurd and satiric – which is directly oppositional to the dominant forms of anti-working-class, racist and sexist comedy” (Craig, 1980: 46-47).

For Fo, culture is a political view of the world, and, no matter if reactionary or progressive, it is always class culture (Fo, 1992: 48). The second premise is that, in spite of aristocratic and bourgeois cultural hegemony, the lower classes have always developed their own culture in relative autonomy. They have a history, heritage, and autonomous expressive forms, even though they are not part the canon. This second strand is the focus of the following analysis. I will analyse some texts from this group, paying particular attention to the themes, historical events, and characters that emerge as core elements of the Italian Left cultural baggage. The strategies used in this group of texts are essentially two: on the one hand, we have a reflection on historical moments that shaped the Italian Left such as the early socialist struggles between 1910 and 1922, the foundation of the Communist Party in 1921, or the partisan Resistance between 1943 and 1945. On the other, we have shows with a stronger cultural focus, productions that aim at unearthing the long history of proletarian and peasant culture, highlighting its complexity and its connection with past struggles.

*Tutti uniti! Tutti insieme! Ma scusa, quello non è il padrone?* ('All United! All Together! Hang on, isn't that the Boss?' 1971) is set between 1911 and 1923, a moment of heightened social conflict which culminated with the mass strikes and factory occupations between 1919 and 1920, and with the split between reformist and revolutionary socialists with the foundation of the Italian Communist Party in 1921. The play's explicit political aim is to explain the failure of the 1919-20 mass mobilisation and the schism between socialists and communists, warning militants against the dangers of forsaking revolutionary ambitions in favour of reformist strategies. The play follows the life of Antonia, a young seamstress who gradually becomes politicised and becomes herself a communist activist. Of all the plays of the

early 1970s, *All United!* is the one that stands closer to Fo's farces. Throughout act one Antonia is a typical *etourdie* character, young, attractive, uninterested in politics, and apparently naive. Her behaviour, however, always leaves the spectator doubting whether her ingenuities are authentic or set up to get herself out of trouble. She is the trigger of several comedic moments, but also the character whose naivety – no matter if genuine or opportunistic - unmasks power games and uncovers inconvenient truths. In the second act, Antonia is a determined communist activist. She loses the fashionable *belle époque* dress and the flamboyant attitude, but not her feisty spirit. The text is often wordy and overly didactic, but it offers some light and fast-paced comedic moments, typical of Fo, and it testifies to the historical and cultural points of reference proposed by Fo to the radical Left. In the long, final scene, for example, Antonia faces a series of masked characters, representing the pillars of capitalist society: an industrialist, a prefect and a colonel representing the administrative and military arms of capitalist state, a socialist union leader willing to compromise with the bourgeoisie, and a fascist thug who protects the capitalist state from the 'red threat'. The scene is built to illustrate how capitalism and socialist reformists sabotaged the mass workers' unrest that brought Italy to the verge of a revolution in 1919. During their long dialogue, the masked characters go through the events of the past few years, including the mass strikes, the factory occupations, the division within the socialist bloc, and the rising fascist violence. During this scene Antonia, who is pretending to be a police informant, learns that her lover has been assassinated by the Black Shirts; in a burst of rage, she kills the fascist only to repent immediately afterwards, admitting that she "killed the dog but not the owner" (Fo, 1977a: 165). For the revolutionary Left, the fascist regime, horrific as it was, was only an instrument at the capitalist bourgeoisie's service. Antonia's final words

provide an important synthesis of what this historical period represented for the Italian radical Left. She accuses the socialist leaders of sabotaging the struggle and predicts that the fascist regime will eventually grow out of the industrial elites' control:

And when this fascism you brought up will begin to make you sick...  
and you won't need it any longer... then you'll look for us, so that we  
can help you bringing it down... and we... yes, we will come out of  
jail, out of your jails to help you. [...] But we warn you that along with  
your repugnant fascism, we'll do anything we can to bring you down  
too! (Fo, 1977a: 166-167).

The early socialist struggles and the brutal fascist repression that followed are proposed by Fo as a moment of fundamental importance for the development of the Italian Left which presents many similarities with the contingencies in which the Italian revolutionary Left found itself. For example, the conflict between revolutionary fringes and progressive forces willing to negotiate with the bourgeoisie plagued not only the Socialist Party between 1919 and 1921 but was also at the core of the disagreement between the extra-parliamentary Left and the PCI during the 1970s. From the revolutionary Marxist perspective, no compromise or reformist agenda would work. Either the proletariat seizes power or the bourgeoisie would eventually impose itself. In addition, Antonia's final words link the early struggles to the partisan Resistance, predicting that the revolutionary Left will rise again to overturn fascism. In *All United!* we begin to see that for the movement the division between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces was crucial. The use of masked characters in the final scene separates the revolutionaries (Antonia) from a complex web of powers that support one another to the detriment of the working class.

Interestingly, those forces are faceless, dehumanised, seen only as the pillars that hold the capitalist system in place.

The partisan Resistance is the second historical landmark for the Italian radical Left and the second historical point of reference proposed by Fo to his audience. The image of the Resistance proposed by La Comune is in stark contrast to the official narrative of an inter-classist struggle, composed of a plurality of political perspectives united by antifascism. The narrative of antifascist unity that informed Giorgio Strehler's early approach to commitment in the post-war years had by this point crumbled down under the blows of class conflict. La Comune's representation of partisan Resistance is markedly popular, communist, and revolutionary. *Vorrei morire anche stasera se dovessi pensare che non e' servito a niente (I Would Rather Die Tonight if I Had to Think it Had All Been in Vain, 1970)* was staged in a critical historical moment for the movement, after the major factory occupations and the Piazza Fontana bombing. In this historical moment, this play explicitly proposes the partisan Resistance as a point of reference. The show is divided into two separate yet complementary parts. The first act is a collection of biographical narratives<sup>54</sup> and songs from the Italian Resistance while the second is dedicated to the Palestinian resistance and the left-wing Fedayeen in particular. The juxtaposition of the two forms of armed struggle sounds contrived to the contemporary reader and the text's lyrical tone - very far from the grotesque and the carnivalesque so prominent in the vast majority of Fo's work – makes it one of Fo's least accomplished scripts. Yet, the

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<sup>54</sup>Robert Lumley highlights the importance of the development of oral history in the creation of epic accounts of the 1968 uprisings. "In the 1970s oral history developed to capture these memories for posterity, and to serve as a basis for reflection on the nature of subjectivities and experience" (Lumley, 1990: 274). The same, I believe could be said for the perception of the partisan Resistance.

show “challenged the double standards that allowed the Italian Resistance to be regarded as a heroic liberation struggle and the Palestinian guerrilla war as a terrorist campaign” (Farrell: 2001: 97). Act one especially, dedicated to the Italian Resistance between 1943 and 1945, presents several elements of interest. The act is organised as a series of monologues and songs, with brief explicative introductions to the various sections. Although the partisan ranks included militants from different political backgrounds (Communists, Socialists, Christian Democrats, Liberals, Republicans, and even Monarchists), Fo’s focus here is on the Communist Resistance’s fight against the Nazi occupation in preparation for a proletarian revolution<sup>55</sup>. On a formal level, what is interesting is the use of personal narratives, the documentary enactment of stories collected by Nuova Scena all over Italy. Each testimony is re-narrated by the actors on stage in the first person, keeping the colloquialisms and the regional inflections of spoken language, often preferring dialect over standard Italian: a linguistic strategy that explicitly places itself against high bourgeois culture and highlights the characters’ popular background. In *I Would Rather Die Tonight*, the perspective over armed struggle is to a certain extent ambiguous. On the one hand, it focuses on armed resistance in different historical and geopolitical contexts, and on the other it looks at these specific and complex examples through the lens of Italy’s present struggles, selecting the elements that

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<sup>55</sup>Philip Cooke identifies a Resistance revival during the 1970s as a complex and contradictory phenomenon. The partisan Resistance was a fundamental point of reference for the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary groups at the left, but also for the armed groups. If the armed groups found in *the* Resistance a justification for armed struggle, the rest of the movement saw the Resistance as a *rivoluzione mancata* (missed revolution), a missed opportunity to start a revolutionary process. The movement was particularly critical of the image of the Resistance popularised during the 1960s “a watered-down version of the Resistance which skipped over its problematic aspects in order to emphasize the unity of the movement” (Cooke, 2006: 180).



would corroborate the Marxist-Leninist view on the possibility of violent action against the bourgeois state. For example, act one closes on the image of the 'betrayed resistance', on the partisan dream of a proletarian revolution that should have followed liberation from the Fascist regime and the Nazi occupation. The narrating voice in the last monologue is that of a woman, a partisan in Bologna, who had been detained, tortured, and raped in a fascist prison. In jail, a small opening between two cells allows her to talk to a young partisan who is going to be executed the following day. The young fighter regrets that he will not be there on the day of the liberation, and, most importantly, that he will not be there *after* the liberation.

But Luisa, why do you think we are here to get beaten to a pulp, to get killed for what? But for afterwards, right?... For when we are going to be free! And then Communism will really come... like in Russia... we will do it... but it won't be easy... how I would love to be still around... we'll still have to fight because the bosses and the rest of their lot won't sit there and do nothing [...] but this time we'll have guns, Luisa, our guns... the music is going to change... this time 'revolution, revolution will prevail' (Fo, 1977a: 53).

*Would Rather Die Tonight* stages the communist resistance in almost epic tones and depicts it as a cohesive revolutionary front set against a clear enemy and with a defined goal: socialism. From these two shows, we can begin to see that the urgency of the struggle pushed Fo towards a militant practice that does not shy away from direct references to armed struggle, even though the examples he proposes are from the past and their relevance to 1970s Italy's dubious. There is in these shows, however, beyond the reference to armed struggle the necessity of creating a militant

cultural horizon for contemporary militants, a cultural horizon in which the early socialist struggles and the partisan Resistance are landmarks.

The conflicts within the Left are at the centre of another important show of this period, *L'operaio conosce 300 parole, il padrone 1000 per questo lui e' il padrone* (*The Worker Knows 300 Words, the Boss 1000, That's Why He's the Boss*, 1970).

Rather than focusing on a specific historical event, the show is an attempt at translating on stage the debate on the relationship between political struggle and culture. The piece is structured as a series of episodes held together by a narrative frame. A group of workers is dismantling the library in a *casa del popolo*; while packing, they stop and read passages from the books. The reading evokes historical characters such as Antonio Gramsci and Vladimir Mayakovsky, or crucial moments in the history of the European Left such as the Spanish Civil War or the Slansky Trials Czechoslovakia. The frame allows a smooth shifting from one historical period to next; it renders the show agile. The tone is still tragic for a great part of the play, and it becomes almost hagiographic in the case of the final episode, dedicated to Mayakovsky's conflict with the Party and to the poet's suicide<sup>56</sup>. What is interesting

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<sup>56</sup>It is worth remembering that *The Worker* is the last show before the break with ARCI and with the PCI. In a moment when Fo's relationship with the party was already highly conflictive, Fo seems to use Mayakovsky to talk about himself. For example, when discussing Mayakovsky's alienation from the Soviet apparatus, Fo is indirectly attacking the PCI which had often been ill at ease with his work. Mayakovsky's lover – called Anna in the play – confronts the Party's cultural functionary and openly accuses him being responsible for Mayakovsky's death. "I saw you killing him day after day... you killed him by slamming theatres' doors on his face, one by one" (1975: 118). In a similar vein, when the functionary comments that the working class is not interested in the theatre, Anna remarks: "[b]ut try to talk about things that concern them, talk about them, about their toil, about their history, in their own home, in the factory, like we did... and then see if they don't come to the theatre!" (Fo, 1975: 124). The part dedicated to Mayakovsky closes the piece. In the final scene, the Soviet poet recites his 'Vladimir Ilitch Lenin' to an audience of factory workers, with the actors gradually joining the poet on stage.

for the purpose of this thesis is that Fo proposes unorthodox Marxist models and deliberately focuses on historical figures that inhabited the conflict between class struggle and party apparatuses: a subject matter that balances the often didascalic tones but also stirred heated debate with the audience, many of them documented in the volume *Il Teatro Politico dell'Associazione Nuova Scena* (The Political Theatre of the Association Nuova Scena) published in 1970. Overall, the aim is still to foster the audience's awareness of the history of class struggle. This time, the play opens up to staging divisions and internal conflicts. For example, Rudolf Slansky is depicted both as a victim of the Party's apparatus and as a politician detached from the masses, who acted with the best of intentions but committed the fatal sin of concentrating power in his own hands, thereby excluding the proletariat from the decision-making process (Fo, 1975: 97-103). A significant scene is the one dedicated to the young Antonio Gramsci, shown as a *studentello*, a young university student, similar to the activists of the 1968 student movement (Fo, 1975: 106). In the play, we see the young Gramsci speaking to workers against reformist socialist strategies and against FIAT's progressive taylorization, which disguised productivity enhancements as improvements in the workers' welfare. In this specific scene, the workers are divided; some are interested, some dismisses him as a politicised student with no experience of factory work, others consider him an extremist who foments revolt for its own sake (Fo, 1975: 104-106). Their reaction mirrors the workers' attitude towards the students' movement throughout the 1970s. Significantly, it is Fo's young Gramsci who questions the division between high culture and popular culture and openly criticises the intellectuals' top-down approach to proletarian culture, and indirectly, the PCI's cultural policies:

GRAMSCI: We must stop considering the worker a puppet who does not know, who cannot know because he has no culture. The worker knows because he is the people's vanguard, because the people have a great culture. Aristocratic and bourgeois power, the Church destroyed and buried most of it, but it is our task to make the people recover it (Fo, 1975: 107).

It is not difficult to hear Fo himself speaking about his practice through the young Gramsci. In this particular quote, retrieving the people's culture from bourgeois power is a communal task: that 'our' includes several layers of signification. It refers to the revolutionary party founded by Gramsci, to the workers, to communist militants and sympathizers that constituted great part of Fo's audience, and, as the line comes from a performer, it also refers to the artists on stage, thereby identifying the company with the Gramscian organic intellectual, who emerges from the working class and fights with the working class.

From the examples we have just encountered, we can begin to see that Fo's productions during the early years of his revolutionary period move between two polarities. On the one hand, we find a direct reference to political confrontation and to current political struggle. On the other, we can see an interest in working class culture as something that develops autonomously, but that is under the constant threat of being incorporated and manipulated by bourgeois culture<sup>57</sup>. This heritage, which includes past struggles, and more specific historical figures such as Vladimir

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<sup>57</sup>For Fo, the working class is exploited not only in economic terms, but also from a cultural point of view: "exploitation is also the fact that they steal your language, your proverbs, your way of singing. That they disguise your history, and they tell you a load of bollocks about your origins, and about the meaning of all revolutions" (Fo, 1992: 34).

Mayakovsky and Antonio Gramsci, is shaped in relation to the present, in order to strengthen working-class consciousness.

In light of the shows examined so far, we can now look at Dario Fo's most famous piece, *Mistero Buffo* (1968) as his most articulate attempt at strengthening the link between artistic practice and class struggle, and at legitimizing his contribution to the proletarian cause. *Mistero Buffo* is a piece that detaches the cultural problem from immediate political confrontation and from working-class history, to reflect upon the very nature of working-class culture and the artist's political role. It is not a coincidence that this collection of monologues achieved such a wide popularity.

*Mistero Buffo* is, as Jenkins notes, the quintessence of Fo and Rame's art; a show that "provides the key to the techniques that animate their theater" (Jenkins, 2001: 114). Beyond the technical aspects, however, what is important for this thesis is that *Mistero Buffo* is the show that best embodies Fo's approach to culture in relation to political activity. In *Mistero Buffo*, Fo's focus on the medieval roots of workers' revolt and of capitalist domination aimed at challenging aristocratic and bourgeois culture and at promoting a popular counter-history. This thesis does not aim to analyse the show in all its richness and complexity; others already analysed it from several different perspectives<sup>58</sup>. I would like to focus on two fundamental aspects of this piece. I will start with the monologue *The Wedding at Cana*, which is an allegory of how, in Fo's view, high culture delegitimized and silenced popular culture, and I will proceed with an analysis of the role of the intellectual in *The Birth of The Jester*.

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<sup>58</sup>See, for example Puppa (1978: 95-121), Valentini (1977), Pizza (1996). More recent scholarship in English includes Behan (2000: 95-110).

These two elements complete the previous analysis of the radical Left's identity in Fo's theatre.

Fo started working on medieval and Renaissance texts as early as 1963, but *Mistero Buffo* premiered only in 1969 and evolved throughout the 1970s, especially in terms of structure and choice of material (Rame, 1977: 133-134). *Mistero Buffo* is composed of a series of monologues based on translations, rewritings, and adaptations of medieval and Renaissance texts in Provençal, Latin or early Italian dialects<sup>59</sup>. Farcical, satirical, and grotesque, the show lambasts the ruling classes, aiming primarily at two targets: the aristocracy as the holders of economic and political power, and the clergy, for having abused their authority and for their search for temporal power. Every monologue is introduced by Fo himself, who contextualises the piece in order to give the audience some necessary background. The introduction also politically frames each sketch, providing a distinctively Marxist perspective on the material. Fo is keen in underlining the fact that his interest in the past is not to be confused with historical research for its own sake:

I didn't want to conduct an archaeological exercise with *Mistero Buffo*. No. What I and the other comrades with whom I carried out the research were concerned about was the need to show that *another* culture exists. (Fo in Behan, 2000: 98 emphasis in original).

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<sup>59</sup>*Mistero Buffo* is Fo's first experiment with a performative style that will become a trademark of his in the following decades: the *giullarata*, a monologic form based upon storytelling which also includes a strong dramaturgy of the body. We shall see what importance his aesthetic research on the possibility of narration will have on a younger generation of Italian performers (Soriani, 2009: 12-20).

Once again, Fo aims at putting the past at the service of present struggles. His strategy is to think about the present historically and to look at the past from an explicitly political perspective (Chesneaux, 1977: 6). Where the plays about the Resistance and the early socialist struggles aimed at strengthening the audience's awareness while using past events to illuminate the present, with *Mistero Buffo* Fo goes a step further. The show not only shapes a working-class cultural canon but also reflects on the dynamics that prevented working-class culture from becoming hegemonic. In *Mistero Buffo*, Fo uses medieval sources in order to challenge the bourgeois cultural canon, to highlight popular culture's complexity, and to provide the Italian working class with an alternative tradition.

Examples of this popular counter-canon are present almost in every monologue of the piece, especially those concerning biblical stories or religious figures. The attention to religion and spirituality is a recognition that the relationship with the divine is a fundamental part of popular culture, a relationship that Fo depicts as profound, personal, and unmediated. Evangelical figures such as Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary are depicted as humane and earthly, close to the joys, toil, and sorrows of ordinary people, starkly different from the aloof, contemplative, almost aristocratic images of the Cristian tradition. It is important to underline that *Mistero Buffo* was conceived for an Italian audience, and for a very precise context in which the Catholic hierarchies held considerable power. The Catholic Church is challenged as a political and cultural power, which, in Fo's view, played a role in supporting the working class' subjugation.

*The Wedding at Cana*, one of the most popular monologues of *Mistero Buffo*, is an excellent example of how Fo builds this popular counterculture. Two characters compete to narrate the story: an angel, collected and haughty, the bearer of the

Church's perspective; and a drunkard who attended the wedding party and provides the popular perspective. The angel focuses on Christ's miraculous turning of water into wine as proof of his divine nature, whilst the drunkard is eager to narrate the celebrations: he portrays a humane Jesus, a man among men who laughs with the other guests and drinks with gusto. Fo performs both characters, swiftly moving from one to the other. The change is made clear by the actor's position on stage (stage-left for the drunkard, right for the angel) and by his precise physical characterisation of the two; while the angel is composed and solemn, the drunkard is loud and accompanies the narration with huge steps across the stage and wide uncoordinated movements. The angel attempts to censor the drunkard several times; he commands him to back off, to leave the stage, to be quiet and states that he has no right to tell the story of the Wedding at Cana. The only truth is the one provided by the authority, the otherworldly and aloof angel, not the loud and mundane man. However, the drunkard's defiant and impertinent spirit often puts the angel's nonchalance under threat. He winks and whispers to the audience, plucks feathers from the angel's wings, and interrupts him constantly. The angel threatens to kick the drunkard off the stage, and the drunkard replies by calling him "overgrown hen" and by threatening to pluck all of the feathers from the angels' wings. The angel eventually flies away, and the drunkard can tell his truth, his version of the story, finally free from the restraints of censorship (Fo, 2006: 94-99). His story proposes an image of Jesus radically different from the ascetic, mystical, aristocratic figure proposed by the Church; the drunkard's Jesus is a merry and almost pagan figure. Although the two different perspectives on one of the most popular biblical story are not necessarily antithetic, by opposing the orthodox to the popular, almost pagan, image of Christ, Fo and attacks not religion or religious sensibility *per se*, but rather the dogmas, images and



narratives which have traditionally been the ideological backbone of economic and political power. His theatre is concerned with “ridding culture of its mystical aura” (Lumley, 1990: 127), and in this respect his comment on the notion of the sacred is significant:

[t]he ‘sacred’ is an invention of our world’s hypocrisy to prevent the humble ones from having a dignity. The ‘sacred’ is a limitation, is a closed door, a taboo to exclude the others. Therefore, ‘to desecrate’ means to get rid of this hypocrisy and allow the others, the humble ones, to get closer (Fo, 1992: 60).

Fo’s use of religious images, therefore, highlights how hegemonic culture, including religion, upholds the economic status quo and how the working classes can create and nourish a popular counter-tradition.

The last monologue I would like to analyse is *The Birth of the Jester*, which proposes almost an archetype of the intellectual organic to the working class. All the monologues that are part of *Mistero Buffo* revolve around the figure of the medieval travelling player. The Italian word *giullare* indicates a street performer who embodies elements common to “the minstrel, the clown, the Shakespearean fool, and even the modern busker” (Farrell and Scuderi, 2000: 10). Fo reinvents this figure from the theatrical past and makes it the unifying thread of the entire show. The *giullari* and the *giullarata* - their typical performance text – form the backbone of the show and are the basis of *Mistero Buffo*’s most striking characteristics: the show’s performance style (a series of monologues performed on a bare stage with no props, costumes, or light changes), its tone (satirical, farcical, even carnivalesque), the choice of material (alternative narratives of biblical stories or historical events) are all derived from Fo’s understanding of the *giullari*’s performance. Most importantly for this thesis, the

*giullare* becomes in *Mistero Buffo* a model, almost a prototype for the engaged artist<sup>60</sup>. The sketch called *The Birth of the Jester* narrates how a poor farmer is forced by circumstances and by divine intervention to become a travelling street performer. In the monologue, the jester is a poet who has received the gift of a sharp tongue and a quick brain, and that uses his skills to make his audience aware of the injustice that aristocrat and religious powers perpetrate on lower classes. Fo begins the sketch as the jester, gathering a crowd on a village square for his performance; he jumps, leaps, he moves lightly, hopping from one foot to the other whilst his arms whirl through the space; he shouts to bystanders to attract their attention and as the spectators are assembled the jester begin to tell his story. The volume of his voice lowers, and his movements become more measured; the tone is always warm and vigorous, but Fo's voice acquires the gravity of someone who is about to make a confession. "I was born a peasant. A real hoeing-ploughing farmer. I didn't have much to be happy about: I had no land. I had nothing!" (Fo, 2006: 114). In a flashback he narrates how one day he found an abandoned and barren hill, land nobody claimed and nobody seemed to care about. The peasant turned it into a luxuriant garden with the only force of his labour and thus managed to provide for himself and his family. Until one day, the local landowner attempts to repossess it.

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<sup>60</sup>Valentini argues that *Mistero Buffo*'s solo performer was not originally linked to the medieval jester. Fo initially tried to stage *Mistero Buffo* with many actors, "but it doesn't work, the action stagnates, Lazarus, Christ, the Virgin, Judas cannot develop a theatrical dimension, they remain literary characters" (Valentini, 1977: 119). The subsequent attempt with a solo performer acting and introducing each section gave the material dynamicity and depth. The explanation that the monologic form had been chosen because it was used by medieval jesters "is one of the typical justifications that Fo used in a phase of his life, that of the early 1970s, in which he tended to coat every action with erudite cultural justifications (Valentini, 1977: 119-120). Valentini's account is backed by Franca Rame (1977: 133-134).

He sends a priest first and a notary afterwards to talk the peasant into submission, but he dismisses them unceremoniously. Then the landowner visits the peasant along with a bunch of henchmen. In retaliation for the farmer's disregard of authority, the landowners' thugs burn the farmhouse down and rape his wife. Soon after the established power manifests itself in all its brutality, the farmer's wife goes mad and runs away, while his children slowly die. Resigned to live lonely and in misery, the farmer attempts to hang himself but he is stopped by Jesus Christ, disguised as a beggar, who asks him for a drink of water. After the farmer gives him to drink, Jesus praises him for resisting tyranny but reproaches him for not sharing his land, his work, and his experience with the poor, for not turning his personal fight into a collective struggle against oppression.

Tell me, peasant... did you go around the farmhouses... around the huts to tell your story? Have you tried to make the others part of your life? No? Well, from now on you have to share the burden of your story with the others... you have to tell them about the landowner, about what he did to your wife, about the priest and the notary! And then listen to what they tell you. And above all [...] [I]earn to laugh! Learn to transform even terror into laughter [...] make everybody burst into laughter... so that every fear would melt (Fo, 2006: 132).

Jesus asks him to leave his land and travel to tell his story to others. The peasant argues that he is no good at telling stories: he is a simple man of slow brain. Jesus' response is a small miracle: he kisses the man and gives him the gift of a sharp tongue and a quick brain. The farmer who suffered first-hand the aristocracy's abuse is now a performer who devotes his life to tell his story in order to inspire his audience to resist tyranny. His authority is grounded in his own experience of

oppression, and his art is social rather than individualistic. In a cultural landscape where the only culture granted legitimacy is high culture, the story of the *giullare* renews the pact between intellectual and working class, giving artistic practice a precise political purpose. *The Birth of the Jester* proposes the artist as a necessary element in the lower classes struggle for emancipation. As the quote above illustrates, the artist's first duty is to leave her isolation (in the monologue, to abandon suicidal tendencies), to share her work and her experience, and to listen to what the others have to say. The top-down approach based upon a deficit model identified by Pierpaolo Antonello begins to crumble down. Fo's emphasis on the cultural underpinnings of political struggle necessitates a model of *impegno* that detaches itself from the deficit model and starts a dialogue with the audience. Notwithstanding Fo's actual practice and his ability to adhere to the model of intellectual *impegno* proposed in the *Birth of the Jester*, this is a crucial shift in the way the Left had historically conceived intellectual commitment. The intellectual is a militant who exits her isolation and places communication, sharing, and listening at the top of her priorities.

## **Conclusions**

In one of the most recent publications on Fo's theatre, Joseph Farrell and Antonio Scuderi rightly point out that "[a]ny attempt to put flesh on the theatrical poetics of Fo has to begin with the thought of Gramsci" (2000: 8). Despite Fo's lifelong concern with popular performance, his engagement with Gramsci's thought has often been neglected. As Scuderi and Farrell argue "while the failure of Italian intellectuals to appreciate Fo is itself incomprehensible to outsiders, their inability to see him in a Gramscian perspective is downright perverse" (Scuderi and Farrell, 2000: 9). Fo's

interpretation of Gramsci's thought is sometimes idiosyncratic, but it clearly spots the political potential intrinsic in Gramsci's notion of organic intellectual:

When Gramsci says that the artist, that is the proletarian class' intellectual, has to be organic to the proletariat, he means that she has to become an organ; and what does that mean? It means that she must become irreplaceable, that she has become vital; if you remove her, the proletariat is missing something; the proletariat [...] needs [the intellectual] to build a sincere class consciousness. She is its weapon for the struggle, they need her to build a new language, a revolutionary culture (Fo, 1976: 149).

Fo's openly Marxist perspective and his intellectual debt to Antonio Gramsci's thought prevent him from slipping into the top-down approach to culture and the patronising attitude towards 'the people' described by Pierpaolo Antonello and reviewed in Chapter One. In his work, the intellectual is a component in a much larger machinery. In Fo's practice, the intellectual not only strengthens political awareness but also paves the way to a working-class counter-hegemonic culture, and she does so in dialogue with the proletariat. This dialogue might be conflictive and contradictory, as the transcripts of the long debates after Nuova Scena's performances testify (Associazione Nuova Scena, 1970), but it fuels Fo's openly Marxist type of *impegno*. The identity of the Left is articulated within a non-negotiable binary that opposes revolutionary forces to capitalism and the bourgeois state. However, despite the often celebratory tones, Fo's theatre is open to tackling internal conflicts, divisions, and contradictions, and, in alignment with great part of the extra-parliamentary Left, he does not spare criticism towards the parties that abandoned their revolutionary vocation to embrace reformist strategies. The split

highlighted in his plays of the early 1970s is the one between the working class and the parties, a conflict that involves institutions and collective political subjects, but not the individual. In the following analysis of the theatre of the Left during the 1990s, we shall see how political identity is no longer articulated as collective class-awareness, but rather as an individual matter in a context where articulating the possibility of a cohesive political subject such as the proletariat has become impossible.

By looking at a few texts from the early seventies, we have seen how Fo shapes his intervention not only through direct political confrontation on specific issues but also through an active cultural intervention that aims at fostering class consciousness. Class consciousness in Fo's practice is not only awareness of economic exploitation, but knowledge of one's identity and of the cultural colonisation perpetrated by the upper classes to the detriment of working class cultural traditions. As Tom Behan noted, this is the essence of Fo's militant theatre, its basic tenet being: "opposition through knowledge" (Behan, 2000: 96). In Fo's practice this opposition through knowledge does not express itself only through counter-information, like in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. It also informs the creation of a popular counter-culture and a reflection upon the dynamics that support and reiterate bourgeois and aristocratic cultural hegemony. Consequently, the intellectual must become an integral part of class struggle, contributing to building and shaping the struggle's ideological underpinnings and fostering class awareness. An awareness which, contrary to the modernist drive towards innovation, is firmly rooted in the past and in popular tradition: a tradition that must be unearthed and reinvented in function of the present, but that is the bedrock of working class identity. The past and history's centrality in Fo's practice is still informed by the master-narrative of progress. For instance, it still includes teleological progression and closure (that is, the possibility

of a future revolution), and does not yet problematize the past. However, I would argue that his interest in the past did lay the foundation of common concern with memory that will characterize much politically engaged in Italy, especially during the 1990s. In the following sections and in Chapter Five, we shall see other examples of theatre that engages with the national past and with collective memory, albeit with a different political agenda.

### **Staging the Seventies**

As we have seen in the in the previous section, the radical Left's political project withered in the second half of the 1970s. The new decade coincided with the end of mass mobilization and the beginning of a new political phase. The reasons that brought the extra-parliamentary movement to its end were many. Some are specific to the Italian context, such as the armed group's hijacking of the revolutionary process and a forceful state repression that targeted not only terrorist groups but also entire sectors of the extra-parliamentary movement. The challenging political predicament the Italian Left was going through can also be linked to an increasing difficulty experienced by a great part of the European Left. As Perry Anderson noted,

[p]owerful historical forces – the end of the Soviet experience; the contraction, or disintegration, of the traditional working class; the weakening of the welfare state; the expansion of the videosphere; the decline of parties – have borne hard on the left everywhere in Europe, leaving none in particularly good shape (Anderson, 2009: n.p.).

In this quote, Anderson identifies several causes that affected both the political and cultural horizon of the global Left. The end of the Soviet experience and of the Cold War forced the European Left to reassess its priorities and allegiances, whilst the contraction of the traditional working class compelled the Left to rearticulate its policies in relation to a different political subject, a subject that lost the (real or imagined) uniformity and cohesion of the industrial working class and was, therefore, difficult to pin down.

In Italy, after the demise of the extra-parliamentary groups, the PCI remained the only standing force capable of mobilising a large following. Yet, the party had been unprepared to face rapid cultural and economic changes, and, when international events forced it to reconsider its position, it demonstrated to be unable to innovate without jeopardizing and even disavowing its cultural and political heritage. One historical event, not as marginal as it might seem, might give the idea of the Italian Communist Party's inability to interpret change and innovate without disowning its past. On 12<sup>th</sup> November 1989, only days after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the party secretary, Achille Occhetto, announced that the Italian Communist Party would change its name after seventy years of history (Ginsborg, 2003: 160). The fall of European socialist regimes had been interpreted not only as a new beginning or as the failure of actually existing socialism, but as an epochal change that questioned the very premises of communist politics. The change of name, however, left militants baffled at best and eventually led to a split in the party. The new Democratic Party of the Left (now Democratic Party) moved gradually towards the centre, leaving left-wing militants without the strong point of reference the Communist Party had been, for better or worse, in Italian political life. The Communist Party was only the first of Italy's mass parties to be swept away. In the early 1990s, a series of corruption



scandals badly hit the Socialist Party and the Christian Democracy. Two of the great mass parties that shaped Italian parliamentary politics for the better part of a century had been unable to recover and in few years disappeared from Italian politics.

Within this context, characterised by lack of political points of reference and by the transformation of the political subject that had been the referent of left-wing politics for decades, the Italian Left tried to navigate the crisis not by assessing the implications of the global changes that were radically modifying European geopolitical structures, but rather by beginning a thorough reflection upon the Italian Left's own past, its political heritage, its cultural and ideological points of reference. A process that evolved over the years and that in the 1990s was characterised by a particular attention towards one problematic node: the heritage of the 1970s. The seventies have emerged as a fundamental turning point, the decade that most violently impacted on the country's life, and one that left behind many open questions, unresolved conflicts, and even profound wounds. Pierpaolo Antonello argued that the 1970s are the most problematic period of Italian recent history, and that is not by chance that they have become one of the main cores of creative investigation and historiographic research.

If [...] the Resistance has often been represented in mythical terms, as the nation's new foundational narrative, the 'years of lead' have been investigated as the great black hole in the country's political and historical conscience. And this has been done not much by the fathers' generation [...], but by the children who, albeit immersed in the phantasmagoria of the 'society of spectacle', are trying to interrogate [...] that history, through heterogeneous expressive

means, from literature to memoirs, from cinema to graphic novels

(Antonello, 2012: 149).

In this quote, Antonello mentions a popular phrase in mainstream media and in historical accounts, commonly used to refer to the seventies in Italy<sup>61</sup>: The 'years of lead' (*anni di piombo*). The phrase comes from the title of Margarethe von Trotta's 1981 film *Die bleierne Zeit*, and it implies an image of the 1970s that foregrounds political violence and terrorism as the decade's most prominent aspect. The 'years of lead' is a significant and yet problematic definition. On the one hand, it highlights to what extent political violence and terrorism, but also the frequent violent rallies or the clashes between police and protesters, left a mark in Italian public consciousness. On the other hand, as Giovanni De Luna pointed out, the 'years of lead' is a definition that does not give justice to such a rich historical period and tends to flatten the decade's complexity to one aspect (De Luna, 2009: 8). Despite its problematic tendency to reduce the entire decade to political violence, its widespread use is symptomatic of the fact that the memory of the 1970s is indelibly marked by terrorism and political violence. The entire decade has become, in Antonello's words, "the great black hole" in the country's recent history. Violence does cast a shadow on the vibrant, and for the most part peaceful, political practices that preceded it and developed alongside it.

Alan O'Leary argued that "terrorism continues to operate as a force that creates disagreement in Italian national life" (O'Leary, 2007: 199). The reasons are many. I have already mentioned the way the terrorist groups hijacked the radical Left's political project, and how part of the Left had been too lenient towards individuals

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<sup>61</sup> See for example Montanelli and Cervi (2001).

who chose armed struggle, euphemistically referring to them as *mistaken comrades*. To this picture we need to add the fact that the most ominous terroristic attacks ascribable to the strategy of tension, such as the 1969 bombing in Milan's Piazza Fontana<sup>62</sup>, remain a contested and divisive element in public discourse. Neither historiography nor the judiciary had been able to clarify once and for all circumstances and motives or to identify perpetrators, thereby denying closure to the entire country.

Political violence during the 1970s, therefore, is still an open wound in the country's consciousness. What brought the movement to its end, how political violence emerged and developed, its relationship with and its impact upon the movement and upon the future of the Italian radical Left are still open questions. The debate around the relationship between the movement and political violence developed across literature, cinema, oral history research, memoirs, documentaries, and, as we shall see shortly, the theatre<sup>63</sup>.

The importance of this reflection upon the heritage of the 1970s lies in the fact and the extra-parliamentary movement's perceived collusion with or lenience towards 'proletarian violence' and armed struggle undermined the very possibility of conceiving a radical political Left in the country. We can interpret this flourishing of cultural products concerned with the 1970s as an attempt to understand the nature

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<sup>62</sup> For an analysis of the events and judiciary battles around the Piazza Fontana bombing, see Crainz (2003: 363-410) and Ferraresi (1996: 90-114). For analysis of the conflictive narratives around the memory of the Piazza Fontana bombing see Foot (2009: 183-204).

<sup>63</sup>For an analysis of cultural representations of the 1970s see the excellent collection edited by Antonello and O'Leary (2009). For terrorism in Italian cinema see O'Leary (2007), for literature see Demetrio Paolin (2008), for political memoirs, Anna Cento Bull and Philip Cooke (2013).

of that violence and as the product of a widespread need for closure. The investigation into this troubling past does not aim to find definitive answers to the many open questions. However, in the case of the shows analysed in this chapter, this reflection can and does illuminate some of the open conflicts and it allows audience to gain a better understanding of the individuals' ambitions, hopes, struggles, and doubts hidden underneath the uniform veneer of the 'years of lead'.

By analysing this specific aspect of politically engaged theatre, we can see clear continuities and transformations that illuminate the relationship between Marxist theatre during the 1970s and politically engaged theatre during the 1990s. We can see three clear lines of development. The first one is a shift in the representation of the identity of the Left. Its foundational narrative is no longer epic, but troubling and problematic. The clear-cut division between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces no longer stands. Baliani and Paolini's analysis, therefore, shifts its focus from social and historical dynamics to individual perspectives upon political militancy. The second development is a shift from the collective to the individual, which is not articulated as withdrawal from politics, as in the *riflusso* narrative, but rather as an awareness of the limitations of historical discourse. The class perspective on history that characterised Fo's theatre has fragmented, and it has been replaced by limited individual perspectives upon history. Baliani's and Paolini's shows propose one fragment from the past among many. A single fragment which cannot provide answers to the macro-political questions, cannot bring closure, and does not carry any vision of the future. Yet, however partial, this fragment can shed light on a common past. The third line is concerned with the type of *impegno* proposed by these practices. Baliani's and Paolini's is a theatre that, despite the absence of the master narrative of progress that informed Fo's practice, does not abandon

commitment and acknowledges doubt and contradiction. Despite its limitations and its awareness of the impossibility of grasping history in its totality, this limited personal perspective has a great advantage: it allows the audience to empathize with the conflict and to gain a better understanding, albeit never a complete one, of this historical moment. In the following pages we shall see two examples of the theatre full of questions and capable of instilling doubts envisaged by the promoters of the 1967 *Manifesto for a new Theatre* (Augias, Bartolucci et. al. 1967: n.p.).

In this section, I will look at two solo pieces that engage with the political and cultural heritage of the 1970s and with political violence. Both shows look at the 1970s from a very specific point of view: that of the left-wing militant. The first one is *Corpo di Stato* (*Body of State*, 1998) by actor and director Marco Baliani. In this show, the perspective is autobiographical. Baliani's devising process revolved around a historical event that indelibly marked the image of the 1970s, the abduction and murder of Christian Democrat politician Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades. However, rather than focusing on the macro-historical event, Baliani turned his attention to his generation of militants and to their reaction to the Moro case. The significance of this piece is that it looks at one of the most debated and contested episodes Italian recent history without ever attempting to illustrate or explain the event, but rather by looking at the ethical and political repercussions the event had on a generation of militants and on the Italian radical Left. The second piece I am going to analyse is *Aprile '74 e 5* (*April '74 and 5*, 1995), by Marco Paolini. This piece mixes autobiography and fiction to narrate the political coming of age of a group of teenagers in a provincial town during the most conflictive years of the decade. The protagonists' political apprenticeship is scarred by political violence that eventually hits the Italian province. The piece, in alignment with Baliani's show, provides a

limited and peripheral perspective on recent Italian history, and it never attempts to explain history or to provide any definitive account. Similarly to *Body of State*, this is a piece that instils doubt and explores conflict, but contrary to Baliani's show, *April '74 and 5* goes against the grain of a narrative of the 1970s that limits the decade's scope to its grimmest and most ominous episodes. Paolini's show instead focuses on the joy of being a militant, on the passions that drove thousands of people to engage actively in politics.

### **The Inability to Act: Marco Baliani's *Body of State***

Marco Baliani (1950), actor, director, and writer began his artistic career in Rome, in the early 1970s. He studied architecture and approached the performing arts for the first time during the 1973 University occupation, when, with a group of fellow students, he devised happenings and agitprop performances within the occupied architecture department. Theatre and political commitment are strictly related from the very beginning of his career. After graduating, he founded the group Ruotalibera, one of the first companies specialized in theatre for children and young audiences in Italy. The group worked especially with children in schools and in working class suburbs (Bottiroli, 2005: 33-40). His work with children in the community represented on the one side a way of recovering theatre's social function, but also a valuable laboratory that allowed him to explore and discover his own aesthetics. Working with children and directing shows for young audiences Baliani laid the ethical and aesthetic foundations of his future work, compelling him to explore theatre primarily as communication. In an interview with Oliviero Ponte di Pino he recalled that the most significant lesson from that early period was

the importance of communication: I began to understand that the artist is not someone who develops languages linked only to aesthetics, but rather languages necessary to communicate something to someone. The artist's work, therefore, consists in mediating between his creations, knowing that there is someone who is watching him (Baliani in Ponte di Pino: 1995, n.p.).

Through this reflection Baliani started a research on the possibilities of storytelling that lasted over two decades and informed several of his shows. The necessity to match a systematic aesthetic research with communication is grounded on a concept of theatre as the site of the encounter between performer and spectator and on the idea that the creative process is finalised uniquely within this encounter (Baliani in Ponte di Pino, 1995: n. p). The result is a linguistic and dramaturgical research that presents both ethical and aesthetic concerns, and that seeks to develop a theatrical language that is powerful and immediate, evocative and capable of actively involving the spectator.

According to Baliani, his choice to focus on narration and on orality is a form of political resistance. He argues that the overwhelming quantity of information we are submerged by does not necessarily enhance our knowledge or increase our experience. On the contrary, it dramatically reduces human experience and therefore the ability of conveying this experience through narration. In the context of a highly mediatised society which places great emphasis on the visual, Baliani intentionally uses oral narrative to invert the process (Baliani, 2010:131). He reduced the visual aspect of his solo shows to a minimum, subtracting any unnecessary element. In his performances, images and events are evoked rather than represented, in a process that attempts to work on the audience's perception and that requires active and critical participation. In a recent collection of writings Baliani stated that "nowadays

working on an awakening of perception capable of forcing us out of the uniformity through which we read the world can have an antagonistic value” (Baliani, 2010: 147).

Baliani is also keen on stressing that it is never the content on its own that makes a work of art political. He argues that the act of gathering an audience for a performance is in itself a political act, the moment in which a community is formed to share an aesthetic experience (Baliani, 2009; n.p.). The political character of his theatre lays not in the content, but rather in the way this content is examined, elaborated, inserted into the narration, and proposed to the audience. Moreover, to have an effect on the audience, theatre must avoid any didactic attitude; instead it should elaborate a conflict capable of upsetting the spectator’s certainties:

[W]e presume that the content’s ethical greatness, the remote or near past’s testimonial value may be more important than the search for a narrative form. The storyteller believes that the mere fact of staging a controversial theme, a denunciation, an otherwise buried historical memory, a political perspective, other similar themes with a strong ethical element, would authorise him to assume a careless, professorial, didactic, pedantic narrative mode. This way narrations are no longer necessary, they are devoid of communicable experiences, they inform but they do not form, they might stir indignation but they won’t be challenging (Baliani, 2010: 57).

Through his work Baliani brought the narrative aspect to the forefront. For example, in one of his most popular productions, *Kohlhaas* (1989), an adaptation of Heinrich von Kleist’s *Michael Kohlhaas*, he devised a performance of pure narration that



transformed Kleist's text, elaborating on the conflict between justice and rule of law. Baliani's version maintains the plot almost unchanged, but adapts language, images, and rhythms to the performance's needs. In order to focus on the dynamics and on the economy of narration, Baliani imposed himself a physical limit: he sits on a chair for the entire length of the show. In spite of this limit, *Kohlhaas* develops a subtle and yet precise dramaturgy that includes text, voice, gaze, and gesture. *Kohlhaas* evokes, rather than representing; the narrator brings the characters to life through minimal changes of posture accompanied by a careful modulation of voice and breath. He sits stiffly and lifts his head when he gives voice to the Baron; he leans backwards and his voice turns into a hoarse whisper when the wounded servant Herse is speaking; he stomps his feet on the floor and beats his chest with his hands as he evokes the battle between the rebels and the army. *Kohlhaas* is the most accomplished storytelling experiment developed by Baliani, a story that already tackles several markedly political aspects such as the search for individual integrity, the rule of law, power's arbitrariness, rebellion against abuse, violence and the unresolved question of how far an individual can go in his struggle for justice.

This section will focus on a later production, *Corpo di stato* (*Body of State*, 1998) which capitalises on the work previously developed on narration and applies it to a relatively recent historical event and to autobiographical narratives. The show, commissioned to Baliani by RAI television – the Italian public broadcaster - for the twentieth anniversary of Aldo Moro's death, was written and performed by Baliani and directed by Maria Maglietta. The production's premiere was broadcast live by RAI on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1998. *Body of State*, however, went beyond RAI's initial project, and only marginally tackles the story of the abduction and murder of the Christian Democrat politician. Instead, it shifts the focus from Moro himself to what the Moro

case represented for Baliani's generation. The production frames the event in a precise historical period (the 1970s) in order to explain why the murder of the Christian Democrat leader represented a turning point for an entire generation, the symbolic end of the extra-parliamentary movement.

Aldo Moro was not any politician. Among the Christian Democrats, he was the one most open to dialogue with the PCI. He was one of the promoters of the so-called 'historic compromise', an attempt to form a coalition government which included Christian Democrats and Communists. The Italian radical Left considered Christian Democrats directly responsible for the oppressive bent took by the democratic state. However, Moro was perceived to be somewhat of an outsider in his own party, or, as Pier Paolo Pasolini wrote on the daily *Corriere della sera* in 1975, Moro seemed to be "the least implicated of all" (Pasolini, 2001: 133). Aldo Moro was kidnapped by the Red Brigades on 16<sup>th</sup> March 1978; he was held prisoner for fifty-five days. In exchange for Moro's life, the kidnappers asked for the liberation of Brigades members held in prison. The Government refused any negotiation and launched an extended police operation that militarised the city of Rome for over a month, but that was ultimately a failure. Aldo Moro was murdered on 9<sup>th</sup> May and the cove where he was held hostage was discovered only after his death. Although judiciary truth has been established, the Moro affair is still perceived as a deeply ambiguous event, partly because of the several contrasting interpretations and reconstructions of the episode (Foot, 2009: 195-203). The Moro kidnapping represented a turning point for an entire generation, and it is often considered the event that symbolically ended the movement. In Baliani's words, "[i]t was as if in those days a profound laceration was beginning to emerge; it may have existed already, but it fully manifested itself only then" (Baliani, 2003: 17).

The title of Baliani's show is significant and it deserves an explanation before I proceed any further in the analysis. The published script contains other writings by Baliani which can shed light on his devising process. In particular, the appendix titled *Diario* (diary) describes the process that shaped Baliani's work on the Moro case. The first diary entry is a reflection on *Antigone*, a tragedy Baliani had already worked on in a 1991 project<sup>64</sup>, and particularly on Polyneices' body<sup>65</sup>, a body that, similarly to Moro's, is the object of state affairs<sup>66</sup>. The title *Corpo di stato*, which I translate literally as *Body of State*, recalls the phrase *colpo di stato*, the Italian for *coup d'état*, thereby explicitly linking the abduction of Moro to an undermining of the democratic regime<sup>67</sup>. The title, however, also refers specifically to the image of Moro's lifeless

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<sup>64</sup>The project *Antigone delle città* (*Antigone of the Cities*) was a series of commemorative events created in 1991 for the 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1980 Bologna station bombing (Tognolini, 1992).

<sup>65</sup> It is worth noting that one of the most popular staging of *Antigone's* tragedy in Italy was the Living Theatre's, which toured the country extensively. Polyneices's body is also at the centre of the Living Theatre's production (Molinari, 1977: 185-207). In the interview with Ponte di Pino already quoted in this section, Baliani recalls the influence of the Living Theatre's work on his early career (Baliani in Ponte di Pino, 1995).

<sup>66</sup>For the cultural significance of Aldo Moro's abduction and death see John Foot's book *Italy's divided memory* (2009:183-204). As Foot explains, Aldo Moro's death was intensely visual. Two images of the politician that show his body exposed in all its vulnerability recur frequently on Italian media. The first one is a picture sent to the press by the Red Brigades during the abduction: it shows Moro alive, sitting against a BR flag, holding a copy of *La Repubblica*. The second one is the picture taken when Moro's body was discovered by the authorities; it pictures Moro lying in the boot of car dressed with the suit he was wearing the day he was abducted.

<sup>67</sup> Another possible translation would be *Corp d'État*. This translation would more closely recall the phrase *coup d'état* and maintain the original word play. The risk with such translation, however, is that it might be accessible only to those familiar with the French language. In this thesis I prefer to keep the focus on the 'body' rather than on the *coup d'état*. It is the body that is the origin of Baliani's interpretation of Moro's abduction as tragedy, whereas the attack to democratic institutions has a more marginal role in his production.

body (*corpo*), which is the piece's magnetic centre: a body "that became cumbersome, both when living, the imprisoned body, and after death, the immolated/sacrificed body" (Baliani, 2003: 85). The association with Antigone and the parallel Polyneices/Moro also gives a precise key to read an event that, according to Baliani, can be fully understood only through the dynamics of tragedy: during the fifty-five days of Moro's abduction everyone involved, the State, the extra-parliamentary Left, the student movement, and Moro himself, seemed to be bound to an ineluctable destiny:

[s]ince the beginning of Moro's story, everything precipitated towards ruin; not just his physical and mental ruin, but the ruin of the world around him, in which I also included myself and my generation; it was as if Moro's body were dragging along an entire historical period, revealing its relations and contradictions (Baliani, 2003: 86-87).

The Moro case is therefore examined not as an investigative question or a political scandal, but rather as a symbol of the movement's demise. In order to leave debates and conspiracy theories out of the picture, Baliani needed a shift of perspective that would take the Moro case not as the creative process' aim, but rather as its starting point. The focus, therefore, is not on the Moro case itself, but on the political and cultural significance of this particular event for his generation (Baliani, 2003: 93-94).

Baliani decided to expose himself and insert his own experience of the Moro case. A short prologue explicitly links his early theatre practice to his activity in the extra-parliamentary Left. In 1974 Baliani was among the students occupying the

architecture department at the University of Rome<sup>68</sup>. With other occupiers, he started performing short agitprop pieces for student audiences. Dario Fo visited and talked to them about the actor's work. The group devised a new piece, an adaptation of *The Emperor's New Clothes*. The performance closed with the actors distorting the traditional socialist song *Bandiera Rossa* (Red Flag) into a blues rhythm whilst dancing as if they were the chorus of a musical theatre show. The students' political committee did not appreciate and asked the performers to leave the occupied department. Their accusation is the beginning of Baliani's artistic career: "Get out! Out! These are no longer comrades! Actors, that's what they are! Actors! I had been branded. This is how I started making theatre" (Baliani, 2003: 10).

By opening *Body of State* with this scene, Baliani explains how his theatre practice stemmed from his political activity, and testifies the existence of a political theatre often at odds with a student movement that was gradually losing the libertarian force of 1968. By starting with what can be considered a foundational moment, Baliani establishes his authoritativeness: as a former activist he has the credentials to narrate this story. He knows the student movement first hand, yet, like most narrators, he is now an outsider who can look back at that moment with the necessary distance.

The narration rapidly moves to 9<sup>th</sup> May 1978, the day Moro was murdered. Here Baliani briefly dwells on Moro and on the *brigatisti*. He imagines their thoughts, doubts, and gestures: the loading of the weapons, the murderer's hand on the gun,

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<sup>68</sup>Baliani never states to which extra-parliamentary group he was affiliated. He keeps his militancy vague, avoiding the sectarianism that often plague the radical Left, and keeping the narration closer to the sensibilities of the wider movement.

the *brigatisti* dressing Moro's corpse and hiding it in the boot of a car. By starting from the politician's death, Baliani reminds the audience that Moro's story has already been written. Strong of this awareness, the narrator can proceed and turn his attention to the cultural and political implications of Moro's death. A flashback abruptly cuts the imagined scene of Moro's murder and takes the audience back to his abduction, fifty-five days earlier. Here the narration closes up on the young Baliani:

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 1978 I was 28 years old; the year before I had become a father, and it was four years that I was making theatre  
(Baliani, 2003:17).

Here Baliani declares his emotional involvement with the story and, therefore, takes responsibility for the narration (Antonello, 2009: 241). Yet, this line in particular also declares that the performance's perspective is very specific and, therefore, limited. History cannot be grasped in its totality. In order to provide a possible account of dynamics and processes that led part of the Movement to embrace armed struggle, Baliani goes back to his past, to autobiographical narratives, and to the stories of fellow militants that crossed the line between radical opposition and violent struggle.

At the core of the piece are the contradictions, doubts, and hopes that Baliani shared with a significant number of left-wing activists during Moro's abduction. For example, straight after the line quoted in the paragraph above, Baliani confesses that as he heard the news of Moro's abduction, his first reaction was exaltation, "a euphoric sense of belonging" (2003: 18), a "revolutionary excitement" (2003: 23).

Why someone like me, who had quit active militancy and was doing politics through the theatre, working in the community, with children

living in difficult environments, in prisons – a militant theatre in which he truly believed [...] – how could someone like me listen to the radio announcement [of Moro’s kidnapping] and feel gripped by a sense of revolutionary excitement, even if only for a few instants? (Baliani, 2003: 23)

The show does not explain this contradiction. Rather, it looks at the ordinary life of left-wing militants, at their dreams and hopes. Within this main objective, the several stories that Baliani weaves into *Body of State* focus on three elements that contributed to the extra-parliamentary Left demise: the first one was the gradual closure of a movement that was losing touch with a rapidly evolving political and cultural landscape; the second was the escalating violence; the third was the Left’s inability to act or to take a clear position against political terrorism.

Baliani’s piece is especially concerned with the self-referentiality that characterised left-wing terrorist groups in the late 1970s. In *Body of State*, the Red Brigades’ actions are often perceived as mysterious and unintelligible. The very choice of Aldo Moro as a target seems incoherent. Upon hearing the news of the abduction, the narrator cannot help thinking: “Why Moro? [...] it doesn’t make sense. Wasn’t Moro the one closer to the Left, the one more open to dialogue? Wasn’t he the one who was bringing the Communist Party to government?” (Baliani, 2003: 20-21).

Reflecting upon the unintelligibility of the Red Brigades’ actions is a painful process. Baliani recognises that certain elements already present in the extra-parliamentary Left were exacerbated by the terrorist groups. As a former activist, Baliani can imagine the motives justify, in their eyes, the turn to terror:

I could almost imagine those meetings of theirs; I could almost guess what was growing in their heads. After all, how many similar meetings we had at the beginning of the seventies, where we used those same words, that way of thinking, that revolutionary phrasebook; yes, I could almost see them, locked in their rooms, in hiding, with no real contact with the outside world. Listening to the sound of your own voice day in and day out, until you really start believing you're the vanguard of the future world (Baliani, 2003: 35).

Although the Red Brigades represent the extreme peak of this detachment from the world, the narrator can see elements of this tendency in his own militancy, in language, jargon, and rituals incomprehensible to those outside of the movement. For example, when mentioning one of his political group's charismatic leaders, the narrator recalls how his way of speaking was "too pompous, baroque, never gets anywhere, [...] revolves on itself with no beginning or end" (2003: 44). Similarly, the narrator expresses impatience towards certain routines, such as the "infinite series of meetings and policy documents" (2003: 43) that precede any practical action, or the political group's cultural requirements whereby activists had to "read certain books and not others, learn certain Maoist-Leninist quotes by heart" (2003: 39).

The second controversial issue tackled *Body of State* is the movement's ambiguous attitude towards violence. As Robert Lumley argues, violence, real or symbolic had been part of left-wing social movements since 1968:

The idea of 'proletarian violence' was by no means exclusive to those choosing to engage in armed struggle. It was widely canvassed within the social movements. Moreover, violent action



was a significant, if largely symbolic, aspect of clashes with the police or with foremen. 'War' metaphors abounded in the language of the Left. The Red Brigades could therefore legitimately claim to be drawing on a tradition and not just a movement's spontaneous outbursts of rage (Lumley, 1990: 280).

Baliani acknowledges that weapons did not appear suddenly, that violent confrontation was part of the extra-parliamentary Left, and that signals of growing aggressiveness, often a direct consequence of police brutality against activists, had been there for a long time. For example, "[i]t was sufficient to be part of a group preparing a rally to notice that the most important part was reserved to the organising of demonstration marshals, to how to defend and arm ourselves" (2003: 29). One episode in particular gives the audience a glimpse of this tendency. It is a rally in Rome at the beginning of 1971. The narrator, who was among the protesters, uses this episode to illustrate what dynamics brought a significant part of the movement to justify the use of violence. The rally is initially peaceful, animated, and lively. The police stops the demonstration; someone from the back of the rally throws incendiary bottles; the police charges; the protesters are mostly dispersed but some of them are hit badly by the agents. The young Baliani finds himself in the midst of the clash; he tries to escape but sees a friend being beaten up by the agents and reacts with rage. As the demonstration marshals approach carrying incendiary bottles, the narrator instinctively grabs one and throws it towards an armoured vehicle. Injured and furious, Baliani hides in a church and finds himself ruminating aggressive thoughts, his rage directed equally against the police and against the protesters:

Ah, but next time they aren't going to get me, next time I won't go to a rally unprepared, next time... hang on, what was I thinking? That I had to arm myself too? (Baliani, 2003: 33-34)

During those conflictive years, crossing the boundary between self-defence and aggression was a matter of choice but also of circumstances. In a context where left-wing protesters experienced the authorities' open hostility, it was not difficult to be caught in the spiralling escalation of violence. One episode in Baliani's narration is particularly significant. It recalls a heated political meeting in 1972 during which the leaders openly advocated a 'qualitative leap in the struggle' and asked militants if they were willing to start operating underground. Baliani was aware that 'going underground' meant "changing life from one day to the next, disappearing, going around Rome all day with weapons on you, ready to shoot and kill. Hiding meant living within structures with strict, rigid rules, structures of a military kind" (Baliani, 2003: 43). Nonetheless, he confesses that he remained silent and did not put himself forward out of astonishment rather than out of true awareness (2003: 42). Part of his political group eventually agrees to join the groups operating underground while Baliani and few others silently leave the meeting, bewildered and unable to speak or act. The image effectively sums up one of the elements that caused the movement to split. Baliani seems to suggest that whereas a minority got involved in underground activities, others did not explicitly reject armed struggle. In *Body of State* it is precisely this inability to firmly detach the movement from armed groups that caused, years later, its demise. As political violence increased, this silence turned into frustration and impotence. According to Baliani, during Moro's abduction the entire movement seemed unable to move. The feeling was that of being at the

end of a card game, when “you can only play [...] the cards you have left, you can only follow an inevitable plot” (Baliani, 2003: 69).

As we have seen, the life, experiences, and militancy of those who took up arms and those who did not often intersected, making any clear-cut distinction the more difficult. Baliani admits that he knew comrades who suddenly disappeared and presumably went into hiding and that the line between militancy and being implicated in illegal activities was often blurred. *Body of State* explains how difficult and potentially dangerous this choice was by including the story of Armando, a personal friend of Baliani, a former activist who one night receives a visit from a comrade he had not seen in a long time. The man asks Armando to keep a parcel in his cellar, only for one night. After three days the comrade had not come back and Armando’s house is searched by the police. The parcel, containing a weapon, is brought against him in court and Armando is sentenced to serve three years in prison (Baliani, 2003: 53-55). The narration then goes back to the city of Rome during Moro’s abduction, a militarised city where checkpoints, searches, and police raids were the order of the day. Baliani describes the increasing paranoia seizing activists, the fear of casually meeting comrades in hiding. He then asks himself what he would have done in Armando’s place, how he would have reacted if a comrade in hiding had asked for a favour or for hospitality:

of all the possible courses of action, in my imagination when I rethink about this scene I cannot move; I don’t know what to do; I stand still, there, on the threshold. A step backwards to let her in and I would be complicit, I don’t even know of what. If instead I close the door and she gets arrested that very night, for the rest of my life I would feel

responsible for her imprisonment. And I stay there, unable to choose, dilating the moment of decision to infinity (Baliani, 2003: 57).

The doubt is an ethical one that involves the narrator's his political and personal integrity. The stakes are high, even for someone like Baliani who is no longer active in the movement: his political commitment, his family, his responsibility as a parent, his ethics. Here, the sense of impotence becomes real impasse: any action can generate effects out of the narrator's control.

On the macro level, this impasse is summed up by a slogan published during Moro's abduction on the front page of *Lotta Continua's* newspaper.

'Neither with the Red Brigades nor with the State' [...] We are not playing this game, neither with the Red Brigades and their approach to struggle nor with this State that goes on butchering students and workers on the streets. [...] I thought it was such a liberating choice. But now, over thirty days after Moro's kidnapping, that slogan sounds like a sign of impotence (Baliani, 2003: 58).

The inability to act described by Baliani was not limited to the extra-parliamentary Left. If the movement did not detach itself from political terrorism and ended up divided, dispersed or caught in the state repression of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the rest of the country has so far been unable to elaborate the trauma and to gain historical perspective. *Body of State* gives a contribution to this process, trying to construct a micro-narrative that partially illuminates reality's complexity.

Those who had been part of the movement felt, during the fifty-five days of Moro's abduction, that the ground around them was shifting. The limited autobiographical

narrative gives the audience a glimpse of the profound contradictions that eventually contributed to the movement's end and the ethical conundrum that left-wing militants faced during the 1980s and 1990s when Italian culture started processing the memory of those years. Although the production tries to voice the concern of those who rejected armed struggle, Baliani does not hide the fact that when it comes to the cultural, ethical, and intellectual responsibility of left-wing political violence, claiming innocence is harder than it might seem. The show closes with a reflection upon the movement's inability to react in front of political terrorism.

For all those who did not take up arms, and we were the majority, those were the times when we were forced to silence. As if being against that power, against that state, against that way of living could only be expressed through armed struggle (2003: 71).

This quote summarizes the significance of political violence in relation to the movement and to the future of the Italian Left. Terrorism pulled, in Baliani's view, the entire extra-parliamentary movement into a political dead end. The political space between the state and the Red Brigades could only be silent because what was left of the movement did not have the time, the possibility or the skill to question and rearticulate its ideological positioning. The production offers no closure and no definitive explanation. It looks at the past with empathy but also with the detachment of hindsight. *Body of State* inserts itself within the rich cultural production concerned with the 1970s mentioned in the introduction to this section. It contributes to shed light on some of the dynamics that brought part of the movement to accept violence and a significant minority to embrace armed struggle. Yet, compared to Fo's approach to history, Baliani's presents important differences.

Firstly, his aim as an artist is not to report judiciary or historical truths but rather to explain why “those fifty-five days represented a watershed for an entire generation, my generation” (Baliani, 2003:17). The artist’s task is to tackle the Moro case from a cultural perspective, reflecting upon the significance, even the political significance of this event.

History is, in *Body of State*, material the artist can approach only as fragment, never as a whole. The choice of relying on the autobiographical narrative and on individual stories, such as that of Armando can be attributed to this approach. In a 2009 interview, Baliani clarifies his method referring to Walter Benjamin’s concept of history as “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage” (1999: 249). For Baliani, all the artist can do

is extracting one of these fragments, recover from the debris one of these scraps, isolate it and make it implode, turn it into an excellent conflict. [...] This excellent conflict partially illuminates the pile of rubble behind it, partly illuminates history. It does not explain it, it does not resolve it and, above all, it does not inform us on how the story went. It’s a painful passage through history and in order to go through it, we must empathise with the conflict we chose (Baliani, 2009, n.p.).

*Body of State* is one manifestation of this painful passage through history, and it is considerably different from Fo’s approach. In Fo’s work the heritage of the Left is represented in almost heroic tones and history is something we can record, investigate, understand, and use to the benefit of the present. In *Body of State*, the abduction and murder of Aldo Moro is a complex and problematic foundational

narrative. In the impossibility, at least on stage, of engaging with macro-history like Fo does, the fragment illuminated by Baliani's narration takes empathy back into the picture.

From a political point of view, however, the fragment is characterised by doubt, contradiction, and unresolved questions. The doubt concerns especially a possible course of action, and it even translates into complete inability to act. *Body of State* never tackles the movement's or the Red Brigades' ideology; the piece is far removed from the Marxist categories that informed Fo's practice. The practices, rituals, and discourse of active militancy even cause a certain uneasiness in the narrator. The pompous and baroque language that "revolves on itself with no beginning or end" (2003: 44), the "infinite series of meetings" (2003: 43) or the Maoist-Leninist quotes to be learnt by heart (2003: 39) are described almost as hindrances to action, barriers between the individual and real engagement. And yet, despite the doubts, Baliani never forsakes engagement. He explicitly articulates his *impegno* in his professional practice (2003: 23) rather than through the extra-parliamentary Left. By the end of the monologue he refers to categories that are not exclusive heritage of the radical Left, thereby engaging a wider audience. The last line of the piece goes back to the origin of both the radical Left and the armed groups: "We all came from the same '68", the narrator states at the end of the performance, "we all came from the same need for equality and justice" (Baliani, 2003: 71).

I will now proceed with the analysis of another piece from the 1990s: *Aprile '74 e 5* (*April '74 and 5*) by actor and author Marco Paolini. The piece focuses on a younger generation, those who were in their early teens in 1968 and were developing their political identity during the most conflictive years of the following decade. Similarly to

Baliani, Paolini proposes a fragment, an individual story – this time fictional – which partly illuminates the history of the 1970s and proposes a type of *impegno* that grapples with the lack of political points of reference but articulates itself in relation to the other.

### **A Political Coming of Age: Marco Paolini's *April '74 and 5***

Marco Paolini, born in 1956, started making theatre at the end of the 1970s. He had a heterogeneous theatre training: initially influenced by the work of Grotowski and Barba, he has extensive *Commedia dell'Arte* experience. He started exploring storytelling's potential with the theatre company Laboratorio Teatro Settimo and with director Gabriele Vacis. He then developed his practice autonomously, combining the functions of performer, author, director, and dramaturg. Narration became a particularly fertile field for Paolini, an aesthetic choice that entails a political commitment towards the material and an ethical one towards his audience. During the nineties, his shows gained huge popularity, particularly one of them, *Racconto del Vajont (The Vajont Story)* which premiered in 1994. The show focuses on the mismanaged construction of the Vajont dam, an ambitious engineering operation that aimed to create the biggest reservoir in the Alps. In 1963, a landslide fell into the reservoir, creating a 250 meter-high wave that overtopped the dam and destroyed the valley below killing two thousand people. The show is a powerful reflection on the price of Italian industrialisation, an explicit critique of a notion of progress that disregards environment and local communities. In 1997, it was staged by the old Vajont dam and broadcast live by RAI on primetime, gaining an audience of over three million viewers, an exceptional achievement for televised theatre. This large



and unexpected success contributed to the popularity of storytelling theatre (Prono, 2012: 62).

Paolini was born in Belluno and raised in Treviso, in the north-east of Italy, and his work on orality owes much to his origins. Since the first storytelling shows, developed in the rich context of the Italian scene for young audiences, Paolini recognises and exploits the communicative potential of his dialect. Paolini does not hide his north-eastern accent, but rather explores its possibilities on stage. His research on his regional variant of Italian is not informed by a necessity of claiming his origins, but rather, it is intended as a way to recover the complexity, the precision, and the evocative power of spoken language (Paolini, 2008: 74). The preference for a regional variant of Italian grounds Paolini's stories in a very specific landscape and in a precise cultural and economic background. This element, rather than being an obstacle, enhances the narrator's authoritativeness, and brings the narration closer to the audience's personal experience.

Paolini proceeds through devising<sup>69</sup>, modifying the narration performance after performance, and often performing semi-staged versions for small audiences before embarking on a national tour. Every performance is, therefore, part of a process that attempts to renovate the relationship with the audience. In this process, the published text, which is available for most of Paolini's works, is the result of hundreds of performances during which the actor adapts, modifies, cuts, and adds material according to the audience reception of the piece (Marchiori, 2003: 23). His

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<sup>69</sup>Devising the text on stage is a common practice within Italian storytelling theatre. See Guccini (2005) and Soriani (2009).

practice matches aesthetic research with an immediate theatrical language, accessible to a wide audience.

Some of his most popular shows deal with conflictive or problematic aspects of Italian history and are grounded on extended preliminary research on primary sources, journalistic reports, or first-hand accounts. Paolini subsequently elaborates this material and inserts it into a cohesive narrative. This narrative is the element that links the material to the listener via the narrator's voice and presence. Paolini argues that live performance is the site where a process of collective elaboration of memory, and therefore interpretation of the present, can take place. This is in contrast with mass media's treatment of historical material which tends to reduce the complexity of the memory discourse and to limit our emotional relationship to history (Paolini 2008: 66-67). In an interview with Simone Soriani published in 2009, Paolini shows a certain reluctance to use the term political theatre and yet he admits that his work after Vajont is political and has a "civic" function (*civile*, in Italian). Vajont is, according to Paolini, "an identitary work".

[T]hat is, it speaks about us without making an *a priori* political statement. [...] if it is true that we don't have a common future, we must remember that we have a common past. This is politics and this is the theatre's 'civic' function. I call it 'civic' [...] but it is political theatre: it simply doesn't have a thesis to sell (Paolini in Soriani, 2009: 179)

Memory has a political quality in Paolini's theatre because of the role it plays in shaping identity. In this respect it is significant that Marco Paolini reconstruction of collective memory and national identity works through an extensive work on

biographical narratives. *April '74 and 5* is the fourth show of a series of productions known as *Albums*, developed between 1987 and 2003. It is composed of five shows for a solo actor who narrates in first person. The first two were originally devised for young audiences and then adapted for a wider public. The shows follow the coming of age of Nicola, the narrating character, and his friends: Barbin, Gianvittorio, Nano, Ciccio, and Cesarino. In *Adriatico* (*Adriatic*, 1987) Nicola leaves the family for the first time to go to a summer camp on the Adriatic coast; *Tiri in porta* (*Shots at the Goal*, 1990) takes place on the local football pitch, a liminal world where adults are not allowed; *Liberi tutti* (*All Set Free*, 1992) sees the boys going into their early teens and discovering the theatre at the church recreation centre; *April '74 and 5* focuses on their political education, and *Stazioni di transito* (*Transit Stations*, 1999) looks at their passage into adulthood with the military service and, for Nicola, the beginning of his professional acting career. Paolini described the shows as a collective biography

because it was born from the collection of friends and acquaintances' memories, seasoned with my own and stirred in a wider historical picture, in order to retrace the path into adolescence and early adulthood of a boy growing up in post-war Italy. For me the *Albums* are an excuse to face my country's recent history and its memory (Paolini in Soriani, 2009: 177-178).

*Aprile '74 e 5* (April '74 and 5) is entirely dedicated to the development of Nicola's political awareness and his response to the conflicts and struggles developing in Italy during 1970s. In this production in particular the narrative of Nicola's passage from childhood to maturity assumes the traits of a political coming of age. In *April '74 and 5* Nicola is eighteen and his life is all contained within the physical and cultural borders of the small provincial town where he lives with his family. Nicola's life is

occupied by two apparently distant, but strongly interrelated activities: playing rugby for a local team and political activism. Whilst Nicola's political coming of age is the core of the piece, rugby training and matches regularly counterpoint the main narrative. Through rugby Nicola learns the values that will inform his political commitment: solidarity, collective action, and the awareness that, in order to reach the team's goal, a player must get dirty and suffer few blows from his opponent. As Fernando Marchiori argued, the rugby match becomes "physical allegory and spatial equivalent of political confrontation" (Marchiori, 2003: 48).

The show opens with an autobiographical note that immediately places Nicola's political commitment at the core of the piece and at the same time blurs the lines between actor and narrating persona<sup>70</sup>

Her name was *politics* [...]; and up to a certain point, it was requited love. Then no, we no longer understood each other; and whatever I did or said, all I got was: "Idiot, idiot, idiot!"

I started making theatre instead (Paolini, 2005: 58).

Here the audience learns that the adult Nicola is a theatre maker himself: the boundary between the fictional narrator and the performer become uncertain. Paolini exploits this precise strategy throughout the *Albums*. The spectator never knows where Paolini's story ends and Nicola's story starts, how much is autobiographical

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<sup>70</sup>In a 2009 interview, Paolini describes his personal concept of political commitment in relation to artistic work: "When I started making theatre, I stopped being an active militant. Up until then, theatre and politics had been one vital force, but all politics gave me in return for my commitment was "idiot! Idiot! Idiot!" It was the autism of a leaden language, made of rhetorical words. [...] With *Vajont* I understood what was it that politics could not give me: politics allowed me to address only those who already agreed with me" (Paolini in Soriani, 2009: 180).

material and how much is fiction. Yet, rather than undermining his credibility, blurring the line between character and performer allows Paolini to develop a fictional narrative that has the authoritativeness of an autobiography.

The narration moves on revealing that the piece's perspective on political activism is not the one of a seasoned militant, but rather, that of a teenager:

What I liked about politics were the ideals and the liturgies. You can't talk about ideals: you spoil them if you do. The liturgies were that stuff crammed between 25th April<sup>71</sup> and 1st May, the last chance to start the revolution and find a girlfriend before summer, but in reverse order of importance (Paolini, 2005: 58).

The teenager's perspective adds lightness to a subject matter that is usually associated, as we have seen, with the 'years of lead' narrative. In contrast, the show starts with a light note. Nicola's world is still an adolescent, provincial, peaceful, perfect world<sup>72</sup> which seems, at first, physically and culturally detached from the global struggle. The Cold War and the Vietnam War are titles on the newspapers or footage on the television screen. News of occupied universities and factories, of the clashes between political activists and police in Rome, Milan, and Turin seem to belong to a different world. Political violence will reach this apparently secluded world as well, marking an abrupt end to the protagonist's innocence.

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<sup>71</sup> 25<sup>th</sup> April is the anniversary of the liberation of Milan from Nazi troupes in 1945, a date that marks the symbolic end of World War II in Italy. Traditionally 25<sup>th</sup> April celebrations are particularly felt by left-wingers.

<sup>72</sup>The published script of *Aprile '74 e 5* is divided into three main sections, the second focuses on the local bar and is titled *Un mondo perfetto*, which can be translated as 'A perfect world' (Paolini, 2005: 70-91).

Nicola and his friends are dedicated and enthusiastic founders of their own political club, the '1<sup>st</sup> May Club'. They follow almost religiously the political 'liturgies' (the meetings, the long discussions, the rallies, the slogans), and they try their best to get a grip on Marxist theory and to apply it to their daily lives. The boys' commitment is genuine, yet the Marxist revolutionary project is detached from their reality of teenagers in a provincial town. In the following passage, the club meeting reports are intertwined with an ordinary exchange between Nicola and his mother. The affected Marxist jargon used for the meeting stands against the fluid and immediate quality of everyday dialogue. In performance, changes in tone and pitch in the narrator's voice highlight the switch from the narration of Nicola's daily life to the meeting report. In the published script, the text is divided into two columns: on the left, everyday exchanges between the boys or between Nicola and his family, on the right, slightly smaller font, the meeting report.

\_Bye, mum! I'm going out.

From the 'May 1<sup>st</sup> club' assembly reports book.

\_Where are you going, Nicola?

GIANVITTORIO our reality is filtered,  
mediated! The club does not  
stem from a working-class  
reality but from a middle-class  
society.

\_Mum, I'm off to South America.

NANO Spontaneism is not a correct  
definition for the club.

\_Nicola, please, take the blue coat with you!

\_Mum... it's an eskimo jacket...

GIANVITTORIO Through counter-  
information we need to put  
forward a very critical stance  
towards PCI comrades.

[...]

There you have it; I wanted to be like everybody else. I didn't want to distinguish myself or show off. And they got me the only wrong eskimo<sup>73</sup> jacket in the entire town: mine... blue! (Paolini: 78-79)

Present in the same scene is a glimpse of the daily lives of seventeen-year-old boys in a provincial town, the need to be accepted and to feel part of a group (Nicola's concern with the blue eskimo jacket), the haste to grow up and to confront themselves with the adult world, along with an attempt to engage with the debates within the extra-parliamentary Left, such as the critique of the PCI or the industrial action in Turin and Porto Marghera<sup>74</sup>. Yet, these are only echoes of struggles and debates happening in the cultural and political centres; they reverberate in the boys' life but their everyday experience remains detached from the major political conflicts.

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<sup>73</sup>The khaki eskimo jacket was the student movement's unofficial uniform. Robert Lumley argues that the student movement had been keen "to project a political self-image. Style took on political connotations, in that the activists often wore their clothes as if they were carrying a banner. Commitment was worn on the sleeve for everyone to see. Politics was no longer invisible to the eye, a private matter of conscience to be guessed at by the curious stranger; it was made public for all to see" (Lumley, 1990: 71).

<sup>74</sup>Porto Marghera is a major industrial area few kilometres away from Venice.

Things change abruptly in 1974 when a fascist terrorist attack changed Nicola's perception of politics. On 28th May 1974, a bomb exploded on the main square of Brescia, a provincial town not far from Milan. The terrorists' target was an antifascist protest. The blast killed eight people and wounded over ninety. On stage, the shattering memory of the bombing is rendered through an abrupt interruption of the narration. Nicola is recalling a clumsy and endearing dialogue with Norma, a girl he had a crush on. The narration is interrupted by the audio recording of the explosion in Brescia<sup>75</sup>, the narrator stands silent for a moment, overwhelmed by what he is hearing; he tries to move, to find the thread of his story; he attempts to go ahead, but the blast and the screams cover his voice. In the 2008 staging broadcast by *La7* television, Nicola tries to remember how the news arrived to him, and for a moment he seems to recollect hearing the explosion from his classroom, miles away from Brescia.

Why do I remember it as if I heard it? Of course, it's because we had the windows open, it was May, and, as we were adults, you know, in school they even allowed us to smoke [...] and we sat with our arse on the window sill, half inside, half outside...

[The performer is interrupted by the audio of the explosion. Voices crying for help. The narrator stops]

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<sup>75</sup>The 28<sup>th</sup> May 1974 antifascist rally in Brescia included a political meeting on the main square, Piazza della Loggia. A stage was set up and several speakers were expected to address the crowd. The organisers audio-recorded the speakers' interventions and the tape also captured the explosion and the first moments straight afterwards. The recording is available via the *Casa della memoria* website at the page <http://www.28maggio74.brescia.it/index.php?pagina=73> [accessed 11<sup>th</sup> May 2014].



Wait a moment! That's not it! You can't hear it from my school! It's not possible, is it? And yet I remember this bomb as if it exploded inside my head! How is that possible? (Album d'aprile, 2008)

At this moment, the fictional narrator seems to live once again the confusion and the emotional shock he felt upon hearing the news. Here Paolini's writing deliberately undermines Nicola's authoritativeness. On stage, Nicola is in a state of visible distress his narration becomes disconnected and incoherent. The thread of his story is broken by the sound of the explosion, and the narrator mixes up stories and memories: at first he seems to remember that a phone call at school broke the news of the terroristic attack, then he has the impression he heard the blast from his classroom, then he finally remembers that he learned about it at home, the black-and-white TV set repeatedly showing the first images of Piazza della Loggia after the explosion. Several possible versions of the same story overlap and contradict one another, as if one perspective would not be enough to explain the devastating impact that the Brescia bombings had on his generation. The bomb has metaphorically exploded "inside his head", marking a traumatic landmark in his coming-of-age.

An event of extraordinary violence hit a provincial town presumably very similar to Nicola's town, and, what is more, it hit the city square, the place that historically represents the pulsing heart of Italian towns, the physical and symbolic centre of civic life. After their final exams, the boys go travelling around Europe and they stop in Brescia on their way back home. The visit gives them a sense of the pervasiveness of violence – this time perpetrated by neo-fascist militants:

They look all the same these provincial towns; our square has porticoes too, for instance. [...] The French have the boulevards, the

English have the parks, but our lot gave its best on these provincial town squares where you can't help feeling at the centre of the world. And then you think: how could you play such a dirty trick? Steeping such a place in blood (Paolini, 2005: 92-93)?

With the fascist bomb in Brescia Nicola for the first time feels the threat of the strategy of tension and realises the existence of a complex political conflict that goes far beyond his reach and his commitment. The bomb opens a breach in Nicola's political awareness, yet the strategy of tension has not yet physically entered the protected space of Nicola's town. It will eventually happen during the 1975 election campaign when an electoral meeting on the main square turns into a violent clash between protesters and police. The narrator's voice is intertwined with numerous others: his friends', a neo-fascist politician talking from the stage, the owner of the local cafe, the police chief. Paolini's description of the tension and the riot is evocative and willingly vague. It borrows vocabulary and phrases from both the theatre and rugby jargon, thereby expanding the narration's semantic scope whilst strongly linking political confrontation to the other two pivotal elements in Nicola's life: theatre and rugby.

The use of theatre vocabulary to describe the mounting tension before the rally suggests that what was about to happen on the town square was purposefully set up. Nicola remembers a foreboding tension right from the start of the election rally. From the stage, an unnamed neo-fascist politician is deliberately provoking the crowd and the unusual display of armed police and armoured vehicles gives Nicola the impression to be in the middle of an affair that goes far beyond a local electoral meeting.

Something in the air makes you understand that there is another game, another match and that this one has little to do with it. But today things won't go the usual way; there are signs that, if you want to read them, can make you understand that there is something bigger in the air, something dirtier, something organised somewhere else. You can get it from the guy on stage, who knows how to provoke, he stirs tension; he knows where he wants to get. It is the rerun of a touring show that was stopping in every Italian town, how can you miss it? There is no way you can miss it! If the entire city is a theatre, you are in (Paolini, 2005: 116).

This bigger, dirtier battle is fought elsewhere, far from the city square, at a different level. Despite his commitment, the macro-political conflict between the radical Left and neo-fascist elements of the state is beyond Nicola's control. The theatre vocabulary (rerun, touring show) reinforces the idea of something pre-arranged, a performance prepared in advance. Paolini suggests that the riot is a show purposefully set up to stir tension. Not only it is impossible to miss it, but it is impossible not to feel involved, not to be implicated. The line "if the whole city is a theatre, you are in" is a direct warning to the audience watching Paolini's performance. Everyone is involved even those who are not aware of it.

As previously mentioned, rugby and political activism intertwine constantly, and when the tense political rally turns into a clash between opposing forces, Paolini makes large use of rugby terms such as 'scrum' and 'ruck' to indicate the clash between left-wing protesters and police, or 'prop' and 'back row' to indicate the various 'roles' played by the individuals involved in the clash. This linguistic choice lightens the event's gravity, adds humour, and divides the left-wing protesters and

the police into two opposing teams, playing a game that, at least at the beginning of the scene is tough but fair. The analogy with rugby holds until the clash becomes violent, imbalanced. At this point in the narration, rugby can no longer be considered an allegory of political struggle. Any figurative structure is dropped, and the language becomes concrete, exact.

It looks like a dream but it's a nightmare. When you see the blows arriving, solid, concrete, the balance of forces is devastating, seven against one, and now they're poisonous because now they're raging...

\_They're going to beat you up, Barbin, they're going get you... get away from there (Paolini, 2005: 123)!

The clash is brutal. The police charges and one of Nicola's friends, Barbin, is beaten up by the agents and ends up in hospital in a coma. Whilst the fascist bombs and the spectre of the strategy of tension were devastating and yet somewhat distant news. Now violence has physically reached Nicola's world. The small, provincial town is no longer the protected haven of his teenage years. The riot, the teargas, the armoured vehicles, and the image of Barbin unconscious on a hospital bed forced Nicola into adulthood and changed his vision of politics. By the end of the show, Nicola has realised that in mid-seventies Italy the political game is rigged and the outcome out of his control. His enthusiasm suffered a hard blow, and yet, it is not erased, but rather transformed into a new type of engagement. The last few lines of the published script take us back to the adult Nicola, who looks back at those years with melancholy and rage, and reflects on the very meaning of political struggle (in the text is *lotta dura*, tough struggle).

[W]e were no good for the tough struggle. I used to think that the tough struggle is the one you do when you have nothing to lose, there, on the pitch; and you take into account that you get beaten up, but you give a few blows too. Then you discover, you feel, you understand that there's another one behind, not a struggle: a war, armed, with civilian targets in peace time! Dirty ambushes! What kind of youth did I get in this country? I believe [...] that the tough struggle is the one you do to resist the temptation to tell everyone to go to hell and keep hold of a little will, don't withdraw before it's time (Paolini, 2005: 123).

Whereas the adolescent Nicola conceived his political engagement within a Marxist framework and as part of a larger political movement, the adult Nicola discovers that politics is an activity that relies on individual and collective everyday commitment, an activity that lives through everyday attention and care towards one's community as well as resistance to the temptation of disengagement, pessimism, withdrawal from conflict. An activity that, throughout the show, lives at the micro level. The macro level is beyond the boys' commitment. Within the micro level, however, the boys can and do act: they engage in politics, they try to protect each other from the police blows during the riot, they visit Barbin in hospital. Their commitment is directed towards interpersonal relationships, towards those *thick relationships*, to borrow Avishai Margalit's definition, based on "closeness and kinship to the near and dear, [...] based on passional and relational exchange, rather than on abstract norms" (Antonello, 2009: 238). In the show, this lesson comes from political militancy and rugby. It is through rugby that Nicola articulates this relationship: "in rugby there is no

individual action, if your team member is in action, it's instinct: back up" (Paolini, 2005: 122).

In contrast to *Body of State*, which is set in the capital and focuses on the generation who was actively involved in the movement since 1968, *April '74 and 5* explicitly focuses on the generation that will become politically active in the late 1970s and early 1980s, during the movement's decline. The script places Nicola's formative years in the most politicised period of Italian history and between two highly traumatic events:

I was thirteen when the bomb in Piazza Fontana exploded. I was about to sit my high school final exams when the one in Brescia exploded. And I remember I thought: there you have it, now they are never going to stop (2005: 91)!

The timespan is very specific. It starts with the bombing at the National Agrarian Bank in Piazza Fontana in Milan on 12 December 1969 and ends with the Brescia bombing in May 1974: the period when the extra-parliamentary movement was most active and most visible, but also the moment when political conflict was at its highest. Yet, despite the focus on two among the most traumatic and controversial events in Italian recent history, the show goes beyond the 'years of lead' narrative and presents the period 1969-1975 as a moment of widespread violence and of enthusiastic political engagement. Nicola belongs to a generation that did not directly witness the birth of the movement in 1968 but firmly believed in its ideals. A generation, as Paolini argued, "scalded by politics" (Paolini in Soriani, 2009:179). A generation that willingly detaches itself from certain forms of militancy without renouncing engagement altogether.

*April '74 and 5* proposes the image of a Left that is facing the failure of old modes of struggle and that is slowly and painfully adapting to a rapidly changing cultural context. For Nicola and his generation, and indeed for Paolini himself, the 1970s are formative years, years of political enthusiasm but also years scarred by profoundly traumatic events.

## **Conclusions**

In a relatively short time span, the Italian Left shifted from a radical politics tending towards a revolutionary change – even if the terms of this revolution were contested – to a Left that lost sense of direction and searched the past for answers to the current crisis. The comparative analysis of Fo's militant theatre and Baliani's and Paolini's solo pieces highlighted some breaks and continuities. I would like to pause on three of them: the identity of the Left, the approach to staging history, and the artist's role.

The narratives of the Left proposed by Fo on the one hand and by Baliani and Paolini on the other could not be more different. The image proposed by Fo in the early 1970s is heroic and almost epic. Fo's theatre looks back to the early socialist struggles and to the Resistance not to analyse the past in its own terms, but rather in function of the present. Fo's explicit aim is to foster class awareness and to support the cultural and political foundation of the proletarian revolutionary subject. The plays analysed in this chapter propose a series of revolutionary upsurges that ultimately failed (albeit for different reasons). Fo focuses on failure in order to warn and prepare contemporary militants. All his characters, Antonia, Slansky, Majakovsky, Gramsci, the protagonists of the stories collected in *I Would Rather Die Tonight* are

represented uniquely as militants. Fo's has always been a theatre of situations rather than characters, but the result in this context is a precise strategy that keeps the spectators emotionally detached in order to engage them intellectually.

Baliani and Paolini look at the past with a different agenda. Like Fo, they select the material in function of the present but there are two crucial differences. Firstly, both artists recognise the partiality of their perspective and they do so by looking at history through the eyes of a very specific character: Baliani himself in *Body of State* and the fictional Nicola in *April '74 and 5*. Moreover, Baliani and Paolini search the history of the Italian Left not with the aim of isolating past revolutionary action but rather in order to trace the origin of the present crisis. They provide a personal account of the extra-parliamentary Left's demise which acknowledges failure but also attempts to retrace and rescue the enthusiasm of that period. Fo's militant theatre of the early 1970s developed in relation to a very precise Marxist ideological framework that conceived history as progress and that inserted proletarian revolution as a fundamental part of this process. In Baliani and Paolini, on the other hand, grand-narratives of progress have collapsed and even the possibility of understanding history in all its complexity is questioned. However, if history is unintelligible, in Baliani and Paolini the past is still within reach, not as a historical account, but rather as experience that can be communicated and shared with others. By acknowledging the trauma of political violence and the movement's failure, and by inserting in their narration the characters' emotional response to the events, Baliani and Paolini open up to a public wider than that of the Left. They insert in the narrative of political struggle elements such as vulnerability, affects, doubt, mistakes, and desires. All elements that draw the audience closer to the subject matter and allow them not only



to look back to a controversial historical period but also to empathise with the conflict of a generation 'scalded by politics'.

As far as the artist is concerned, Fo fashions a very precise role, that of the proletariat's jester, the intellectual that comes from and is organic to the working class. His task is not to engage in political confrontation, at least not primarily, but rather he aims at fostering class awareness in order to support the proletariat's struggle. Baliani and Paolini no longer have a defined industrial working class they can refer to, and the revolutionary project is no longer in the cards. Contrary to Fo, they cannot see a future course of action but they still see a possible way out. At the end of *April '74 and 5* Paolini mentions the desire, the will to get involved in spite of the temptation to withdraw from political commitment altogether. Baliani mentions his personal way of doing politics: a militant theatre that exits the structures where theatre practice is confined and meets communities wider than the group of usual theatregoers. This exit from the theatre will be the focus of Chapter Four.

## 4. Utopian Spaces

Over the decades, the figure of the public intellectual attracted criticism for several reasons, but one of the main ones has certainly been her often problematic relationship with institutions and with institutional power. The early student movement was particularly attentive to the contradictions of the intellectual class. The movement was especially concerned with the intellectuals' relationship with institutional powers such as the university or the judicial system, and with their connivance in perpetuating the capitalist order by manufacturing consent. Within this context, left-wing intellectuals often moved between two apparently opposing and equally risky strategies. On the one hand, a revolutionary intransigence that manifested itself in a radical break from the institution; on the other, the need to stay put and negotiate with power in order to reform the institution from within.

The theatre is not new to this type of radical critique. Bourgeois theatre, drama schools, and art academies have been regularly called into question since the historic avant-garde. Not only the theatre's aesthetic and artistic values have been challenged, but also the power structures, hierarchies, and organisational arrangements that supported the theatrical machine went through in-depth scrutiny. As Kershaw argued in *The Radical in Performance*, institutionalised theatre operates as a 'disciplinary system' which reinforces dominant social values and ideological frameworks and that ultimately perpetuates exclusion.

[A] theatre building is not so much the empty space of the creative artist, nor a democratic institution of free speech, but rather a kind of social engine that helps to drive an unfair system of privilege. The

theatre achieves this through ensnaring every kind of audience in a web of mostly unacknowledged values, tacit commitment to forces that are beyond their control, and mechanisms of exclusion that ensure that most people stay away (Kershaw, 1999: 31).

The aesthetic necessity to betray the theatre, to expand the theatre's boundaries beyond its linguistic horizon and the walls of the playhouse was already an integral part of the historic avant-garde. The encounter, during the 1970s, between a renewed necessity for aesthetic reform and the social movements politicised this tendency. The need to restore the theatre as a living, unpredictable, and irreproducible event was matched by the necessity to free it from the laws of the market. The questioning of the performer's role and her relationship with the audience moved towards a blurring of the audience/performer divide; the creative process itself opened up to collective and collaborative creation, challenging the theatre's internal hierarchies.

In this context, Joe Kelleher identifies a specific line of politically engaged theatre that purposefully developed outside of or beyond the theatre, "[a]s if theatre's political potential could be realised only by somehow stepping away from the conventions – indeed the whole outmoded machinery – of theatrical representation" (Kelleher, 2009: 64). Distancing one's practice from what Kelleher called an "outmoded machinery" does not simply mean abandoning mainstream theatre's aesthetic and creative practices, but also renouncing "a certain production and fruition system that reduces performance to the status of commodity" (Mango 2003: 183). As Lorenzo Mango noted, in this context the 'outside' is seen as a liminal territory, a non-codified space where a new relationship between spectacle and public and, more in general, between work of art and life can take place (Mango,

2003: 183). When theatre practitioners met counterculture, the students' movement, and the workers' struggles, they turned to sites outside the playhouse. There they found new audiences, the possibility of researching new artistic practices, and the chance of emancipating the theatre from the market. Performance outside and beyond the institutionalised theatre seemed to many "a more fruitful domain for radicalism" (Kershaw, 1999: 16).

As we have seen in Chapter Three, getting out of the bourgeois playhouse, far from being the panacea for the ills of the theatre, can open up a different set of problems. Dario Fo and Franca Rame, for example, left the bourgeois circuit only to find themselves compelled to negotiate with other institutional powers, such as the Italian Communist Party. The efforts to go beyond the sites of bourgeois theatre were not limited to individual practitioners. *Teatri stabili* had been the prime example of progressive production practices, of artistic institutions keen to cater for a wide and varied audience. Nonetheless, by the mid-sixties, they were facing increasing criticism. Some of the major *stabili* attempted to meet the increasing demand for participatory and democratic artistic practices with several types of decentralisation projects, which included touring smaller towns and alternative venues, or organising theatre workshops and performances in working-class neighbourhoods (De Marinis, 1987: 244). Although informed by the best of intentions, this type of project, known in Italy as *decentramento* (decentralisation), often harboured patronising and almost colonialist attitudes. Writing in 1976, Franco Quadri objected that exporting shows to communities not usually reached by mainstream theatre is, in fact, an imposition of bourgeois culture:

Recruitment in factories is over; we no longer load trucks with workers in order to take them from the periphery to the theatre in the

city centre. With a turn-around that sounds like self-disavowal, we pitch circus tents right into working-class neighbourhoods. The 'poor' finds the classic play, already viewed by the centre, nicely packaged on her doorstep; or a series of companies considered second-rate by the colonizing institution and, therefore, unworthy of being hosted in the main playhouse [...]. Naturally, nothing changes with this home-delivery approach to culture: this is another form of culture brought and imposed [upon the working classes] (Quadri, 1976: 20-21).

Despite decentralisation's good intentions, its flipside is indeed cultural colonialism backed up by a blind belief in theatre's value *per se*. Yet, beyond the *decentramento's* flaws, theatrical practice outside the theatre produced several interesting outcomes. We have already seen the work produced by Fo and Rame in the alternative circuit, but there is another phenomenon, which took the characteristics of a movement, that deserves to be mentioned before I proceed further.

In Italy, one of the most significant and most enduring strands of this movement 'outside' is commonly referred to as *animazione teatrale* (theatrical animation). *Animazione teatrale* defies simple definitions and classifications, but we can say that the term is generally used to identify a diverse set of practices developed in settings other than the artistic one and with participants who are not theatre professionals. Within the framework of a workshop, participants explore a series of artistic techniques or media (acting, improvisation, narration, puppetry, music, role-playing, etc.) and respond to a series of stimuli in order to engage creatively with the technique itself (Casini-Ropa in Scabia and Casini-Ropa, 1978: 28). Born within the school and then extended to other settings, *animazione teatrale* usually prefers

process-focused practices that sometimes altogether eliminate the final product. The workshop often interweaves liberating and creative activities with moments of reflection and analysis. Especially during *animazione*'s early years, the workshop was not simply a way of going beyond the dichotomy actor-spectator, nor a generic exaltation of the participant's creativity, but a device that fostered cultural awakening and aimed at cultivating critical awareness in daily life, beyond the laboratory. In contemporary Italian scholarship, *animazione* inserts itself into wider fields such as *teatro sociale* (social theatre) or *teatro delle diversità*<sup>76</sup> (theatre of diversity).

*Animazione* refers to a body of specific methodologies, approaches, and strategies that can be used by theatre professionals and non-professionals. What interests me in relation to this chapter is that the origins of *animazione* are explicitly political and strictly linked to the social movements. As Cristina Valenti argued, for many practitioners close to the extra-parliamentary Left, *animazione* "represented a moment of passage from the ideological closure of militant practice to the liberation of artistic expression and to alternative cultural action" (Valenti, 2003: 40).

Historically, *animazione* was born between the 1960s and the 1970s as one of the many alternative approaches to learning experimented within a movement for a non-authoritarian school<sup>77</sup>.

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<sup>76</sup> *Teatro sociale* is a broad umbrella term which includes a wide set of practices developed in different contexts, from theatre in the school to arts therapy. *Teatro delle diversità* is a commonly used term, which I find highly problematic, as its use of the word 'diversity' is often uncritical.

<sup>77</sup> *Animazione teatrale*'s early influences are to be found in the work of Asja Lacis in Soviet Union, Walter Benjamin's *Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater*, and the work of Leon Louis Chancerel and Catherine Dasté in France (Garavaglia: 2007: 17).

In this chapter, I shall explore another strand of this movement outside of the theatre. I will analyse the work of two practitioners who, in different contexts, decided to 'get out of the theatre' and enter two among the most problematic and contested institutions: the asylum and the prison. Their work developed as an explicit critique and as a tool to reform closed and seemingly immobile institutions. I will look at the work developed by Giuliano Scabia in Trieste asylum in 1973 and at the work of Armando Punzo and *Compagnia della Fortezza* (Company of the Fortress), active in Volterra prison since 1993. The work developed by Giuliano Scabia and his collaborators in Trieste Asylum was a one-off experiment that set itself in open contrast with the psychiatric institution and that always refused becoming part of it. Despite being isolated and limited in time, it had huge resonance among theatre practitioners and activists in the anti-psychiatric movement and paved the way for subsequent artistic practice within total institutions. *Compagnia della Fortezza* in Volterra prison, on the other hand, is an established company engaged in a long-term project and aims at becoming the first *teatro stabile* in prison. What interests me for the purpose of this thesis is how both projects engage with controversial establishments, with institutions that live the contradiction between therapeutic/rehabilitative aims and political-administrative functions of social control. Scabia's and Punzo's practices are inserted in this contradiction, they inhabit it, and they transform it into material for their practice.

By looking at theatre in the total institution, I am not trying to define a practice according to the place, nor according to the community. Rather, I would like to unpack the complex, multifaceted, and perhaps contradictory politics of these two unique practices. As we shall see shortly, these practices are rife with political and ethical risks for practitioners, scholars, and audience. One of these risks for both

scholars and practitioners is to consider a certain practice automatically radical by virtue of the site or the participants involved. In *Theatre & Prison*, Caoimhe McAvinchey warns the readers against this type of assumption. Although she refers to theatre practice in prison, her comment is valid also for other settings.

The authority of the prison building, as manifestation of the state's power to detain and punish, is seen to be ideologically compromised by the artist's act of border-crossing. But performance practice in prisons cannot be assumed either to be left-leaning or to be radical.

The site alone, or constituency of participants, does not make the work radical. This claim can be made only of the methodology (McAvinchey, 2011: 59).

The second hurdle we must face is the very concrete risk of essentializing the communities who live in prison or in the asylum, of looking at the inmates as 'subaltern', as 'other', thereby objectifying them and depriving them of agency. Once the participant is reduced to 'otherness', it is easy for the practitioner to slip into the paternalistic or even colonial attitude described above by Franco Quadri and by Pier Paolo Antonello in Chapter One. In *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Gayatri Spivak challenges precisely the intellectual custom of approaching the political concerns of subaltern groups without questioning the dynamics that allow the subaltern to enter discourse only through the intellectual's mediating commentary (Spivak, 1994). In Spivak's critique, these deeply ingrained dynamics make the subaltern dependent upon the intellectual elite, and, consequently, perpetuate the construction of the subaltern. The practices analysed in this chapter inhabit the political ambiguities illustrated by Spivak but do not allow those legitimate questions to prevent them from acting. They run the risk of theatre work outside the sites traditionally assigned to



artistic production and fruition, and they do so by questioning their own role within the total institution. They aim neither at empowering the participants nor at representing them. Rather, through their practice they aim at modifying the institution.

## **Exposing Contradictions: Giuliano Scabia and Laboratory P**

Giuliano Scabia (1935), a writer, performer and director, was one of the first theatre practitioners in Italy to bridge the neo-avant-garde's aesthetic research with the pressing political questions raised by the extra-parliamentary Left. As a writer, he was close to *Gruppo 63*, and his first works of experimental poetry already focused on the aural and performative aspect of poetic language that will, later on, make him one of the most innovative Italian playwrights of his generation (Casi, 2012: 30).

Between 1960 and 1968, Scabia worked as a teacher in Milan, and it is in the classroom that he began to develop the techniques, strategies, and approaches to theatre work in the community that would become the bedrock of his practice<sup>78</sup>.

During the 1960s, two artistic collaborations will greatly contribute to Scabia's apprenticeship as writer and theatre practitioner: the first one, with composer Luigi Nono (1924-1990), the second with director Carlo Quartucci. With Nono, Scabia worked on *La fabbrica illuminata*, (The illuminated factory, 1964), a highly polemical

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<sup>78</sup>Marco De Marinis rightly argues that, although Scabia can be considered one of *animazione teatrale*'s initiators, he has always highlighted that "the dilation of theatre he has been working on for years is something bigger and goes far beyond simple *animazione* [...] [it tries] especially to avoid its big ideological risks: optimistic activism, acritical fetishization of spontaneity and creativity; marginalisation of the socio-political dimension to the exclusive benefit of the psychological and individualistic ones" (De Marinis, 2005: 46).

piece on factory work for soprano and magnetic tape<sup>79</sup>. For Quartucci Scabia wrote one of Italian neo-avant-garde most iconic works, titled *Zip Lap Lip Vam Mam Crep Scap Plip Trip Scrap & la grande Mam alle prese con la società contemporanea (Zip Lap Lip Vam Mam Crep Scap Plip Trip Scrap and the Great Mam Come to Grips with Contemporary Society)*, performed at the Venice Biennale in 1965<sup>80</sup>. Partly the product of group devising, *Zip* was written by Scabia as a response and re-elaboration of the company's input during rehearsals. The published script includes dialogue, design notes, movement and sound notation, with "no hierarchical difference between gesture, word, sound, object, projection" (Scabia, 1967: 181). Although reviews were, for the most part, sceptical, for Italian theatre historiography *Zip* is a landmark event, a performance that embodied years of neo-avant-garde's aesthetic research, and one of the most accomplished attempts to bridge theatre, experimental poetry, and visual arts. Most importantly, *Zip* challenged one of the last bastions of modern art, until then untouched by the Italian neo-avant-garde: authorial identity. An open, shifting, dynamic approach to authorship became one of the constant characteristics of Scabia's work and contributed to his reflection upon the role of the artist.

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<sup>79</sup>The piece, originally commissioned by RAI, eventually premiered at the Venice Biennale in 1964. Scabia's text incorporates words, orders, and phrases recorded at the Genoa Italsider steel factory, along with excerpts from union reports on working conditions in the factory mentioning low wages, long hours, exposure to dangerous chemicals, high temperatures, blinding lights. (Fondazione Archivio Luigi Nono, n.p.)

<sup>80</sup> In *Zip*, the action follows ten clowns who are born on stage from a giant egg. They discover language, the physical world, the other clowns inhabiting the space, and, as the title suggests, contemporary society. Some control and others are controlled; some gain a profit and others serve; some rebel and others obey. Over them stands *La Grande Mam*, a giant puppet made of skip material, symbol of "consumerist religion" (Visone, 2010: 82). For a more detailed analysis of the piece see Daniela Visone (2010: 77-92).

As his writing moved towards participatory creative processes, Scabia began to look critically at both mainstream and neo-avant-garde theatre. He perceived them as a set of spaces and practices closed onto themselves and separated from the rest of the world (Scabia in Salvatori Vincitorio, 1978: 206). In a 1979 interview with Elisa Salvatori Vincitorio, Scabia explains that his initial motivation was a “need to find something richer [...] outside the ghetto in which I felt theatre, writing, poetry, and painting were detained (Scabia in Salvatori Vincitorio, 1978: 207).

In 1969, during the most conflictive period of workers struggle, Scabia developed, within Turin *Teatro Stabile*'s decentralisation projects, his first experiments with theatrical intervention in working-class neighbourhoods<sup>81</sup>. Here he faced a complex environment and highly politicised communities in full agitation. As Stefano Casi's thorough analysis illustrates (2012), Scabia's work was not intended to release pressure, to contribute to social pacification, or channel the communities' unrest into cultural activity. Rather, it allowed contradictions and conflicts to emerge, thereby compelling communities, artists, administrators, and activists to acknowledge them and work with and through them<sup>82</sup>. A politically charged practice, then, and yet one that Scabia always tried to liberate from the boundaries of political theatre. For Scabia the concept of political theatre is ambiguous and too historically determined; moreover it “isolates the political into a genre, eluding the totality of dialectical

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<sup>81</sup> Corso Taranto, Le Vallette, Mirafiori Sud, and La Falchera, all neighbourhoods built quickly in order to accommodate the tens of thousands of migrants that moved to Turin between the early 1950s and the 1960s. Here, services such as shops, public transport and schools were poor or lacking altogether.

<sup>82</sup> The workshops were welcomed by many and ostracised by others, including the Teatro Stabile that promoted the experiment but ultimately seemed overwhelmed by the controversial material that emerged from the workshops (Casi 2012).

relationships and often confusing the political with the ideological” (Scabia, 1973: XVII). Sceptical of categories and labels, he preferred to define his practice as

an attempt at giving shape to contradictions, with the only aim of bringing them to light (even in a traumatic manner), in order to become aware of them. Trying, however, to fight mercilessly the old mistake, which consists in letting form be seduced by borrowed political slogans, or forcing current political issues into deceased forms (Scabia, 1973: 75).

In Scabia’s writing of this period, we can always perceive a dialectical approach to reality. Yet, his approach to dialectics betrays a crisis of dialectical thinking itself, whereby contradictions often remain unresolved but can be exposed in order to create occasions for knowledge and awareness. There is no search for harmony in Scabia’s work in the community during the 1970s; his work seems to be constantly marked by this struggle to unearth and expose contradiction.

If theatre practice cannot be impermeable from society’s contradictions, tensions, and struggles, formal experimentation is neither an end in itself nor a tool to serve political purposes. Rather, aesthetic research involves theatre practice in its entirety and has much wider implications. For Scabia, “formal research is always research into one’s own *Weltanschauung* [German in the original] and into the meaning of history” (Scabia, 1973: 75). Consequently, the theatre practitioner’s role has to change; it has to become a “behaviour within society” that has to set itself “in opposition to the conditions of wage labour’s rhythmic time” (Scabia, 1973: xix). As we shall see in the analysis of Laboratory P in Trieste’s Asylum, participatory practices allow the intellectual to inhabit the struggle and to create a “utopian time

and space, in contrast with the reality around” (Scabia, 1973: XXI), thereby challenging the division of time imposed by capitalist production.

## **An Institution in Revolt: The Anti-psychiatric Movement**

Before analysing Laboratory P in Trieste asylum, it is important to introduce the context in which it was operating. Between the 1960s and the 1970s the generation of psychiatrists who started working after the war grew increasingly frustrated with Italian psychiatry’s inadequate, obsolete, and oppressive structures and engaged in a thorough critical discussion on the state of the discipline, its approach to mental illness, its therapies, and its administrative structures. Whilst other European countries, such as France and Great Britain, started reforming psychiatry in the immediate post-war years, Italian psychiatry retained pre-war structures, legislation, and outlook. Asylums were large nineteenth-century establishments often hosting several hundreds of inmates. Therapies were largely ineffective and often downright brutal; violence towards patients and appalling living conditions were common. The percentage of discharged patients was minimal; the vast majority, once institutionalised, spent the rest of their lives in the asylum. Moreover, Italian psychiatry retained an ambiguous relationship with the judicial system. The obsolete pre-war legislation, oriented towards social control rather than patient’s welfare, allowed the frequent use of forced institutionalisation not only for psychiatric conditions but for a wide range of behaviours<sup>83</sup>. The inmate was stripped of her civil

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<sup>83</sup> Law n.36/1904 regulated involuntary treatment until the 1978 reform. It established that involuntary psychiatric treatment could be applied to anyone who is a “danger to himself or to others” and whose behaviour is source of “public scandal”.

rights and automatically registered on the criminal record system, thereby explicitly linking mental illness to crime and social danger. In the 1960s and 1970s, counterculture contributed to politicise anti-psychiatry. In particular, the student movement's anti-authoritarian critique and the workers' struggle for a reform of the national health system enlarged anti-psychiatry's horizon and drew attention to the asylum's function in contemporary capitalism: suppressing dissent and hiding society's contradictions from public view.

Between 1969 and 1978 Trieste's San Giovanni asylum was one of the vanguard establishments of Italian psychiatric reform. The director was Franco Basaglia, Italian anti-psychiatry's most prominent exponent. Through his practice and his writings, Basaglia politicised psychiatric reform and made it relevant for the wider public. His medical practice gathered the public's attention since the early sixties, when, as director of Gorizia asylum, he banned ECT and constrictive measures, opened the wards, allowed patients freedom of movement and frequent visits, set up a daily assembly open to patients and staff, and, keen to communicate with the outside, invited the press into the asylum. In his writings<sup>84</sup> - and in those co-authored with his wife and collaborator, Franca Ongaro<sup>85</sup> - he advocated the closure of Italian asylums

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<sup>84</sup> Within a broad Marxist framework, Basaglia's reflection on medical practice, on the nature of psychiatric illness and on psychiatry's objectification of the patient is very much indebted to existentialism and phenomenology, as illustrated by Alvise Sforza Tarabochia (2013). Jean Paul Sartre's work, in particular, was a constant point of reference for Basaglia: it had a great impact on some "key points of Basaglia's work, such as the concept of the technician and the intellectual's responsibility, the centrality of *praxis*, the critique of ideology, the refusal of utopia as something beyond one's commitment in the here and now" (Giannichedda, 2005: xvii).

<sup>85</sup> Franca Ongaro (Often referred to as Franca Basaglia or Franca Basaglia Ongaro) (1928 – 2005) was a writer, a translator, and an activist in the anti-institutional movement. She co-authored a significant part of Franco Basaglia's writings and, after his death in 1980, she edited the publication of

and the implementation of alternative mental health support. But the most interesting aspect of his approach was his thorough analysis of the asylum's political, cultural, and economic function. His most famous publication, the edited collection *L'istituzione negata* (*The Negated Institution*, 1968) became one of the most important texts for the 1968 anti-institutional movement. It argues that the asylum is functional to a violent society that uses it to "lock away its contradictions and its obscene byproducts" (Sforza Tarabochia, 2013: 8) and that psychiatry legitimated exclusion through the alibi of controlling deviance. The asylum must, therefore, be negated, as must be negated the science that covers and legitimates violence against the mentally ill. However, in contrast with the most radical fringes of the international anti-psychiatric movement, Basaglia never denied the reality of mental illness. He bracketed the medical question<sup>86</sup> to focus his attention on the patient not as an object of scientific enquiry, but rather as an individual who is both affected by a psychopathological illness and socially excluded<sup>87</sup>.

The battle for psychiatric reform, therefore, goes beyond the domain of medicine. New therapies and institutional arrangements were undeniable improvements, yet

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his conference papers and articles for Einaudi. She was elected Senator in the Italian Parliament in 1984 and stayed in office until 1991.

<sup>86</sup> From a strictly medical point of view, psychiatry did not see the advancements that traversed other medical disciplines since the end of the XIX century. Diagnosis criteria were vague, pharmacological therapy was only just starting to be investigated and more scientifically rigorous medical research was desperately needed. In this context, Basaglia preferred bracketing the purely medical question to focus on issues such as the patient-practitioner relationship and the asylum's function in society.

<sup>87</sup> As Babini noted in her history of Italian psychiatry, for Basaglia "the excluded hides the patient, subtracting her from the therapeutic dialogue: this is because her behaviour is the result of what the institution made of her, more than the product of the original illness" (Babini, 2009: 205).

opening up and ‘democratising’ the asylum exchanged physical violence with coercion, turning the inmate into a docile patient tailored to the mental hospital’s needs. Moreover, institutional improvements did not address the structures that produced exclusion in the first place. Exclusion and social stigma - the “social face of mental illness” (Basaglia and Basaglia, 2010: 408) – still affected the patient before, during and after institutionalisation. Violence inside the mental hospital is the flipside of an oppressive social and economic system outside. As Franca Ongaro argued in a conversation with Ronald D. Laing, the split between inside and outside of the institution is, ultimately, fictitious.

The debated problem of acting within the institution or outside the institution, within the system or outside the system, presumes the existence of an *inside* and an *outside* of the institution, an *inside* and an *outside* of the system as distinctly separate and antagonistic positions. But the inside and the outside are created as opposing and incommunicable poles by the very social system which bases itself on division on every level (Basaglia Ongaro in Basaglia and Basaglia Ongaro, 2013: 71, emphasis in original).

One of the psychiatrist’s intellectual duties is to breach the wall between inside and outside, looking not only at illness, but also at how society perceives, represents and relates to illness, involving the public in the debate and preparing it “to confidently live mental illness without fear, refusal or discrimination” (Babini, 2009: 191).



## Laboratory P: Setting Contradictions in Motion

Similarly to what he did in Gorizia, in Trieste Basaglia established an open door policy, invited journalists and documentarists, organised concerts and theatre performances. His aim was not only the end of segregation and the patient's return to the community but also the dialogue with the outside community in preparation to the asylum's dismantling. Giuliano Scabia's work in Trieste asylum was part of this larger medical and cultural project of psychiatric reform. In this section, I would like to unpack few elements in order to analyse the political function of Scabia's work in Trieste. In particular, I would like to look at the laboratory<sup>88</sup> as a time and space other, markedly different from, and in open contradiction with the asylum's time and space. I shall explain how the laboratory's aim was to set itself as a foreign body, a machine deliberately built to unveil the contradictions that psychiatric discourse traditionally hides. I shall then look at the implications of Scabia's practice, not only in relation to psychiatry and the asylum but also concerning the boundaries of theatrical practice and the challenge posed by the asylum on the concept of art and artist. I shall base a good part of the analysis on Scabia's diary of the laboratory, published originally in 1976 and in a new expanded edition in 2011. I will also refer to the writings of Peppe Dell'Acqua, one of the psychiatrists working in Trieste Asylum in 1973, which often refer to Laboratory P. A short super8 video, shot by an amateur video maker during the laboratory and the final parade, has recently been restored

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<sup>88</sup> I prefer here to use the word laboratory, not only because it is the closest translation to the Italian *laboratorio*, but also because it highlights the experimental, research-driven nature of the activities developed in Trieste asylum. Moreover, as reported by psychiatrist Franco Rotelli, who worked in Trieste during the 1970s, the term laboratory was widely used in the asylum. According to Rotelli, "[T]he term laboratory designates in Trieste a complex structure. Site of production of culture, of work, of exchanges and relationships between artists, artisans, patients and non-patients" (Rotelli, 2007: 309).

and published and it is the only surviving video documentation of the laboratory. The documentation material available is limited and this hinders the analysis of the activities. Moreover, we do not know to what extent the material reported in the book is filtered by Scabia, only a more thorough historical and archival research might be able to provide a complete reconstruction. However, I believe that it is still possible to look at the laboratory's artistic and political implications. In this section, I will focus on the one hand on how the laboratory restructured the relationship between 'inside' and 'outside' of the hospital, and, on the other hand, at how Scabia's work stretched the boundaries of theatre practice and of political engagement, redefining our concept of art and our understanding of the role of the artist.

At the end of 1972, Franco Basaglia invited Giuliano Scabia and painter and sculptor Vittorio Basaglia to set up an experimental art laboratory in Trieste asylum. The asylum's director granted them absolute freedom to structure the work and allowed them the exclusive use of a recently emptied ward, the 'ward P', which became *Laboratorio P* (Laboratory P). Although Scabia and Vittorio Basaglia had never been into a psychiatric hospital, they were aware that they were entering an institution in transformation. After discussing the initial plans with the hospital staff, they articulated the laboratory's function and purpose in relation to the hospital's efforts:

[H]ow do we make the 'inside' (the patients and the entire world of the asylum) reclaim the 'outside', the outside world from which it is separated, and that refuses those who are 'inside'? [...] We are not psychiatrists, [...] we haven't come to do therapeutic art, which seems to us dangerously ambiguous, and neither we have come to create artworks ourselves [...], but to join our action to the effort the entire hospital is sustaining (Scabia, 2011: 26).

The laboratory, therefore, did not operate in isolation and was initially conceived as a space where the encounter between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ could take place. In order to make this encounter possible, the laboratory needed to define itself as space ‘other’ than the asylum, a non-institutional space<sup>89</sup> in contradiction with the asylum, its logic, and its rules. In Scabia’s words, the laboratory needed to exist as something different, as “a freer dimension, [...] a non-institutional relationship that challenges the hospital” (Scabia, 2011: 107). The facilitators’ explicit rejection of therapeutic art is one of the elements that set Laboratory P as space and time other than the hospital’s. For Scabia, engaging in the therapeutic discourse would defy the laboratory’s purpose. If intended as therapeutic, Laboratory P would enter psychiatry’s territory and become part of the institution. Moreover, by tackling the therapeutic problem, the facilitators’ role would ambiguously overlap that of the medical staff, the guardians who exert control over the patients.

Scabia and Vittorio Basaglia organised activities within an ‘open laboratory’ (*laboratorio aperto*), a structure already used by Scabia in Turin. The laboratory sets itself as a non-medical space explicitly foreign to psychiatry, “a different, invented space, where anything can happen” (Scabia 2011: 50). Laboratory P was open all day, and anyone could enter at any moment and participate in the activities suggested by facilitators or participants (Scabia, 1973: XXIII). Patients and their relatives, medical staff, visitors could observe, participate, come and go as they please. The workshop immediately caught the attention of a large group of individuals: students, medical professionals, academics, social workers, teachers, artists, journalists. In Scabia’s view, everyone, facilitators included, should play “on a

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<sup>89</sup> *non-manicomiale*, in the words of one of Trieste psychiatrists (Scabia, 2011: 43).

par with everyone, with [their] ability to invent and to create stimuli” (Scabia, 2011:52).

The open laboratory sets itself not only in spatial terms but also as a ‘time’ other than the asylum’s divided and rhythmic time, a time where it is possible to reinvent modes of communication, expression, and communal life. In a 1973 publication, Giuliano Scabia defined the open laboratory as “continuous practical research into the possibility of invention, communication, expression and analysis”, hence a cognitive experience, at once personal and collective. Interestingly, he also adds that within the open laboratory “the condition of wage labour” is banned, or momentarily bracketed out (Scabia, 1973: XXIII). The open laboratory is therefore devised as a resistant site, separate from capitalist organisation of time. Laboratory P actively resisted the separation of labour time from leisure time.

The activities followed a loose structure called *schema vuoto* (empty layout). The empty layout is a flexible outline - Scabia compares it to a scenario - which “can be filled in many ways, depending on the situation or the participants” (Scabia, 2011: 201). Scabia explicitly linked it to an established political theatre mode, and defined it as “an open didactic play, which in certain moments tends to become spectacle through improvisation, but that is, first of all, engagement through research, work, play, imagination, reflection” (Scabia, 2011: 201). The emphasis is therefore on learning through participation and cooperation. Laboratory P’s layout was minimal. In the published diary of the laboratory, it covers not more than a page and includes only a few main elements. The first one is the construction of a great object in papier-mâché (a house in the original plan, until patients opted for building a horse). The second element was the creative practice developed through a wide variety of media, such as drawing, puppet-making, improvisation of songs and short

performances, storytelling. The third is 'permanent information': daily updates on the laboratory's activities distributed to the rest of the hospital.

Before entering the analysis of laboratory P's political elements, it would be useful to provide a brief, general description of the laboratory's activities. The laboratory started with a stronger focus on manual activities, painting and construction of puppets especially, used as a prompt for performative activities. Participants' paintings and drawings, for example, were pinned on the walls or collected into booklets and used as prompts, visual scripts or scenarios for storytelling, dramatization, and improvised songs. Emblematic is the work developed by a patient called in the book Cucù, who spent most of his life in the asylum and could only articulate a few sounds. Assiduous visitor of laboratory P, Cucù painted in the first few days several sheets with series of geometrical figures, variations in shape, position, and colour of an original pattern. Following Scabia's suggestion, the group 'read' the paintings interpreting the signs as fantastic alphabets (Scabia, 2011: 46). Two weeks later, Cucù's drawings are collected in several books and 'sung' by the entire group:

Those horseshoes painted looking upwards or downwards, of varying dimensions and colours, arranged in uneven lines for tens of pages can be transformed into sounds, vocalisms. They recall certain new music notations. In a choir, our voices overlap. Cucù is enthusiastic about this sung reading. It's a theatrically and musically intense moment. Maybe all the other abstract drawings we have done at Laboratory P can be read this way (Scabia, 2011: 90).

By the end of the laboratory, painting became “an expressive custom” (Scabia, 2011: 126) that participants pursued autonomously, without the facilitators’ mediation. Similarly, the construction of puppets was often a gate towards dramatization. On the fifth day of work in the laboratory, the group started building papier-mâché puppets. Even before the puppets were painted and dressed, the participants animated them and improvised short dialogues. As Scabia noted, “[a]nyone, as soon as she has a puppet in her hand, make it speak: maybe because the puppet can be a projection of the self, maybe because it allows [participants] to avoid direct exposure” (Scabia, 2011: 41). The puppets created are sometimes imaginary characters, but often become a representation of the self, of loved ones, either living, dead or imagined. In the second week, the facilitators build a wooden rack to expose the puppets, each one of them with a tag that summarizes its biography (Scabia, 2011:64-65). Each puppet’s biography was invented by the participant who built it and used as an outline for improvised performances.

It was vital that the laboratory was perceived as an open, inclusive space and that the entire hospital was aware of it. Permanent information kept the rest of the hospital up to date with the laboratory’s activities and started a dialogue with hospital staff and with patients who did not come to ward P. A daily leaflet, printed with the hospital’s offset machine, reported on the previous day main event, achievement or debate. Several large wall newspapers were prepared by participants, filled with drawings, songs, and stories created within the laboratory and put up in the wards. Finally, the *teatro vagante*, the ‘wandering theatre’, was a procession of participants and facilitators that visited the wards every evening to show everyone the newly created puppets and perform songs and scenarios devised during the day.

Communication was an integral part of the laboratory’s activities. It amplified the

images and stories developed in the laboratory and allowed them to penetrate the hospital community, creating a bridge between the laboratory and the other guests of San Giovanni hospital (Scabia, 2011: 41).

The heart of the laboratory was the construction of the great object<sup>90</sup>. Scabia and Vittorio Basaglia's initial project was to build a house and work on the idea of the home, an element that emerged from the very first contacts with the hospital. The home is "the first reality remembered and lived", but could also be a "fantastic home where we would like to live" (Scabia, 2011: 25). Nonetheless, in the first week, the house was superseded by another powerful archetypal image, that of a horse.

Patients and staff members tell Scabia and his collaborators that an old horse called Marco used to live on the hospital grounds. A familiar and much-loved figure for great part of the participants, Marco pulled the cart that delivered the laundry to the wards, but he had been sold only two months before the start of Laboratory P. From the patients emerges the idea of building a horse, a horse with a hollow belly where they could place real and imaginary objects. Marco Cavallo (Marco the Horse), a three-meter-high papier-mâché horse, painted in bright blue, was built at Laboratory

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<sup>90</sup> The large-scale was a characteristic of Laboratory P right from the first day. According to Scabia, working on large-scale objects or painting on large sheets of paper allowed participants to avoid the emersion of constrained or mannered expressive modes linked to their past, for example, to their time in school. In front of the *large-scale*, participants can "measure themselves in an unusual and surprising dimension" (Scabia, 2011: 26). Scabia already used big-size puppets in several of his works in the community. In his practice, large puppets have three main functions. To begin with, it they are "a narrative necessity" (Scabia, 1973, XIX): an element that can act as catalyst and springboard for the creation of stories, characters, performative texts and actions. Secondly, the large puppet is a totemic object: "an external projection of archetypes (protective or destructive)" (Scabia, 1973, XIX) which are then put in relation to the participants and the space. Lastly, the big-size object upturns the space's original function and the set of meanings attached to it. "The surprise of this new perspective constitutes the beginning of a cognitive process: [...] a calling into question of the stereotypical (and ideological aspects) of the space we are immersed in" (Scabia, 1973: XVIII).

P by Vittorio Basaglia in less than two months. It became the object that united the participants, and laboratory P's symbolic kernel (Scabia, 2011: 101). As the sculpture took shape, Marco's story grew and began to inform great part of the paintings, improvisations, songs, and characters developed at Laboratory P. Marco the Horse was also at the centre of the laboratory conclusive moment, a festival organised with the help of the neighbourhood committee, during which the papier-mâché sculpture, laboratory participants, facilitators, patients, and medical staff paraded across the city.

Right from the beginning, the images developed around the figure of Marco the Horse suggested the idea of a journey. For example, when asked where Marco the Horse should go the patients listed familiar, imaginary, and symbolic spaces such as the hospital, the park, the public gardens, Venice, the carnival, Heaven, the patients' houses (Scabia, 2011: 123). The numerous songs composed by participants include episodes such as Marco running free on green fields (2011: 59-60), meeting a friend who brings him home and feeds him grass and hay (2011:74), running up a mountain and fighting his enemies (2011: 87), going to a wedding (2011: 90), going about Trieste whilst a large crowd cheers him (2011: 112). Throughout the laboratory, the image of Marco acquired additional meanings; it became a symbol of liberation, of the struggle against exclusion, and for a more compassionate approach to mental illness. The horse's journey around the world became more explicitly a journey of discovery and appropriation of the world outside. In one of the last songs composed by a nurse, he is even explicitly associated with revolution:

What will make this horse walk?

It's a large pedestal; perhaps it will be.



And then it will go about Trieste

And everyone will give him

A warm, warm welcome.

This is liberation,

Come on, sing! Come on, sing!

This is liberation

Long live revolution (Scabia, 2011: 112).

As Peppe Dell'Acqua noted, by choosing to build a horse rather than a house the participants pushed the facilitators' original idea further. The house was meant as a reflection on the individual's basic needs, such as shelter, food, work. The patients, however, by opting for the horse, chose a more dynamic and powerful archetype that embodied radical needs, such as freedom, autonomy, self-determination, desire (Dell'Acqua in Dell'Acqua, Scabia, and Pozzar, 2011 n.p.). The preparation for Marco the Horse's exit into the city stirred excitement and anticipation, and once the work developed within the hospital is propelled outside, Marco acquires an overtly political meaning. Upon discussion, the laboratory comes up with the slogan "Marco the Horse fights for all the excluded" (Scabia, 2011: 139), which was written on large sheets of white paper that decorated the hall where the final parade stopped and a closing party with patients, staff and citizens took place.

After this broad overview of Laboratory P, I would like to look in greater attention at two central aspects of the non-institutional space created by Scabia and his collaborators. The first one is the laboratory's function as a device that uncovers contradictions and conflicts within the hospital and within the relationship between the hospital and the outside world. The second important element that emerged from

Scabia's work in Trieste is a radical critique of the concept of art and artistic practice, and a reassessment of artist's role.

The laboratory, as a foreign body inside the asylum, is a device the function of which is, in Franco Basaglia's words, to trigger and expose contradictions:

Franco Basaglia emphasizes that we constitute a practical contradiction inside the hospital; that we set in motion a series of contradictions; that our real function is to set them in motion. That we would lose this function if we tackled the therapeutic problem (we would get muddled up with the doctors). The important thing is to go on existing as a different thing. As the presence of a freer dimension, of a non-institutional relationship that challenges the hospital (Scabia, 2011: 107).

The laboratory's presence immediately unsettled the asylum's dynamics and routines. For example, whilst some doctors approved of the initiative and actively collaborated, others "were sceptical about the work or refused it altogether" (Scabia, 2011: 34). Contrasts emerged with some nursing staff who came to laboratory P with the best of intentions but often manifested authoritarian attitudes towards patients, for instance forcing them to participate (49). Other problems emerged with some visitors who sometimes entered the laboratory "looking for the ugly, the deformed, the hideous madman, rather than seeing the vital aspect that everyone possesses and expresses, even when it is merely visible" (Scabia, 2011: 119-120). However, the most problematic and perhaps emotionally charged conflicts were those that emerged with the patients. This latter case was, according to Scabia's account, a rare exception. He mentions one particularly problematic episode in which the

laboratory did not unite the hospital, but excluded someone. A patient called S. in Scabia's book and referred with his name, Zoran Pangher, in Dell'Acqua's account, was in violent disagreement not only with the laboratory's activities but with the entire approach promoted by Basaglia and his team. He initially asked to remove photos pinned on the walls; he took down the signs indicating the way to ward P, destroyed some of the participants' paintings, and verbally abused participants and facilitators during an assembly at laboratory P. His behaviour was, according to Dell'Acqua, the product of a profound distress, of a fear of the asylum's progressive opening.

Dell'Acqua argues that Laboratory P

disrupted the cold, and yet safe, institutional geometries that had been, for better or worse, his life. When he saw the horse in his majesty, the flags, people arriving in great numbers, everybody occupied in preparations, when he felt that there were less than ten days left to [the horse's] triumphal exit, he understood that the asylum could truly disappear. His anguish became uncontrollable (Dell'Acqua, 2007: 151).

Zoran Pangher leaves the Laboratory in a rage, and the medical staff decides to confine him to his room for few days<sup>91</sup>. The entire laboratory is shaken. On the same day of the altercation with Pangher, participants and facilitators discuss the problem in an assembly. Some insist on excluding Pangher from the laboratory, others, considered his state of profound distress, are in favour of finding a way of communicating with him. The assembly was, perhaps inadvertently, reproducing the

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<sup>91</sup> The psychiatrists explain that Pangher's destructive behaviour was already an auto-exclusion, and that the temporary isolation was, in fact, almost a request of his (Scabia, 2011: 105).

two main lines of argument pro or against psychiatric reform: inclusion and integration as the only way of helping the patient, or exclusion and isolation as means to protect the community from violence. For Scabia, this is an important moment of reflection. The very existence of the laboratory brought to a patient's exclusion and even to his temporary solitary confinement. The contradiction could only be acknowledged:

The existence of a positive moment for the others (let's say it was all but one) pushed one person away. It's a contradiction we cannot eliminate [...]. And we certainly do not want to close our eyes and shrink from this contradiction (Scabia, 2011: 105).

In such moments of crisis, the assembly became the site where the conflict is examined and discussed, and where possible solutions might emerge.

In any creative work, the general meeting is an important moment, as a comprehensive check on the work done, as a reflection about the images that have come up, as an instrument for those who were left behind to catch up, as a political moment, etc. Only when we managed to have the first meetings did the laboratory leave the first stage of mere liberation and encounter, to step into a 'political' stage, a stage of growing consciousness of the work we were performing (Scabia in De Marinis, 1977: 65).

The assembly is, therefore, the moment that politicises the laboratory, the moment in which participants and facilitators reflect upon the artistic work developed, and unpack the enormity of the questions that emerged from the laboratory. Questions

regarding primary political issues such as self-determination, identity, independence, freedom, and social exclusion.

The assembly as a moment of reflection complements and feeds into another fundamental moment, that of communication. As briefly mentioned in the introductory paragraphs, internal communication – the leaflet, the wall journal, the daily visit to the wards – amplified the activities developed within the laboratory, allowed them to reverberate into the hospital, thereby contributing to the creation of a community around Ward P and around Marco Cavallo. Fed by the enthusiasm of great part of the hospital and by the support of the external community that was timidly entering the asylum and getting to know its inhabitants, the non-institutional space grew to the point that it could no longer be kept within the hospital boundaries. In a first stage, the outside community entered the asylum, but once the encounter had taken place, it was necessary for the asylum to trespass its borders. The contradictions and conflicts that emerged through laboratory P needed to be propelled outside. If kept inside, they would have fed the asylum and confirmed psychiatric power and its function: hiding the patients from view. It was, therefore, necessary to exit the asylum and meet the community outside.

Opening up the asylum and the laboratory implies a certain degree of exposure and an effort, on both sides, to understand an 'other' perceived as threatening, illogical, and incomprehensible. And it is precisely here, in the encounter/exposure that the most problematic and challenging contradictions emerged. As mentioned in the introductory section, Franco Basaglia was very much concerned with the social and cultural aspects of the psychiatric question and was particularly keen in involving the wider community in the debate. Similarly, Giuliano Scabia soon realised that

If what happens at Laboratory P is experienced as part of confinement, then it would only be one of its aspects, it would become one of the modes of institutionalised life: a freer, different mode, but always within confinement's boundaries and logic. It is, therefore, necessary to throw outside of the hospital what happens at Laboratory P and in the wards; to connect all this to the struggle for everybody's liberation (Scabia, 2011: 91).

Marco Cavallo had a fundamental role in thrusting the Laboratory's work outside. The very choice of a horse rather than a house immediately focused the laboratory's work towards a dynamic symbol, a figure that is, by definition, in motion. As soon as the sculpture was ready, it was clear that the horse's movement – and the laboratory's – could only be directed outside, towards the neighbourhood and the city on the other side of the gates. Although Scabia and his collaborators confided that the benefits of exposure would outweigh the risks, others were sceptical or outright hostile to the idea. For example, in the last week of the laboratory Scabia and Vittorio Basaglia invited a television crew to film the activities (Scabia, 2011: 135) in order to give visibility to the laboratory and the hospital's transformation. Their proposal was, however, forcefully contested by some of their collaborators. According to Scabia's version, the group's main concern seemed to be the Laboratory's lack of control over the broadcast and the fear of being manipulated, distorted, or reduced to spectacle by the media. The mistrust of mainstream media shows awareness that the laboratory, the material developed within it, the asylum's and the patients' image could easily lend themselves to manipulation.

It was in the final, most performative and most overtly political event, Marco Cavallo's parade across the city, that the concerns over the ambiguous power of

visibility created the harshest internal conflict, compelling facilitators and medical staff to reflect upon the terms of this visibility, upon the images proposed to the outside community, and the way the images are framed and interpreted. By the day before the final parade, Marco Cavallo had become a powerful symbol for the entire hospital, and his exit into the city was gathering attention outside of the hospital and increasing expectation inside. The image of the three-meter tall blue horse, leading patients outside of San Giovanni asylum and into the city had explicitly been conceived as allusive, hinting at anti-psychiatry's struggle and serving Franco Basaglia's relentless effort to make the asylum visible to the communities outside. Yet, the final parade's political significance was not fully articulated until the night before, and its full political significance perhaps emerged only afterwards. Two days before the exit, the assembly of patients, staff and facilitators chose a slogan to write on banners and posters. The slogan, 'Marco Cavallo fights for the excluded' is approved by the entire assembly, but it is still vague, a generic call for liberation that unified the hospital but did not address the pressing practical problems that staff and patients were facing. The day before the exit, a group of nurses and doctors proposed to cancel the final parade in solidarity with a national strike programmed for the following Tuesday. They saw the parade as an event in contrast to the general strike, and they were concerned that taking a powerful symbol such as Marco Cavallo outside would turn it into a product to be consumed. A triumphal exit into the city could be misinterpreted as a flaunting of a 'good asylum', thereby endorsing its ideology and justifying its existence. For Peppe Dell'Acqua, the group's main concern was that

[t]he festive exit, the symbol could mask the difficulties, the shortages, the miseries, the violence, the oppression that were still

present in the asylum and that had been further highlighted by its progressive opening.

We didn't want the rally, which was willingly allusive, to become a triumphal showcase, an exhibition of something that was still far and uncertain (Dell'Acqua, 2007: 154).

The Medical staff wanted to openly denounce the misery patients still lived in, the lack of support after discharge, the nurses' difficult working conditions. A compromise was eventually found after a long assembly. Laboratory P embraced the medical staff's plea and agreed to distribute a leaflet during the parade, which briefly illustrated the difficult living conditions inside the hospital, the ongoing exploitation of nursing staff, and the total lack of support for discharged patients in terms of employment, housing, and health care. This conflict within the group contributed to politicise Marco Cavallo's exit even further and resulted in a clearer articulation of the exit's significance. Marco Cavallo eventually embodied both demands: it became a powerful symbol of desire, emancipation, and the dream of a society that no longer considers illness a taboo. On the other hand, it denounced the appalling conditions in which patients lived and staff worked<sup>92</sup>.

The final parade saw over five hundred patients getting out of the hospital and marching on the streets of Trieste. It was, in Scabia's words, "popular, participated,

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<sup>92</sup> A series of accidents rendered Marco Cavallo's exit even more significant for patients and staff. Due to the sculpture's large size, the group had difficulties taking it out of ward P, and once taken into the open air, they realised that the ward's gate was too narrow. They then had to physically break down the gate to allow the horse to get out. A photo became a symbol of this moment. It shows Franco Basaglia, Vittorio Basaglia and other collaborators holding a garden bench on their shoulder and using it as a battering ram to break down one of the hospital gates (Scabia, 2011: 188).



lived, meaningful” (2011:152). The march turned the spotlight on the asylum and, even if only for a day, it bridged the gap between the asylum and the city and explicitly asked the outside community to look at the asylum and embrace the struggle for its reform and its eventual dismantling. Yet, despite the event’s success, part of the psychiatrists actively involved in Laboratory P continued to be sceptical. Aware of Marco Cavallo’s significance and of its profound evocative power, they warned against the risk of turning it into spectacle, into a product, or into a carnival where the hegemonic community allows a temporary symbolic subversion of the *status quo*. In a document published as an appendix to Scabia’s diary, they eloquently express their concerns. It is worth quoting them at length.

In the city, the subproletarians stagger behind the horse like the proletarians behind Mother Courage’s cart: but the horse, useless and beautiful, will always be the commodity, the object produced: Here, the subproletariat becomes producer of commodities and is, therefore, acceptable, allowed to walk the city streets. Production has its laws; the law guards and fosters production. The outlaws produce for a day, and for a day they are allowed to circulate [...]. They strut about in their battered clothes: it’s the eternal carnival of the poor: there is room for exhibition but not for opposition. The struggle has other sites, other dates, other city squares: the holiday continues, the spectacle has won once more [...]: horse-liberation bites its own tail; the madman returns to the normal circuits of his destruction (Rotelli, Dell’Acqua, Reali and Sarli, 2011: 193).

Rotelli, Dell’Acqua, Sarli and Reali see a very specific risk in the parade. Marco Cavallo would become not a symbol of liberation, but a product. The city would,

therefore, accept the patients only as long as they become productive, as long as they conform to the laws of capital. The community's acceptance is conditional. The moment they become unproductive the city would shun them again. However, it is important to remember that the idea to organise an event outside the asylum came from San Vito neighbourhood association. The final march and festival were in part a response to a request that came from the city itself, or at least from part of it. Basaglia's gradual reform had already opened a communication channel with civil society. Laboratory P strengthened this channel and opened it even further. The recourse to a complex spectacular event such as the parade was, therefore, functional to a necessity felt by the hospital staff, the city, and the patients, who, after few weeks of work started asking, "When are we going out with Marco Cavallo" (Scabia, 2011: 153)? Scabia's writings demonstrate a sharp awareness of the multiple and perhaps contradictory messages embedded in Marco Cavallo and in the march across Trieste, but they also manifest a relentless optimism in the outcomes of the anti-institutional struggles. Despite contradictions, conflicts, and tangible risks, Marco Cavallo showed the city that inside that asylum a profound transformation was set in motion, a transformation "difficult and taxing, but hard to stop" (Scabia, 2011: 153).

## **Conclusions**

The encounter between the asylum and the artists was, as we have seen, often problematic but certainly fecund. If Laboratory P contributed to and perhaps even accelerated the asylum's gradual dismantling, the impact with the asylum was not devoid of consequences for Scabia's practice either. As far as theatre practice is

concerned the open laboratory stretched its boundaries, to the point that halfway through the workshop, Scabia asked himself whether what happened in Laboratory P could still be called 'theatre'. "Even thinking about theatre in all its forms, near and far, can the idea of theatre resist this dilation? Wouldn't it be reductive to call these things theatre, participatory theatre" (Scabia, 2011: 99)?

The challenge was to theatre in general and bourgeois theatre in particular, and it was posed from different fronts. Firstly, collaborative practices among individuals entering the laboratory with different backgrounds and skill sets stretched the theatre's boundaries from an aesthetic and technical point of view, but also blurred customary hierarchies. Secondly, it challenged the separation between production and fruition, by instituting an idea of theatre not as a product, but rather as experience to be shared, as time and space for discussion and investigation. But most importantly, as Umberto Eco noted, by taking his practice out of the theatre, Giuliano Scabia purposefully deserted the customary sites of artistic practice, depriving them of their privilege (Eco, 2011: 220).

But it is perhaps our understanding of the artist's function that was more radically trialled. For Scabia and his collaborators, the question of defining themselves within the laboratory and in relation to the hospital emerged immediately, right from the very first day. Scabia was aware that on a practical level, "more than artists or *animazione* specialists, we needed people open and available on a personal level" (Scabia, 2011: 23). Yet, in order to characterize Laboratory P as a space other than the institution and differentiate themselves from the medical staff, Scabia and Vittorio Basaglia agreed to make an almost strategic use of the word 'artist'. If the rejection of therapeutic art allowed the laboratory to detach itself from psychiatry, the word 'artist' marked them as foreign to the institution, as "people not involved in custody"

(Basaglia, V., Mele, et al. 2011: 17). When working on the first leaflet to distribute in the wards, Scabia and his collaborators looked for simple words, understandable by everyone, patients and staff. They decided to define themselves as 'artists', in order to clarify that they were in the asylum to propose activities related to their profession (Scabia, 2011: 30).

Yet, the concept of art seemed to Scabia, right from the beginning an "equivocal and worn-out concept", plagued by "millenary ghosts" (Scabia, 2011: 35). The encounter with the asylum challenged the facilitators' relationship with their profession and their role. Scabia's thinking was based on a concept of art as "uninterrupted journey, passage from the known to the unknown" (2011: 35) but by the end of the laboratory, it seems to have been affected by Franco Basaglia's definition of artist as "anyone [that] exits her own circle and reinvents her role in relation to the others" (Scabia, 2011: 35). As the laboratory progressed, Scabia and Vittorio Basaglia reframed their notions of art: art was no longer a practice based not on the aesthetic but rather on relation. In a conversation reported by Scabia in his book, the theatre practitioner and the sculptor agreed that the "supreme form of expression" might simply be stretching and developing our ability to listen:

Maximum listening to grasp minimum expression. Isn't this reciprocal invention? Listening to what the other says, but not in order to listen to ourselves in her (which is a danger we are always exposed to).

The ability to listen is part of our 'being artists' (Scabia, 2011: 137-138).

Paying attention to the other, listening to what the other has to say, in whatever form she expresses herself, implies the listener's active participation. The communicative

act is then rebalanced, taking the listener out of the passive role she is usually associated with. This relational perspective on creation and expression harbours a new role for the artist: no longer exclusively a producer, but also someone who by trade nourishes every aspect of the communicative act<sup>93</sup>.

However problematic, conflictive, and contradictory the relationship with institutions might be, Giuliano Scabia's approach is to take the risk to engage with them and try to modify them, even if imperceptibly. And he does this by acting within the cultural domain. That is to say, Laboratory P modified the institution not by acting upon therapy, mental illness itself or the institution's structural arrangements – that was the medical staff's job - but rather by tackling the enduring narratives, assumptions, prejudices, and irrational fears that plague the understanding of mental illness inside and outside the asylum walls. In line with Franca Ongaro's thought about the ultimate fictitiousness of the division between 'inside' and 'outside', Scabia argues that

All the structures in this society are limiting, they are all structures of power [...] therefore, we must place ourselves politically inside and outside, sometimes even using those structures, [...] unmasking them from the inside, and, continuously, from the outside (Scabia in Casi, 2012: 53).

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<sup>93</sup> Within the laboratory's participatory environment, it was the entire division of roles within the creative process that inevitably crumbled down along the blurring of the lines between creation and fruition. "In reality, in this communicative and creative tension that unites patients, 'artists', doctors, nurses the division of roles according to one's profession no longer makes sense" (Scabia, 2011: 99).

The laboratory was not an autonomous revolutionary island; it was part of a political and cultural project - a utopian one if you like - that slowly dismantled the asylum and rendered it superfluous, devoid of meaning. Laboratory P was a space and a time where participants investigated the nature of exclusion and oppression, uncovered contradictions and conflicts, explored alternative communication strategies and, as Umberto Eco put it, suggested “what artistic practice could become in a non-repressive society” (Eco, 2011: 2019).

### **From Prison to Cultural Institution: Compagnia della Fortezza**

The anti-institutional wave that swept Italian psychiatry and brought to the 1978 Mental Health Act affected other total institutions only partially. The prison system, in particular, became the target of a critique from the radical Left only for a limited period between 1968 and the early 1980s. Yet, in the last forty years, the prison system has not been totally immobile. It went through two legislative reforms, in 1975 and in 1986. Both attempted to shift the focus from punishment to rehabilitation and aimed at breaking the prison’s isolation from the community. They allowed educational and cultural activities and introduced a series of measures alternative to detention such as house arrest, work releases, conditional discharges, and a series of temporary releases<sup>94</sup>. Both laws are in part a product of the cultural climate of the 1970s and early 1980s: it was in this period that the arrest of many extra-

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<sup>94</sup> At the time, the short-lived debate included important proposals such as the closure of criminal asylums and young offenders prisons with the ambition of building alternative structures for mentally ill and underage offenders (De Vito, 2009 111-113).

parliamentary<sup>95</sup> leaders and militants contributed to politicise the prison population whilst the anti-institutional debate and the 1978 Mental Health Act compelled the judiciary system to introduce reforms in the prison system (De Vito, 2009).

However, in the past three decades the reforms have been progressively emptied not only by shortage of funding and lack of sensible long-term planning, but also by economic, political, and social factors, some of them common to most Western countries, and others more specific to the Italian context. Among the historical contingencies specific to the Italian case that contributed to the restrictive bent in penal policy, the rise of political terrorism in the late 1970s and the organised crime emergency in the early 1990s, compelled governments to introduce restrictive emergency measures that emptied already timid reforms. More profound and widespread social and economic factors shaped not only the prison, but also the country's cultural approach to crime and punishment, and the relationship between prison and the community outside. In *Prisons of Poverty*, Loïc Wacquant illustrates some general trends common to the US and to most European countries. The elements common to great part of western prison systems are a sharp rise in restrictive policies and an increase in 'zero-tolerance' laws against petty crimes which causes exponential increases in prison population and a dramatic change in its demographics, with an overrepresentation of the most precarious segments of society, such as unemployed, non-European migrants, and drug addicts. The Italian

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<sup>95</sup> Among the groups of the extra-parliamentary Left, Lotta Continua was the one that paid closer attention to the prison and its problems. A regular column on the group's newspaper contained letters from prison and general information and analysis about life in Italian prisons. First-hand details about overcrowding, undernourishment, abuse and miscarriage of justice started to emerge. "The young criminal, brought up in the shanty towns of Rome and Naples, or on the extreme periphery of Milan and Turin, became for Lotta Continua a potentially revolutionary subject" (Ginsborg, 1990: 323).

situation matches the general trends. Since the 1990s, 'crime-fighting' policies have been put forward in order to please the electorate. Higher sentences for petty crimes are counterbalanced by a progressive decriminalisation of financial and tax fraud (Neppi Modona, 2009: XV). As a result, the prison population increased exponentially, with the National Institute of Statistics estimating in 2011 a prison population of nearly 66.900 inmates against a maximum capacity of 45.700; a situation that placed considerable pressure on infrastructures already inadequate or downright obsolete (Istat, 2012). The change in demographic described by Wacquant is also visible in Italian penitentiaries where about two-thirds of the total prison population are currently composed of drug addicts and non-European migrants serving sentences of less than four years (Istat 2012 and 2015). Confinement has therefore been reduced to what Wacquant called "warehousing of the undesirable" (2009: 4). Political exploitation of 'crime fighting', lack of long-term planning, and mass incarceration created a prison system more and more focused on confinement rather than rehabilitation. In this context, the 1986 prison reform - known in Italy as the Gozzini Law from the name of the PCI senator who proposed it, Mario Gozzini - originally introduced to facilitate the prisoner's return to society, transformed into a powerful instrument of control of a prison population in constant growth. Its system of benefits and temporary releases as a reward for good behaviour compels prisoners to conform to penitentiary rules and often to endure degrading living conditions (Pagano in Deaglio, 1995: 17). In his book on the history of Italian prisons, Christian G. De Vito argues that the Gozzini Law rewrote the rules of the penitentiary game. The prisoners realised it and, in the vast majority of cases, they modified their behaviour accordingly" (De Vito 2009: 114).



From a more strictly political and cultural point of view, in recent years, Italy witnessed what Wacquant calls the “castigatory shift of public discourses on urban disorder” (2009: 4). The pattern is the same for most Western countries: political forces increasingly exploited the social insecurity brought about by casualization of labour, unemployment, shirking of welfare. Political discourse channelled this widespread insecurity into anxiety about crime and public order and exploited it for electoral purposes, placing ‘crime fighting’ at the top of the agenda, and implementing restrictive penal policies.

Notwithstanding the attempts to introduce tangible improvements in prison life through the 1975 and 1986 reforms, the debate around living conditions in prison or around the function of incarceration in society never managed to engage the wider public, like anti-psychiatry did, and remained within the relatively restricted groups of researchers, experts, prison directors, magistrates, and charities working in prisons. Moreover, it does not challenge the ideology of incarceration, its symbolic power as retribution, the complex and troubled relationship between prison and the world outside. For the public, detention still holds a strong symbolic value as means to efface a crime. Despite the reforms, the prison retained its function, “a technology of state power which invisibly guided the criminal body towards reform through the manipulation of time, space and action” (McAvinchey, 2011: 29). Socially and politically, the prison question is largely ignored. As Luigi Pagano, former governor of Milan prison, bitterly commented in a 1995 interview, “today most people are uninterested in the prisoners’ living conditions. There is insecurity around, and this produces the need for protection and, therefore, desire for more prison” (Pagano, 1995: 18).

It is between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s that the first experiments of theatre in prison in Italy took place. One of the first was the 1984 staging of Sophocles' *Antigone* at Rebibbia Prison, in Rome. Since then several prisons and youth detention centres introduced theatre activities. The practices vary from prison to prison, in terms of approach, number of participants, aims and outcomes, but it is a phenomenon that grew exponentially in the last two decades in spite of the enormous problems. This galaxy of practices was the object of a survey led by *Teatro e Carcere in Europa* (Theatre and Prison in Europe), a research project which aimed at mapping the terrain whilst connecting Italian groups with European counterparts, building a network and disseminating best practices. Coordinated by Massimo Marino and Carte Blanche Association, the research project initially sent a questionnaire to all Italian prisons (excluding youth and psychiatric detention centres) via the Ministry of Justice. Of the institutes that returned the questionnaire, eighty-nine stated that they have or had in the past theatre activities with inmates in prison. Most of them are or were led by external practitioners and culminated with a final performance, with half of the shows taking place in prison and half outside. 20 percent of theatre work was also accompanied by other activities such as seminars and publications, whilst 10 percent collaborated with higher education institutions (Marino, 2006). The numbers are significant, and the favourable attitude towards theatre in prison is confirmed by a 2008 document by the Penitentiary Administration Department which acknowledges theatre in prison's many benefits, from socialisation to the opportunity it offers "to maintain the contact between outside and inside" (Dipartimento Amministrazione Penitenziaria 2008: 321). According to the report, theatre in prison must be an "integral part of the institute's pedagogical project" (2008: 324) and should be periodically monitored and

assessed against general criteria such as its visibility and relationship with the outside community, its impact on living conditions in the institute, and its contribution towards rehabilitation. Overall, the document promotes a cooperative approach and a significant opening to theatre in prison. Yet, it emerges that penitentiary administration looks favourably at theatre in prison only insofar as it endorses the institution's agenda and is instrumental to its methods, its objectives, and its outlook. The institution compels theatre to justify its presence, to advocate and assess its 'value' and 'function'. In order to do so, theatre enters the institution's discursive space, which is primarily concerned with theatre's instrumental value (Thompson and Schechner, 2004: 12).

The presence of the arts inside the total institution was, and still is, firmly in the hands of the institution itself. In Trieste asylum in 1973, Franco Basaglia – peculiar figure who was at once in charge of the institution and vocal advocate of its dismantling - brought artists into the asylum to disturb the institution and accelerate its closure. On the other hand, the presence of theatre in prison in the 1990s and 2000s is normalised by the institution, incorporated and bent to its own necessities. However, there are elements that suggest that interaction between arts and prison is more dynamic than we might think. In the past few years, a different attitude seems to emerge which conceives the arts in prison in less utilitarian terms and suggests that almost thirty years of regular practice all over the country have somewhat rubbed against seemingly impermeable and unmovable institutional structures. For example, the Penitentiary Administration Department document cited above, whose perspective is undoubtedly institutional, acknowledges that there is something about theatre practice that cannot be completely subjugated to the prison's ideology. The writers argue that “the theatre is, primarily, *work on oneself in relation to the other*”

and therefore “it is more therapeutic the less it poses itself a mere rehabilitative objective” (Dipartimento Amministrazione Penitenziaria, 2008: 320 emphasis in original). From the administrative jargon emerges an opening towards an activity that defies utilitarian approaches, the benefits of which can be perceived by many but are hardly quantifiable. Despite the institution’s attempt to bend theatre practice to its own agenda and theatre’s need to justify its presence in the prison setting, the relationship between the two is a dynamic one. As the following section will demonstrate, the example of Compagnia della Fortezza shows that, although the ideology of incarceration is never directly challenged, it is possible to resist it from within and to engage in a practice that questions and challenges both the penitentiary system and theatre practice.

## **Theatre in the Fortress**

Compagnia della Fortezza was formed in 1988 when director Armando Punzo started a theatre workshop inside Volterra Prison. Born in Cercola (Naples) in 1959, Punzo started his professional career as a performer, working at first in Naples on street theatre performances with the group Teatro Laboratorio Proposta (Theatre Laboratory Proposal). In 1983, he moved to Volterra where he joined the Gruppo Teatrale l’Avventura (Theatre Group the Adventure), collaborated with Belgian director Thierry Salmon, and, in 1987, founded Carte Blanche<sup>96</sup>, the cultural

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<sup>96</sup> Since 1987, Carte Blanche also organises VolterraTeatro Festival and manages San Pietro Theatre, a 100 seats venue just opposite the Prison gate. Carte Blanche also hosts the Centro Nazionale Teatro e Carcere (Theatre and Prison National Centre) an independent study centre that promotes collaboration between prison theatre practitioners and educational and academic institutions.

association that produces and distributes Compagnia della Fortezza's shows (Bernazza and Valentini, 1998: 23 and 119). As Fortezza's work became a continuous commitment, Punzo decided to develop his practice almost entirely in prison, dedicating most of his professional career to the company. Compagnia della Fortezza has now been working for over twenty-five years and has been producing a new show every year, usually premiered inside prison in late July as part of VolterraTeatro, one of the major summer theatre festivals in the country.

Compagnia della Fortezza's twenty-five years of activity produced a rich and multifaceted body of productions and a practice in constant evolution. In the following section, I would like to pay attention to a few aspects particularly relevant to this thesis. Firstly, I will look at the company's relationship with the institution, a relationship that evolved through time and that has often been conflictive. I will not dwell on the history of Fortezza's institutional arrangements, but I will briefly outline the thinking underpinning their practice within an institution such as the prison. In the second part of this section, I will analyse Fortezza's choice to develop their practice in function of production, a choice strictly linked to their relationship with the institution. I will then proceed to analyse two particularly significant productions *I negri* (*The Blacks*, 1996), an adaptation of Jean Genet's *The Blacks*, and *I Pescecani, ovvero quel che resta di Bertolt Brecht* (*Sharks, or whatever is left of Bertolt Brecht*, 2003), a devised piece loosely based on Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*. These productions will allow us to see how the company's aesthetic choices engage with the institution and with the ideological apparatus that informs it, with narratives of criminality, and with assumptions about art's political function.

Punzo is keen in highlighting that his practice in prison sits upon a preliminary element: the necessity to destroy the idea of theatre, of the artist, of art, to get rid of a notion of theatre as an exclusive, bourgeois institution. Armando Punzo was originally compelled to work outside the theatre circuit by a profound dissatisfaction with mainstream theatre. In his search for a different type of theatrical practice, he was invited in 1988 to lead a workshop in Volterra Prison, and there he found the conditions for “an action against conventional theatre, against the image others have of theatre and the actor” (Punzo, 2013: 93). Despite the restrictions in terms of space, time, and access, the prison offered Punzo a freedom few professional settings can afford: continuity, autonomy from the market, and the possibility to explore languages organic to the group. In this sense, Fortezza’s theatre inserts itself, as Valentina Valentini argued, in a long tradition that sought the theatre’s regeneration outside of theatrical culture itself, in artistic communities other than the professional ones, with performers free from the profession’s clichés and mannerisms, and open to long and in-depth research processes (Valentini, 1998). The company’s attitude towards mainstream theatre, however, is ambivalent and is characterised by a push and pull between the need to cultivate an artistic life on the margin of theatrical culture and the search for the artistic world’s recognition.

The company has always refused to frame their practice within what Punzo polemically called “hypocritically and falsely educational discourses” (Punzo, 2013: 93). Punzo is aware of the peculiarities of work in prison; he recognises his actors’ specific needs and the particularly delicate group dynamics within the prison. Yet, he argues that the inmates are primarily “people with a strong need to communicate” (Punzo in Bernazza, 1998: 43) and that they do not ask for therapeutic activities, but rather for “interaction and tangible results” (Punzo in Bernazza, 1998: 48). The

company's work is, therefore, focused towards the yearly production and it is precisely the active engagement in a concrete long-term project that produces the by-products sought by the institution: socialization, work on the self, improved social dynamics within the prison, increased communication skills, heightened ability to empathise (Punzo in Marino, 2006: 56).

There are other reasons for Fortezza's refusal of utilitarian notions of theatre. In a 2006 interview with Massimo Marino, Punzo argues that theatre practice that directly aims at rehabilitation risks looking at the participant as an inmate rather than as an individual, thereby reconnecting him with his past experiences and preventing him from imagining himself beyond his current status as prison inmate (Punzo in Marino, 2006: 57). This type of work, therefore, risks serving the prison and its agenda, endorsing the ideology of incarceration rather than resisting it. For Punzo, the greatest merit of Fortezza's approach to theatre in prison is that it frees the inmates from their daily gestures (Punzo, 2013: 126). For example, when working on their second production, Elvio Porta and Armando Pugliese's *Masaniello* (1990), Punzo recalls the company decided not to talk about the prisoners' charge or about their arrest. The rule was not a rigid one, but it served two purposes. On the one hand, it clarified Punzo and his collaborators' role within the institution. They did not want to become "adjunct social workers" (Punzo, 2013: 22), rather, they aimed at engaging with individuals beyond their charge or their previous criminal activity:

In front of us, we had prisoners, people serving long sentences, but we wanted to see behind this screen, beyond this tag that by referring to easy behavioural and cultural clichés [...] definitively negated their humanity and the possibility of a different reality (Punzo, 2013: 22).

To be able to devise, therefore, it is necessary to get rid not of the inmates' past, or of their identity, but rather of the roles, dynamics, and behaviours continually reiterated by prisoners and prison staff; to wipe away the stereotypes and assumptions about the prison that linger in the outside community, and that affect also Punzo himself and the external collaborators that enter prison with him. Through the rehearsals, Punzo aims at creating "another time and another space" (Punzo in Marino, 2006: 56). A space other than the prison, not unlike the open laboratory's liberated space theorised by Scabia, where the group can nurture its creativity and where the performers can exit the fixed roles, behaviours, and hierarchies imposed by the institution.

Another way of going beyond utilitarian notions of theatre practice passed through the struggle to have the company's activity recognised as professional by the penitentiary administration and the Ministry of Justice. The 1986 reform recognised the possibility for inmates to undertake paid work inside prison, or to apply for daily work releases. Theatre, however, had been regarded, until very recently, uniquely as a recreational activity. As a result, the inmates involved in theatre work as performers and technicians were not paid, and in order to perform outside of prison, they had to use their personal temporary release allowance. After a long struggle, Compagnia della Fortezza succeeded in changing Volterra Prison's approach to theatre practice, and the prisoners involved in Fortezza's productions can now perform outside using work releases<sup>97</sup> rather than personal permits (Marino, 2006: 15).

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<sup>97</sup> Painter and theatre practitioner Michele Sambin, who has been working for over twenty years in Padua Prison, argues that the problem regarding the access to work permits to perform outside is partly legislative and partly logistic: "Paradoxically, in the theatre you can be hired for a day.



The company soon realised that in order to secure continuity and stability they had to gain visibility and they had to expand the liberated space they carved inside the penitentiary. Unlike Scabia's experience in Trieste, Fortezza felt the need to institutionalise its presence in order to benefit from the advantages institutional bodies enjoy: recognition and visibility and, crucially, the ability to negotiate with cultural and penitentiary administration. In Punzo's vision, Fortezza - a company with over thirty performers, a yearly production, a national tour, and several strong ties with higher education and the theatre sector – could become a cultural institution inside the prison, open to the outside community. Interestingly, the institutional form vocally claimed by Punzo and Compagnia della Fortezza is that of the *compagnia teatro stabile*, the permanent theatre company originally elaborated by Giorgio Strehler and Paolo Grassi. After three decades during which theatre institutions and *teatri stabili* had been heavily criticised, Punzo reclaimed Strehler and Grassi's notion of a cultural institution at the service of the community and theorised its possible rebirth within the prison. In the past few years, Punzo has been tirelessly campaigning to make this new cultural institution possible. The final aim is to build a fully functioning venue adjacent and connected to the prison. The venue, run by Compagnia della Fortezza, would become a producing and receiving house and provide the inmates with the necessary technical facilities.

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A daily contract is legal. This seems to fit perfectly with the possibility of allowing prisoners to exit for a tour. The only problem, and I do not know how Armando [Punzo] solved it, is that in the case of someone taking the flight the one responsible is the prison governor who issues the permit. Not many governors are willing to take this responsibility for a high number of prisoners" (Sambin in Marino, 2006: 26).

The company's entire practice and the ambitious project of a *teatro stabile* in prison are based on their conviction that even a seemingly immobile institution such as the prison

can change [...]. [I]t can stop endlessly reiterating itself; it can successfully betray common beliefs and better itself. It can become a promoter of innovation. In order to do so, it must not shelter behind conservative positions [...], it must grow by reducing the parts of itself that would hold back this process, it must dialogue with what is Other from itself (Punzo, 2013: 36).

The project of a *teatro stabile* in prison is ambitious and would entail not only the creation of new type of cultural institution but also a radical transformation of the prison that would involve administrators and policy makers at a national level.

As we have seen so far, Armando Punzo's approach is in many respects not dissimilar from Scabia's. The need to defy the total institution's logic, to go beyond the objectification of the inmate, the refusal to justify theatre practice according to the institution's criteria, and finally the need to identify themselves unambiguously as artists and theatre practitioners, inform both Scabia's work in Trieste and Punzo's practice in Volterra. Where they differ is in their relationship with the total institution: where Scabia wanted to avoid at all costs becoming part of the asylum, Fortezza aims at becoming a stable part of Volterra prison, thereby radically modifying the institution's very nature. They also differ in another, crucial element: the approach to spectacle. Fortezza is unmistakably a product-driven ensemble. They look at the final performance and the national tour as the keystone of their entire practice in prison. This is due primarily to two factors. First, as mentioned above, working

towards a performance, gives the actors something tangible to work on and prevents the workshop from becoming an end in itself<sup>98</sup>. The goal of the performance served, at the beginning “to build the group and then to cultivate it” (Punzo in Marino, 2006: 60). The ambitious project of becoming *teatro stabile* added a further dimension.

The prison becomes a cultural institution that you have to defend and nourish by producing shows, by showing the inmates’ work to the public, to theatre practitioners, to critics; by organising a festival around it, by weaving relationships with society, with the school, with the university. (Punzo in Marino, 2006: 60-61).

The live performance opens a channel between the inside and the outside of prison. On a basic level, the performance allows the encounter of two communities that are normally kept separate. The movement between inside and outside goes both ways and includes not only the external community entering prison during VolterraTeatro Festival but also the prisoners physically exiting prison during external performances. Moreover, by giving visibility to the company’s daily practice, performance and national tour defend and strengthen the company’s status, actively promoting the cultural institution to come. Fortezza’s yearly production can be considered the element that sets in motion and feeds a virtuous circle. Through the years, their artistic output increased their visibility in the wider artistic world, it

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<sup>98</sup> The same thing stands for vocal or physical training. In an interview with Letizia Bernazza, Punzo clarifies this point: “I’ve never wanted to propose a training which was separate from the performance because in the context of the prison it is not justified and it is too intellectually mediated. I thought it was more interesting to work with the actors on a specific piece and I give them explanations about the training only when they encounter objective difficulties during rehearsals” (Punzo in Bernazza, 1998: 37-38).

contributed to gradually ease the movement between inside and outside, thereby denting the prison's apparently shatterproof surface.

Before I proceed, it might be useful to clarify a few things about Fortezza's work on the text. The company often worked on iconic texts and on characters that moved beyond the page and the stage to become part of popular culture. Through the years, they worked on Hamlet, Pinocchio, Lewis Carroll's Alice, Macbeth, Faust, Romeo and Juliet. Their approach to rehearsals takes a text as a starting point, in order to give actors something tangible to focus on. The process is collective and prefers improvisation, devising, workshop-based activities rather than straightforward *mise en scène*. The original text is usually adapted to the ensemble's needs, often radically modified or rewritten. Punzo says that the company usually uses texts as reagents, making "the words react in contact with the situation and the people involved" (Punzo, 2013: 290). Their preference for images present in popular culture is a way to reconnect with and question our theatrical and cultural heritage, to engage in a dialogue with that heritage and see what images, characters, and narratives still speak to the contemporary.

[W]e do not need new texts, we need texts-icon, texts-myth that already somehow exist in the spectator's mind and that we can bring back in different form (Punzo, 2013:141).

Their dramaturgy usually proceeds through subtraction (Punzo, 2013: 291) from the original piece, which is laid bare, reduced to few images or to a key conflict they isolate and develop outside of its original structure. After isolating these central

images or conflicts, they then proceed by juxtaposing other materials that support or counterpoint the company's focus on that particular production<sup>99</sup>.

Their productions do not shy away from explicit references to the prison and interrogate narratives of criminality, punishment, otherness, and difference, highlighting their inherent ambiguities. The texts chosen during the first ten years include works such as Kenneth H. Brown's *The Brig*, Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade* and Jean Genet's *The Blacks*. The scripts are used almost as a pretext. Through the rehearsals process, the text is stripped down to few key moments or few images that had particular resonance with the group. It is then often contaminated with inserts from other works of poetry, fiction, cinema or visual arts, and occasionally autobiographical material. For example, *The Brig* (1994) eliminated dialogue almost entirely. The entire performance took place on a large sloping wooden platform which ended in a shallow pool of water, only a few centimetres deep, just before the audience's seats. The actors, bare-chested and wearing military green trousers, run and walked constantly, carried heavy wooden blocks, whilst one performer shouted orders. The relentless, rhythmic pace of running, marching, and shouting was occasionally broken off by other, slower, more intimate moments: in one of these instances the previously compact group, almost a chorus, broke off and entered the space designated for the audience. Each performer addressed a small group of spectators, revealing details of his story, his fears, his desires. For few minutes several performances take place simultaneously until this glimpse of intimate dialogue between performers and audience is broken by the shouting of another order, compelling the actors to leave the audience and resume the endless series of

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<sup>99</sup> For an example of Fortezza's devising practices see Mancewicz (2012).

marches, injunctions, and punishments on the wooden platform. *Marat-Sade* (1993), originally devised to be performed in the prison's inner yard, visually recalls Peter Brook's production for the Royal Shakespeare Company with Charenton's inmates wrapped in loose white robes and straitjackets, separated from the audience by high iron railings. Only, the railings are real: they separate two sections of Volterra Prison inner yard. Peter Weiss' text is stripped bare; the long dialogues between Marat and De Sade are eliminated to give more space to Marat himself, Charlotte Corday, and Jacques Roux. Armando Punzo is on stage with his actors as De Sade, dressed in a long black robe; he moves about the stage guiding the actors through the performance, giving them cues or asking them to repeat a line<sup>100</sup>.

In the cases mentioned above, the choice of material and the visual representation reacts with and rubs against the prison both as a physical site and as a cluster of signifiers, images, and narratives. The physical prison is doubled in performance, is reflected into the image of a prison, whilst the play between representation and reality of the prison enriches the fictional elements with additional meanings and allow the company to stage the prison in symbolic form, without exposing themselves too much, evoking a fictional incarceration that goes beyond their direct experience. The choice of material might seem an obvious exploitation of the representation of the other, the madman, the criminal, the prisoner. Yet, Punzo resists this interpretation. In his writings he recalls that the company started working

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<sup>100</sup> Punzo is not always present on stage with his actors. He performs with them when they ask him to do so. In a 2003 interview, he commented that frequently spectators interpreted his presence on stage as a homage to Kantor: "In reality my presence on stage is merely the result of circumstances, the result of a certain relationship with the actors who asked me to be there with them. When they asked, I had no problem doing it. But it doesn't always happen, it's not a rule (Punzo in Maggiorelli, 2003: 65).

on *The Brig* as early as 1990, but decided to stage it only four years later, afraid that the performance might be interpreted as “a sterile denunciation of the institution made by inmates and few politicised theatre workers” (Punzo, 2013: 59). For Marat/Sade the difficulties in staging asylum inmates were many, not only because a few actors directly experienced the psychiatric hospital, but most importantly because ‘playing the madman’ destroys the image of themselves they had built in order to survive in the prison context:

[I]f making prisoners play the role of asylum inmates might seem tautological to the external spectator, from the inside it entails a significant process of differentiation, a hard research process aiming to represent their opposite. Only from the outside, the world of exclusion looks the same (Punzo, 2013: 261).

Fortezza’s shows play with the ambiguity of exposure and representation according to a precise strategy that reproduces the common image of incarceration and criminality on stage whilst compelling the audience to become sharply aware of their position. The shows expose our idea of prison whilst disguising the prisoner as a fictional convict or asylum inmate. The play between representation and exposure, symbolic incarceration and exclusion, along with the prison’s physical presence gives the audience licence to unfettered voyeurism and at the same time asks them to question their gaze.

## **Two Case Studies: *The Blacks* and *Sharks***

Overall, Fortezza’s work resists representation and prefers a type of performance which foregrounds the performers’ presence and the relationship with the audience.

In performance, their effort to create a space other than the prison does not translate into a denial of the company's peculiarity. As briefly illustrated above, the company's productions do not shy away from the performers' current condition or from the context in which the performance takes place. The prison is present in their performances and in the audience's horizon of expectation. In the following section I am going to analyse *The Blacks* and *Sharks*, two productions which are aesthetically very different but that directly deal with the narrative around criminality. There is a ferocious, yet subtle, violence in these two texts, which assumes different values in the context of the prison.

*The Blacks*, which premiered in 1993 and toured extensively throughout Italy, turns Genet's reflection on race into a powerful metaphor for the inmates' alienation from the outside world. In Genet's text, the ceremonial killing of the white woman and the complex set of conflicts between the black characters, the masked white court, and the white audience place a powerful magnifying lens upon the deep-rooted set of narratives around race: on the one hand purity, virtue, beauty, progress and on the other danger, barbarism, exoticism, primitiveness. *The Blacks* puts the white audience in front of its own prejudices by enlarging and distorting the set of images and symbols that feed racial prejudice, thereby rendering them unmistakably visible and utterly disturbing. Yet, as Susan Taubes argued, the relation between black and white characters in the play carries further symbolic meanings:

It is clear in the development of the ambivalent relation between blacks and whites that the "race problem" is only one of a complex of dialectical pairs in which black serves as a symbol for the sacrality of the Negative. The drama of *The Blacks* is thus the drama of the "rejected zone", whether of the psyche, or of society, or of the



dominant civilization; it is the zone of the "totally other" (Taubes, 1963: 86-87).

The core of Fortezza's adaptation is precisely this drama of the totally other. *I negri* maintains very little of the original script, only a few monologues and dialogues. It also eliminates the white court altogether and keeps only the black characters except Archibald, Diuf, and Newport News. Visually, *I negri* also does away with masks and costume. The performers are bare-chested, and for the most part barefoot, except for Village, who wears a tailcoat and a top hat, setting him apart from the other characters. Gone are also the flowers and catafalque at the centre of Genet's scene, substituted with a spatial configuration that divides performers and audience whilst keeping them in close proximity of one another. Throughout the performance, the audience sits in a semicircle of tiered benches on a steep incline above the performance area, whilst the actors occupy the area in the middle and often sit or stand in the lowest tier of benches. This arrangement recalls the steep tiers of an anatomical theatre and places the audience in the higher spatial position that Genet reserved to the white court. From their position, spectators can see the performers' bodies in minute detail. The absence of costume, props, and makeup, along with the spatial configuration, contributes to expose the performers' physicality. The spatial arrangement and the elimination of the white court are part of a precise dramaturgical choice. They shift the focus of the conflict. By silencing the court, Punzo gives greater visibility and space to the black characters, who deliver the lines referred to the whites directly addressing the spectators. Punzo's dramaturgy of subtraction removes the racial conflict and transforms it into a broader reflection on otherness. The 'totally other' mentioned by Taubes is explored through the

modulation of two sets of images, one revolving around the lack of agency and the other around exposure.

Throughout the performance, the actors are often moved about and manipulated by other performers who stand behind them and move them around the stage. During one of such moments, an actor sits on the floor, inert. Another performer clothes him with a tailcoat and a bowler hat, lifts him up on his feet, and, whilst standing behind him, makes him walk around the performance area and brings him centre stage, all in silence. The other actor stands still, his legs slightly bent, his weight partially supported by the performer behind him who controls the movements of his limbs and head and manipulates his lips, cheeks, and forehead. This control over the performer's movements renders his exposure to the audience's gaze even more intense. In the meantime, the actor wearing tailcoat and hat delivers a short monologue composed of various extracts from Genet's script; a monologue which reiterates once again the magnified and grotesquely distorted images of blackness.

Does the stench frighten you now? That's what rises from my African soil. I, Bobo, want to draw my train over its thick waves! May I be wafted up by a smell of carrion! And you, pale and odourless race, race without animal odours, without the pestilence of our swamps (Genet, 1960: 18), I order you to be black to your very veins. Pump black blood through them. Let Africa circulate in them (42). What we need is hatred. Our ideas will spring from hatred (28).

The performer addresses the audience (rather than the white court, as in the original) in a detached, flat tone. The actor's lack of agency over his movements undermines the lines' violence and the performance of race hatred and of 'total

otherness' created by Genet is enforced upon the performer who has little control over his actions.

For Fortezza empowerment does not come with visibility. Armando Punzo is well aware of the dangers of exposure. In a 1998 interview he reflected on the contrasting reactions to Fortezza's work coming from audience and institutions alike, and recognised the risk of indulging the voyeur hidden even in the most open-minded audience member:

On my part, I tried to show the inmates in a different, unexpected manner, and not merely as "prisoners" (I'm certain that the audience would pay a ticket only to observe inmates in prison as if they were monsters). [...] It is difficult to accept that the inmates are able to put up a show, that they have something to say which is not better or worse than what others might say (Punzo in Bernazza, 1998: 41).

In *The Blacks*, in particular, the passivity conventionally attributed to the act of watching is challenged. The show explicitly places exposure at the core of the performers' vulnerability and of the viewer's aggressiveness. The production's spatial arrangement, with its reference to the anatomic theatre, places the audience in the position of the viewer who examines, dissects, marks, and classifies. The potential violence of the audience gaze is further highlighted by the inclusion in the performance of excerpts from the writings of Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) who classified the criminal into several 'types' and associated criminal behaviour with specific physical characteristics, such as the shape of the skull or certain types of facial asymmetry. Inserted in Fortezza's *The Blacks*, Lombroso's words, extrapolated from their context, shed light upon deeply ingrained cultural

narratives around crime and punishment. The performance offers a grotesque staging of Lombroso's writings, which simultaneously ridicules his theories and offers a disturbing example of how objectification operates. In one of the show's most memorable scenes, the actor playing Village gathers several performers on stage as he reads out a list of the criminal's physical characteristics taken from Lombroso's writings. Village pauses and the performers on stage stand facing the audience, looking up at them; one of them slowly turns, another opens his arms and show his hands, all of them stand to allow the audience's gaze to dwell on the 'criminal body'. The mark of criminality investigated by Lombroso is offered to the audience's scrutiny. The scene is interrupted by another monologue from Genet and then Village resumes his list of Lombrosian classifications. He grabs a few performers and starts reading: "In rapists... in rapists... in rapists... the eye is almost always twinkling". He pauses and with a sudden movement, he is face to face with another performer, checking his eyes. He goes on reading: "Usually, delinquents have protruding ears, abundant hair..." (Compagnia della Fortezza, 1998) and as he utters these lines he indicates a performer with small ears and another one who is completely bald. The irony breaks the tension; the scene is light-hearted and humorous, and it establishes, for the first time, an allegiance between performers and audience. The joke is at Lombroso's expense. His pseudo-scientific thought is pointed at as preposterous and even risible, and it is publicly ridiculed. Yet, Fortezza's hint at our tendency to objectify the prisoner or our desire to draw a neat line between 'norm' and 'deviance' is visible against the grain of a comedic moment. The audience observes the scene from the benches of an anatomic theatre; like the scientist, they objectify the actor/prisoner and reduce him to the criminal act that

brought him to prison in the first place. The free citizen's gaze upon the 'totally other' can potentially be as monstrous as Lombroso's science.

Interviewed in 1995 by journalist Enrico Deaglio, Luigi Pagano, governor of Milan's prison argued that prison's worst impact on the inmate is the permanent mark of criminality. "In our society", Pagano argues, "it is not considered criminal the one who commits a crime but rather, the one who is caught and is detained in prison. The brand of criminality is something that the prisoner feels like a trademark of his" (Pagano in Deaglio, 1995: 17). Prison brands the individual and hides him from view. In the rare occasions in which he is visible to the outside community, he has no control over his image. In Compagnia della Fortezza's *The Blacks*, the play between covering and exposure, lack of control over one's exposure, and branding are all elements of the same micro-physics<sup>101</sup> of power that creates the totally other and prevents him from becoming an autonomous subject. The show is a powerful reflection on the image of crime and criminality and on the complex network of

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<sup>101</sup> Michel Foucault is the philosopher that most immediately comes to mind when discussing the prison system. The term 'micro-physics of power' is famously his and I use it in this research to refer to the complex web human activities, often minute, which create, reiterate, and uphold the *status quo*. Yet, I do not refer to Michel Foucault's work on the prison simply because I try to understand Compagnia della Fortezza's practice in its own terms. In a recent talk at the *Scuola Normale Superiore* in Pisa, Armando Punzo admitted that for many years he refrained from reading Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* because he did not want to be influenced by it. When he eventually read it, in 2014, he recognised that many of Foucault's reflections on the relationship between prison and discipline have always been part of his practice, first and foremost Foucault's analysis of the interiorization of disciplinary practices above and beyond the prison (Punzo, 2014: n.p.).

powers – cultural, juridical, and scientific – that contributes to branding and objectifying the inmate.

The second production I would like to analyse is *Pescecani, ovvero quello che resta di Bertolt Brecht (Sharks, or Whatever is Left of Bertolt Brecht, 2003)*. More than an adaptation of Brecht's play, *Sharks* is an almost metatheatrical reflection on the impossibility of staging *The Threepenny Opera*, a text which is not only one of Brecht's most iconic works, but is also profoundly significant for Italian theatre, with Giorgio Strehler's production still considered a fundamental point of reference. In Fortezza's work, the impossibility of staging *The Threepenny Opera* is both an artistic and a political problem.

*Sharks* is built on Fortezza's ongoing exploration of cultural representations of criminality. As Punzo argued in his notes, when the company first approached the script in 2002, he felt like they had always worked on *The Threepenny Opera*:

It is as if we had always worked, in spite of ourselves, at the construction of a theatrical, operetta-like image of a cultural reality perceived as dangerous and in certain aspects more dramatic, complex, and worrying. I refer here not to the single shows, which subtracted themselves from this risk, but to a parallel image that had been attached to us (Punzo, 2013: 119).

Aware of the risks of exposure, Punzo admits that their work might have inadvertently contributed to the creation of a reassuring and simplified image of the prison inmate. *Sharks*, therefore, is built upon that theatrical 'operetta-like' image and upon the company's necessity to detach themselves from it. Without concealing or denying their status as inmates, with *Sharks* Fortezza attempted to distance

themselves from “that deformed, rhetorical, detestable double of ourselves” (Punzo, 2013: 119). The first step of this process is a reflection on *The Threepenny Opera* and on the image of the criminal in Brecht’s text. This reflection expands to include Bertolt Brecht’s work in general as an unavoidable point of reference in Fortezza’s artistic horizon. The second step is to turn the spotlight on inherited forms of political commitment and on the relationship between artist and audience. In particular, with *Sharks* Fortezza focuses on political commitment as a consolatory narrative which indulges the audience’s and the practitioner’s complacency.

Fortezza’s work on Brecht’s script is, as it is their custom, far from that of a straightforward *mise en scène*. *Sharks* takes the shape of a 1920s cabaret with several independent acts following one another and usually introduced by a Master of Ceremonies. Very few elements of Brecht’s text are present in the performance, only the *Ballad of Mack the Knife*, Peachum’s first monologue and few lines from the dialogue between Peachum and Filch from the opening of act one. Punzo’s dramaturgy subtracts from the text the elements of power: gone are dialogues, songs, and all the aesthetically pleasing elements that, according to Strehler, would complement and support the political element. If Strehler introduced Bertolt Brecht’s work to the Italian audience in the early 1950s, in the new millennium Compagnia della Fortezza denies the audience *The Threepenny Opera* they know and expect to see. The images proposed by Fortezza are remnants (the ‘whatever is left’ of the title) and they are distorted, extrapolated from their context, alienated from themselves and from the audience.

On a visual level, the impossibility to stage *The Threepenny Opera* is elaborated through resource to the grotesque. The performances in prison were held in a purpose-built structure in the inner yard and the set included stages and platforms of

various sizes and heights where the acts are performed - sometimes simultaneously - whilst the audience walks freely around them. The entire area is illuminated by red lights; warm white footlights, reminiscent of cabaret and variety theatre, encircle some of the platforms. Platforms and audience area are populated by a multitude of heterogeneous and grotesque characters wearing tawdry costumes and heavy makeup which highlights and misshapes the performers' facial features: Capitalists and bankers in tails and excessively large top hats, flappers and dancers in drag, priests and bishops wearing fishnets and heels underneath their robes, soldiers, a bride in white wedding gown and veil – a reference to Polly Peachum – and a silent bespectacled figure holding signs with surreal and ironic messages<sup>102</sup>. *Sharks* distorts not only characters but also the typically Brechtian devices familiar to generations of theatregoers and practitioners. The result is a grotesque and intimidating crew, which explicitly recalls George Grosz's and Otto Dix's paintings<sup>103</sup>. Without ever becoming a fully immersive performance, the production's use of space, the multiple platforms and simultaneous performances, and the presence of the actors among the audience blur the spatial division between performance and audience. *The Threepenny Opera* can no longer be contained on a stage.

Brecht's original script, its structure and stage hierarchies are eliminated from *Sharks*, and yet, the performance is populated with Brechtian references. Macheath is the one element from *The Threepenny Opera* that Fortezza places at the centre of

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<sup>102</sup> Some of the signs read, "You are a decadent slop – an insult to public morals" or "Become a parasite and money will jump into your pockets" or "38 degrees! You are producers of heat! Inside this witches' cauldron, men are soaked like sausages in a soup" (Fortezza, 2004).

<sup>103</sup> The reference to George Grosz is explicit. In a 2003 interview Armando Punzo says that much of the work on *Sharks*' characters developed from improvisations based on Grosz's paintings (Punzo in Maggiorelli, 2003: 63).



its reflection on cultural representations of criminality. Once again, however, Fortezza plays with the iconography of Macheath rather than with the actual character. The performance magnifies his image, distorts it, and uses it to highlight the distance separating Fortezza's actors from the 'operetta-like' images of criminality mentioned by Punzo and from the 'real sharks'. Macheath's entrance<sup>104</sup> is simply but solemnly announced by the Master of Ceremonies, a frame that immediately places him in the context of a cabaret act. However, the character who steps on stage is far removed from the traditional image of Brecht's famous gangster. Fortezza's Macheath has the energy, boldness, and self-confidence expected from the character, yet, the actor's appearance is purposefully dishevelled. He wears a tailcoat and top hat, but he is bare-chested, an old and battered dickey partially covers his protruding stomach. He sings the *Moritat* accompanied live by the brass band and when the lyrics mention the word *pescecane* (shark) he lifts the dickey to reveal a large shark tattooed on his stomach. After the song, he briefly addresses the audience in strict Sicilian dialect and before his exit, he warns them that he is no shark, he is nothing but a small fish. He defines himself using a popular Sicilian saying referred to people of little importance: *nuddu ammiscatu cu nenti*, which translates as 'nobody mixed with nothing'<sup>105</sup>. Mackie Messer the gangster, the crook turned capitalist, the criminal who enjoys the state pardon and mingles with the wealthy and the powerful is not on stage. In spite of the Master of Ceremonies' introduction, this is no Mackie Messer and both audience and performers are aware

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<sup>104</sup> In *Sharks* the character is always referred to as Mackie Messer, never as Macheath.

<sup>105</sup> Here the choice of dialect rather than standard Italian is a further element used to highlight the distance between Fortezza and a strong theatrical tradition that still suppresses regional variants in favour of a somewhat artificial standard Italian.

of it. Fortezza's actors, onstage and offstage, are self-confessed small fishes. Gangsters, real or fictional, the true sharks defy the stage and the conventions of representation. In the impossibility of representing Mackie Messer, all Fortezza can do is evoking a theatrical symbol through the image of shark and an iconic song, *The Ballad of Mack the Knife*. The result is once again the grotesque distortion of a remnant, a Mackie Messer no longer in his prime, tatty and unkempt, who sings his own *Moritat*. In the encounter with prison and with real inmates, *The Threepenny Opera* characters, and Macheath, in particular, elude representation.

The impossibility of staging *The Threepenny Opera* is explored not only as an aesthetic problem but also in its political implications. For Punzo and his actors, the only way to be faithful to Brecht's text is to dismantle the long theatrical tradition associated with his work. A fundamental part of this theatrical tradition are customary forms of political theatre which hold Bertolt Brecht's practice, for better or worse, as a point of reference. In *Sharks* all the cultural and political categories that formed those inherited forms of artistic commitment are devoid of meaning or efficacy. The Master of Ceremonies, who acts as the dramaturgical link between the audience and the array of characters on stage, is the one entrusted with making this meta-theatrical reflection explicit. In one of the most memorable scenes, whilst a group of characters abandon themselves to a simulated, outlandish, exaggerated orgy, the Master of Ceremonies addresses the audience in a short monologue which sounds very much like a declaration of the death of political theatre:

Categories are gone! Values are lost! [pointing at the orgy of priests  
and soldiers at his back] We exalt what cannot be exalted!

Brecht is dead!

In the Grand Hotel of the world, can can, red lights, ballerinas,

dancers, murderers, pimps, hobos, whores, transvestites, wealthy men, lords, thieves, sycophants, maniacs, priests, bishops, gamblers, bodyguards, musicians, cabaret artists, traitors, and Judas take over the stage!

There is nothing left. Communism is over, art will not change the world, nothing is sufficient.

Brecht is dead

(Compagnia della Fortezza, 2006).

The impossibility of staging *The Threepenny Opera* steps offstage and expands into a reflection upon the difficulty of relying on inherited forms of political commitment. The Master of Ceremonies' words, 'Communism is over' and 'Brecht is dead' are both an announcement and the realisation of the disappearance of a cultural landscape where political struggle had clearer contours and where the committed artist could unmistakably see where she stands. Yet, remnants of Brecht's legacy are still present and we have not stopped interrogating them, referring to them as pointers on our theatrical and political maps, however, incomplete and tentative they may be. All we are left with are doubts and questions, such as the one the Master of Ceremonies addresses to Bertolt Brecht himself:

So, dearest Bertolt Brecht, what is worse? Why did you leave us without an answer to your questions? What is worse? Founding a bank or breaking into a bank? [...] [To the audience] I don't know. You tell me, what is worse? (Compagnia della Fortezza, 2006)

What in *The Threepenny Opera* was Macheath's rhetorical question as he begs the audience for forgiveness<sup>106</sup> becomes in *Sharks* a legitimate doubt. Whilst *The Threepenny Opera* used crime as a device to talk about capital, now that 'Brecht is dead' and 'Communism is over' the real sharks are elusive and protean enemies. The burden of the doubt can only be shared with the audience.

*Sharks* makes explicit for the first time Fortezza's reluctance to adhere to forms, methods, and ideologies that informed political theatre in the past. This show expresses more acutely than the rest of Fortezza's repertoire, the company's resolute refusal to cover the old inherited function of the engaged intellectual and it denies the artists and the audience the commitment status almost automatically associated with Bertolt Brecht. The argument against political commitment is once again entrusted to the Master of Ceremonies. His second monologue is both a political and an aesthetic manifesto in which, on behalf of the company, he rejects utilitarian notions of theatre, denies their work having any purpose except theatre itself, and purposefully undermines any authoritativeness that might be accorded to them by virtue of being on a stage or being the motor of a project of theatre in prison.

I want to say nothing.

Nothing, absolutely nothing.

This time, if there is a purpose, the purpose is the theatre.

[...] You see, we, in this Pantagruelian bedlam, we let the others speak, we let the others express themselves, we let the others

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<sup>106</sup> "What's a jemmy compared with a share certificate? What's breaking into a bank compared with founding a bank? What's murdering a man compared with employing a man?" (Brecht, 1987: 138)

convince themselves to have the certainty of a mission, we let others have the certainty of a message to carry. We don't have one. [...]  
Those who need to speak, may speak. Those who need to be reassured, may reassure themselves. We are nothing but a few thespians; we are nobody (Compagnia della Fortezza, 2006).

What might seem a nihilist attitude is an acknowledgement that old forms of commitment no longer apply to our reality and at the same time is an attempt to reflect on the audience responsibility. The rejection of content-driven political theatre is the necessary premise for the advocacy of an alternative practice, one which questions not the audience political convictions, but rather the power relationships we are all embedded in and the reassuring and consolatory character of cultural practices such as political theatre.

We have already seen how *Sharks* denies the audience *The Threepenny Opera* and the entire Brechtian tradition they know and expect by proposing a fragmented, contaminated, distorted version of Brecht's play. However, their dismantling of political theatre's staple practices goes further. Whilst explicitly divesting themselves of the engaged artist's authority and responsibility ("We are nothing but few thespians. We are nobody") and denying the existence of any 'purpose' or 'message' beyond theatre practice itself ("Today, if there is a purpose, the purpose is the theatre"), *Sharks* turns the spotlight on the audience. Similarly to *The Blacks*, but from a different point of view, *Sharks* aims at problematizing the relationship between performers and audience. They polemically address the audience's attitudes on two fronts: on the one hand, they challenge customary forms of politically engaged performance, and on the other, they tease an audience of free citizens entering prison for leisure to watch inmates perform on a stage. As with *The*

*Blacks*, the attitude towards the audience is openly confrontational, even if always humorous. The grotesque distortion of a very familiar work of art is part of this confrontational strategy, as it is the company's refusal to provide or endorse any reassuring narrative that would bolster the audience complacency, such as political commitment, political art, or cultural representations of criminality.

In the light of this openly confrontational attitude, I would argue that in *Sharks*, cultural representations of the criminal are deconstructed not only in their content - narrow, ill-informed, or romanticised sets of images - but most importantly in the function they cover in shaping the free citizen's image. As Punzo stated in a recent publication "bourgeois like stories of delinquents and bandits because through a process of detachment – I would say very questionable – they think they will never be like them" (Punzo, 2013: 119). We cannot ignore that the necessity to confirm the distance between the inmate and the free citizen is a component - albeit often covert or unacknowledged - of the interest around theatre in prison. Theatre in prison always runs the risk of confirming that distance, thereby fuelling consolatory narratives which reassure the law-abiding citizen that there is nothing criminal in her and the audience member that she is an active, engaged, democratic member of society.

*Sharks* disrupts this consolatory construction. On a superficial level, we have the Master of Ceremonies' frequent comments upon the audience conduct, behaviour, and expectations. In his first monologue, he directly addresses the audience with a curious reproach: "you are still too good. You can do much more; you can do much worse! Take our word for it; we know a thing or two about it." In addition to this mild teasing of the spectator's attitude, I contend that the performance's aesthetic premises – the impossibility to stage *The Threepenny Opera* – operate towards a

systematic disruption of the audience's sense of self. As we have seen, the actors define themselves, both onstage and offstage as 'small fishes'. Gangsters, real or fictional, the true sharks seem to shun the stage and the conventions of representation. The Master of Ceremonies also warns the audience that if they are looking for fictional, romanticised representations of criminal, they will not find them in *Sharks*:

*The Threepenny Opera* gets out of hand and the characters from *The Threepenny Opera* are not here on stage, oh, no, they are among the audience, they are at home, they are around the world (Compagnia della Fortezza, 2004).

If all we have left of *The Threepenny Opera* characters is their caricatures, their grotesque distortions, the real sharks roam the world, and could well be among the audience. The line separating the sharks from the free citizens is not as neat and visible as we would like to think, and our position is inherently ambiguous. In fact, we as audience members might be less innocent than we think. Not only, as pointed out in *The Blacks*, our gaze can be as aggressive and as objectifying as the criminologist's, but there might well be a shark in each one of us. As the Master of Ceremonies remarks in his second monologue, the audience's laughter is not dissimilar from the shark's grin mentioned in *The Ballad of Mack the Knife*:

You are right, in the end, you do as I do; laugh on the ruins of our illusions, laugh of the pieces of our desires! Do as I do, ladies and gentlemen! Laugh, Ladies and Gentlemen, of this world! Your white teeth have turned into a grin! Your white teeth have turned into a grin! Your white teeth have turned into a grin! (Fortezza, 2004)

In the rubbles of *The Threepenny Opera*, Fortezza finds and explores the text's most anarchic and rebellious elements, those capable of breaking the audience and the practitioner's complacency, thereby allowing them to explore politics and engagement beyond representation. With *Sharks* Compagnia della Fortezza challenges the audience's assumption about themselves and about criminality, they question the motivations that brought the audience to enter the prison to watch a show and their role as spectators in this kind of setting. In this context, *The Threepenny Opera* becomes a pretext to reflect on the theatre's function.

## Conclusions

When the need to get out of the theatre met the total institution in the practices analysed above, it produced a profound challenge for both the total institution and the theatre. In the examples proposed in this chapter, this encounter led on the one hand to the negation of the institution, and on the other to inevitable – and often productive - compromises. Both Scabia and Punzo are aware that the total institution either ostracises and obstructs or regulates and rationalises theatre practice for its own purposes. Strong of this knowledge, they do not indulge in total antagonism but are willing to take the risk of negotiating.

Moved by the same dissatisfaction towards mainstream theatre and subsidised *stabili*, Giuliano Scabia and Armando Punzo approached the total institution in two different contexts and with different strategies. With Scabia and Laboratory P we encountered the necessity to get out of the theatre and to engage with the total institution carefully avoiding to become part of it. Laboratory P, a 'foreign body' in the asylum purposefully inserted by Basaglia and Scabia, was part of a larger and



complex anti-authoritarian political project. Its action was limited in time and was functional not to the asylum but to its gradual dismantling.

On the other hand, Armando Punzo and Compagnia della Fortezza's practice, although based upon the same dissatisfaction with mainstream theatre, based their relationship with the prison upon the need to build a new institution. Fortezza aims at institutionalising itself not by conforming to the institution's needs, but rather in order to shake and modify both the prison and the cultural institutions. The company started as one of the many theatre workshops in prison, one example in a vast galaxy of practices. By structuring itself as a long-term project, Fortezza carved a permanent place for theatre within the prison walls and, in a way, forced the prison to open up to accommodate theatre practice. Where Basaglia, Scabia, and the wider anti-psychiatric movement could see that the time was ripe for a different approach mental health care, Compagnia della Fortezza works within a different cultural setting. Our justice system is still based on incarceration and Armando Punzo and his actors are aware that society's attitude towards crime and punishment still places a strong symbolic value upon the prison. If it cannot be dismantled, the prison can be questioned and, as the company demonstrated, it can be changed. When Fortezza started working in Volterra, in 1988, allowing inmates temporary releases to perform outside of prison was not an option. Twenty-five years later, it is part of Fortezza's ordinary practice.

Reflecting on theatre in prison as a field of practice and enquiry, James Thompson noted that "[i]ronically, one of the least familiar voices in this debate is that of the prisoners" and he adds that "[k]nowledge and the creation of a history in any field [are] [...] selectively based on who has the power to get themselves heard" (Thompson, 1998: 15). Indeed, this is also the case for Laboratory P and Compagnia

della Fortezza. In both cases, the participant's voice is mediated by the practitioners and it is always a collective voice, the laboratory's or the company's. Punzo and Scabia never take upon themselves the equivocal role of the intellectual who 'gives voice' to the subaltern without questioning her position within the dynamics that create and perpetuate subordination. Rather than clumsily attempting to 'give voice' to the inmate, Laboratory P and Fortezza try, with the best of intentions, to use artistic practice to disturb those dynamics. They act on a fine line, always – and sometimes consciously – running the risk of endorsing mechanisms of exclusion and repressive and violent institutions. Despite Scabia's questioning of his role within the asylum, and Fortezza's reflection upon the power dynamics within the audience-performer relationship, the problematic aspects of the practitioners' seemingly necessary mediation between inmates and outside world remain open; and this is not a secondary problem. The relationship between inmate, practitioner, and audience is asymmetrical but not necessarily authoritarian or oppressive. What these practices teach us about the relationship between practitioner and participant is that fetishizing horizontality and equality can make practice impossible. Accepting asymmetry means acknowledging the existence of complex power dynamics and accepting the risk of navigating them.

Despite the inevitable compromises, both Fortezza and Laboratory P share an approach to art as an activity that resists the institution's demands for quantifiable, measurable results. At the same time, they problematize the opposite narrative, which considers art as an inherently valuable practice. Their approach to theatre as a product, however, presents some important differences. Both Laboratory P and Fortezza have used performance to communicate with the world outside the total institution, and to avoid being incorporated and rationalised by the total institution

itself. In this context, giving the audience a product that might be misinterpreted as a showcase of 'the good asylum' or 'the good prison' is a risk worth taking. The moment of the live performance, either Laboratory P's parade or Fortezza's show, is the moment in which the encounter between inside and outside takes place, and it takes place, at least in part, outside of the institution's terms. It is indeed by virtue of the product that the inmates are accepted by the outside community. The Marxist critique of theatre as product proposed by Trieste asylum's medical staff is only partly applicable to a product like a live performance. The ephemeral, unquantifiable nature of the aesthetic experience cannot be completely subsumed into capitalist notions of productivity.

Fortezza's practice is, in this respect, particularly significant. By recovering the theatre's spectacular element that previous practice had reduced to a minimum, they recover and question a whole set of relationships and power dynamics at play within the performative event. Fortezza uses representation to reflect on the prison but refuses to make a spectacle of the prison, or to reproduce it in performance. When Fortezza interrogates narratives of criminality, justice, or marginality and otherness it maintains and exploits the short-circuit between representation and reality - what Hans-Thies Lehmann would call the self-reflexive irruption of the real typical of the postdramatic (2006: 99-104). Yet, their questioning of the audience's gaze and its power to categorise and classify the inmates, to mark them as 'other' in shows such as *The Blacks* and *Sharks* powerfully unsettles the audience-prison relationship. The supposedly free and innocent audience entering prison can no longer measure itself against 'the criminal'.

Laboratory P and Compagnia della Fortezza are only two examples of artistic practice which unsettles power relationships within and around the institution thereby

forcing them into a crisis. Theatre practice can productively disrupt the time, space, and materiality of the prison world. The physical building of the prison or the asylum is no longer uniquely the site of psychiatric oppression or of the state's power to detain and punish. Those spaces now allow other possibilities, other relationships, other activities, even if only momentarily.

## 5. At the Core of Politics

Perhaps 1968's most significant breakthrough was its awareness that no political reform or can truly address oppression. Although government and party politics can tackle social and economic arrangements, to understand what oppression is and how it operates we need to address the building blocks of our culture, such as epistemic structures, our understanding of subjectivity, the language that shapes our thinking, and the narratives we live by. Feminism is, among the Italian social movements, the one that most consistently engaged in such a critique, the movement that changed not only political confrontation but also the meaning of the word 'political'. The centre and the protagonists of this radical critique were women, subjects that lacked not only legal rights, but also a voice to confront power, and a language to define themselves, their sex, and their experience.

Dissatisfied with the politics of equal rights – in Italian often referred to as *tradizione emancipazionista*, 'emancipationist tradition' (Lussana, 1991: 479) – second-wave feminism dug deeper into the woman question and soon realised that the boundaries of the political established by liberal democracy were too narrow for woman's liberation. Patriarchal power unravels before, underneath, and beyond party politics permeating customs and language. Against such complex power structure, the old tools of political confrontation were of little use. The only way of developing new political tools was clearing the decks and starting over. Feminism's strategy was based on a reflection on lived experience, on what was considered non-political: the private, the family, relationships, sexuality. From here emerged an ambitious political

project, which historian Fiamma Lussana identifies it in the search of a possible relationship between “individual experience and the project of transforming the world” (Lussana, 1991: 475).

In this chapter, I am going to analyse two examples of theatre that foregrounds women’s experience within the continuum between individual and collective highlighted by Lussana. I will look at how feminist theatre developed in relation to the feminist movement, incorporating the movement’s concerns and even its strategies into its practice. I shall argue that feminist theatre during the 1970s focused primarily on critique of patriarchy and of its representations of femininity, whereas after the end of the mass movement, contemporary feminism and indeed contemporary feminist theatre moved beyond critique to embrace a positive search for and proposal of images of femininity liberated from patriarchal discourse.

My case studies are four short monologues by Rame, grouped in the show *Tutta casa letto e chiesa* (*All Home, Bed, and Church*, 1977), and in two autobiographical pieces by Curino, *Passione* (*Passion*, 1988) and *L’eta’ dell’oro* (*The Golden Age*, 2005). The work of Franca Rame and that of Laura Curino, albeit developed in different historical and artistic contexts, move along a feminist horizon and are indebted to the political and cultural debate developed within the Italian feminist movement. I will argue that Rame’s text, thematically in close proximity with the 1970s feminist struggle, stages female characters that define themselves in contrast to patriarchal power and to patriarchal images of femininity. Curino’s *Passion* and *The Golden Age*, on the other hand, stage a gendered self that tries to define itself independently from patriarchal discourse and looks to other women to find the language to do so.

As we shall see, both Rame's and Curino's work is close to the feminist movement, yet I would like to briefly clarify how I articulate the relationship between feminism and theatre. The definitions of what can legitimately be considered feminist theatre vary from that of a theatre which bases itself "on the seven demands"<sup>107</sup>, as Susan Bassnett-McGuire argued (1984: 447), to a practice which is "informed by broadly feminist ideas" and that "allows for a cultural emphasis on 'women's experience'"<sup>108</sup> as in Lizbeth Goodman's definition (1993: 34).

In the following analysis, I would like to avoid the risk, first, of assuming the existence of one homogeneous feminist movement and thereby subsuming a multiplicity of political and philosophical approaches under one banner. I also would like to look at feminism as a broad movement that included not only political confrontation, but also cultural critique and a rich philosophical debate. Limiting feminism's scope to a series of demands – important as they are – would not do justice to the movement and it would lead the analysis into the methodological trap

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<sup>107</sup> Bassnett-McGuire thus summarises the seven demands "equal pay, equal education and job opportunities; free 24h nurseries, free contraception and abortion on demand; financial and legal independence; an end to discrimination against lesbians and a woman's right to define her own sexuality; freedom from violence and sexual coercion" (Bassnett-McGuire, 1984: 447). Bassnett-McGuire also rightly dismisses the notion that a female perspective, or a female performer addressing all-female audiences could be considered feminist by default, and, drawing from Raymond Williams's definition of Marxist writing (1977: 199), she adopts the concept of alignment as a more malleable approach to the problem of defining the elusive political positioning of feminist theatre (Bassnett-McGuire, 1984).

<sup>108</sup> In her book on British feminist theatre, Goodman defines feminist theatre "in a flexible way as that theatre which aims to achieve positive re-evaluation of women's roles and/or to effect social change, and which is informed in this project by broadly feminist ideas. Feminist theatre thus defined may include all the different schools of feminist thought and practice. It allows for a cultural emphasis on 'women's experience', yet it acknowledges that some feminists reject this idea as potentially reductive or essentialist" (Goodman, 1993: 34).

illustrated by Claudio Vicentini and reviewed in Chapter One: the temptation of confusing direct political confrontation with ideology and thereby pushing the analysis of political theatre into a fruitless search for 'efficacy'.

In the previous chapter, we have seen how politically engaged theatre can critique representations of otherness and question the cultural dynamics that make objectification of the other possible. In this chapter, I will focus on the relationship between representation – cultural and theatrical – and subjectivity. An approach that looks not only at the theatre's adherence to a feminist agenda, but also at the materiality of the performative text. Within patriarchal cultures, the woman's image is often mediated by man, the sex that historically reigned over discourse. Woman cannot represent herself as a subject; she is only visible on patriarchy's terms. Moreover, patriarchal culture often compels woman to internalise the male gaze thereby representing herself through terms, images, and narratives that belong to the patriarchal order. In light of these premises, I would define women's theatre as a cultural practice that either represents femininity in terms other than those used by patriarchy, or offers a critique of patriarchal representations of femininity. I articulate the difference between women's theatre and theatre developed along feminist lines as a matter of conscious self-representation. I understand feminist theatre as a new space for self-representation, where women artist can regain ownership over their image, where they can represent themselves in their own terms, and propose this conscious representation to an audience. Through representation, feminist artists challenged the male gaze and the images of woman he created for his own pleasure, thereby making room for alternative representations of femininity and for a gaze that does not objectify, control, or oppress.



The birth of Italian second-wave feminism – often referred to as *neofemminismo*, (neofeminism) - happens in the political junction between the legislative achievements of the post-war period, the realisation of the flaws of a politics of equality, and the rise of student and workers' protests in 1968<sup>109</sup>. Few core principles united the movement: “the proposition of ‘woman’ as a political subject; the rethinking of the spaces of the political to include the private sphere; the proposition of new political vocabularies, based on a practical analysis of one’s everyday life” (Bracke, 2014: 210). This complex phenomenon acquired the characteristics of a mass movement during the 1970s, when women activists gathered around two main sets of agendas: the political and legal articulation of women’s control over their bodies (including birth control and abortion), and the cultural transformation of gender roles in all spheres of life.

Italian feminism has often been identified with this moment of great visibility and relative cohesiveness, and yet, underneath mass mobilisation on specific issues were daily practices and an articulate theoretical and philosophical production that came before and developed after the mass movement<sup>110</sup>. In her recent study of Italian second-wave feminism, Maud Anne Bracke recognises that “many Italian writers have narrated the history of 1970s feminism as a parabolic one, characterised, by sudden rise and rapid decline” (Bracke, 2014: 5), a pattern similar

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<sup>109</sup> Paul Ginsborg rightly points out that 1968 saw Italian women from any walk of life getting involved in political action: “[t]he student movement and 1968 had seen more young women taking part in politics than any time since 1945-48. Similarly, during the ‘hot autumn’ and after, thousands of women workers were in the forefront of trade union struggles” (Ginsborg, 1990: 367).

<sup>110</sup> According to Lussana, although neofeminism exploded in 1968 and bears undeniable points of contact with the anti-authoritarian student uprising and with the extra-parliamentary Left, its premises, questions and concerns emerge before and go beyond the 1970s (Lussana, 1991: 492).

to the one often deployed for the workers' and students' movements. Yet, if we take a closer look at political practices and philosophical debate, we would find that the gulf separating the 1970s from the 1980s is not that deep after all. Common to both periods was a search for the theoretical and political instruments that would debunk patriarchal structures and enable woman to become a political subject, allowing her to articulate her position in the world. Despite the end of mass mobilisation, decades of feminist practice built a precise feminist horizon that informs personal and professional choices in the life of many women. From these continuities, I am going to draw the tools to analyse two significant examples of women's theatre in Italy.

Before I look at the case studies, I would like to introduce some crucial aspects of Italian neofeminism that will help us understand the complex political debate that informs Rame's work. As we shall see, neofeminism during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s is primarily a movement concerned with political and cultural critique practiced through a thorough analysis of patriarchal culture and of its dynamics. This critique was the mass movement's ideological core. As we shall see, this critique also informs feminist theatre during the 1970s and Franca Rame's theatre especially. I would like to introduce two main problematic nodes and two methodological proposals that shaped Italian feminism. They will provide the chapter's theoretical foundations and the tools for the analysis of Rame's *All Home, Bed, and Church*. Firstly, I would like to unpack neofeminism's dissatisfaction with the emancipationist tradition, and I shall then introduce the movement's conflictive relationship with the Left and the extra-parliamentary Left. Secondly, I will look at the movement's focus on the private and at some of the main strategies it deployed to build political spaces where woman could gain awareness of her oppression and act as a subject. The conflict with the Left, the attempt to bridge left-wing politics and

feminist concerns, and a strong attention upon the relationship between private and public are fundamental elements in Rame's show. In addition, by looking at feminist strategies for the creation of inclusive political spaces, I shall set the tools and terms that will allow me to analyse theatre's role within feminist struggle.

## **Italian New Feminism: an Introduction**

Neofeminism's most immediate point of reference<sup>111</sup> was post-war feminism, often referred to in Italian scholarship as 'emancipationist tradition'. The post-war years brought important legislative reforms: universal suffrage in 1945, equal pay – at least on paper – in 1960, and access to any public office in 1963. Women political associations born during the Resistance and in the immediate post-war years<sup>112</sup> played an important role in women's slow but steady venturing into the public sphere. They often forwarded specific demands for juridical and economic equality, but always considered the family as a foundational institution and never addressed oppression within the private. The emancipative model soon revealed its flaws. Not only legislative reform did not tackle many of women's concerns such as family law, protection for working mothers, and childcare, but most importantly the new laws

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<sup>111</sup> Some of neofeminism's concerns had already been raised, albeit in a different context, by the early socialist debate. Revolutionary socialism, up until the 1920s, considered woman and the proletarian united in their desire for emancipation. The Socialist Party itself was involved in the debate around issues such as suffrage, domestic labour, childcare, divorce, and the woman's role within capitalist production (Righi, 2011: 47-52).

<sup>112</sup> Among them were UDI, *Unione Donne Italiane* (Italian Women Union), and CIF, *Centro Italiano Femminile* (Italian Female Centre), which gathered thousands of women all over the country. They were set up by the Communist Party (UDI), and by the Christian Democracy (CIF) as part of a strategy that aimed to engage a large sector of society that recently gained right of vote (Lussana, 1991).

aimed at facilitating access to a public sphere tailored on the male subject, thereby requiring woman to bracket her sex in order to fit in. What the emancipationist tradition failed to tackle were the issues at the threshold of the political as it was conceived at the time: “the double burden [of paid work and housework], the continued precariousness of women’s work and the rigidity of gender roles and identities” (Bracke, 2014: 219). It became clear that woman’s subordination went beyond the scope of juridical or economic reform and that emancipationism was unable to provide an answer to the woman’s question

*Neofemminismo* was born out this frustration with the emancipationist tradition. It was a multifaceted movement, characterised by the presence of many independent collectives that shared a common anti-authoritarian and anti-institutional bias. In the first few years, the collectives’ main aim was to carve out a separate space where women could gather without male interference. Separatism<sup>113</sup> was, especially at the beginning, a necessary step. Excluded from the male public sphere and confined to the household, Italian women lacked both the opportunity to discuss common concerns in their own terms and a language to articulate their needs. The groups’ research was based on personal experience in order to engage in collective reflection, and in collective writing of articles, books, and pamphlets<sup>114</sup> that transcend

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<sup>113</sup> Historian Luisa Passerini thus defines the value of separatist practices in the context of 1970s feminism. “Separatism, which nowadays seems to many women a dogmatic choice or a price to be paid, should instead be understood historically as the site for the exercise of female inter-subjectivity” (Passerini, 1991: 162).

<sup>114</sup> A good collection of early documents and manifestos can be found in Rosalba Spagnoletti’s volume (1978). It includes writings by Demau, by feminist collectives within the Roman students’ movement, M.L.D., Rivolta Femminile, and the Trento-based feminist group *Il cerchio spezzato*.

subject-divides and sets themselves against the academic writing tradition (Bono and Kemp, 1991: 2-8).

Since the mid-sixties, several groups forcefully critiqued emancipation and the very idea of equality. As early as 1966, the group *Demau, Demistificazione Autoritarismo* (Demau, Demystification of Authority) stated that they were in “opposition to the concept of woman’s integration in current society” (Demau, 1978: 38). They also pointed out that woman’s subalternity survived legislative reform, and that by trying to integrate woman into the existing social order, emancipationism was implicitly endorsing the patriarchal *status quo*. For Demau emancipation ultimately was an “ingenuous fight” (Demau, 1978: 55). Similarly, philosopher Carla Lonzi, founder of *Rivolta Femminile* (Female Revolt)<sup>115</sup> also argued that sex equality hides woman’s inferiority and that the struggle for equal rights would not modify power relationship between hegemonic and non-hegemonic forces. On the other hand, shifting the focus from equality to difference, and to sexual difference<sup>116</sup> in particular, would promote respect for all life in its diversity, creating a world where “tyranny yields to respect of life’s variety and multiplicity” (Lonzi, 2011: n.p).

For the new feminist groups, the woman’s question needed new methods of enquiry, a new vocabulary, and new political practices that only partly matched that of the Left. While the parties of the Left after World War 2 settled on conservative positions

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<sup>115</sup> *Rivolta Femminile* (Female Revolt) was founded in 1970 in Rome and soon various affiliated groups were created in different parts of Italy who worked independently. Their political and theoretical praxis, which often involved communal life, focused mainly on consciousness-raising and on the analysis of personal experience (Lussana, 1991).

<sup>116</sup> The debate around sexual difference has been one of the most fertile theoretical threads in Italian feminist thought. For a more thorough analysis from a philosophical and theoretical point of view, see Graziella Parati and Rebecca West (2002).

and placed the family at the centre of their programme in an attempt to win catholic votes, the extra-parliamentary Left struggled to consider women an oppressed class in itself. Diffidence or outright dissatisfaction with the new radical Left was common among Italian feminists. *Rivolta Femminile's* manifesto, for instance, rejected Marxism altogether, not on grounds of its premises, but rather because of its inability to evolve and incorporate a reflection upon the mechanisms of oppression existing above and beyond capital. In their perspective, in the aftermath of every revolution, “woman, who has fought with the others, finds herself and her problems pushed to one side” (Rivolta Femminile, 1991: 39).

A considerable number of women tried to match militancy in parties, in the unions, or in the extra-parliamentary groups with participation in feminist groups. Although the so-called ‘double militancy’ spread feminist ideas within the Left<sup>117</sup>, women who embraced it lived in-between a Left that regularly dismissed the woman question and a feminism often very critical, if not explicitly opposed to, Marxist priorities and political strategies (Giacchetti, 2005: 179-192). A great part of the movement identified woman’s oppression not only in economic and legal arrangements but also in elements considered beyond the realm of the political, that is, those elements traditionally ascribed to the private.

Similarly to Laboratory P and Compagnia della Fortezza’s critique of the division between inside and outside of the institution, Italian neofeminism challenged the distinction between public and private. It recognised that one of the most striking manifestations of patriarchal power is to be found in the distinction between male public sphere and a female private sphere. This distinction is based on a series of

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<sup>117</sup> For the problem of ‘double militancy’, see Giacchetti (2005) and Lilli and Valentini (1979).

widely accepted dichotomies, such as male rationality in opposition to female sensitivity, political activity against domesticity. In this respect, the feminist claim that 'the personal is political' is to be intended not as a call to make the private sphere public, nor a demand for the abolition of boundaries between the two spheres. Rather, feminism claimed that the private is already political "in its being part of the economy of reproduction, in its being governed by relationships of power and in the already far-reaching state intervention" (Bracke, 2014: 218). The private, therefore, needed to be understood as a site where deeply ingrained power relationships are already at play. In 1968, Demau published a pamphlet titled *Il maschile come valore dominante (Maleness as Dominant Value)* which analyses the structure of patriarchal culture and identifies in the private sphere and in the nuclear family the root of the male authoritarian personality.

The authoritarian personality, which is characteristic of our culture, has therefore here, in the family, its roots. Our culture bases all its social roles on the power relationship created by the family, and renders belonging to one sex rather than to another the primary, illustrative symbol of this relationship (Demau, 1978b: 59).

Not only the family but also sexuality itself is seen as the primary element of women's oppression. In this respect the movement's critique proceeded in two directions: on the one hand the analysis of one of the pillars of patriarchal power, the concept of woman as male property, on the other a distorted idea of 'sexual revolution' "whereby woman is forced to go from being one man's object to being everybody' object" (Movimento Femminista Romano, 1991: 69). Similarly to emancipation, sexual revolution did not modify power relationships within the sexual realm. In the movement's perspective, as long as virility is still placed at the centre of

sex, sexual revolution will never translate into liberation but will only represent another disguise for male supremacy.

In terms of political practices, neofeminism's strategy revolved around woman's lived experience and did away with the traditional structures of political action: parties, representation, state institutions. *Partire da sé* (starting with oneself) was the founding principle neofeminism's political activity. 'Starting with oneself' acquires a relational and performative element in the practice that became the kernel of Italian neofeminism, at least up until the mid-seventies: Consciousness-raising. Known in Italian as *autocoscienza* (which can be translated as self-consciousness, although the prefix *auto* suggests stronger agency), it rapidly became the privileged tool, the practice capable of turning personal experience into collective knowledge, and "the methodological hypothesis of the search of a new equilibrium between private life and social reality" (Lussana, 1991: 494). Carla Lonzi defines *autocoscienza* as a practice capable of reclaiming a political space previously occupied by man. She clarifies that "it is not a physical space we are talking about – but a historical, psychological and mental space" (Lonzi, 2011: Chapter 6, paragraph 9). For those who participated to the consciousness-raising groups, *autocoscienza* created a gendered political space that provided the self with a centre. A political space, carved out of patriarchal discourse, where the reflection on self and identity could develop independently from male discourse and patriarchal symbolic mediation (Cavarero, 1997: 80-81).

The developments mentioned above are of great significance for our understanding of politics and of political theatre. Firstly, neofeminism's uncompromising critique of emancipationism undermines one of the concepts that characterised the Left's approach to politics. Emancipation, equality, access were all part of the narrative of



progress that informed left-wing politics. Neofeminism contested not much emancipation in itself, but rather its centrality in left-wing and feminist politics. This is the first central change introduced by feminist politics. Secondly, neofeminism's focus on the private as the site of woman's oppression undermines another foundational element of our approach to politics, the division between social life and domestic life. When Italian neofeminism – and great part of second-wave feminism in other countries - turned a spotlight upon the oppressive power dynamics within the domestic sphere, they articulated an idea of power much more pervasive and subtle than the one at the foundations of the emancipative model. This is precisely the reason why great part of Italian neofeminism engaged primarily in cultural critique and only occasionally in struggles and campaigns aiming at institutional or legislative improvements. Neofeminism realised that liberation is possible only when woman begins to see the workings of patriarchal power in her own life experience.

In the impossibility of reaching true freedom without tackling the political aspect of the private, feminist theatre in Italy during the 1970s, had to develop as a theatre of cultural critique. As we shall see in the following pages, in Rome and in Curino feminist theatre is a type of political performance that places the gendered subject at its centre. A subject that is no longer the homogeneous collective subject of class struggle, but rather a subject that embraces difference and that articulates her liberation as a process that begins with one's private and develops in relation to other women. In this chapter, I would like to look at feminist theatre as the creation of a political space that, similarly to the one developed through *autocoscienza*, is alternative to the space of politics traditionally dominated by and subservient to the male subject. A political space where the representation of the woman's image and the narratives of femininity are questioned, and where the female self can emerge.

At the time of writing, scholarly research on feminist performances or on theatre inspired by feminist politics in Italy is still limited. Nonetheless, we know that many feminist groups engaged with theatre, performance, visual art, and film. Among them were Le Nemesiache, a Neapolitan group which focused on women's creativity and worked with both live performance and video production, Gruppo Teatro Le Streghe (Theatre Group the Witches) stemming from Roman Feminist Movement, and the Padua Feminist Centre (Fraire et al., 1978: 161-167). One of the main companies that engaged with a specific feminist practice was Teatro della Maddalena (Theatre of Maddalena) active in Rome throughout the 1970s (Boggio, 2002). Their experience is exemplary of the types of theatre practices developing the feminist movement. Teatro della Maddalena is a significant example of how women's theatre consciously operated within broad feminist frameworks and carved out physical and artistic space where women could develop their practice and grow as theatre professionals. Teatro della Maddalena was founded in 1973 by a group of female writers, directors, performers, and technicians who took over a disused printing workshop in Rome city centre and transformed it into a small studio theatre. Their primary aim was, as playwright Dacia Maraini argued, "to give space to women. To give them a place where they could express themselves. They had never had one before" (Maraini in Bortignoni, 2002: 200). In this context, the choice of separatism was a necessary step, even if it was never total and the company often collaborated with male performers. Although Teatro della Maddalena never explicitly rejected mainstream theatrical forms as such, it developed its aesthetics organically with subject matter, space, and conditions of production. The monologue was often the preferred form, not only because it allows the female voice to emerge unmediated, but also because it is adaptable to small spaces and limited number of performers.

Their texts incorporate typically feminist themes such as sexuality, motherhood, marriage. The first show produced by Teatro della Maddalena in 1973, *Mara, Maria, Marianna*, written by Dacia Maraini, Maricla Boggio, and Edith Bruck, is a collection of short monologues, each titled after the protagonist's name. All of the protagonists are in open conflict with different aspects of patriarchal culture and society: Maria, a Sicilian migrant stuck in a loveless marriage; Mafalda, a feisty Roman subproletarian who struggles to provide for her family; Marianna, a single mother ostracized by Italy's largely conservative society; or Anna, torn between her violent husband and a lover half her age (Boggio, Bruck, and Maraini, 2002). Teatro della Maddalena explicitly aimed at stirring controversy. Dacia Maraini's *Dialogo di una prostituta con un suo cliente* (*Dialogue of a Prostitute with Her Client*), also premiered in 1973 and explores prostitution as a characteristic of woman's condition beyond sex work. The protagonist, Manila, is an intelligent and educated young woman who consciously chooses prostitution. In her lucid rejection of bourgeois society, Manila looks at prostitution as a trade among equals, unlike marriage or any kind conventional relationship based upon woman's submission. The play is purposefully controversial and the published text (Maraini, 1978) signals several moments during which the two actors step out of role and directly address the audience asking if they have ever paid for sex, what they think of prostitution, how they relate to the characters. These moments of debate were not intended as an interruption, but a fundamental component of the performance (Maraini, 1978: 18-21). Teatro della Maddalena is only one example of a largely uncharted area of Italian explicitly feminist theatre and performance. It shares with Franca Rame a marked interest in the private, in the conflict between patriarchal images and narratives of femininity, and in woman's effort to articulate herself as a subject. Franca Rame's theatre used the stage as a

site where the female voice could emerge unmediated and inserts itself in this type of cultural intervention.

## **We All Have the Same Story to Tell: Franca Rame's Feminist**

### **Theatre**

Franca Rame might seem at first glance a peculiar kind of feminist. Never a feminist activist herself and an artist whose practice was marked by a lifelong partnership with a male practitioner, she seems to challenge a rigid image of feminist artist. Her work became openly feminist only after the mid-seventies, and yet, her popularity and her ability to address an audience wider than the feminist counterpublic<sup>118</sup>, certainly gave visibility to the feminist agenda and the feminist debate at large. In this section, I would like to focus on one of her most popular shows, *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa* (*All Home, Bed, and Church*, 1977)<sup>119</sup>, a production that more than others incorporates feminist debates and pays particular attention to the mechanism of oppression within the private. The title is in itself significant. The phrase 'all home and church' is used in Italian to indicate the devout and dutiful woman who divides herself between the family home and the church. To this image of acceptable femininity, Rame adds the bed, the site of woman's sexual servitudes. I would like to

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<sup>118</sup> I borrow the concept of counterpublic from Nancy Fraser. In a 1990 article, she highlighted the confusion around Habermas' concept of 'public sphere'. Fraser contends that there has never been one, singular public sphere, but that the public – intended as everything outside the domestic sphere – has always been fragmented into several competing counterpublics "including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics, and working class publics" (Fraser, 1990: 61).

<sup>119</sup> The play was performed for the first time in the UK at the National Theatre in 1981 with Yvonne Bryceland in the lead role. This English translation is titled *Female Parts* and was published by Pluto Press in 1981. In this thesis, I prefer to use a more literal translation.

look at this show in relation to the critique of patriarchy developed by the feminist movement, and I shall pay particular attention to the relationship between the representation of female subject on stage and collective feminist subjectivity.

In 1977, when she premiered *All Home Bed and Church*, Franca Rame was a very popular performer. Her career had spanned from post-war variety theatre to revolutionary Marxist political theatre, through commercial theatre and successful TV appearances<sup>120</sup>. The evolution of Franca Rame as a performer is symptomatic of the rapid changes Italian women went through in only few decades. Rame had been performing since childhood in her family's company, but her first roles in revue and variety theatre were decorative and she was often typecast into roles that "fit into the feminine mould of the 1950s" (Radulescu, 2011: 123), such as the many variations of the blonde airhead. Her first film roles complied with the 'blonde bombshell' stereotype: eye-catching and naive, "but good-hearted and a bit unlucky" (Rame, 1977: 141). Later on in her career, she would describe this kind of typecasting as a "sexist conditioning" (Rame, 1977: 141) that she carried with her for many years, but she eventually managed to shrug off and even to exploit for political ends, as she does in *All United! All together! Hang on, Isn't That the Boss?*, analysed in Chapter Three. Throughout the 1960s, her characters became more articulate and dynamic. The female voice in Fo and Rame's work becomes clearer, female characters hold the scene independently and are no longer only a support for more dynamic male characters (Günsberg, 1997). However, it was only after Fo and Rame abandoned

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<sup>120</sup> For a biography of Rame and Fo see Farrell (2001) and Franca Rame's autobiography (2009).

the commercial theatre circuit that a greater awareness of the woman's question<sup>121</sup> and increased confidence in her abilities as a performer widened the range of female roles in their work<sup>122</sup>.

It was in the period of *All Home, Bed, and Church* that the collaborative nature of Fo's creative process clearly emerged, with Rame beginning to be acknowledged as co-author of a great number of texts. Before then, she received neither credit for her contribution to the creative process, nor for her substantial editorial work in preparation for publication (Farrell, 2001: 199). If Fo could be considered the company's playwright in the conventional sense, Rame's suggestions and feedback had always been, as Fo himself admitted, fundamental. In the introduction to the eighth volume of his *Comedies*, Fo recalls the collaborative writing process for the monologues for women and the plays based upon female experience:

Franca was often the first one to propose an idea, I used to write a first draft, we discussed it together, and then I adapted it for the stage. Other times it was Franca who asked me to read one of her

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<sup>121</sup> Rame and Fo's thematic engagement with the woman's condition developed in conjunction with feminism's moment of greatest visibility, but it also might be due to an evolution of Rame's role within the company. Joseph Farrell notes that it is unclear whether during the seventies an actual change in the company's creative process took place (Farrell, 2001: 199-200), however, it is possible that during those years Rame became more self-assured as a practitioner, and that her feminist views began to influence the company's work.

<sup>122</sup> It was Rame who introduced the tragic register in their theatre. She explored it primarily within the monologic form, in pieces such as her *Passion of Mary at the Cross* in *Mistero Buffo*, *La Medea*, *Michele Lu Lanzone*, in which she plays the elderly mother of a Sicilian union activist killed by the Mafia, or *Una Madre (A Mother)*, monologue of a middle-aged woman who discovers her son is involved in the activities of an armed Marxist group.

scripts, I gave her my comments and she concluded the writing (Fo and Rame, 1989: 1).

In an interview published in 1979 Rame, recalling the genesis of the piece, stated that she had been interested in putting on a show about the woman's condition for many years (Rame, 1979). She proposed the themes and characters to Fo, who wrote a first draft, which was subsequently discussed and rewritten during rehearsals right up until the premiere. Further adaptations took place during the run according to the audience's response, or in relation to current affairs and political events<sup>123</sup>.

Rame's relationship with the feminist movement has not always been straightforward. In a 1977 publication she highlighted the relevance of the female question in today's society, praised the movement's achievements, and confessed her admiration for feminist activists, "especially those who do not set themselves in total antagonism with man, those who courageously operate to change reality, working in the community" (Rame, 1977: 144). Despite her diffidence towards separatist groups, she often collaborated with feminist collectives in various ways, mostly by performing at feminist events or by donating the takings from her performances to feminist campaigns (Rame in Raimondi, 1992: 30).

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<sup>123</sup> Rame recalls that the most significant alterations to the original script were done on stage. "But the real collaboration, the text's real growth... on my part happens when I go on stage, when I start trying it out... there I feel all the dross, what is useless and what is missing... and most importantly it grows when I perform it night after night for the people; in fact, with *All Home, Bed, and Church*, Dario was touring with *Mistero Buffo* and he came back [to watch the show] after a couple of months and said "I don't recognise the show anymore!" (Rame in Raimondi, 1992: 46)

Interestingly, in a 1991 interview Rame confessed that her main problem with a certain type of feminist discourse was linguistic. Rame found that the language deployed by some groups was too intellectually mediated:

They use a language that... unfortunately, disconcerts me, because if you have a class awareness and you want that woman, who maybe is a factory worker who only went to primary school, if you want her to grow... you must speak at her level, you must speak in a way that will reach that woman's brain and heart (Rame in Raimondi, 1992: 30).

The quote betrays Rame's Marxist background, but it sheds light on her understanding of the relationship between art and political militancy. Fo and Rame's theatre always aimed at reaching publics beyond the relatively limited number of regular theatregoers. In a similar vein *All Home, Bed, and Church* incorporates the feminist movement's main political and theoretical concerns and tries to reach beyond the feminist counterpublic.

The publications that tackle *All Home, Bed and Church* often overlook the relationship between her work and the specificity of the Italian feminist movement. For example, in his biography of Fo and Rame, Joseph Farrell considers Rame's engagement with feminism as secondary to her Marxism:

[h]er political thinking was essentially class-based, where the classes were the exploited and the exploiters, or the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. She was never able to afford women the status of an independently exploited class (Farrell, 2001: 198)



Farrell almost sees Marxism and feminism as mutually exclusive, whilst Rame was part of a vast tradition of Marxist feminists concerned not only with capitalist exploitation but that also with the broader and deeply rooted forms of oppression highlighted by feminism. Sue-Ellen Case, in her *Feminism and Theatre*, dedicates to Franca Rame part of the chapter on materialist feminist theatre. She correctly identifies two of the main themes within Rame's texts in the exploitation of the working woman and the dynamics of the relationship between woman and man. However, Case also contends that Rame's texts lack a critique of patriarchy as such, and that she interprets male privileges as an extension or result of capitalist production modes (Case, 1988: 92)<sup>124</sup>. The problem with Case's argument is that it places Rame's work against a generic feminist backdrop – proposed as generic but derived from American feminism - and does not take into account the specificity of the Italian movement in which the boundary between materialist, liberal, and radical feminism are difficult to draw. A closer look at *All Home, Bed, and Church* reveals that the piece actively engages with the critique of patriarchal power and stages multiple aspects of woman's oppression, above and beyond capitalist exploitation. Rame's women, proletarian and bourgeois alike, are burdened by cultural and social constructs that impose upon them passive and deferential behaviours. Her critique of patriarchy focuses on the private and on relationships within the family, and looks both at male oppression and at woman's responsibility in endorsing and justifying patriarchal power.

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<sup>124</sup> Case also locates Rame's work "in the tradition of socialist realism, aimed at educating the men and women in the audience" (Case, 1988: 92). Whilst it is true that Rame's, like Fo's is a militant, 'throw-away' theatre written and performed for the here and now, her preference for comedy, farce, and grotesque is aesthetically distant from the socialist realist tradition.

## ***All Home, Bed and Church: Feminist Awareness as Process***

*All Home, Bed, and Church* was preceded by another show which tackled the woman's question. *Parliamo di donne* (Let's Talk about Women) (Fo and Rame: 2006a) was first performed for RAI television in 1977 as part of a retrospective of Dario Fo's works. It is a collection of monologues, sketches, and one act plays which thematically engage with subjects such as women's condition in the factory, pregnancy, abortion, and motherhood. Overall, this piece is still cautious in addressing the specific issues at stake in the current feminist debate. For example, in the one act farce *L'uomo incinto* (*The Pregnant Man*), a convinced antiabortionist discovers that, in a farcical overturn, he is expecting a baby. The pontificating pro-life militant grapples with morning sickness, midnight cravings, and swollen breasts, and, terrified by the repercussions pregnancy would have on his professional life, he starts considering having an abortion (Fo and Rame, 2006a). The piece does work as a satire of conservative antiabortionists, and yet, it does not take into account the repercussions of such an issue on the woman's life. The perspective, despite the paradoxical overturn, is still male. Nonetheless, *Let's talk about women* can be regarded as the foundation of the much deeper reflection developed in *All Home, Bed, and Church*.

In *All home Bed and Church*, the emphasis shifts from critique of capitalism to critique of patriarchy. The arena in which this critique is developed moves from the relationships of production to the private, the household, the family, sexual relationships without neglecting capitalism's repercussions onto the private sphere. The show premiered in Milan in 1977 and toured widely throughout Italy. Rame

describes it as “a show about woman’s sexual servitudes”, written in solidarity with the feminist movement, to raise awareness on the woman’s condition (Fo and Rame, 2006b: 7). As it was customary for Rame and Fo, thorny political issues such as woman’s subjugation and liberation are elaborated through comedy, farce, and the grotesque. The only exception is the final monologue, *La Medea*, an elaboration of Euripides’ tragedy. The script published by Einaudi in 1989 and the subsequent 2006 Fabbri edition, is composed of six monologues plus a prologue which introduces the themes, sets the tone of the performance, and provides the audience with the interpretative key to the succeeding pieces. Since the show’s premiere in 1977, *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa* has been adapted and modified several times: sets and costumes changed, and some monologues were added or cut. The 1989 Einaudi script, rewritten in accordance to the 1985 run of the show, is composed of six monologues: *Una donna sola (A Woman Alone)*, *Il Risveglio (Waking Up)*, *La mamma fricchettona (The Punk Mum)*, *Abbiamo tutte la stessa storia (We All Have the Same Story)*, *Contrasto per una sola voce (Contrasto for solo voice)*, and *La Medea (Medea)*. The monologues develop as dialogues with unseen and unheard characters and the dialogue is inferred from the lines and actions of the female part alone.

The monologues incorporate several themes dear to the movement, such as domestic violence, sexuality, contraception, abortion, the working woman’s double burden, and the function of domestic labour within capitalism. The material is heterogeneous, and, as Rame recalled in an interview, the issues tackled in the show “came up from the many articles we read, from many situations we directly followed” (Rame in Raimondi, 1992: 33). The representational strategies used are varied and they are all typical of Fo and Rame’s theatre. The main strategies are the

use of comedic register, of farcical structures and tempos, grotesque images, and the strong focus on situation and conflict rather than character. In *All Home Bed and Church*, the characters are never portrayed realistically, but rather they are types, articulated in generic terms as functions, symbols, examples. The focus on situation and conflict rather than character allows Rame and her audience to distance themselves from the material, to pay attention to the power relationships at play, and to critically engage with the dynamics of patriarchal oppression.

In *All Home Bed and Church*, the critique of patriarchy focuses on the private and on the intersection of private and public as the site of woman's oppression. All the protagonists, regardless of class and cultural background, are marked by a patriarchal power that shapes institutions, habits, mind-sets, behaviours, and relationships. The characters also share the same path from unawareness and frustration, to rebellion and, in some cases, to awareness and liberation. Within the private, Rame pays particular attention to the family, the institution at the core of the clash between the emancipative model and 1970s feminism. Within the private in general and the family in particular, the conflict revolves around the protagonists' uneasiness with roles imposed by patriarchal culture: the dutiful wife, the sexual object, and the self-abnegating mother. All the women in *All Home, Bed, and Church* confront themselves with such roles, some of them have internalised patriarchal discourse and attempt in earnest to conform, whilst others openly rebel. Despite the different levels in awareness of their own condition, all of Rame's women are torn between their desires and what patriarchal power expects of them. The core of the conflict is, therefore, an existential uneasiness, a lack of self-centeredness and self-determination that the characters are not always able to recognise and articulate as such. This analysis will focus on four monologues from *All Home, Bed, and Church*

that better illustrate Rame's engagement with the feminist movement. The first one is *A Woman Alone*, the second *The Punk Mum*, the third *We All Have the Same Story*, and the fourth is *Medea*. I have chosen these short pieces because they better illustrate how Rame engaged with the feminist debate. I am particularly interested in three aspects that recur through all the pieces I selected. The first one is the women's control over their bodies, which is articulated in terms of objectification, sexual servitude, and reproductive rights. This first thematic cluster will give us an example of political engagement with the private, an element that previous forms of political theatre did not consider. The second aspect I would like to analyse is Rame's critique of motherhood as represented and articulated by patriarchy. As we shall see, all of Rame's women in *All Home, Bed, and Church* are mothers, and yet motherhood is questioned and problematized. An analysis of motherhood in these monologues will allow me to start a reflection on representations of femininity that will conclude in the second part of this chapter. The third element I shall consider in the monologues is the relationship with other women as the prerequisite of feminist awareness. We shall see how other women act as guides, they provide support, but also they are images of femininity in which woman can recognise her own oppression. This show presents a radical shift for Italian political theatre and for our understanding of commitment. It significantly detaches itself from Marxist theatre by focusing on oppressive dynamics within the private, by shifting the emphasis from economic arrangements, to the conflict between the acceptable images of femininity fashioned by patriarchy and woman's needs and desires.

In Rame's work we see a type of *impegno* in which the practitioner exposes herself as a member of the category fighting for liberation. In Chapter Three we have seen the example of militant artist who does not belong to the working class and yet is

immersed in the struggle. In Chapter Four we have seen how the theatre practitioner can act as an intermediary between the inside and the outside, and theatre as the practice capable of questioning the narratives that support the total institution's existence. With *Rame*, we see for the first time a type of *impegno* in which the practitioner is directly affected by the oppressive structures she is critiquing. This approach is markedly different from the post-war types of commitment we encountered in Chapter One and Two, a change that the current literature on *impegno* has not tackled yet.

The first monologue, *A Woman Alone*, opens the show with a strong focus on woman's sexual exploitation. *A Woman Alone* is a fast-paced farce for a solo performer in which "a deliberately exaggerated concatenation of abuses [...] takes familiar situations, multiplies them and assembles them into a grotesque parody" (Hirst, 1989: 154). The protagonist, Maria, is a petit-bourgeois housewife who is kept locked up in her own flat by her husband and is reduced to the rank of a sex object by all the men around her: her husband, her brother-in-law, her lover, a phone stalker, and a peeping tom. Maria, naive but feisty, has internalised patriarchal discourse to such an extent that she cannot identify the source of her unhappiness in her reduction to a sexual object. The monologue opens when Maria, busy with her usual chores, discovers that a new neighbour has just moved into the block of flats opposite hers. She begins to talk to her new acquaintance through the window, and, eager for interaction, she tells her story, without sparing intimate details, concerns, and personal tragedies. The neighbour, always unseen and unheard, is located in the auditorium, placing the audience in the position of Maria's interlocutor and thereby giving the piece the intimacy of a storytelling piece. The dialogue with the neighbour is counterpointed by a rapid crescendo of events that eventually brings

Maria to breaking point: The peeping tom and phone stalker relentlessly harass her, her maniacal brother-in-law keeps groping her, her husband threatens her over the phone, a creditor tries to track down her husband, and her lover comes to reclaim her. We encounter Maria at a moment in which the conflict between her desires and the behaviour expected from her is already visible but her duty towards the family compelled her to sweep it under the carpet and carry on as usual. The dialogue with the neighbour exposes the conflict and contributes to her rebellion.

The many men in her life all claim access to her body; they look at her, touch her, claim her, and even control her movements. Maria vehemently protests against the peeping tom, the phone stalker, and her brother-in-law. However, she only timidly questions her lover and her husband, the men who, by virtue of their relationship to her, feel entitled to claim exclusive possession over her. The marital relationship is especially violent. The husband beats Maria and, since he discovered her affair, locks her up in the flat. He masks his actions as acts of 'love', and 'adoration', and justifies them with the argument that she is "like a child and that he must protect [her]..." (Rame and Fo, 2006b: 19). Maria is therefore infantilised, patronised, and deprived of agency, but at the same time she is required to be always sexually available<sup>125</sup>. Maria's young lover is as disinterested in her feelings as her husband. For example, when Maria initially refuses his courtship, not for lack of desire but out of commitment to marital fidelity, the young man resorts to emotional blackmail and

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<sup>125</sup> Maria confesses to the neighbour, in a tone that does not hide her annoyance, that after he beats her, her husband "immediately wants to make love! Yes, love! And he doesn't care if I don't want to, if I don't fancy it! I have to be always ready, always ready! Instant sex, like Nescafe! Washed, perfumed, shaven, hot, supple, willing, but quiet!" (Fo and Rame, 2006b: 19)

threatens to take his own life if she does not make love to him (Fo and Rame, 2006b: 25). Later on, unable to accept the end of their relationship, the young lover presents himself uninvited to Maria's flat, insists in getting in despite the woman's request to leave, and even tries to break into her flat.

Maria's lack of awareness of her own condition is particularly visible in her inhibition with language, highlighted by the dialogue with the neighbour. For example, when discussing her disaffection for marital sex, Maria refrains from using specific words:

Well, I don't feel anything... I... I don't manage to reach... (*She is very embarrassed; she doesn't find the right word. The neighbour suggests it to her*). That's right, yes... that word... What a word!! I never say it! Orgasm! It sounds like the name of a horrible monster... a cross between a mandrill and an orang-utan. I can even see it on the headlines: "Adult orgasm escapes from the circus!"(Fo and Rame, 2006b: 19)

As Sharon Wood rightly argues, through Maria's inhibition, Rame seems to tell us that within patriarchal discourse "woman's sexual pleasure is unnameable, unspeakable, deemed not to exist" (Wood, 2000: 167). Her reticence has profound implications, as it translates into an inability to name her feelings and therefore to understand them:

I don't know why I don't feel anything with my husband. Maybe because I feel like... blocked... I feel like... (*She cannot find the right definition. The neighbour suggests it to her. Complete change of tone*) Yes! Why did you wait so long to move over here! You wouldn't believe for how long I have been thinking about it... it's even an easy



word: 'USED'! Yes, used, like the electric razor or the hairdryer... (Fo and Rame, 2006b: 20)

The dialogue with the neighbour, with a more experienced woman, provides her with a vocabulary to give meaning to her experience, and with an interlocutor who can listen, empathise, and advise. As we shall see later on in the chapter, it is only within relationships with other women that a feminist consciousness can develop.

The protagonist of *The Punk Mum* is the first woman in *All Home, Bed, and Church* to reject life within the nuclear family. She is a middle-aged woman, and we encounter her when, chased by the police, she tries to cover her tracks by entering a church and hiding in the confession booth. Talking to the priest, she narrates how her only son left home and became an activist in an extra-parliamentary group. The woman, overwhelmed by anxiety over his safety, left her home to look for him and joined a group of youngsters living in an occupied building. The search is ultimately fruitless, but in her months outside of the family home, the woman discovers counterculture, gains awareness of her condition, and enjoys a taste of freedom and meaningful human interaction. The experience leads her to reconsider her priorities and values, and she takes the decision not to go back home. When the piece opens, the break with the family has already taken place, but her husband claims her back and sends the police to look for her.

Interestingly, all the protagonists of *All Home, Bed and Church* are mothers, and *The Punk Mum* is the monologue that best illustrates the problematic aspects of the 'selfless mother' model, a powerful female archetype very much ingrained in Italian culture. It is not by chance that the piece is set in a confession booth. The Catholic Church is one of the forces that shaped Italian culture and contributed to the

construction of certain images of femininity, including that of the self-abnegating mother, whose life finds meaning only at the service of someone else and in relation to that service. In the traditional image of the Italian mother, the relationship with the son is particularly important. More than mother and daughter, mother and son are bound to one another in a relationship in which the mother offers unconditional love and an absolute devotion that does not fade when the son enters adulthood. Centre of the mother exclusive attention, the son returns an equal devotion and “an affective and symbolic dependence that has no equals” (Bravo, 2001: 78). *The Punk Mum* is the monologue in which this model of maternal relationship emerges most clearly, but Rame, far from reiterating the archetype, focuses on the contradictions, sacrifices, and frustrations that abiding to the archetype might bring.

In her dialogue with the priest, the protagonist recalls the years of absolute commitment to the family. Faithful to her duty, the protagonist dedicated all her attention to the family, quit her job, and buried desires and aspirations (Fo and Rame, 2006b: 45). She recalls how, in the early years of her marriage, she saw motherhood as the completion of womanhood itself. The monologue is, once again, humorous, and the ideal of the joys of motherhood clashes with the reality of a difficult pregnancy:

I was so happy to be pregnant... How happy I was! (*change of tone*)  
Nine months throwing up! Always in bed for fear of a miscarriage! I  
used to say to myself, with an ecstatic voice, between a bout of  
sickness and the other: “This child is going to change my life around!  
What is a woman if she’s not a mother? She’s not even a woman,  
she is only female!” What a moron I was! (Fo and Rame, 2006b: 49)

However, the mother's devotion is not reciprocated by her son, who leaves the family in a moment of rebellion. Here a generational and political conflict stands in the way of the mother-son relationship, a conflict between parents close to the PCI and a young militant in the extra-parliamentary Left. Within this generational clash, the parents are not only symbol of authority, but also the representatives of an old left that betrayed its revolutionary vocation. At this point, the woman's abnegation turns into anxiety and she tries to control her son, with comical and grotesque results. She follows him during protests and marches, she finds herself involved in clashes with the police, and even endures arrest and a trial after a particularly violent rally (Fo and Rame, 2006b: 44).

The time spent outside of the family home – two years, she tells the priest – and the encounter with counterculture reveal to her an approach to human interaction and communal living based on affective, cultural, and intellectual kinship, rather than family ties. In the encounter with the movement, the protagonist realises to what extent the family had repressed her needs.

I started living with these girls and boys, I listened to what they said... at first, I didn't understand a thing, and then I got it. They said, "the personal is political! We have to take control of our sexuality! ... Yes, sexuality, father. 'Reclaim life and enjoyment, power to the imagination! Reject the ideology of work'<sup>126</sup>. [...] You say I lost

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<sup>126</sup> 'Refusal of work' (*rifiuto di lavoro*) was a popular slogan within Italian social movements throughout the 1970s. As Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt explain, "it should be understood principally in opposition to the glorification of work that has permeated some veins of the socialist tradition. [...] For these workers, communism does not mean any sort of liberation *of* work, but rather a liberation *from* work. The destruction of capitalism involves also the destruction (not the affirmation) of the worker *qua* worker" (Virno and Hardt, 1996: 262).

myself? What if I told you that I found myself? That I feel liberated,  
that I've never been better? (Fo and Rame, 2006b: 52-53)

The discovery of a way of life free from the nuclear family's repressive structure is a liberating one, and yet, it does not lead the protagonist to full feminist awareness.

There is a bitter ending to this monologue. The protagonist never finds her son, but the young man eventually finds her. After his fling with the extra-parliamentary Left, he has gone back home and presents himself to his mother as the image of bourgeois respectability. Well-dressed and clean-shaven, he has found a job and is no longer interested in politics. He asks her to go back home. The protagonist refuses, aware that the family structure would compel her to go back to the roles assigned to her by patriarchal power: the dutiful wife and the self-abnegating mother. Carla Lonzi argued that the young's uncompromising upsurge is indeed a rejection of patriarchy whereby "virility refuses to become paternalistic, it rejects the role of the blackmailer" (Lonzi, 2011: Chapter 2, paragraph 33). However, the young man's rebellion against authority is inherently ambiguous and, unlike the woman's, it is only temporary. What for the young can be "nothing more than an adolescent phase, [...] for the woman it is a matter of identity and survival" (Wood, 2000: 170-171). Here is where the paths of the counterculture movement and that of woman diverge. Whilst woman fights a subjugation that accompanies her from childhood to old age, the young man, himself oppressed by patriarchy, is, nonetheless a potential candidate for the role of oppressor in the future. In spite of the common uneasiness with patriarchal power, the woman finds only a temporary ally in the young. Woman's experience is charged with political significance only in relation to other women.

Straight after *The Punk Mum*, Rame gives us another example of problematic motherhood. This time, the focus is on conception and pregnancy and the conflict is with an entire web of forces that try to maintain control over the woman's body. *We All Have the Same Story* is the monologue of a young woman who gets pregnant and faces her partner's disinterest for her sexual health and the captiousness of the Italian abortion law. Worn out by the interference of patriarchal and state powers that claim control over her body, the woman decides to keep her baby and embrace motherhood strong of her feminist awareness. The monologue ends with the protagonist telling her daughter a grotesque fairy tale, an allegorical narration of woman's path from subalternity to awareness and liberation.

*We All Have the Same Story* is stylistically quite different from the other monologues in *All Home, Bed, and Church* and it is structurally closer to the monologues in *Mistero Buffo*. Rame performs on a bare stage, and the action is not limited to one space and one specific time (the family home in *A Woman Alone*, the confession booth in *The Punk Mum*), but quickly shifts from one situation to another, with the performer signalling the change with swift and controlled movements. The monologue opens with a moment of intimacy between the protagonist and her partner, followed by a scene with a nurse during which the woman tries to book an appointment for her abortion; then the action rapidly fast-forwards to show us the stages of pregnancy, with food cravings and antenatal exercises, the delivery room, the baby's birth and in fast sequence the child's first years. The protagonist speaks to several characters, her partner, a nurse, a doctor (all unseen and unheard), and she frequently interrupts the scene, to directly address the audience. The result is a fragmented, syncopated, and fast-paced monologue where the performer moves

between mimesis, and storytelling. More than in the other monologues, what we see on stage is not a round character but a generic feminine image.

This monologue starts with the protagonist demanding her partner's attention. The protagonist lies still on her back, from the lines we infer that the couple is making love. The woman asks her lover to slow down, pay attention to her needs, but her biggest concern is avoiding a pregnancy. Her attitude towards her partner moves between desire, uneasiness, and eagerness to please. She is eloquent and even sarcastic in her complaints, and demonstrates an acute understanding of sexual revolution's ambivalent implications. Her desire to make love with a bit of feeling is dismissed by her partner as an old-fashioned and risible request for romance. Her reply is snappy and cynically points at patriarchal culture's hijacking of sexual liberation:

How come that if a woman doesn't immediately takes on a comfortable position, skirt up, panties down, legs wide open, she automatically is a neurotic bitch, a prude obsessed with honour and modesty, all because of her reactionary-imperialist-capitalistic-conformist-catholic-repressed education? (Fo and Rame, 2006b: 55-56)

It is not by chance that after the protagonist gets pregnant, her partner disappears, to be mentioned only once afterwards: whilst she is giving birth, he is outside, nervously chain-smoking. For the rest of her journey, she is on her own. The woman embraces motherhood as a form of rebellion against the network of powers that deny her control over her body: not only a sexual culture that revolves around male pleasure, but also the hurdle race around abortion law, with the long waiting lists,

medical staff objecting on grounds of conscience in the public sector whilst charging small fortunes to practice abortions privately. The protagonist decides to call herself out, to deny the state power over her body. As she tells the nurse: “it’s not for the money, I could get a loan... It’s just that I don’t accept the blackmail. The legislation is there, apply it!” (Fo and Rame, 2006b: 58)

The protagonist gives birth to a girl, and the monologue ends with the woman narrating a grotesque allegorical tale to her daughter. In order to avoid any misunderstanding, Rame explains the meaning of the tale in the introduction to the monologues (Fo and Rame, 2006b: 12). In the story, we have a beautiful and well-behaved little girl and an ugly and battered rag doll that utters profanities. They represent the two poles of every woman’s personality: the good-natured side, submissive and eager to please, and the rebellious self, which in this case is even liberated from linguistic taboos. The girl and the doll get lost in the woods, and after going through many adventures together, the girl picks up the doll, holds her tight against her chest and the rag doll disappears into her heart. The girl is now an adult, rebellion and docility find a balance, and her journey ends under a big tree, where she finds a group of girls sharing personal stories.

“You start...” they say to a blonde girl who was sitting there. And the blonde girl starts: “When I was a child I had a rag doll that used to say terrible swearwords”.

“Me too!”

“Me too!”

“Me too!” They all burst into laughter. And one says: “Who would have thought: We all have the same story... all of us: the same story to tell” (Fo and Rame, 2006b: 65).

The unnamed protagonist is, more than other characters in the show, a generic image through which we can always see Franca Rame as a woman and as a performer. I would also argue that protagonist, unnamed, sketched through the rapid whirlwind of events, and removed from any recognisable social or economic context, is 'everywoman': a dramatic synthesis whose referent is not any specific individual. Rather, the protagonist stands for the ongoing process towards awareness every woman goes through. An awareness that develops through experience, but that acquires political significance when shared with other women. 'We all have the same story' is not only a title; it is feminism's discovery. The discovery of a 'same old story' shared by most and yet untold for centuries is the foundation of feminist collective identity. In 1987, Milan Women's Bookshop published one of the key books of Italian feminism, titled *Non credere di avere dei diritti* (*Do Not Believe You Have Any Rights*). Reflecting upon feminist consciousness-raising practices, they identify consciousness-raising's political value in the act of sharing one's story and in the recognition that the other woman's story, her path towards awareness, is also my story.

[T]he practice of consciousness-raising implied and fostered a perfect reciprocal identification. I am you, you are me, the words one says are the words of a woman; they are hers and mine. This, of course, as long as the woman who speaks has consciousness of herself (Libreria delle Donne di Milano, 1987: 35).

According to the activists of Milan Women's Bookshop, the process of mutual identification is not always possible or even desirable. The woman who speaks must have awareness of herself. The caveat is significant, but it is not to be intended as an attempt to silence women who have not reached feminist awareness. It is an



acknowledgment that whilst woman's experience is always significant, the way we interpret this experience is not necessarily feminist. Women unaware of their positioning in relation to patriarchy can internalise and perpetuate patriarchal discourse. This conflict is explored in the last, and perhaps most controversial monologue of *All Home, Bed, and Church: Medea*.

The last monologue, *La Medea*, is an allegory of the necessity of destroying patriarchal institutions. The monologue opens with Medea grieving Jason's betrayal. Rame's Medea loses, with Jason's repudiation, not only her husband, but also her social role and her sense of self. Her grief is not simply a consequence of Jason's actions, but also of her frustrated desire for self-determination. The monologue is performed in a language that recalls the dialects of Tuscany and Umbria: a strategy similar to the one deployed in *Mistero Buffo*, where the dialect embeds woman's struggle in history and in popular culture. Similarly to *Mistero Buffo's giullarate*, in *Medea*, Rame performs on a bare stage, without props except for a chair, and she gives voice not only to Medea, but also to a chorus of women, marking the passage from one character to the other with controlled and swift movements, and change of pitch and tone. Two elements are particularly interesting in relation to the critique of patriarchy developed in *All Home, Bed and Church*. The first one is the killing of the children, and the second is the role of the other women in Medea's rebellion.

The murder of Medea's children is an act that fascinated audiences for centuries. In light of the mystique of maternity that still permeates much of Western society, appropriating a figure such as Medea might at first sight seem paradoxical or outright counterproductive. Maggie Günsberg, for example, sees in Rame's *Medea* a dangerous reiteration of patriarchal discourse which leaves the show vulnerable to anti-feminist attacks (Günsberg, 1997: 226-227).

In Franca Rame's *Medea*, however, the text itself and the context in which it is inserted - the final piece in a series of monologues with an openly feminist agenda - charges the murder of the children with additional meanings which could be misunderstood if separated from the unequivocal exegesis Franca Rame always provided before each performance and that is included in the text's Italian edition. Here Rame explains that the murder of the children is to be interpreted as an allegorical fable, as rebellion against the patriarchal narratives of motherhood; "a political act that defies the assimilation of femininity to motherhood" (Wood, 2000: 173).

Rame's concern with motherhood finds in *Medea* its most radical representation. Joseph Farrell argues that Rame has always been far from radical feminism, and he supports his argument by pointing out that all her characters are mothers, concerned, first and foremost, with their children's wellbeing (Farrell, 2001: 209). This is certainly true, and yet motherhood in *All Home, Bed, and Church* is always a profoundly problematic and even unsettling matter. In Rame, the mother-child bond never exists in isolation. External forces shape it and exploit it. By questioning the maternal bond, Rame goes against the grain of a culture that still defines femininity in relation to reproduction. We have already seen a few problematic aspects arising from the patriarchal image of motherhood, including woman's lack of agency over reproduction, childcare as an exclusively female task, and an ideal of womanhood that finds in the maternal its only realisation, thereby compelling woman to cancel herself into maternal care. The most interesting aspect of *Medea*'s articulation of motherhood is that she moves between two polarities: on one side the particular, with her emotional attachment to her children, and on the other the general, her profound understanding of the maternal as articulated by patriarchy. What makes

Medea the archetype of the self-aware woman is her ability to link the particular – her own experience – to the general; that is to say, to patriarchy’s exploitation of the maternal bond. Medea transcends her own experience and looks at the function the self-abnegating mother plays within patriarchal society. The image she uses is immediate and powerful: a yoke around a cow’s neck.

I thought that this cage you built to imprison us, with the children tied around our necks, like the wooden yoke to the cow, to better hold us back, submissive, whilst you milk us and mount us... I thought it to be the worst blackmail of your vicious society of men (Fo and Rame, 2006b: 83).

How the blackmail operates is explained through the dialogue between Medea and the Corinthian women, which covers about two-thirds of the piece. The piece opens with Medea locked in her own house, grief-stricken. The women beg her to come out and speak to them. They present themselves as sympathetic to Medea’s suffering. They offer their solidarity, a bond based upon the awareness that ‘we all have the same story’:

Open the door, Medea, come out and speak to us... we have suffered and cried for the same reason! Our men wronged us in the same way... we can understand you (Fo and Rame, 2006b: 79).

The Corinthian women offer a defensive, consolatory solidarity. Shared experience does not develop into action or awareness. The women try to convince Medea to accept her ‘fate’. In their words, Medea’s situation is ‘unavoidable’ and Jason’s need for a younger bride is ‘natural’. Woman’s condition is established from time immemorial: “it’s the law of the world” (Fo and Rame, 2006b: 80), fixed, eternal,

unquestionable. Medea, on the contrary, clearly sees that “the law of the world” the women live by is tailored to male needs and disguises custom as ‘nature’.

The law of the world? What law are you talking about, women? Is it a law that you, my friends, have thought, said, written, and established... did you announce its sacredness on the city square? [...] Wretched that you are! Now I see, my friends, that man’s greatest idea was to raise you according to his doctrine... he sent you to his school, you repeat his lesson and are content (Fo and Rame, 2006b: 80).

The Corinthian women have internalised patriarchal discourse to such an extent that they become patriarchy’s mouthpiece. In addition, it is significant that when Jason, towards the end of the piece, finally appears, he remains silent. The epitome of oppressive masculinity does not need to speak; the women have already defended his position. In their attempt to make Medea come to terms with her sorrow, they use the children and their wellbeing to bring her back to a behaviour consonant to her role. Their plea is to the mother, not to the woman.

You must sacrifice yourself, Medea, for the love you have for your children. You must think like a dignified mother, not like a proud woman... for the good of those who are your own flesh and blood (Fo and Rame, 2006b: 79).

Medea has no agency over her children; they are a weapon used to blackmail her into submission. The murder subtracts the children from patriarchal power and represents an allegorical destruction of the maternal bond as articulated by patriarchy. At the end of the piece, Medea screams: “[i]t is necessary, my children

have to die, for you, Jason, and your vicious laws to be destroyed” (Fo and Rame, 2006b: 83). The text channels the violence of the act. It is not an act of revenge, but a necessary step towards the destruction of patriarchal law. The children need to “die, for a new woman to be born” (Fo and Rame, 2006b: 83). With the death of the children femininity liberates itself from patriarchal representations.

## **Conclusions**

*All Home Bed and Church* is a show that responded to the Italian feminist movement’s complexities and that engaged with a multiplicity of issues: from the direct struggles that united the mass movement, such as the regularization of abortion, to questions that tap into deeply ingrained behaviours and customs, such as childcare and sexual behaviours. What I find most interesting, however, is how the show reflects upon representations of womanhood: the dutiful housewife, the selfless mother, the lover, the emancipated woman juggling production and reproduction. Images that are ultimately objectifying and functional to the patriarchal order. All the female characters in the show measure themselves against these images of femininity, some struggle to conform, others openly rebel, and yet measuring oneself against those images always leads to frustration. The result is at the same time a throw-away theatre of direct intervention that responded to the urgency of the struggle, and a “critique of femininity as defined and circumscribed within patriarchy” (Günsberg, 1997: 203) still relevant to the contemporary audience.

*All Home, Bed and Church* inserts itself in the construction of a common feminist identity, which develops through a three-pronged strategy. Firstly, the feminist identity must be functional to the movement’s needs and respond to its complexities. The preference for ahistorical, barely sketched types over round characters, and the

generic situations and conflicts, allow the audience to relate to each one of the monologues and to recognise the oppressive dynamics typical of patriarchal society. Secondly, we have the thorough analysis of feminist themes such as sexuality, reproduction, male violence, etc., and the dissection of images of femininity. Thirdly and most importantly, *All Home, Bed and Church*'s most interesting contribution to the construction of a collective feminist identity is its focus on *self-awareness as a process*. Moving between two polarities – from unawareness and frustration in *A Woman Alone*, to full awareness and rebellion in *Medea* – Rame stages a gradual process towards feminist consciousness, a process that engages with a multiplicity of forces. This process' outcome is not, paradoxical as it may seem, collective political action. The struggle in the private, Rame shows us, is as important as collective action; it is a constant negotiation of the feminine self, and it is made of small daily gestures as much as life-changing decisions.

Awareness emerges as a process also based on experience and interaction, where experience provides the material that informs it, but it is interaction that puts it into perspective and makes it significant. In Rame, interaction with men and women is equally important. Although there are no men on stage, in *All Home, Bed, and Church* man is always an interlocutor. Gender conflict is in Rame a battle where the female narrative always risks being silenced and erased by patriarchy's supremacy. Yet it is not a battle between man and woman, but between woman and patriarchy. In this show, patriarchy emerges a complex structure in which woman can actively contribute to her own oppression, whilst man can be an interlocutor, under the proviso that he realises how his behaviour and biases perpetuate woman's oppression. Rame's female protagonists are in open conflict with patriarchal

structures but they also look for a dialogue with man, trying to engage with him outside of patriarchal discourse, most the times with little results.

The relationship with women, on the other hand, is fundamental to the woman's path towards awareness. Rame's characters find in other women solace and guidance; they learn to recognise oppression and gain awareness of their condition, but they can also see how patriarchy conditions woman into internalising its discourse and accepting its rules. In *A Woman Alone* it is the dialogue with another woman that provides the protagonist with the vocabulary for articulating her experience, whilst in *We All Have the Same Story* the encounter with other women – at the end of the fairy tale – puts experience into perspective and makes it significant. Yet, with *Medea*, Rame reminds us of something much more disturbing: the danger of internalising patriarchal discourse, of unknowingly perpetuating oppressive dynamics. This is significant because it breaks the victim/oppressor dichotomy that, for better or worse, informs the entire show and much of the feminist movement.

In *All Home, Bed, and Church*, Rame develops a reflection upon some of the most pressing issues raised by the feminist movement. In *We All Have the Same Story* and *Medea*, however, we see begin to see an approach to feminist politics which is not only thematic, but that reflects upon how the gendered self begins to define itself in relation to other women. Not only in relation to the 'sisters' that share the path from submission to feminist awareness, but also in relation to the women that internalised patriarchal discourse. Subjectivity and the gendered self will be the focus of Italian feminist theory in the following decade, and the methodological tool that will allow me to analyse Laura Curino autobiographical work.

## Renegotiating Subjectivity

One of the great merits of second-wave feminism, not only in Italy, certainly was its insight into the shortcomings of a politics based exclusively on equality: important as they are, legislative reforms cannot liberate women if the culture that fostered and backed woman's submission does not change as well. Second-wave feminism, therefore, embarked on a systematic and thorough critique of patriarchal power that exposed the complex mechanisms behind woman's oppression. It pushed the boundaries of the political further and developed a political practice centred not on direct political confrontation, but rather on ideological critique. Culture - that is to say the complex interplay of images, narratives, customs, traditions, scientific knowledge, and aesthetic production - was discovered to be partial. Woman refused to recognise herself in that culture, and, by doing so, she deprived it of "the illusion of universality" (Rivolta Femminile, 1991: 40). Through this critique of patriarchy, second-wave feminism exposed woman's oppression for the first time not as an individual problem, but as a political issue. This newfound awareness, the common belonging to an oppressed category was the foundation of a complex, multifaceted, but strong collective identity. It was this collective identity, a "mix of thought and action, 'subjectivity and reason', individual and collective" (Ossanna, 2011: 63), that channelled and shaped mobilisation.

Feminist theatre partook in the feminist political project in various ways: by carving out creative spaces and foregrounding female voices and stories, like Teatro della Maddalena did; or by contributing to the critique of the patriarchal order, focusing its attention on representations of femininity, as in the case of Rame. In the previous section, we have seen how Rame gave visibility to feminist demands whilst tackling the existential uneasiness women face when they try to conform to patriarchal



images of femininity. In the 1980s and 1990s, the representation of womanhood is still relevant and an integral part of many women practitioners' work. In this section, I am going to look at women's theatre after the end of the mass feminist movement in the light of feminist philosophical and theoretical production during the 1980s and 1990s. I am going to focus on the work of actor and author Laura Curino, whose autobiographical pieces, *Passione (Passion, 1990)* and *L'età dell'oro (The Golden Age, 2003)*, provide an example of alternative representation of female subjecthood. I will explain how, since the 1980s, a feminist politics primarily based upon critique of patriarchal power began to show its limitations. Neofemminismo's attention to sexual difference, however, provided the springboard for a new line of political and theoretical enquiry, which detached the female gendered subject from patriarchal discourse in order to allow women to think themselves no longer as victims or as an oppressed category. The aim was to search for positive models of liberated femininity. My choice of Curino's autobiographical shows over other examples of contemporary women's theatre is due to the fact that they better illustrate this new line of feminist political and theoretical practice. I shall argue that Curino's autobiographical narrations stage precisely this type of gendered subject: a subject that defines itself independently from patriarchal discourse and that, contrary to the autonomous, self-identical, disembodied subject of humanism, develops only in constant relation and dialogue with the other.

## **Beyond Emancipation and Critique: Italian Feminism after the Mass Movement**

At the turn of the decade, mass mobilisation withered, the entire feminist movement lost visibility, and collective identity weakened. Nonetheless, the 1980s also are, perhaps paradoxically, the moment in which feminist ideas started spreading beyond the movement. Some traditional political institutions, such as the PCI, embraced, albeit timidly, part of the feminist agenda. At the same time, reactionary forces also appropriated and distorted elements of feminist practice and discourse and used them to undermine once again woman's freedom (Bracke, 2014: 192 - 200).

Significant examples can be found the Catholic Church's adoption of the language of sexual difference, bent to celebrate women's 'natural' existence as mothers and carers, or a distorted notion of sexual liberation which objectifies woman even further and wants her sexually available no longer only to one man, but to many.

Nevertheless, I am reluctant to define this period simply as postfeminist. As Jeanelle Reinelt argued, there is something defeatist in the word (Reinelt, 2006: 17).

Postfeminism implicitly relegates feminism's significance to the past whilst defining the present negatively, by the perceived end of a feminist movement, or by its supposed irrelevance. Moreover, the end of the mass movement did not imply the end of feminist practice. During the 1980s and 1990s, Italian feminism returned to the magmatic and multifaceted character that marked the first few years of *neofemminismo*. Although it lacked the mass movement's apparent cohesion, after the 1970s, feminists went on working, publishing, writing, theorising, and discussing. They also looked critically at some elements of *neofemminismo* and developed practices and theoretical approaches to find a way out of the movement's political

impasse. Yet, neofemminism always provided an essential political and theoretical heritage, a point of departure for a revised approach to the woman's question.

Sociologists Anna Rita Calabrò and Laura Grasso look at 1980s feminism in terms of transformation and evolution, rather than uniquely as the disappearance of the mass movement. They define the present as a condition of *femminismo diffuso*, which can be translated as 'diffused' or 'widespread' feminism. They recognise that the premises that held the mass movement together, such as the network linking groups and collectives and a series of concrete institutional demands, disappeared during the 1980s. However, and despite the fact that a conscious alignment to feminist politics is still the prerogative of a relatively limited number of women, what was left after the mass movement's demise was not a political void, but a spreading of feminist ideas beyond the movement. According to Calabrò and Grasso feminism remained

an ideological point of reference for many women. Women that recognise in their private, professional, social, political life the sense of belonging to a collective heritage which exists between a past of struggles and ideological production, and a present characterised by the feminine search of alternative paths towards individual identity (Calabrò and Grasso, 2004: 54).

A Vital part of Calabrò and Grasso's concept of 'widespread feminism' is the constitution of a feminist-oriented active citizenship, the product of a feminist belonging that is not necessarily militant, but that expresses itself in women's daily choices and behaviours. Examples of this diffused feminism are the numerous women groups active in every field of social and professional life, who "relate to one

another to express living desires and to value female sexual difference” (Martucci, 2008: Chapter 2.2, paragraph 9). As we shall see in the following section, this feminist-oriented professional practice is also a component of contemporary Italian theatre.

Women’s cultural and professional endeavours walk the fine line between the need to produce contents that aim at being more than a superfluous addition to patriarchal culture, and the risk of isolating female creativity leaving male supremacy unchallenged. Yet, women’s cultural activities carve out spaces for dialogue, for individual and collective growth; spaces where women’s creativity is nurtured. In this sense, *femminismo diffuso* can be seen as an evolution of 1970s structures set up by feminist activists, such as clinics, unions, and indeed artistic associations such as Teatro della Maddalena. Women’s engagement in setting up structures for other women responded to practical needs but also to the necessity of establishing a “productive connection between the self and the outside world” (Lussana, 1991: 548). The theatre was an integral part of this phenomenon, but before I go back to the theatre, I would like to look at Italian feminism’s reassessment of its theoretical premises. The theoretical production on representation, language, and subjectivity will provide us with the tools to analyse the work of a practitioner like Laura Curino, whose autobiographical work provides not only an alternative representation of femininity but also a performative form that foregrounds a female subject no longer defined uniquely in contrast to patriarchy.

The 1980s are the moment in which Italian feminism, along with its spreading within numerous cultural and social endeavours, takes a markedly theoretical turn. With the demise of the mass movement, Italian feminists had to develop a feminist thought that would support a renewed feminist practice. In order to do so, it was necessary to

reassess the previous theoretical production and political practice. The writings of this period highlight a series of elements that held strategic importance in the past but that in the current political and social context can undermine feminist politics.

In one of such attempts at reassessing the previous tradition, philosopher Luisa Muraro looked at neofemminismo's strategic critique of patriarchy. Although she acknowledged the importance of analysing the "many philosophical, religious, literary complicities that sustained [patriarchy's] system of domination", she warns us "critique work, no matter how vast and accurate, will be cancelled in one or two generations if it doesn't establish itself" (Muraro, 2006: 21). Most importantly, critique alone does not directly affect patriarchal power and does not automatically lead to change.

The existing order reproduces itself not because it is considered good, but because it is reproduced by a mechanism that can be stronger than our intentions and our criticisms, valid as they might be. The problem, then, is to break the mechanism of repetition (Muraro, 2006: 91).

Muraro's argument acknowledges that feminist theory can no longer afford to dedicate the better part of its energies to critique. The risk is to enter a political and philosophical impasse. Vita Cosentino and Federica Giardini, activists in Milan Women's Bookshop, eloquently summarize this need to go beyond feminist critique

A woman nowadays no longer limits herself to denunciation, to the critique of a millenary oppression. Rather, she is in a positive search for forms, figures, and concepts capable of expressing a new world. In practical terms, this means, first of all, a way of engaging, using,

teaching, learning marked more by freedom than recrimination  
(Cosentino and Giardini in Martucci, 2008: Chapter. 3.3, paragraph  
34).

Although *neofemminismo*, shifted the focus from legislative demands towards a critique of patriarchy, thereby detaching itself from the previous emancipationist tradition, it always accepted the premises of feminist politics. In particular, both traditions are founded upon a common representation of woman as oppressed by and victim of patriarchal power. The politics of demands and protection laws as much as *neofemminismo*'s shunning of equality in favour of critique implied the premise of woman as subaltern, as victim. The political implications of this leaning towards a politics of victimisation (which is common among identity or subject-oriented social movements) are significant. This representation, based on historical facts and backed up by the critique of patriarchal power, is a double-edged sword. It contributes to the formation of a collective feminist subject capable of forwarding demands, but it also deprives woman of agency. For the Milan Women's Bookshop's activists, the problem with the representation of 'woman as victim' is not in the representation's validity or truthfulness, but rather in its centrality to feminist thought and practice. Throughout the 1970s, for instance, the movement strategically mobilised collective action upon generic images of womanhood: the housewife, the woman with the problem of abortion, the rape victim. "Not women in flesh and blood, with desires and opinions, but rather figures of the oppressed female and as such capable of justifying femininity in its entirety" (Libreria delle donne di Milano, 1987: 120). According to Milan Women's Bookshop, the image of the victim is generic. The victim has no name, no individuality, and no agency; she exists only in relation to her suffering and to the power that oppresses her. Moreover, the image of the victim is

difficult to live by. If the concepts of oppression and subordination describe the condition of a group or class, they are harder to recognise in one's own experience.

In the previous section, we have seen how Rame offers a position that, although based upon the critique of patriarchy, breaks the oppressor/victim dynamic in at least two ways. On the one hand, by searching dialogue with man, and on the other by recognising the active role women play in the preservation of patriarchal power. Yet, for the Women Bookshop activists, this is only a partial improvement. When it comes to defining herself and her sex in the world, woman is still divided between two options: between the impossibility of recognising herself in patriarchal culture and the problematic feminist image of woman characterised primarily by oppression and subordination. Here feminist thought pays the price of a political practice that defined feminism negatively, by what it opposes. This produced an image of woman dependent upon patriarchy. Woman could only see herself as subaltern, only within the victim/oppressor dichotomy.

Muraro and the Women's Bookshop look at the woman question in a perspective that combines linguistics and psychoanalysis. Building on second-wave feminism's work on sexual difference, they define woman's subordination as an exclusion from discourse, an inability to signify herself in relation to the world. Borrowing a Lacanian term, the Women's Bookshop define this existential and epistemic impediment as "a weak feminine symbolic order, or, to be more exact, a subaltern one" (Libreria delle donne di Milano, 1987: 119). In other words, if representation is structured according to patriarchal language, woman's liberation will be only partial and her existence in the world always mediated by patriarchal power. Ida Dominijanni's words further clarify this problem:

[w]hat the woman suffers from [...] is 'being put into the world without a symbolic placement', with no sense-horizon that would connect her being of female sex with her living in society. It's an age-old state which goes back to the original constitution of the symbolic order and of sexual roles in western civilization, but more importantly it is a condition which has been not eased by the society of emancipation (Dominijanni, 1991: 131).

The hitch in feminism's step was due to its overlooking of patriarchal symbolic order's ability to reproduce itself, regardless of feminist cultural critique, and the weakness of a feminine symbolic order that thinks and represents woman as subaltern. If feminine experience does not translate into free social forms, this is because when entering society women do not know how to inhabit it without neutering their own gender. "They enter [society] as a losing sex" (Libreria delle Donne di Milano, 1987: 125).

Feminist thinkers found a way out this impasse in one of *neofemminismo's* most significant intuitions: sexual difference. Contemporary feminist thought is grounded on feminism of difference, but it digs deeper, engaging in a rich analysis of subjectivity as the element at the foundation of politics. The reflection upon subjectivity had particular importance for identity politics and allowed subaltern groups to confront the hegemonic group and put forward demands. Yet the risk of identity politics is to articulate the subaltern subject in relation to the hegemonic group and, therefore, to articulate it as 'other than'. Being 'other' means being object, non-person, non-agent. The subject emerging might be vocal and united in its demands, but it is only "the other pole of a binary opposition conveniently arranged so as to uphold a power-system" (Braidotti, 1991: 161).



In their work towards a new theory of the subject, feminist philosophers engaged with a philosophical tradition that for centuries silenced the feminine. They realised that the sovereign subject of emancipation cancels out sexual difference and forces woman into the abstraction of a neutral, disembodied, transcendental subjectivity. This concept of subjectivity is the gatekeeper of thought, discourse, culture, and of the patriarchal symbolic order. For woman, embracing an emancipative model based upon the sovereign subject, autonomous, homogeneous, and (supposedly) neutral meant negating her sex. In relation to subjectivity, the problem with the emancipative model is that it takes for granted that access to political rights would automatically allow women to become full subjects, and it does not question what type of subjectivity woman's liberation is aspiring to. When woman embraced the emancipative model along with the idea of the subject that supports it, her demands still fell within the patriarchal symbolic order.

Before political action and demands, before liberation, there is for feminist theory the need to reconceptualise the subject, to found a new theory of the subject capable of including woman's experience and of translating it into an alternative symbolic order. No longer simply counter-subjectivity, but rather a subject "no longer *different from* but *different so as to bring about new values*" (Braidotti, 1991: 161 emphasis in original). The philosophy of sexual difference provided the methodological tools for such an endeavour. In the 1980s feminist philosophers, and especially the Diotima philosophical community, unpacked its premises and implication, eloquently articulating its political potential. Placing woman experience at its core, feminism of difference attempted to restructure the system, beginning with its ontological foundations (Ossanna, 2011: 17).

The subject of sexual difference departs from the humanist subject, such as the Cartesian or Kantian, in at least three ways: it is embodied, relational, and dynamic. First and most importantly, the subject of sexual difference defines itself not through abstract or universal categories but rather through lived, unique, embodied experience. Sexual difference represents in Italian feminism “a general cognitive and interpretative category [...] [which] is neither only biological ‘sex’, nor only ‘gender’ as it has been culturally created; it is the inscription of both of these in the symbolic dimension” (Bono and Kemp, 1991:16). It conceives biology and culture as inseparable. The separation of sex from gender, especially in American and British theory, powerfully articulated gender oppression as a modifiable construct. Italian philosophy of difference, however, chose to build upon the political practices developed during the previous decade, such as ‘starting from oneself’, which, for Luisa Muraro, is the only strategy woman has to make sense of her experience, to dispel the ‘symbolic disorder’ she lives in (Muraro, 2006). Sexual difference is produced and signified by woman who here and now experiences both sex and gender. It is not ancillary to patriarchal subjectivity, is neither superfluous nor adjunctive. It is necessary, rooted in her being. Therefore, the subject of sexual difference is always embodied<sup>127</sup>.

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<sup>127</sup> Rosi Braidotti further explains what embodied subjectivity is. “The subject is not an abstract entity, but rather a material embodied one. The body is not a natural thing, on the contrary, it is a culturally coded socialized entity; far from being an essentialistic notion, it is the site of intersection of the biological, the social, and the linguistic, that is, of language meant as the fundamental symbolic system of a culture. Feminist theories of sexual difference have assimilated the insight of mainstream theories of subjectivity to develop a new form of “corporeal materialism” which defines the body as an interface, a threshold, a field of intersecting forces where multiple codes are inscribed” (Braidotti, 1991: 160).

The subject of difference is also relational, shaped by the encounter with others in a shared space of interaction. Second-wave feminism was already concerned with individual and collective subjectivity and already knew that when unmediated by man, the relationship among women could be empowering. 1980s feminism shifts its focus from subjectivity itself to the relational nature of the subject. It looked at the relation as the “material and discursive practice capable of *performing* feminist subjectivity” (Cavarero, 1999: 142 emphasis in original), a practice that could structure “a feminine symbolic order in which the signification of the individual generates itself in her relationship with the other” (Cavarero, 1999: 141). Milan Women’s Bookshop, borrowing the definition from Adrienne Rich (1995), called this web of relations “the common world of women”:

a tissue of preferential relations are woven between women, within which the experiences associated with womanhood are strengthened by reciprocal recognition [...] a web of references and relationships to others like yourself which is able to register and make consistent and effective our experience in its integrity, recovering and developing the practical knowledge which many women in difficult circumstances have already intuitively acquired (Libreria delle donne di Milano, 1991: 120).

The archetype of this relation is the one between mother and daughter. Franca Rame’s problematic motherhoods gave us one example of how Italian feminism attempted to liberate the maternal from patriarchal representations – a model of virtue and of selfless abnegation all women should identify with – and from psychoanalytic categories that frame the mother-child relationship. In Italian philosophy of difference, and especially in the work of Luisa Muraro (2007), the

'symbolic mother' is the primary source not only of material existence but also of the feminine symbolic order. She is the paradigm of a relationship among women capable of shaping a horizon of meaning in which woman can make sense of her self and of herself in the world. And, crucially, a relationship that, contrary to second-wave egalitarian 'sisterhood', acknowledges differences of authority and experience among women, a relationship that includes disparity and debt, authority and gift (Cavarero, 1999) (Muraro, 2007). Reassessing our understanding of the self in relation to others in accordance with the symbolic mother paradigm proposed by feminist philosophy means articulating an idea of the self which is not only embodied and relational, but also vulnerable and exposed. Ultimately, a dynamic self, always in flux, in constant becoming.

At first glance, this might seem a strictly philosophical debate. Yet, what is at stake in this restructuring of subjectivity and of the symbolic order is the very foundation of politics. Ida Dominijanni argues that once the subject of humanism - undivided, self-identical, disembodied, and autonomous - is discarded, we can reconfigure subjectivity as "a sexed singularity born of tensions between reasons and drives, aware of his/her vulnerability, marked from and depending on relationships with others" (2009: 140). The consequence of this reconfiguration is significant:

the whole lexicon of modern politics feels the effects of this shift. Equality, freedom, fraternity, power, authority, representation, right and rights, community and common all turn out to be marked by the neutralization of sexual difference and need to be rethought in the perspective of the embodied and sexed subject (Dominijanni, 2009: 141).

Once more feminism pushed the boundaries of the political further. If second-wave looked at the personal as a political arena where power forces are at play, feminism of difference in the 1980s and 1990s went beyond critique and, moving between language and metaphysics, between politics and systems of representation, found a fertile ground where woman can become a subject in her own terms. Woman's needs and political demands can be more strongly articulated if founded on a positive concept of subjectivity.

The shift described by Dominijanni harbours a tremendous significance for our understanding of politics and political theatre. The most immediate implication of this shift is that the humanist subject - individual or collective, but always characterised by unity - is no longer a referent. The politics of emancipation, including Marxism, which had been built upon this type of subjectivity, has to reassess its premises and its aims.

## **A Gendered Theatre Practice: Laura Curino's Autobiographical Monologues**

In a 1998 article, Laura Mariani, in alignment with Calabrò and Grasso's argument, noted that women's theatre in Italy saw in the 1980s and 1990s "a qualitative leap" whereby female artists engaged with the woman's question from a perspective not necessarily militant, whilst placing identity and subjectivity at the forefront. For contemporary theatre practitioners, Feminism has become an individual, yet not isolated, position from which we can interrogate the world (Mariani, 1998:194). Reporting a survey published by *Il Patalogo*, she notes that about six-hundred shows by women practitioners had been produced between 1977 and 1993 (Mariani, 1998:

195-196) and that although not all of them can be labelled as feminist, the considerable number points to women practitioners' greater awareness and assertiveness. Women's theatre is not a specific genre, nor can we force any uniformity upon their practice or aesthetic choices. However, when the practice becomes consciously sexed, when the supposed neutrality of theatre practice is left on one side to explore the feminine – whether in practice, in representation, or both, then we can see an awareness that would not have been possible without the feminist movement, even when artists are reluctant to attach any label to their work.

Moreover, since the end of the 1970s women practitioners have often carved out spaces for female creativity and built structures to support and nourish theatre work by women. Festivals, associations, and networks of female practitioners established themselves in this period, and many of them are still active today. They are dedicated to research and training, they showcase work by women, or provide a platform for devising and creation, but most importantly they create moments of encounter and exchange where professional development and individual awareness intertwine. Examples are *Il linguaggio della dea* (the language of the goddess), active between 1991 and 1995, under the artistic direction of actor and author Ermanna Montanari; Teatro delle Donne association (Women's Theatre), founded in Florence in 1991, which produces performances, organises seminars, conferences, and festivals, and hosts a women playwriting centre with an archive of published and unpublished play scripts. The Magdalena Project international network had between the 1980s and the 1990s strong ties with Italy (Fry, 2007) and since 2008 it has strengthened its presence in the country with the birth of Magdalena Italia (Palladini, 2012).

In their differences, a few elements tie these projects together, such as the necessity for women practitioners to reflect upon their work and to acknowledge the sexed nature of their practice. A strong attention to the connections between artistic practice and life also informs them, where the analysis of the feminine on stage and the research on the sexed nature of language is matched with work on the self and reflection upon one's own positioning as a practitioner. Most of these projects are shaped as moments and sites of encounter, research, exchange and reflection beyond the performative product, and as such can be considered a cultural answer to both mass media's emphasis on spectacle and to the capitalist fetishizing of productive efficiency (Ghiglione, 1998: 219).

Laura Curino's practice inserts itself in this line of explicitly gendered performance. As we shall see in the following analysis, her solo work brings women's experience to the forefront and articulates it not in relation to patriarchal power, but independently from patriarchal discourse and from its images of femininity. This is not to be intended as an absolute freedom from patriarchal structures or social arrangements, but rather as freedom to think oneself and signify oneself neither through patriarchal images of womanhood nor uniquely as victim or oppressed. In this section, I shall argue that the subject in open struggle against the patriarchal order that we have seen in Rame's explicitly feminist theatre, here evolves into a relational subject, rooted in its political, social, and economic context, and yet mobile, in constant relation and dialogue with the other, especially other women "that will be her models, her teachers, her friends, the sisters she never had" (Curino, 1998: 9). This relationship, moreover, in line with Muraro's thought, no longer refers to equality as the foundation of feminist politics, but rather accepts imbalances and difference among women as an integral part of the relationship. What we see in Curino's

women and in the relationship between the autobiographical self and the other female characters is not the relationship among equals, the sisterhood, we encountered in Rame's *We All Have the same Story*. The force of Curino's narration is that her characters do not share the same story – that is, they do not identify uniquely as oppressed subject. Stories and characters multiply in Curino's polyphonic narration to give the audience the picture of a multiple and dynamic female world.

Laura Curino (1956) began her career with Laboratorio Teatro Settimo (Settimo Theatre Laboratory), a company active between 1979 and 2002. Based in Settimo Torinese, a populous industrial town on the outskirts of Turin, Laboratorio Teatro Settimo matched a strong engagement with its own community<sup>128</sup> with an aesthetic research based on collective creative processes, and on a close attention to orality and narration (Teatro Settimo, 1991) that made them fundamental contributors in the development of *teatro di narrazione*. One of the most salient features of Teatro Settimo's work was a balance between creative group processes and relative freedom that allowed members to cultivate their practice individually. Strong of the work developed with the group, members of Teatro Settimo went on working independently, among them Gabriele Vacis, Marco Paolini, and Curino herself.

Throughout her career, Curino combined collaborative work within a troupe composed of women and men, with the necessity to develop her work as a

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<sup>128</sup> Teatro Settimo's work was characterised by a "continued focus on environmental issues" partly prompted by Settimo's history as an industrial town and partly to Teatro Settimo's research into outdoor performance. In an interview with Gabriella Giannachi and Lizbeth Goodman Teatro Settimo founders argued that "The Settimo ethics is urban renewal, rejuvenation. And also communication. [...] In practical terms we began working on the theatre with the idea of transforming the city which was industrial, ugly – transforming it visually, artistically, culturally" (Teatro Settimo, 1991: 28).



specifically gendered practice. Teatro Settimo's female members had particular relevance in the group's creative process and aesthetic research, an influence that has been acknowledged by several company members (Teatro Settimo, 1991: 27). In 1989 Curino, along with three other Teatro Settimo performers, Lucilla Giagnoni, Mariella Fabbris, and Luca Riggio, devised *Stabat Mater*, a show performed in private houses that toured extensively in Italy and Europe. The performance, composed of a variety of materials from contemporary Latin American Literature (Gabriel García Marquez, Isabel Allende, Julio Cortazar, Guimaraes Rosa), was devised through a series of workshops in 1989 and started touring in October of the same year. According to Giagnoni, this show gave them the opportunity to conceive themselves as performers with their own distinctiveness, rather than only as members of a group. She argues that "with Gaia, Demetra, and Fosca (the three sisters protagonists of *Stabat Mater*), we have claimed a vital space and the chance to speak, to exist as distinct individualities and therefore as actors" (Giagnoni in Guccini and Marelli, 2004: 102). This space was not antagonistic to the one shared with the company's male members, but the separation granted them artistic independence, whilst informing and nourishing the work developed with the wider group. The production represented a turning point in Curino's career. With *Stabat Mater*, she began a path towards creative autonomy, often explicitly gendered; a process that she further developed during the 1990s and after the dissolution of Teatro Settimo in 2002. Between 1990 and 1998 Curino, Giagnoni, and Fabbris were also involved in the activities of Divina, a cultural association dedicated to research women's theatre and to promote networking among practitioners, producers, and scholars. Divina produced several shows and organised a yearly conference on woman and theatre that gathered in Turin performers and scholars

from all over Europe. The association, which can be partly considered the product of the creative tensions between Teatro Settimo male and female members, played a significant role for the female practitioners who found a cultural space to develop their own research; an opportunity they would not have had within the structures of Teatro Settimo (Pedrazzoli, 2005: 118).

In a 2005 interview, Curino acknowledged that in her shows she always talks about women or foregrounds the female perspective (Curino in Pedrazzoli, 2005: 175).

One of the most interesting aspects of her work is her use of female perspectives to illuminate two thematic clusters she developed throughout her career. The first one revolves around the interplay of personal and collective history. The feminine, domestic perspective adds depth to the historical account and allows the audience to engage with the subject matter both at an intellectual and at an emotional level. The second thematic cluster is concerned with labour and industry as ambivalent human activities: in Curino's work manufacturing can nourish creativity, generate beauty, and collective wealth, but it can also destroy landscapes, uproot and alienate individuals, divide communities. For instance, the show dedicated to the life and work of Camillo Olivetti, the founder of the Olivetti typewriters manufacture, is at first sight a reflection upon a model of entrepreneurship focused not only on production but also on collective wealth and wellbeing. Interestingly, however, the factory's story, along with Camillo's biography, is entrusted to female characters: Camillo's mother, Elvira, and his wife, Luisa (Curino and Vacis, 2009). The feminine perspective allows Curino's narration to move along the continuum between the private and the public. A more explicitly feminist piece is *Una stanza tutta per me*, (A Room of My Own, 2004) in which Curino takes Virginia Wolf's *A Room of One's Own*

as point of departure for a reflection on women's creativity<sup>129</sup>. Despite the strong emphasis given to female experience, in Curino's work, patriarchal culture does not have the overbearing and oppressive presence we have seen in Rame and the feminine articulates itself in relative independence from patriarchy. Therefore, Curino's work is capable of reaching beyond the feminist counterpublic and of engaging with a wider public.

In this section, I would like to focus on two autobiographical pieces by Curino, *Passion* (1990) and *The Golden Age* (2003). Both shows intertwine Curino's childhood memories, collective history, and a reflection on the repercussions upon communities of two models of production: the intensive taylorist model embraced by FIAT during the 1960s in *Passion*, and the smaller gold manufacture between the nineteenth and the twentieth century in *The Golden Age*. I would like to look at how Curino develops a markedly gendered perspective and at the characteristics of this gendered autobiographical self in relation to the feminist theories of subjectivity reviewed above.

Curino's use of autobiographical narratives is significant in relation to feminist theory and political practice. In her oral history research into Italian *neofemminismo*, historian Luisa Passerini argues that autobiography was a political tool that demonstrated its efficacy especially within consciousness-raising, but that was not limited to this particular practice. Rather, autobiography was widespread as a privileged approach to problems, in the belief that no story could really be exclusively individual (Passerini, 1991: 166). Despite the considerable presence of autobiographical methods of inquiry within the movement's practices, Italian feminist

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<sup>129</sup> For an analysis of this piece see Gandolfi (2007).

theatre during the 1970s did not explore autobiography's political potential in full. Rame's and Teatro della Maddalena's characters were largely based on real life stories, yet they did not explicitly stage autobiographical material. Laura Curino, on the other hand, with *The Golden Age* and *Passion*, exposes herself in a distinctively gendered but not explicitly militant practice. Always a mix of 'truth' and 'fiction'<sup>130</sup>, her autobiographical work defies the characteristics of the genre. Contrary to the traditional autobiographical text where the self is a compact, unified subject that becomes the author of its own story, in Curino the self is a dynamic entity. It emerges from a multiplicity of perspectives and a from polyphony<sup>131</sup> of voices that include the narrator, the narrator as a child, and several characters to whom Curino entrusts great part of the narration. These characters are sketched by the performer through changes in pitch, tone, accent, posture, or blocking, a technique similar to the one used by Rame in *Medea*. The characters thus evoked by the narrating performer interact with young Laura in different capacities and provide their own perspective on the events. Narration and dialogues, first-person and third-person voice constantly intertwine, creating a fragmented and yet dynamic storytelling which converges in the continuum between the narrating persona, the actor, and the

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<sup>130</sup> Curino's explicit mix of autobiography and fiction could be regarded as politically problematic. However, I am not concerned with the problem of truth here. I agree with Graziella Parati who argues that autobiography is fiction. Autobiography is "a narrative in which the author carefully selects and constructs the characters, events and aspects of the self that she or he wants to make public in order to convey a specific message about her or his past and present identity" (Parati, 1996: 4). What interests me here is not the authenticity of the events and characters, but rather how the gendered self is constructed and placed in relation to the world.

<sup>131</sup> I am referring here to the concept of polyphony as articulated by M. M. Bakhtin in his study of Dostoevsky work (1984). He defines polyphony in literature as "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness [...] with equal rights and each with its own world, combine[d] but not merged in the unity of the event" (Bakhtin, 1984: 6).

characters. A continuum that is visible not only in dramaturgical structures or narration techniques but also through the very presence of the narrator on stage. As Curino states “actress and character cannot be distinguished” because they both pass through one body. “They cannot be distinguished because they are physiologically one” (Curino in Pedrazzoli, 2005:180).

In terms of temporality, the narration proceeds through thematic associations rather than chronological succession, skipping from image to image, from character to character, and, from time to time, going back to the narrator’s voice to tie the images together. The narration shifts between micro and macro, but it is rooted in a specific historical background sketched through brief references to major historical events and to popular personalities or products that anchor the narration to the 1950s and the 1960s. Whilst the major historical events give the audience specific historical coordinates, the popular culture references provide cultural landmarks charged with emotional value, and broad enough to be recognised by a wide the audience.

This shift in the representation of femininity and of the feminine self, the use of the female perspective to give depth to the historical account, the practitioner autobiographical exposure in function of a choral, collective narration are all elements that make *Passion* and *The Golden Age* two prominent examples of a type of *impegno* that no longer articulates itself only negatively, as opposition against an oppressive power such as the bourgeoisie in Chapter Three or the total institution in Chapter Four. The one emerging from Curino’s autobiographical work is a type of *impegno* that asks the practitioner to expose herself in order to enter a dialogue with the other, and to commit herself to nurture non-oppressive relationships.

## **Relational Subjectivity in *Passion* and *The Golden Age***

*Passione* is a solo piece performed for the first time in 1990 at the first Divina conference. The version presented at the conference, rewritten and expanded, toured Italy extensively and was published in 1998. The text is based on the work Curino had already developed with Teatro Settimo on Settimo Torinese's history. It interweaves episodes from her childhood with fictional elements, building the narration around the cultural and social environment that shaped her as an individual and as a performer. The events are set in the 1960s when Settimo Torinese grew rapidly and chaotically into a populous industrial town. The piece opens with the family's arrival in town, following Laura's father, a mechanic at Fiat. The monologue includes the voices of various characters, and through the eyes of Curino as a child, gives the audience a glimpse of the profound repercussions Italy's unbalanced industrialisation had on individuals, families, and communities. The first part of the monologue narrates the economic boom seen from the domestic environment. The narrator dwells on Laura's perspective on Settimo and on the chorus of neighbours, teachers, and friends that populate her world. The second part of *Passion* revolves around a specific Sunday in 1969: the day Laura went to the theatre for the first time. On that Sunday, she saw Dario Fo and Franca Rame perform *Mistero Buffo* in Settimo Torinese's Workers' Association Hall. The discovery of the theatre is a life-changing moment. In particular, Franca Rame's performance of *Passion of Mary at the Cross* has an enormous impact on the young Laura, who, overwhelmed by emotion, burst into tears at the end of the performance and runs away. The piece's title is partly an explicit link to Rame's performance but also a declaration of love to the theatre. In the theatre, young Laura discovers "her escape route, the passion that will dictate her choices, the point of view that will make her look differently at that

devastated town where she, disappointed and recalcitrant, had been brought by force” (Curino, 1998: 9).

Similarly to *Passion*, *The Golden Age* is largely based on autobiographical material, but the narration takes us further back in time, to Laura’s early years. The setting is the village where Laura’s grandmother, Primina, lived. The industrial town of *Passion* is substituted with the rural village’s rhythms and relationships. In *The Golden Age*, Curino gives voice to several characters, the vast majority female. At the centre of the piece is Primina’s house, where friends and relatives – all women - gather to work and talk. Laura’s story is composed of short episodes depicting an idyllic childhood: the long summer days, games with friends, her grandmother’s stories; an idyll broken by the start of primary school and by the emergence of the first conflicts. Laura’s childhood memories are intertwined with Primina’s narration of an almost mythical genealogy of goldsmiths that shaped the nearby town, Valenza. In this production, gold manufacture is the symbol of industry driven by love of beauty, of labour that fosters creativity. *The Golden Age* of the title is both the symbol of a production model in harmony with the community and of a time in early childhood when “everything was joy and beauty” (Curino, 2004: 107).

Curino’s narration is situated at the intersection of specific of geographic, historical, and cultural coordinates. The reference to the geographical and social settings are at once very precise and yet applicable to many other contexts. Settimo Torinese is a very specific location in north-west Italy and at the same time Curino’s description of Settimo can recall any industrial periphery. The perspective upon Laura’s “purgatory-town” (Curino, 1998: 10) is always ambivalent. Young Laura’s relationship with the place is conflictive but the adult’s perspective mitigates the child’s hostility. The other characters add alternative points of view and sketch the image of a stricken and

wounded industrial periphery, which, in spite of the difficulties, harbours a lively and diverse working-class community.

One example of the rapid changes brought about by the industrialisation process and of their ambivalent repercussions can be found in Laura's arrival in the family's new flat. Here, the child's perspective, filtered through the narrator, counterpoints the point of view of the adults around her.

*- May I come in?... Look, look how big it is...*

And there I was, not seeing – or rather seeing but not understanding – or rather understanding but not liking what I understood.

*- Look, what a beautiful home!*

Opposite there was eight-storey tower block and around it other four, identical, though smaller, tower blocks. And then holes, holes and more holes, piles of earth, cranes, foundations and bulldozers.

*- But look... this one's even got an intercom!*

A little machine with its belly ripped open and all the intestines spilling out. And they call this home.

[...]

*- Here's the central heating system, the inside loo, and the central television aerial... And now we've even got gas in our own homes!*

(Curino, 2000: 91 italics in original)



The result is an ambivalent picture and a splintering of perspectives, one looking at the flat's modern comforts, another at the devastation of the building sites in this inhospitable industrial periphery.

*The Golden Age* explicitly links a specific geographical location with the protagonist and her family. The story takes place in "Villabella, suburb of Valenza Po. Here [Laura's] grandmother Primina was born, and all her friends. Here [Laura's] mother was born, and all her friends" (Curino and Marelli, 2004: 105). *The Golden Age* situates the narrated subject not only in a very specific geographical location but also within a feminine genealogy that is immediately set out to be a fundamental point of reference. As the piece progresses, Villabella acquires additional meanings that open up to a wider set of cultural references. The village is the secure haven of childhood and the dreamlike memory of a rural Italy untouched by industrialization. Here we can already notice a significant difference between Rame's and Curino's solo pieces. Where Rame's characters are generic images disconnected from any specific background. In Curino, the autobiographical self is already firmly rooted in a particular geographical and historical location, in a specific socio-economic setting, and it is also part of a feminine genealogy. The text multiplies voices and perspectives, tied together by the narrator's unifying voice. Here we start to see how Curino's autobiographical narrative is shaped not by introspection, but by the interaction between Laura and the other characters.

The audience's perception of Laura as a child is also shaped by a multiplicity of voices, each one of them giving us a glimpse of Laura's personality or physical appearance. For example, when mentioning the physical transformations of late childhood and early adolescence, the narration moves between the child's perception and the adult narrator's look at her younger self:

In the meantime, I'd become a frog. Fat! Well, maybe not that fat but I felt I was: round, short legs, long arms! Well maybe they weren't that short or that long, but disproportionate. You know what it is like at that age: too much here – not enough there, a vast forehead and protruding goggle-eyes. [...] Add to this that I never went outdoors and my skin was a greenish colour – and the picture is complete (Curino, 2000:101).

The image of Laura as a little girl is the same, but the gaze is split. We see both the child's perception of her body, her self-consciousness ("I'd become a frog. Fat") and adult Laura's perception of herself as a little girl, the ironic and compassionate gaze that characterises Curino's narration ("maybe not that fat, but anyway, I thought I was very fat"). In the narration, they become almost indistinguishable, and yet they provide already two perspectives on little Laura's body.

In both productions, however, the image of Laura as a child, the autobiographical picture does not emerge much from introspection, but rather from the polyphony of voices that continually take over the narration. Crucially, the vast majority of these voices are female. In *Passion* and in *The Golden Age*, other female characters act as fundamental points of reference for the creation of a gendered horizon of meaning. For example, in *The Golden Age*, right from the very first line the narrator introduces the audience to a feminine space: "I was raised in a harem" the narrator says, "surrounded by women of any age and condition. In the place where I grew up, gold flows" (Curino and Marelli, 2004: 105). The term 'harem' refers to the group of women who regularly gathers in Primina's courtyard. It evokes a fantastic, exotic, and exclusively feminine world of beauty and prosperity, but in this narration, the harem is a community of peers, each one of them with her history and her voice.

They are introduced one by one with a short line and a brief comment that quickly sketches each character.

Around my cot gathered the Fairies.

**Rina** – “Beautiful! What a beautiful baby! Primina, I don’t want to make a big deal about it, but also my granddaughter...”

This is Rina ‘I-don’t-want-to-make-a-big-deal-about-it’... she always talks about her granddaughter.

**Ines** – “Fine, the baby, very fine!”

This is Ines, the telephone operator, she’s a bit harsh but sensitive.

[...]

**Anna’s Grandmother** – “Uhh! What a cutie! What a cutie!”

This is my friend Anna’s grandmother; she can do everything: hoeing and cooking, sowing and embroidering (Curino and Marelli, 2004: 105).

In this autonomous feminine community, Laura finds material and affective nourishment, and points of reference she can measure herself against. These women form a network of relationships which develops without the mediation of male characters. It is not, however, a separatist community, closed in itself. The ‘harem’ looks at the world’s major events from its peripheral positioning; the women comment and reflect upon recent developments, thereby anchoring the narration to a specific historical period.

In the afternoon, the harem meets in my courtyard. Here they sew, they embroider, they knit, they shell beans and always talk about history and politics. The harem says that they don’t understand much

about it, but they always talk and talk about history and politics  
(Curino and Marelli, 2004:107).

The women's conversation unfolds before the child a horizon far broader than that of the village. Politicians and sports celebrities, popes and cinema stars, the Cold War and the Christian Democrat government all enter the domestic space through the women's conversations and inform the child's perspective upon the world. (Curino and Marelli, 2004:107-108). Once again, the boundary between domestic environment and political sphere is porous and allows one to enter and permeate the other.

In *Passion*, the interaction between Laura and the other female characters develops in a similar fashion. In this piece, the young Laura meets along the way "a series of characters, all women, that will be her role models, her teachers, her friends, the sisters she never had" (Curino, 1998: 9). She measures herself almost exclusively against other women. If in *The Golden Age*, men are not part of the rural domestic environment, in *Passion* men are swallowed by the surrounding factories; they are often mentioned, but they are always absent. Among the female characters she encounters along the way, some are fleeting presences, voices that in few words give us a glimpse of the context in which Laura lives. One example is that of the teachers in Laura's school. Each one of them has only a few lines, and yet the combination of their perspectives draws the picture of the precariousness of public schooling in an industrial periphery: overcrowded classes, the stench from the surrounding factories, and young, newly qualified teachers who do not stay longer than a fortnight. Different teachers' voices follow one another, each one of them with a different accent. After this sequence, the narrator steps in, providing context and, once again, a compassionate and understanding gaze.

Poor things! They did what they could. They came, they worked for a fortnight and then got their transfer. They were all young, newly qualified, pale, thin, rootless and, needless to say, they were spinsters. [...] we were taught in the tower block because the school hadn't been built! Instead of blackboards we had balconies, the girls' and boys' lavatories were bathrooms, and in the morning I had to buzz the porter to let me in" (Curino, 2000: 96).

This chorus of teachers' voices, their short comments also gives us snapshots of little Laura: "Curino! Late again! Come in and sit down at your desk! [...] Curino! Curino! Stop gabbing or I'll move you!" (2000: 96). The lines referred to Curino as a child also remind the audience that little Laura is always present, always a witness to the events narrated, a strategy that confirms Curino's authoritativeness as a storyteller.

Other characters have more room and stand out to provide examples of women's social and cultural independence and of a freedom that is not individualistic shedding of responsibilities or rebellion against societal norms. It is a type of freedom that expresses itself through dialogue, interaction, and exposure to the other; a freedom which always negotiates with contingencies and customs, and yet carves out spaces where women can express themselves, even if not always to the full or without conflict. One of such figures is Cristina, a spirited and energetic woman who is not a big presence in *Passion* but, crucially, she is the character who sets the events in motion. She storms into Laura's life "preceded by the most imperious ring at the door I had ever heard" (Curino, 2000: 102) to take her to see *Mistero Buffo* at the Workers Association Hall.

Laura begins to get to know the people of Settimo Torinese through her mother who works as a seamstress from home. Among her mother's customers, one, in particular, captures little Laura's attention. The Lady<sup>132</sup> is an unmarried, elegant, working woman who holds a position of responsibility in one of the nearby factories. Laura is captivated by her elegance and her manners.

[t]he Lady was 'rich' and 'beautiful'. Well, she was maturing, but she was still fascinating with her gleaming hair all pinned up. Oh, no, not in a bun: The Lady had a chignon! [...] I wanted to be like her (Curino, 2000:99).

The Lady is surrounded by an exotic allure, the French words, *chignon* for bun, *bijoux* for earrings, add a glamorous colour to everyday things. Her activities, unheard of in the child's domestic world, such as "office Monday to Friday", "meetings", and "business lunches", increase the mystery that surrounds her. "Meetings"? – I never understood that word. I always thought that it was only rich people who had meetings" (Curino, 2000: 99). As an independent single woman, the Lady's public identity is not defined in relation to a man, and her social status is perceived in 1960s Settimo Torinese as somewhat hard to pin down. In fact, the narrator tells us, "people gossiped a lot about her, not only because she had a responsible position, but also because of her ambiguous relationship with the [factory] director" (Curino, 2000: 99). The gossiping attempts to reduce the Lady to a recognisable gender role, a powerful man's lover. Despite being respected and even feared, the Lady's words reveal a hint of melancholy:

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<sup>132</sup> In the Italian script she is *la signorina*, a title which can refer either to a girl or to an older unmarried woman (Curino, Tarasco and Vacis, 1998: 39).

I'm in the office Monday to Friday. Oh, factories need to be looked after [...]. and on Saturdays I have to prepare for Mondays... [...]  
Security has to stay and wait for me to leave. [...] And in the evening the factory really does shut down. One must rest some of the time.  
And on Sundays? Since Mama passed away there is no one to look after on Sundays any more... (Curino, 2000: 100).

The Lady, with her position of responsibility in a factory management, entered what at the time was an almost exclusively male working environment. Her independence is not devoid of conflicts and has to negotiate with contingencies and societal norms. What is interesting in the quote above is that her approach to management is not expressed in economic terms. She does not speak the language of capitalist production, but that of care: "factories need to be looked after." As we shall see, care is a recurring concept in Curino's work. In her performances, care begins in the domestic realm and extends to the community; 'looking after' and 'taking care of' become the paradigm of a new engagement with the public.

In *The Golden Age* care is also presented as characteristic of the feminine. Primina and her friends inhabit the realm of reproduction, and their reproductive work, their domestic labour is always narrated in terms of a generosity and attention that never becomes selfless abnegation. Material care is shared among Primina and her friends, and it is an element that strengthens the relationship between women and between women and the children.

**Donna Rachele** – "A couple of biscuits?" [...]

**Carmelina** – "Eat, darling, eat!"

**Maria** – “Eat, sweetheart, eat! A little cod from last night?”

And off we go with: Bread, oil, and salt? Bread, butter, and sugar?  
Bread, butter, and jam? Bread, butter, and anchovies? Bread and  
tomato? Gold! This is the garden of delights! (Curino and Marelli,  
2004: 108)

The women’s domestic work provides not only from the material perspective but also from the intellectual and affective one. They dispense in equal measure food and guidance, material support and stories. The most significant example is Primina, who is an accomplished storyteller. It is Primina who intertwines Laura’s biography with the mythical genealogy of goldsmiths that shaped Valenza’s history, and like Curino’s, her narrations always foregrounds the female perspective.

In *Passion*, we encounter a more political model of care, one that exits the domestic environment and acts in the public realm. Rossana is the character that most explicitly proposes an alternative model of political commitment. A commitment in which care displaces ideological alignment. She is the organiser responsible for Fo and Rame’s show at Settimo Torinese Workers’ Association Hall. A proactive left-wing militant, Rossana generously dedicates her energies to the local community in spite of party bureaucracy and male comrades’ lack of inventiveness. She sees Settimo’s problems clearly, and she understands how unruly industrial development can take its toll upon a community. She is practical, down-to-earth, and does not conform to the party’s priorities or to a male approach to political action. Her initiatives, however, usually meet the male comrades’ indifference or open defeatism. Significant in this respect is a comment of hers about time. When she tries to convince a comrade who works in the city hall to issue a compulsory



purchase order that would save an old mansion from demolition, her proposal is dismissed with an excuse: “it takes time”.

Oh yes, and just because it takes such a long time they don't bother at all! It takes time! Of course it takes time! Rome wasn't built in a day! Doing anything well takes time! A child takes nine months... try to have a child in two months. It's not possible, it's not ready!

(Curino, 2000: 106)

Rossana's critique of the comrades' attitude is based not on ideology but on experience and on the materiality of corporeal experience that teaches that “doing anything well takes time”. Here is another example of commitment that begins with attention to the other, from the need to be engaged in the here and now of one's community.

The most significant episode, however, the one that provides the title for the piece, occurs when little Laura is brought to the Workers' Association Hall to watch a theatre performance. The company on stage is Dario Fo's *La Comune*, which was touring with *Mistero Buffo*. This is the moment in which the entire community comes together. All the characters who populate little Laura's world gather for “the theatre, not in a theatre” (Curino, 2000: 99). There is much excitement and anticipation around the “comrade comedians from Milan” (2000: 106) and this is the only moment in which this community, fragmented and alienated, is brought together. That evening Franca Rame performed *The Passion of Mary at the Cross*, one of the most famous pieces in her repertoire. Rame's Mary, stricken by her own son's sufferings, is a pugnacious and passionate woman, an image radically different from the traditional iconography of the Virgin at the Cross. Here Curino draws an ideal line

that links her artistic practice to Franca Rame's, her independent and unorthodox female characters to Rame's humane Madonna who contests the male authority that sacrificed her son. By openly acknowledging the impact of Rame's performance, Curino recognises a bond, a legacy of female theatrical practice and political commitment that the younger generation of performers will develop further.

The Passion of Mary is also the passion for the theatre that passes through Fo and Rame's shows – My passion for the theatre that was born after having seen those masters' shows [...]. The artistic motivation overlaps the political one, and they become one thing: the theatre is a political instrument of liberation of revendication (Curino in Pizza, 1996: 12).

Rame's performance plants the seed of an artistic and political vocation. Curino's performance of the *Passion of Mary at the Cross* at the end of *Passion* is to be intended not only as an homage but also as a debt to a performer that became a symbolic point of reference in Curino's horizon; Rame and her Virgin Mary are other examples of female freedom. The discovery of theatre hits little Laura like a blast. So powerful is the impact that the little girl bursts into tears and runs away overwhelmed by emotion<sup>133</sup>. She runs to the once grand but now abandoned mansion Rossana is trying to save from demolition, and there she meets Carlotta, an old nanny who still lives there "simply because everyone had forgotten about her" (2000:103). Little Laura's encounter with Carlotta is marked, once again, by care. Carlotta, who

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<sup>133</sup> The last part of the piece in which Laura runs away in tears, is present in the Italian published version of the script (Curino, Vacis, Tarasco, 1998: 69-71) but not in the English translation (Curino, 2000).

spends her days wondering around the garden, speaking an incomprehensible dialect, and reciting poetry, is the one who looks after the distressed and child.

She strokes her calmly, she tells her to stop crying, that she isn't hurt, and that anyway, now please she has to blow her nose [...] the old woman takes the frog by the hand, takes the swamp-green glasses off and says that she's not that ugly without glasses and that now she would take her home, and it doesn't matter if all the tower blocks look the same: they would look for the name on the intercom [...] and just when they reached the front door, just before saying goodbye, she said that tomorrow she would teach her how to narrate that story (Curino, Vacis, and Tarasco, 1998: 70-71).

The older woman offers guidance, consolation, and reassurance to the upset child. Care, even maternal care, is not confined to the nuclear family but extends to the community. Whilst the factories were making Italy's economic boom and contributed to the miraculous growth of the country's GDP, outside the factories were "the women who tried not to lose, in the aridity of those times, the meaning of feelings and of the care of the world" (Curino, 1998: 11). Carlotta, the retired nanny, did not forget the sense of care for the world; she takes the child by the hand and takes her home. Significantly, Carlotta is also a storyteller, and the monologue closes with her promise to share her knowledge with little Laura. The disparity between the two - one's experience, age, and strength against the other's vulnerability - is a richness that allows Laura to learn and Carlotta to share her knowledge.

## Conclusions

In the first half of this chapter, we have seen how Franca Rame's theatre developed accordingly to neofeminism's main political strategy: a critique of patriarchy that invested every aspect of woman's life, from culture and economy to sexuality and relationships. The feminist subject was a subject in struggle, a subject that, first and foremost, had to gain awareness of patriarchy's workings and of her own oppression. It was a subject defined by her difference and subordination. As the mass movement withered, Italian feminist theory critiqued feminism's reliance upon the image of woman as victim and tried to articulate a new paradigm, a new symbolic order in which woman could signify herself independently from patriarchal discourse. Laura Curino's autobiographical work inserts itself precisely in this cultural context.

In the introduction to her *Autobiography and Performance*, Deirdre Heddon asks how autobiographical performance can "remain politically urgent and useful" and in what circumstances the personal can still be considered political (Heddon, 2008: 17).

Laura Curino's practice provides one possible answer to this question. By looking at Curino's autobiographical work in light of Italian feminist philosophy, this analysis demonstrates not only the political potential of Curino's work but also its significance for our understanding of contemporary forms of *impegno*. As we have seen, Curino's work avoids the risk of becoming self-referential by anchoring the biographical narrative to specific historical and social contexts that make the individual's story recognisable by a wider audience. Laura's story also gives us an image of the life of an industrial town during the 1960s or of a rural community during the 1950s. Within the uniqueness of the autobiographical narration, the events, experiences, and encounters that mark Curino's biography become exemplary, recognisable, and representative for a wide audience.

However, the element with the greatest political potential in Curino's work is her ability to weave in her narration a multiplicity of voices and perspectives that challenge the traditional autobiographical subject and transform it into a relational one, into a subject that needs the other and the other's voice to narrate her own story. Patriarchal culture has traditionally thought the self within dynamics that subordinate the other, whereas modern individualism articulated it as an autonomous substance, capable of signifying itself in isolation. In contemporary Italian feminism, and, I argue, in Curino's work, the self emerges as a unique existing being that exposes itself to the world leaving a story behind. Immersed in the flux of existence, this self cannot be understood or signified in isolation. In Curino's polyphonic narration, several perspectives overlap and complete one another to give the audience the picture of Laura as a unique, exposed, relational subject. The relational autobiographical subject in Curino's narration is not only embedded in a web of relationships and reliant upon the other's perspective to tell, or at least to complete, the account of her story, but it is also an explicitly gendered subject that chooses to measure herself against other women. The young Laura in *Passion* and in *The Golden Age* finds fundamental points of reference in other women's voices, experiences, and in their artistic practice. The Lady, Rossana, Primina, and indeed, Franca Rame give the narrator the possibility to define herself: they constitute the points of reference of a symbolic order alternative to the patriarchal one in which the narrator can signify herself as a subject.

We have seen how the feminist subject in open struggle against patriarchy grounded its collective action upon a common oppression, upon the awareness that "we all have the same story to tell" (Rame, 2006: 55-65). As Lia Cigarini noted, "it was the negativity of discrimination that made us all equal, unified by a situation of symbolic

misery” (Cigarini in Martucci, 2008: Chapter 4.1, paragraph 7). In Curino’s work, however, the relationship among women is not based on equality. As we have seen, the Lady, Rossana, Primina and the other female voices in Curino’s narration are presented as examples of female freedom. Italian feminist thought and Curino’s narration articulate freedom as the ability to signify oneself accompanied by the acknowledgment of one’s exposure, vulnerability, and the need for the other. Therefore, the only type of relationship possible among free subjects is one of disparity. Yet, it is precisely this disparity of experience, knowledge, and awareness that enriches Laura’s experience, that makes it dynamic, and that allows her to learn.

The type of *impegno* that emerges from Rame’s and Curino’s theatre compels the practitioner to expose herself. In the context of a *neofemminismo* characterised by struggle and critique of patriarchy, the feminist practitioner recognised woman’s oppression as her own. Unlike the post-war type of commitment that required the intellectual to guide the struggle or to critique it from the outside, the feminist intellectual is inside the struggle as a subject in revolt. Her practice places women’s experience at its core and it engages thematically with the movement’s political priorities. *All Home, Bed, and Church*, for example, operates on two levels of feminist struggle: direct political confrontation, with thematic engagement with issues such as reproductive rights and the Italian abortion law, and radical cultural critique with a strong focus on the conflict between patriarchal models of femininity and women’s desires and aspirations. Curino’s practice, on the other hand, develops in a context of ‘diffused feminism’ and proposes a different approach to *impegno*. Curino’s theatre inserts itself within the effort to foreground female experience and to create a symbolic order other than the patriarchal one. In order to do so, Curino proposes several different examples of femininity that, in spite of their difference, share a

certain degree of independence from patriarchy's values and language. In this respect, the most interesting aspect of *Passion* and *The Golden Age* is the reclaiming of 'care' as a model of commitment that is not be confined to the domestic realm, but that becomes part of public life. In Curino's work, caring and nurturing are not dismissed as essentialist or politically irrelevant but rather they become an alternative paradigm upon which we can build a new community. Patriarchal discourse relegated care to the domestic realm and turned it into a feminine duty. In Curino, however, care is explored in its political potential and rearticulated no longer as a duty but as a relation, as exposure to the other, as the ability to discover and nurture relationships – and even conflicts – in which disparity and difference do not translate into oppression.

## Conclusion

The first aim of this thesis was to look at the development of political performance in Italy. I identified the foundations for new approaches to political theatre in some practices developed during the seventies and in their relationship to the social movements. My first research questions were: how did political performance developed in Italy during the 1970s and in relation to the social movements? How did it include the movements' concerns into its practices and its aesthetic output? In parallel, I analysed some examples of theatre produced after the withering of the mass social movements, trying to answer another set of questions: is there any continuity between the theatre developed along the social movements' struggle and the one produced in the following decades? What are the continuities and the differences between the two?

My research is built upon two essential premises. The first one is that there is one category the researcher must grapple with when looking at the political: power. In light of the epistemological shift brought about by postmodernism and poststructuralism, we can no longer interpret power as a static category, as fixed, defined, and knowable structure. On the contrary, power is shaped by mobile and fluid webs of relationships. Our approach to the political in the theatre must, therefore, recognise this shift. As a consequence of this reflection came the second premise upon which I built my argument. Art cannot and should not claim to be detached from ideological formations or power struggles. Building on these two premises, I analysed my case studies in relation to the socio-political context in which they had been developed and performed, and I looked at them not as isolated



works of art, but rather as cultural products and practices that insert themselves in a precise cultural landscape. The contextual approach showed how the social movements had informed the theatre's political and aesthetic strategies in the 1970s. The comparative analysis allowed me to identify fault lines and continuities and to challenge the narrative of a cultural and political crisis characterised by disengagement and nihilism. In order to address these questions and to place the theatre within a larger cultural landscape, I referred to the concept of intellectual commitment (*impegno*).

My analysis charted the relationship between politically engaged theatre practice and the set of political priorities brought about by the extra-parliamentary Left, by the anti-authoritarian movement - and by anti-psychiatry in particular - and by the feminist movement. My findings revolve around three main thematic clusters: Political allegiances, relationships with institutions, and a reconfiguration of subjectivity. These findings also bear important implications for our understanding of intellectual commitment and our concept of political theatre.

In the first section of Chapter Three, we encountered an explicitly Marxist theatre practice. The analysis focused on Fo's political theatre during his so-called 'revolutionary period' in order to unpack the Left's approach to political art and to the artist's function within political struggle. As we have seen, Dario Fo's practice is based on a precise image of the intellectual in relation to struggle. First, he contends that the artist cannot simply express solidarity with the oppressed while reproducing oppression in his professional practice. The artist must be a militant who has control over production and who questions theatre's hierarchies and customary practices in relation to class struggle. However, the most interesting aspect of Fo's practice is his understanding of culture as a crucial element of political struggle. He envisioned his

theatre not as a weapon of direct political confrontation, but rather as ideological intervention, anticipating Vicentini's theory (1981: 22). His work on the identity of the Left, his concern with past struggles, with the Left's political heritage, and with popular culture (whether authentic or artfully fashioned) is, therefore, to be interpreted as a direct intervention in the struggle's ideological underpinning, a contribution to the formation of the Italian working class as a strong revolutionary subject. In a way, it is a theatre that willingly preaches to the converted, aware that the converted need to root their allegiance upon a shared narrative and a communal set of values. Although Fo's model of intellectual engagement is the Gramscian organic intellectual who belongs to the working class, Fo's practice did not completely rid itself of the deficit model identified by Pierpaolo Antonello (2012: 58) and discussed in Chapter One.

In the second part of Chapter Three, we have seen how in the following decades the identity of the Left had been questioned not in light of a future revolution, but of a present crisis. If Fo represented past struggles in almost epic tones, Paolini and Baliani deal with the movement's traumatic decay. Baliani and Paolini propose a type of intellectual commitment that, in the absence of a political project such as the Marxist revolutionary one, offers a humble contribution not in shaping the future, but in looking at the past in order to understand the present in its complexity. With Baliani and Paolini we found a type of intellectual commitment explicitly based on the values and the heritage of the Left, but that no longer acts in function of a clearly established political project such as the Marxist revolutionary one. Their commitment embraces its own limitations (such as the impossibility of providing an all-encompassing historical perspective) and turns them into strengths. Despite its partiality, the micro-historical, and in the case of Baliani autobiographical, narrative is

still capable of denting official narratives and it can still contribute to the creation of a more plural cultural landscape. In addition, it allows Baliani and Paolini to put empathy back in the political theatre picture. This type of intellectual does not speak on behalf of a group, but can only provide one limited perspective, and takes the responsibility of highlighting problematic or contradictory aspects.

In Chapter Four, I analysed two examples of theatre practice developed outside the structures of commercial theatre and inside institutions - the asylum and the prison - traditionally dedicated to confinement. Laboratory P and Compagnia della Fortezza carved liberated spaces within the total institution that unsettled the institution's balance. These liberated spaces forced the institution to accommodate new practices and compelled it to open up and establish a closer dialogue with the outside world. Both Laboratory P and Compagnia della Fortezza tackled the mechanisms of objectification that construct the image of the psychiatric patient and the prisoner as totally other, sabotaging those mechanisms from within. Giuliano Scabia's focus on the participant rebalances the communicative act and reframes the artist's role. Within a non-repressive, utopian space such as Laboratory P, the artist's concern is no longer uniquely expression, but also listening. On the other hand, Fortezza's analysis of processes of objectification is strongest in their productions, in which they question the relationship between an audience of free citizens and the actors/prisoners. Not only they expose the audience's objectifying gaze, but they also explicitly refuse to play the role of the committed artist, seen as a reassuring presence that endorses the audience's complacency. In spite of their differences, Giuliano Scabia and Armando Punzo conceive the function of art within the total institution as that of an intermediary force between the inside and the outside, and, most importantly, a force capable of setting contradictions in motion.

Scabia and Punzo do not yield to the delusion of the intellectual who 'gives voice' to a subaltern group. What they try to do is to sabotage the machine of objectification, not just through critique but also through an open challenge to the practical arrangements and discourses that support it.

In Chapter Five, I analysed how feminist theatre gave visibility to oppressive dynamics that operate within women's private life. Rame's theatre, in particular, is a practice grounded in feminist critique of patriarchy. Rame's commitment is still that of the artist that acts as representative and spokesperson of a group, and, similarly to Fo's, hers is a theatre that aims at fostering awareness, this time around woman's oppression. However, the deficit model identified by Antonello is less visible. As a woman, Rame has a greater personal involvement in the feminist political debate. Her position is not alongside the struggle or at its the vanguard. She speaks from within the struggle. Rame's emphasis is on feminist awareness as a process that can be carried through only by confronting oneself with other women. Although Rame recognises that political consciousness is not static, her feminist horizon is still one based on women's equality in oppression. This emphasis on a relational subjectivity becomes even more visible in Curino's work. Not only Curino's autobiographical work productively exits the critique of patriarchal power to give room to positive models of alternative, non-authoritarian relationships, but she also focuses on a subjectivity in constant becoming, on a gendered self that is shaped and acquires meaning through the encounter with the other. In Rame's and in Curino's work, the actress' presence on stage is liberated from male mediation, but Curino also exposes herself through the autobiographical narrative.

## **Implications: Political Theatre, *Impegno*, and a Post-hegemonic Politics**

The two categories that informed my research, political theatre and commitment, must be reassessed in light of these findings. In part, the aim of this thesis was to test my definition of political theatre and to rethink, as Auslander put it, “aesthetic/political praxis in terms other than these inherited ones” (1987: 21). To approach the problem, I looked at the relationship between art and politics from a historical perspective while trying to analyse political theatre outside of the crisis paradigm that has colonised this debate far too long. Although I still stand by the definition of political theatre I provided in the introduction, this approach has made clear that a model of politically engaged theatre practice should place greater emphasis on the work of art as a communicative act in which meaning-making depends upon content, aesthetic choices, the cultural context in which the communicative act happens, and the actors at the sending and receiving ends. This approach could constitute one way of liberating the political theatre debate from the 'crisis paradigm'.

As far as *impegno* is concerned, in line with the recent scholarship theorising a less author-centred concept of commitment, I have deliberately given greater space to the practices themselves rather than to the artists and to their political allegiance. However, the function of the intellectual in relation to political theatre is still present in the thesis; I would like to sum up some findings and have a look at their implications. In terms of the intellectual's role, my findings match the those of Pierpaolo Antonello: the pattern emerging from my research is that of a slow disappearance of the traditional authoritative intellectual who shapes and guides the cultural debate. The types of intellectual encountered in my case studies place themselves within

struggles (Rame), admit the partiality of their perspective on reality (Baliani and Paolini), shift their work's emphasis from expression to listening (Scabia), fight oppression by changing the circumstances that make oppression possible (Punzo), and finally, they directly expose themselves but only insofar as their exposure sheds light on relationships and the lives of communities (Curino).

Another interesting element emerging from the analysis is the intellectual's need to go beyond critique and towards the concrete proposal of alternative discourses (Baliani and Paolini), alternative practices (Scabia and Compagnia della Fortezza), and alternative representations (Rame and Curino). The proposal of alternative discursive practices and representations implies the necessity of compromise, the awareness that the engaged artist - and the engaged citizen, for that matter - must negotiate with power. The approaches to *impegno* encountered in this thesis move from Fo and Rame's uncompromising exit from bourgeois' theatre to Punzo's decision to stay put and establish Fortezza's practice in prison. Where Fo and Rame thought they could detach themselves from capitalist production, Armando Punzo and Giuliano Scabia are aware that the separation between an inside and an outside of the system is fictitious and ultimately functional to power (Basaglia Ongaro in Basaglia and Basaglia Ongaro, 2013: 71).

The intellectual figure that emerges from these practices is someone who participates in the production of politically charged and politically aware culture. Someone who questions, challenges, and critiques, but also proposes and takes risks, accepting the inevitable contradictions, paradoxes, and compromises inherent in her role, and embracing them as moments of reflection and learning.

The question of commitment is, after all, one of the many facets of the relationship between art and life. It is a complex problem because, as we have seen, it inserts itself at the intersection of several elements: political and historical context, artist's political allegiance, artistic practice, aesthetic choices, production structures, and relationship with the public. As explained in Chapter One, recent scholarship identified an ethical turn in the recent change of attitude towards commitment. For example, Jennifer Burns sees contemporary *impegno* as “[e]thical rather than specifically political, referring potentially to the writer’s responsibility to her art as much as to her society, and not prescriptive about the nature of its realization” (Jennifer Burns, 2001: 35). Pierpaolo Antonello, argues that contemporary *impegno* can be articulated as a 'thick relationship' “grafted upon proximity and relational constancy rather than upon abstract forms” (Antonello, 2012: 143).

The shift is indeed an ethical one. However, this analysis demonstrated that contrary to Jennifer Burns’ argument, the ethical does not substitute the political. The artist's individual responsibility towards her art and towards the audience, her opening to thick relationships that see the other not as a generic object of difference but as another subjectivity, does not prevent her from questioning power structures and proposing alternatives. I would go as far as arguing that not only ethics does not displace politics, but also, it enriches it. The ethical dimension adds empathy and attention to the political, allowing us to build alternative behaviours and social arrangements capable of truly challenging power. These alternative models can be epistemic, as in Baliani and Paolini’s approach to history; institutional, as in Scabia and Fortezza work towards the creation of liberated spaces; or they might change our understanding of subjectivity and relationships - as in Rame and Curino. Yet, as

long as they question, challenge, or engage with power structures, they have political implications.

Armando Punzo argued that Compagnia della Fortezza's work starts from a 'limit' that is both limitation and border, a position other than the hegemonic one, aware of its liminality. All the practices I analysed place themselves at the margin of the hegemonic discursive order. Dario Fo sides with a subaltern class; Baliani and Paolini speak from the perspective of the activists caught between the State and terrorism and therefore silenced; Laboratory P and Compagnia della Fortezza operate within structures erected to confine those outside of the body politic; Rame and Curino see the world from the perspective of a subordinate gender. Their perspectives are now multiple, and so are their political and artistic priorities. These different discursive positionings challenge hegemonic forces from different angles and through different strategies. They tackle not only representation but also professional practices, interpersonal relations, social customs. By placing themselves at the border, they do not aim to dethrone one hegemonic discourse to establish another in its place, but rather, they aim at systematically destabilizing it, highlighting its contradictions, debunking its strategies, and ultimately reducing its space of manoeuvre. They aim at resisting the apparent seamlessness of hegemonic forces, compelling them to uncover their cultural processes and proposing alternative practices along the way. As Adriana Cavarero put it, “[t]he greatest resources for subversion, come, obviously, from identities positioned *outside*; but, crucially, it is the distinction between an *outside* and an *inside* – and, therefore, the *borders* the system's stability depends on – that must be demolished” (Cavarero, 1999: 157 emphasis in original).



Modern political thought has always argued that only a unity can act politically: the sovereign, the prince, the party, the people, the nation, the proletariat. When these unities started to dissolve, we feared there was no possibility of acting politically outside of them, and we are still in the process of reconsidering the new subjectivities that have emerged in the last few decades. Perhaps 1968 could be considered modernity's swansong. It was the last instance in which a movement narrated itself as a unity, even if the fault lines that will later divide it were already visible. In this context, we should articulate *impegno* no longer as a struggle for cultural hegemony, but rather as one for greater plurality, a struggle for an opening to multiplicity. The hegemonic culture is still questioned, and the aim is no longer to replace it but to open it, to enrich it.

Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug (2009) defined this type of *impegno* postmodern. We can indeed recognise in the case studies a move away from epistemic realism and the humanist subject, and a rejection of linear narratives of progress. Nevertheless, there is no libertarian individualism here, and, despite the absence of consolatory narratives, there is still a more or less strong presence of hope, of faith if not in the future, at least in the other. There is even, in the experience of Laboratory P and Compagnia della Fortezza, a strong utopian discourse. Therefore, I do not think these practices can be ascribed to the postmodern. They can, however, be defined, narrowing down the field a little, as post-hegemonic. Not a postmodern *impegno*, then, but rather an *impegno* that aims at creating a post-hegemonic cultural landscape in which difference can express itself, in which a range of perspectives can find space for an encounter that might lead to dialogue.

My findings might be of use to both Italian studies and theatre studies. As far Italian studies are concerned, this thesis can provide another angle to the *impegno* debate, first of all by widening its boundaries to look at how engagement can be articulated within different media, within collaborative or collective creative processes, and through forms that incorporate the textual, the visual, the aural, the performer and the spectator's live presence. On the theatre studies front, I hope my findings would contribute to a rearticulation of political performance free from strict aesthetic or theoretical prescriptions and closer to the variety of contexts in which it may operate.

This work does not claim to be an exhaustive or conclusive analysis of political theatre in Italy. However, it does indicate a general pattern, a series of continuities and transformations that link political theatre during the 1970s to the theatre produced in the following decades. I am aware of the broadness of my argument, and of the necessity to proceed with more in-depth research. I hope my findings could contribute to a more thorough reassessment of present and past political performance in Italy.

New research can go in two directions: the first one is a thorough historical research into the theatre developed along the Italian social movements. For example, as anticipated in Chapter Five, very little literature exists on Italian feminist theatre during the 1970s, and very few scripts by feminist playwrights have been published so far. I am hoping that this thesis could constitute the foundation of more accurate historical research on Italian feminist theatre, research capable of bridging history of the groups and analysis of the surviving scripts in relation to the movement's political and theoretical production. The same could also apply to a history of Italian Marxist theatre. Dario Fo was not the only representative of this particular type of political performance. Other groups such as Teatro d'Ottobre (October Theatre) or

Compagnia del Collettivo (Company of the Collective), were also active on this front, and it is not unlikely that more accurate archival research would reveal many more. It would be worthwhile, for instance, to look at how Marxist politics has been articulated on stage beyond Fo: how close militant theatre practice was to the activities of extra-parliamentary groups, how did they relate to the main currents of Italian Marxism (Leninism, Maoism, *Operaismo*, Autonomism, etc.)? The second direction could begin with the reflection on contemporary forms of political theatre and on post-hegemonic *impegno*. It could look, for example, at how contemporary engaged performance has changed in relation to more recent social movements that operate on a global political landscape, such as the alter-globalisation movements and, more recently, the Occupy movement.

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