

S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

7:1 2021

Virtual Theatre

Edited by Sidia Fiorato

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

Founded by Guido Avezù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri

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Published in June 2021

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ISSN 2421-4353

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SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies
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Contents

Virtual Theatre

Edited by Sidia Fiorato

SIDIA FIORATO – <i>Introduction. Intermediality and Virtuality in Performance: A Reflection on Twenty-First Century Mediaturgy</i>	5
SUSAN PAYNE – <i>What Does Virtual Actually/Really Mean?</i>	21
AVRA SIDIROPOULOU – <i>Permission/Seduction/Indulgence: A Theatre Director’s Account of Working With Digital Media</i>	41
SIMONA BRUNETTI – <i>Connections: A Virtual Theatre Experiment in a Medieval Village</i>	61
RINDE ECKERT – <i>The Virtual</i>	83
ANTONIO PIZZO – <i>Performing/Watching Artificial Intelligence on Stage</i>	91

Miscellany

MARCO DURANTI – <i>The First Greek Tragedy Printed in England: Some Textual and Typographical Notes</i>	111
ROBERTA ZANONI – <i>Unmotherly Love: the Medea Model in Mary Sidney’s Antonius</i>	123
GRAZIA D’ARIENZO – <i>Samuel Beckett on Italian Stages. Intermedial Performances Inspired by his Prose and Poems</i>	151
ALISON MIDDLETON – <i>‘Homer’ Tackles Aeschylus: Theatrical Adaptation as Process in Anne Washburn’s Mr Burns and Robert Icke’s Oresteia</i>	169

Special Section

GUIDO AVEZZÙ – <i>Form, Event, Theatre: Carlo Diano, Form and Event. Principles for an Interpretation of the Greek World.</i> Translated by Timothy C. Campbell and Lia Turtas, Introduction by Jacques Lezra. New York: Fordham University Press 2020, pp. 128	195
DELIA GAMBELLI – Guido Paduano, <i>Teatro. Personaggio e condizione umana.</i> Roma: Carocci, 2020, pp. 209	205
ROSSELLA MAZZAGLIA – Jacques Lecoq, <i>The Moving Body (Le Corps Poétique). Teaching Creative Theatre.</i> New York: Methuen Drama, 2020 (third ed.), pp. 232	223
GIOVANNA DI MARTINO – Luis Alfaro, <i>The Greek Trilogy of Luis Alfaro.</i> Edited by Rosa Andújar. London: Methuen Drama series, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020, pp. 304	231

DELIA GAMBELLI*

Guido Paduano, *Teatro. Personaggio e condizione umana*. Roma: Carocci, 2020, ISBN 978-8-8430-9957-3, pp. 209.

Abstract

In this book the author analyses those theatrical masterpieces in which the ability to represent and give meaning to humanity's principal hopes and needs is to be most clearly discerned. Beginning with the tragedies of Ancient Greece and Greek and Latin comedy, it continues with the rejection of Aristotelian conventions and the reaction against tradition by the twentieth-century European avant-garde. En route it pauses to consider Seneca, Shakespeare, French classicism and the theatrical output of the nineteenth century, from Goethe's *Faust* to Wagner, before targeting the analysis towards Pirandello, Brecht, Ionesco and Beckett. The quest in search of a meaning for the human condition and thus for the art of representation is staged through the changes in interpretation of the concepts of freedom, guilt, responsibility and fate, embodied by turns on the part of the characters and through the theatrical transformation of the relationship between the individual and society. This exploration, despite its complexity, is rendered straightforward and informative thanks to the logic of its structure and the successful linking of the many and various filaments of the argument. The approach to the great theatrical works is both exact and impassioned. The plot summaries, both stringent and incisive and, furthermore, having the capacity to convey the inherent meaning, make for engrossing reading. Ample space is given to differing interpretative positions and lively discussions arise, thus lending an atmosphere of intellectual adventure to the whole discourse. Finally, the special relationship Guido Paduano maintains with the texts, and his extensive knowledge in many different spheres allow him to retrace themes and situations which recur in various works, both theatrical and musical, creating, in this way, suggestive echoes which become in their turn an unexpected source of fascination.

KEYWORDS: theatre; character; the human condition; individual; society

Despite the extreme brevity of the title, Guido Paduano's latest book promises great things. The explicit correlation of theatre, character and the human condition immediately gives an indication of the fact that 'theatre' signifies something more farreaching and profound than simply a literary genre. As in Pad-

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uano 2013, once again the investigation goes beyond the mere workings of the enigmatic and uneasy connection between text and world. Here, too, the author is tracing the interplay and reciprocity of mirrorings and allusions that flicker among the warp and weft of theatre and reality.

During such a difficult undertaking, indeed an *étrange entreprise*, the pathway is full of pitfalls, but this author has at his command unique resources which enable him to avoid them. Just for a start (and I emphasize the word 'start'), should be mentioned the astonishing and exceptional knowledge he has of the different periods of the drama (and of literature in general) and in particular of Greek drama (as already proved by Paduano 1991, 2005, 2006), which is the mandatory basis for the reliable interpretation of all subsequent works whose origins inevitably derive from this.

The analysis develops from ancient theatre up to the European avant-garde of the twentieth century. However far from being intended as an all-inclusive discussion of drama it is, more precisely, a quintessential florilegium of plays which lend themselves most happily to contributing body and meaning to the project as a whole. These plays are scrutinized wherever there is to be found "uno sguardo capace di scendere ... più addentro alle istanze primarie dell'umanità" ("a glance capable of reaching down ... into the most arcane origins of the essence of humanity", 11).²

In this way a subjective, and at the same time highly motivated choice of texts is implicitly instigated. Their action and development are then summarised with an extraordinary capacity for synthesis and with an intense and discerning attention towards the work's most recondite intentions, besides that towards its literal component. At the same time the interpretation of each work is weighed against the most relevant exegetic contributions from previous critics, quoted in the notes, which instead of giving the impression of simply constituting an erudite appendage, enhance the discussion and make it into a sort of lively dialogue.

Other significant features intervene to fascinate the reader of this complex work, one that is rich in opportunities for reflection and in fresh perspectives. I am thinking, for example, of that 'telescopic' dimension (like the one Proust claimed for his own writing, as he implicitly invited the reader to recall to mind far distant pages in the *Recherche*), which interweaves connections between the most distant and diverse texts, so as to engulf the reader in spellbinding echoes. It is not the case of a simple and at times specious discovery of intertextual links: here we have sudden flashes of light that end up by expanding the boundaries and creating almost musical contrapuntal effects (and not only because, on occasion, the reference is to drama in music).

But before approaching the abovementioned features in greater detail, the salient points of the book as a whole must be explored.

The first chapter, "Libertà, colpa e destino" ("Freedom, guilt and fate"), is devoted to a consideration of the existential cornerstones defining the human

² Translation from Paduano's book is to be intended as mine.

condition around which the characters of the plays examined are structured, from *Oedipus* to *La forza del destino* and back again. It is also worth noticing the novel propensity to clear the ground of certain interpretational ambiguities and commonplaces which have revealed themselves to be particularly persistent. Another consummate feature is that of the concise and definitive rebuttal of the critical blunder inspired by Sophocles' *Oedipus* (to which the author has dedicated an indispensable study: see Paduano 1994), which, thanks to the particular exemplary significance of this tragedy, identifies the ancient as the realm of necessity and the modern as that of freedom. What *Oedipus*, often cited by Aristotle as the acme of the tragic genre, really puts on stage, leaving aside the mythic issues of parricide and incest, is in fact the cognitive process, which undergoes furthermore a misdirection on the part of none other than Tiresias, spokesman of the god. So much so that Oedipus may be interpreted as an icon of human liberty, put in crisis by the burden of an unwitting and involuntary guilt.

Although the case of Phaedra, in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, is a different one (lacerated by the fatal struggle between the desire induced by Aphrodite and moral conscience, and by the agonizing attempt, thwarted by her nurse, to keep it a secret) she, and the play with her, ends up by confirming the humanistic and secular nature of Greek drama. In point of fact, it is in the sphere of freedom, and therefore of human choice, that Attic tragedy carries out an investigation of the human condition, and the dynamics of these choices are those which structure western drama as the theatre of the word, given that scenic discourse is the fulcrum of personality understood as subject of the action. Indeed, according to Aristotle, tragedy is nothing else but the 'imitation' of an action. However, human will (to which both dignity and existential relevance are also conceded) does not have control over reality, since the result of conflict with the divine and also with other antagonists is always in the balance. On the comic side, the passage from Aristophanes to the New Comedy sees the protagonist's omnipotence vanish, as he realises he is subject to another deity whose name is 'fortune'.

The pages dedicated to Shakespeare are particularly suggestive (his work will later be the subject of a whole chapter). Here too past and often careless interpretations are challenged. These, it is argued, were perhaps conditioned by an inapposite comparison with the Greeks dictated, in its turn, by an erroneous evaluation of the importance, in this case, of fatalism. In reality the traditional idea of destiny is absent in Shakespeare, and just as in Greek tragedy it is human will that is emphasized and here it imposes itself in circumstances which are impossible to overcome. It is only necessary to cite the case of Othello, dragged into catastrophe not by an uncontrollable passion but by the manipulative deceit of Iago.

If the Oedipuses of the Jesuit versions must admit their responsibility (with the advent of Christianity a hostile god is no longer conceivable), the investigation of the balance between freedom, guilt and fate becomes extremely intricate in Calderón's *Life is a Dream*, where it is the father's unjust and vengeful behaviour that ends up by making what was prophesied actually happen, thus

bringing about a reversal of the relationship between cause and effect. In Schiller's *The Bride of Messina* the attention is focussed on an obsessive fatalism together with an equivocal formulation of the prophecy. Ángel de Saavedra's *Don Alvaro, or the Force of Fate*, which became famous thanks to Verdi's operatic version, marks a turning point in Spanish Romanticism, with a radical vulgarization of the plotlines of freedom, guilt and fate: here the blame deriving from the strength of passion is laid on fate. An extreme case of such 'trivialization' is to be found in Antonio Ghislanzoni's libretto for another of Verdi's operas, *Aida*, where at a certain point the heroine's father wrests a military secret from Radamès, the enemy commander and Aida's lover, and immediately pardons him: "No, tu non sei colpevole, / era voler del Fato" ("No, you are not to blame, / it was the will of Fate", qtd at 32).

Consequently, it is possible for fatalism to have an apologetic function; and this becomes involved with a rejection of the idea of a chaotic and arbitrary world order in favour of the propensity to entrust the task of reestablishing an ethical balance specifically to representation, through the exercise of a sort of 'poetic justice' that rewards the good and punishes the bad. The argument, at this point, can only return to the 'case' of Oedipus, whose original innocence is here, too, effectively advocated (for that matter, for Sophocles guilt is never the main issue). In Aeschylus there may indeed seem to be delineated a certain moral theory of human action, contradicting the widespread tendency to attribute adversity and violence to the envy of the gods, but although the habit of blaming the whole *ghenos* for any misfortune was rife, there is little room for the theme of guilt in Euripides' theatre, "sperimentale e inquieto" ("experimental and disquiet", 36; see also Paduano 1968). The treatment reserved for the character of Medea is particularly conclusive: even in the face of infanticide, the shouldering of guilt and the awareness of the inevitable condemnation painfully proclaimed by the protagonist paradoxically result in the spectator feeling a kind of empathy towards this ultimate atrocity which will inevitably reveal itself to be an act of self-destruction. So it is not fortuitous that the question of responsibility remains a crucial point in drama right up to the crisis of the twentieth century.

In the area of comedy (for which D'Angeli and Paduano 1998 is central), concerning poetic justice, in Menander there is to be seen an exponential influence of positive effects resulting from a virtuous action, while in Aristophanes the theme of justice was in any case of little import. As regards comedy in general, a value system based on the balance between human goodness and satire tolerant of its shortcomings has been maintained up to and including the present. In tragedy however an essential change has come about and at the centre of the action, following in the wake of Seneca, is often to be found the negative character.

In the second chapter ("Ascesa e declino dell'individuo nella tragedia greca, "The rise and fall of the individual in Greek tragedy") and in the third ("L'eroe comico", "The comic hero") the object of the research is the presence of a protagonist, the process through which individuality is asserted on the stage, first in Attic tragedy and then in ancient comedy. In tragedy, contrary to what is

true in the Homeric poems which concentrated on “individualità ... smaglianti” (“resplendent individualities”, 41), it is usually the presence of the Chorus that defines the paradigm of communication (sometimes becoming an actual protagonist itself) while acting as mediator between plot and audience. This conventional function does not however coincide with the absolute truth, but nevertheless its role remains a basic one. A special emphasis is placed upon Aeschylus’ *The Persians*, a social tragedy and “forse la più solenne affermazione dell’autonomia dell’espressione artistica rispetto alla realtà” (“perhaps the most serious affirmation of the autonomy of artistic expression over reality”, 43), where the Chorus, made up exclusively of Persians, causes the Athenian spectators to feel empathetically the grief for a people that they themselves have conquered and destroyed (for a more detailed reading see Paduano 1978). A perturbing character is to be seen in the Clytemnestra of the *Agamemnon*, “il più antico personaggio teatrale a mettere in atto una finzione di secondo grado” (“the most ancient theatrical character to implement second-degree deception”, 44) in her relationship with her husband before the murder.

But it is with Sophocles that a quantum leap is made in this regard in comparison with theatre preceding him. We need only think of the eponymous heroine of his *Electra*, whose implacable desire for revenge – which is, moreover, shared by the audience – causes her to be isolated and different from those around her, a solitude aggravated by the absence of Orestes and the false reports that he is dead. Or what about Ajax from the play of the same title, whose suicide makes him the first to proclaim the victory of different values from those recognised in a world to which he knows he does not belong. Indeed, in the final tragedies the difference of the hero is functional in recreating social bonds.

The first tragedies of Euripides focus on strong, dominant personalities which are always female. A typical example is the *Alcestis* where the heroine gives up her own life in the name of love. She takes part in a predisposed plan concerning her marriage which is both rational and audacious, like the arrival in the unknown territory of eternity as she identifies her tomb as their future home, applying in this way “in modo paradossale il principio della stanzialità femminile e l’attesa del ritorno dell’uomo dalla navigazione della vita (“in a paradoxical way the principle of female stasis and permanence and the anticipation and expectation of the male’s return from the navigation of life”). Thus, at this point there is the appearance on the scene of “non solo la prima costellazione storica del binomio eros-thanatos (*sic*), ma anche la più alta, almeno fino a quando il *Tristano* di Wagner gli conferirà la cifra definitiva” (“not only the first historical configuration of the pair eros-thanatos, but also the greatest, at least until Wagner’s *Tristan* will confer upon it the ultimate degree of intensity,” 50). Medea’s choice, too, as we have seen, positions itself in its own way, through her decision to be the most unhappy woman, against the principle of conservation; but it is in the *Electra* after the matricide that, together with the possibility of entering Euripides’ workshop, a fatal crisis can be perceived of the essential certainties and also of the official religious values. Until the roles of the protagonists become

fixed on passivity, as happens in *Heracles* and in the *Bacchae*, where “l’illuminismo euripideo” (“the Euripidean enlightenment”, 54) and the need for an ethical religion risk reducing myth to absurdity and to drag tragedy itself to the verge of nonsense. So much so that in some of the works the protagonist is defined by absence, given the fact that the action is characterized by variable focalization (*The Trojan Women*, *Heracleidae*, *The Suppliants*, *Andromache*, *Orestes*, *The Phoenician Women*). The most disconcerting tragedy remains the *Iphigenia in Aulis*, in which the conflicts are as unfocused as the characters.

Significant and clearly perceptible differences in the affirmation of individuality may be found in the area of comedy, too. In Aristophanes the comic hero acts under the compulsion of a powerful narcissistic drive, despite the fact that his field of action is an exclusively social one. The affirmation of the ego always has a happy outcome and even the conclusion of the *Birds* really pays tribute to a triumph, revealing on the way a shameless model of narcissism which calls out hidden responses in every human being. A generation gap is the focus of two great comedies which both have an anomalous structure: *The Clouds* and *The Wasps*. At the end of the first the son’s emancipation goes as far as physical aggression of his father; in the second (which the author already analysed in Paduano 1974), the conclusion is surprisingly the loss of power: the very idea the father had of himself guarantees the triumph of the son’s libido.

The passage from Aristophanes to Menander is astutely compared to a change of social mores which is also demonstrated by the tendency to conclude the action within the family unit and limit what is at stake to the issue of sexual contentment.

In Plautus the action hinges on pretence, duplicity and intellectual manipulation usually carried out by the *servus callidus*; sometimes the comic setup is based on an ethical premise, but more often than not it involves transgressive stratagems staged, naturally, by the crafty servant, which are not without metatheatrical effects and metalinguistic overlapping with the poet himself. The transgressions are neutralised by a setting which recalls Greece or at least characters who are not identifiable with the Roman public. In other comedies it is the manifest inadequacy on the part of the fathers that reassures the spectator that it is not he who is the butt of the humour, it is not he who is ridiculed and tricked. In the *Bacchides* and in the *Mostellaria* the protagonist has no hesitation in adopting both stance and idiosyncrasies of a hero to hilarious burlesque effect. In the *Miles Gloriosus* Pircopolinice throws himself head first into the deceit “squadernando un narcisismo compatto e abbagliante” (“unleashing a dense but dazzling narcissism”, 73), in a combination of sexual and military vanity which makes him a worthy archetype for Falstaff. And *Amphitryon* is assigned a special place in the corpus because Plautus coins a neologism, *tragicomoedia*, to classify it: a term which will find extraordinary favour and here is particularly apt since the tragedy of human powerlessness when confronted by the god’s deceptions coexists or better is anticipated by the theft of a servant’s identity, a character who is humble and ridiculous.

Terence challenges many of the specific features of tradition, diminishing the importance of the *servus callidus*, denying the validity of the commonplace incompatibility between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law and defending the social dignity of a courtesan. But the most subversive dramaturgical change is that of the way in which trickery is reduced to simple role-playing. So that once the *imbroglio* is recognised as a communicative code, the truth which is no longer recognised as such is considered as second-degree deception (in *The Self-Tormentor*).

The fourth chapter (“L’eredità di Seneca”, “The legacy of Seneca”) opens with an enquiry into the many reasons why this author has been so neglected. Even without mentioning the undeniably fundamental role he played in history and philosophy, it was he indeed who conveyed the repertory of dramatic situations inherited from the Greeks into western culture. His literary ‘misfortune’ arises from the intersection of two false problems: the possible staging of his plays, which are confused as far as their intrinsic theatricality is concerned, and the comparison of his dialogue, rich in description and sententious rumination, with the Greek, and in particular with the Aristotelian exemplars (even though in this case the issue has been mistakenly rendered categorical). It is however true that Seneca follows psychological and intellectual paths which are singularly contorted. The new dramatic time he introduces can often “indugiare nel vuoto e nella stasi (“linger on in emptiness and inertia”, 77). His Oedipus is unquestionably the model for modern Oedipuses, and nobody but Paduano indeed has greater authority to maintain this. At the centre of every action there is in all circumstances the question of political power, the constitutive icon of evil, as is exemplified in *Thyestes*, the only Senecan tragedy lacking a hypotext. Atreus, the protagonist, is the essence of malign power; vengeance and tyranny combine in him, both in appearance and in action, to become absolute evil, which brings him to the nightmare fantasy of subjugating the gods themselves. On to the backcloth of this is projected the shadow of Shakespeare: “senza Atreo, non so se avremmo Riccardo III” (“Without Atreus, I doubt that we should have had *Richard III*”, 84). Another new dramaturgical constant is the ratification of eros. Whereas in Euripides Medea’s love for Jason belonged to an irrecoverable past, Seneca’s version renders it immutable while inventing uncontrollable dark psychological depths: even the murder of her children paradoxically confers a definitive nature to her relationship with Jason. In the *Hippolytus* Phaedra, through the destruction of her beloved and of herself, perversely reaches the otherworldly union that she invokes as she is dying, an invocation that will become a dramatic *topos* (e.g. the finale of Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*).

The whole of the fifth chapter is devoted to Shakespeare, the greatest amount of space reserved to one author (to whom the author has already dedicated Paduano 2007), and with good reason. While returning to and corroborating Coleridge’s opinion, Paduano focuses on the ontological balance between people and things, so that the characters “sono la condizione umana tutt’intera, nella misura in cui . . . attraverso i tratti specifici riformulano ogni volta lo stesso universale,

dandogli il respiro dell'esistenza, l'anima, la carne, il sangue ("are the human condition as a whole, in that . . . through their specific features they reformulate every time the same universal, giving it the breath of existence, the soul the flesh and blood", 89). And from the vault overflowing with gemstones he takes three examples: Desdemona's "Am I that name?" (*Othello* 4.2, qtd at 89), Lear's "Thou art twice her love" (*King Lear* 2.4, qtd at 90), and in *Macbeth* King Duncan, murdered in his sleep, becoming sleep itself.

The analysis of the plays chosen begins with *Richard III*, and immediately Paduano tactfully but conclusively defines his critical boundaries by jettisoning overhasty comparisons (for example with "la macelleria compiaciuta del *Tito Andronico*", "the complacent butchery of *Titus Andronicus*", *ibid.*) and highlighting previously unobserved connections. The only wholly negative Shakespearean protagonist (who, as we have seen, owes much to the *Thyestes*) follows the Senecan paradigm of the indissolubility of the bond between power and evil (an almost identical position with that of Alberich, the antagonist of Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*: although he has chosen power over love, he too manipulates sexual union to gain power just as Richard does). In *Macbeth*, the other great tyrant of the corpus, may be seen to coexist the criminal and the moralist: the complete deadlock of this situation is only surmounted by the intervention of Lady Macbeth, who demolishes the remorse, scruples and anguish of her husband in an overwhelming scene (which finds its greatest interpretation in the duet "Fatal mia donna, un murmure" from Verdi's homonymous opera). Lady Macbeth in the sleepwalking scene will eventually interrogate herself upon the terrifying reality of her situation so that remorse will emerge in dreams and, in a paradoxical reversal of the Freudian concept of dreams as the terrain of the libido, will permit moral repression to gain an egress.

The analysis of *King Lear* is indeed suggestive. By his own definition the king is "more sinned against than sinning" (*King Lear* 3.2; qtd at 96): here in fact there may be perceived a trace of the ambiguity to be found in the Greek verb *hamartano*, but in reality Lear is guilty of moral blindness, which is not only cognitive, and his behaviour is determined by despotism and solipsism. Even the love test he makes his daughters take defines his tendency to treat words as things, something which is common both to madness and childhood. In Paduano 2018, the author identified in Lear the symptoms of a dual madness (the first coinciding with blindness, the second with illumination); here he pauses to consider the explosion of insanity on the part of the king, coincident with crucial change and with the discovery of the other, which with the unleashing of the tempest creates a devastating symbolic equivalency; a shining example of how the poignant truth of Aeschylus' *pathei mathos*, a founding element of Greek wisdom, in this context becomes scenic reality. With the death of Cordelia, the king must finally confront (here, in truth, blameless) the most agonizing moment of human experience, the loss of the only being he really loved.

The reading of *Hamlet* clears the field of some of the common misinterpretations that no longer stand the test. The least significant, but most disconcert-

ing, is that of considering Claudius a good king; others are the incompatibility of thought and action, for which Hamlet himself is responsible but which are contradicted in other passages, and last but not least the interference religious doctrine would seem to have on his behaviour and the famous Freudian interpretation of the Oedipal triangle. Another Freudian suggestion is however accepted for its textual validity: the son's identification with an admired father. Hamlet's tendency to expand any event into an idea transforms the obligation to avenge his father into the responsibility of remedying what is rotten in the state of Denmark and to restore order to universal chaos (both imperatives in his mind): in this way his sense of inadequacy and the consequent vacillation become devastating. The most painful aspect of his situation is the suspicion and then the realization of his mother's moral fragility which conditions his relationship with Ophelia, one nevertheless based on sincere love. Thus, after the annihilating discovery of a world and a language which are both equally unreliable, Hamlet falls back on the staging of a deception and then of a double deception (the play-within-the-play and his madness). Nevertheless, in the final dialogue with his mother he rediscovers authentic communication and a love of truth and "rivela ... la madre a se stessa" ("reveals his mother to herself", 107).

A love of this kind suggests a parallel with the protagonist of *Coriolanus* who fights against the unnecessary use of words, against the hypocrisy of political relations and against mystification, particularly of one's own image. In this context the speech in which Coriolanus expresses his amazement for the lack of agreement on the part of his peers with his intolerance of such things is particularly significant. As proof of the integral quality of Shakespeare even more than of his versatility, the presence in the corpus of *Anthony and Cleopatra* is signalled, a tragedy close in date and in its derivation from Plutarch: here all is played out within the theme of pretence, a theme which is rendered ambiguous and not a little fascinating, so much so that Enobarbus regards Cleopatra's behaviour as demonstrating the dignity of the forces of nature. But it is with a pretended will to live after pretended suicide that Cleopatra tricks her interlocutors and the audience.

The reading of the comedies which follows evinces the radical change that Shakespeare carried out on this genre. Now the happy ending (and the achievement of a happy world) is replaced by a bitter ending (and by the end of a world full of negativity and anguish).

From this point of view the interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice* proves particularly eloquent. Here there is a reciprocal social loathing between the protagonists, never denied by Antonio but concealed by Shylock beneath specious and misleading excuses until his celebrated outburst of bitterness reveals an insatiable desire for vengeance. The rest, if not silence, is a final leave-taking from his enemies and from the public, an exit that has "nella sua dimessa brachilogia tutta la dignità di una morte simbolica" ("in its resigned brevity and concision all the dignity of a symbolic death", 113).

Less brutal but in the final analysis not less disquieting are the issues con-

fronted in the romantic comedies. Whether it is a question of a young couple trying to pass their blindness off as rationality (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a sort of *Così fan tutte* by Mozart, but without music and above all without his power of redemption), or of the recognition of the necessity to accept the world as it is, full of flawed people (*Measure for Measure*: and here Angelo is compared to Scarpia in Puccini's *Tosca*), or of the suffering inherent in a love affair, even if it has a happy ending (*Twelfth Night*, where the part of Viola stands out, with some of her characteristics returning in Liù in Puccini's *Turandot*), the experience ends up by being emptied of meaning, or with its meaning replaced with a too accommodating common sense, often under the sign of a "sinistro rapporto fra i sessi" ("sinister relationship between the sexes", 114). In this way, all the comedies leave a bitter residue in the soul.

Finally, in his analysis of Falstaff in the two parts of *Henry IV*, Paduano highlights the ceaseless conflict between the pleasure principle and the reality principle which is going on beneath the flamboyant admixture of genres occurring in the alternation between scenes located at the court and in the tavern. Oscillating between the role of victim and that of prevaricator, Falstaff embodies the instability of the division between being the object or the subject of laughter. This is no longer a stable condition but rather an incessantly interchangeable one: a "consolante verità" ("consoling truth", 120) that Verdi will skilfully pick up in his *Falstaff*.

Even faced with the challenge of the sixth chapter ("Il classicismo francese e il regno del super-io", "French Classicism and the reign of the superego") to analyse the *siècle d'or*, the most critical and most creative period of French theatre, Paduano manages to focus on the fundamental problems and the most complex predicaments with authority. He has, moreover, no difficulty at all in engaging in a rigorous discussion with the most eminent scholars of the subject. The authors he chooses to examine could, by themselves, have shaped the history of French theatre: Corneille, Racine and Molière.

In the dramaturgical strategy of *Le Cid* he manages to detect the eloquent presence of the body and follows its traces through the caesuras of the alexandrines. And after observing the pathos of the "contorsioni del pensiero, che formano il vero asse dramaturgico" ("twists and turns of thought that constitute the real dramaturgical axis", 123), he concludes that even more affecting is the fact the instinctive physicality of the body is set free from the terrible incarceration of duty. In *Polyeucte* the ethics of 'duty', eluding the facile dispute between suppressed and suppression, is connoted as libido; and in *Horace* even leads to the erotisation of the conflict. Such confused victories of duty have many variations and are to be seen in their most refined form in *Pulchérie*, where the final choice of bridegroom rules out any idea of sexuality, and in their most extreme configuration in *Pertharite*, in which Rodelinde demands of her future husband the murder of her own son, giving him reasons which echo those of Euripides' Medea.

In Racine's case, Paduano adopts a particularly effective approach to his sub-

ject. He decides to analyse Racine's poetics and practice through the comparison of *Bérénice* (in which the action coincides with the whole spectrum of emotional deprivation) with a play by Corneille on the same topic: *Tite et Bérénice* (constructed on the positive affirmation of the personality). Among the many conspicuous differences between the two plays, perhaps the most important one is that of the fundamental role in Racine's work of the third character, Antiochus, the main channel for dysphoria in the play, and also both the victim and accessory of a strategy of reticence which is even prepared to use alternative modes of signification such as simple exclamations of grief. In *Andromaque* everything revolves around unrequited love and the general collapse of the heroic tradition. Paduano points out that the dilemma that precedes the heroine's decision to place her son's life before her fidelity to Hector finds its origins in Seneca's *Trojan Women*, while her decision to violate the pact will become a *topos* in melodrama (from Leonora in Verdi's *Il trovatore* to Ponchielli's *Gioconda*). In *Iphigénie* there is an attempt to reconcile two incompatible themes: the futility of the scapegoat figure and poetic justice. It is the final tragedy, *Phèdre*, which comes the closest to ancient models. And if Aphrodite's will is no longer credible, "l'inquieta e acuta percezione che l'esperienza amorosa è sempre e comunque dipendente da qualcosa che non è nelle disponibilità dell'io, dall'ignoto che risiede nel partner" ("the disquieting perspicuity of the realisation that the experience of love is always unequivocally dependent not on something that is within the agency of the self, but on the unknown which lies within the partner", 133) is made overwhelmingly obvious. In conclusion, with the innovation of a Hippolytus in love there can be seen the motive for an increase in Phaedra's protagonism, ravaged as she is by jealousy, which is a crucial theme in Racine.

The same torments of eros and jealousy become factors not so much of growth but rather of vulnerability in the tragedies based on the dynamics of political power: *Britannicus* and *Mithridate*. In *Athalie*, a biblical tragedy where there is no eros but instead the power of divine will, the protagonist is possessed by an agonizing inner conflict, typical of all Racine's characters, between an oppressive sense of royalty and a mysterious *sombre chagrin*.

As for Molière, the reading of *L'Avare*, conducted of course with the Plautian hypotext as background, signals a 'blackening' of the protagonist. At the same time, the play's appeal originates precisely in its capacity to generate, beside and beneath an inevitable aversion from the ethical point of view, an attraction deriving from the unavoidable nostalgia or envy of an infantilism manifested without shame. A similar but less obvious childish regression is to be seen in *Le Malade imaginaire*, and also in this case it is a state not without its drawbacks. Indeed, the protagonist sinks into a condition of moral culpability when he tries to arrange his daughter's marriage to his own benefit. The analyses of these plays, whose protagonists are representative of the basic affirmation of vitality, are then followed by two comedies, *Tartuffe* and *Dom Juan*, on the theme of hypocrisy, a psychological procedure that also acts as a social strategy. In the first a touch of genius is demonstrated in the choice of aiming all the ridicule not at the

false devotee but at his victim, guilty of being too easy a prey of manipulation (for Molière credulity is never innocent or harmless). *Dom Juan* is centred on the violent antithesis between false religiosity and agnosticism (while on stage shadows of dubious provenance blur the limits of a debate between agnosticism, sincere faith and superstition). The commentary on the *Misanthrope*, incisive and significant, focuses on the successful balance obtained between the ethical and the comic, as in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, although (Paduano points out) Alceste's windmills are "piuttosto quelli di Amleto: il cancro della mistificazione di parole e gesti che corrompe le relazioni umane" ("rather Hamlet's: the cancer of the mystification of words and gestures which corrupt human affairs", 143).

Goethe's *Faust* opens the seventh chapter ("Uomo e cosmo, singolo e collettività", "Man and the cosmos, the individual and society"). The play is seen as the epochal icon of that continual effort towards the reconstruction of harmony between the individual and society, since, from the times of Aeschylus' perpetual exploration of the problem, the individual had been centre stage for more than two thousand years "in un'analisi del sé rifratta dai rapporti sociali" ("in an analysis of the self refracted by social relationships", 147). The study of Goethe's drama introduces the presentation of a series of works in which the central concern is precisely the constant tension in the relationship between man and society.

The series opens, a few years before the French Revolution, with an ideological scandal: Beaumarchais' *The Marriage of Figaro* (the inspiration for Mozart's most lovable opera). Despite its strong and unconcealed social polemic this work escapes the flat rigidity of a merely political statement thanks to the intensity of its pathos and the mingling of class and gender conflict.

With Schiller's *The Robbers* the harshest representation of the struggle between the individual and society is analysed. The problem of the legitimacy of violence comes up again at the other extreme of Schiller's theatrical career in *William Tell*, but there too can be perceived scruples and uneasy justifications that allow the hope of a coexistence between people and values to emerge. What is more, this idyll of a rustic existence will be made unforgettable by Rossini's opera; and another musical reference is to be found in Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, when Wolfram advises the titular character to travel to the Pope in Rome. In point of fact, Schiller's *William Tell*'s ends with the opening to a new harmony between the classes. Further musical references to other plays by Schiller are scattered through the analysis. Verdi's *La traviata*, just as Schiller's *Intrigue and Love*, is structured on the theme of social inequality. Verdi will then adapt Schiller's *Don Carlos*, where the oedipal syndrome is the best expressed and most complex example of this condition among any other of its artistic representations. Besides which, the tyrant's personality is subjected to a sympathetically contradictory treatment that changes its traditional outlines (and here the citation of Alfieri's *Saul* could not be more apposite).

Büchner brings to the theatre "l'evento assiale della storia moderna" ("the crucial event of modern history", 158): in *Danton's Death* the topics and ideological incentives which justified and authorized the reign of terror during the

French Revolution are confronted. In this case there are no musical referrals but instead precise literary references (to Aristophanes' *The Assemblywomen* and Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*) are indicated along the way during the summary of the plot, which dwells upon Danton's final exhaustion and need for peace that coexist with a sort of deathwish paradoxically saturated with sensual vitality. *Woyzeck*, a tragic hero, is, on the other hand, a humble victim: however, his is not so much a case of simply belonging to the exploited lower classes but of "una dinamica della costrizione sociale capace di devastare il privato e l'intimore" ("a dynamics of a social constraint able to destroy the private and the interior", 161). In his conditioning into a state of induced jealousy the traces of *Othello* are to be clearly perceived; even more blatantly so is the presence of *Macbeth* when the murder weapon appears to Woyzeck in a dream, almost to suggest that the Shakespearian inspiration has also been assumed in a metalinguistic sense as a charter of nobility.

In Kleist's *Prince of Homburg*, whose ending is quintessentially ambiguous, the whole point is the fatal conflict between the formal and indeed universal character of the law (in this case military discipline) and freedom of choice on the part of the individual. The conflict is resolved at the moment in which the hero's conscience internalizes the law and recants even the ethics of success. With *Penthesilea* we reach, in Paduano's opinion, the most perturbing of all the plays considered in the book. In this reengineering of a myth, Achilles embodies a conception of the love relationship so violent as to efface the image of the dragging of Hector's corpse. The finale sees the titular character, in the throes of madness, maul Achilles before regaining control of herself (a deed weighed against that of the murderous mother in Euripides' *Bacchae*), at the conclusion of a disorienting crescendo triggered by the inexorable torrent of the discourse, and of its inherent action, from the metaphorical register (to eat his face) to the most bloody and appalling literalisation.

With Ibsen the analysis of the nerve centres of society moves into the domain of the middle-class family, a sphere in which the marital relationship is of primary importance. Whether it ends, as it does in *A Doll's House*, with "il più duro attacco portato prima del Novecento al regime patriarcale" ("the harshest attack on patriarchal rule carried out before the twentieth century", 167) and the arduous realization on the part of the protagonist of her irremediable divergence from society, or that the new beginning actually happens, as it does in *Little Eyolf* through the socialization of the parents' love, Ibsen's work is dominated by the search for meaning and value in a true marriage (attainable through a choice which is difficult but free: *The Lady from the Sea*). The ideological obstinacy of a fanatical moralist to establish its absolute fulfilment leads, in *The Wild Duck*, to the sacrifice of the most moving and 'truest' character in the play. The conflict between the individual and society is clearly exemplified in *An Enemy of the People*, in which the protagonist pronounces an 'explicit' confirmation of his human condition: "l'uomo più forte del mondo è quello che è rimasto solo" ("the strongest man in the world is he who stands alone", 173). Solitude and protago-

nism are, in particular, the hallmarks of the characters in Ibsen's last plays. They are also brought together by the central theme of ascension and of verticality, and of the opportunity of salvation offered them through the intervention of a female character (only, however, if previously committed sins do not entail a tragic ending).

In the theatre of Chekhov, through the alternation of resonances of anguish and elegy a progressive tendency begins to delineate itself which could be seen as 'enlightened', bearing in mind the social and political context. At the centre of the action are to be found myths (the myth of Moscow in *Three Sisters*, synecdoche of the affective frustration between the sisters) and also idols (for example that of work, which by countering frustration feeds the need for renewal and the utopia of a future society). The work ethic in *The Cherry Orchard* is applied in a tangible way to the momentous change from "la staticità di un'agricoltura sonnolenta ... al frenetico attivismo della speculazione edilizia" ("a sleepy agriculture ... to the frantic activity of property speculation", 176-7). The diffidence towards unscrupulous speculators is however overtaken by that felt towards nostalgic myths that conceal an attachment to the social injustice of an *ancien régime*. Meanwhile, hope and disappointment, happiness possible but shunned (Varya's marriage in *The Cherry Orchard*) foster the bittersweet atmosphere which pervades all the plays by this author.

With Wagner the circle beginning with the theatre of Goethe is closed, since the tetralogy *The Ring of the Nibelung*, which almost constitutes a reply to *Faust*, makes the history of the world coincide with the tragic story of an individual. Here the god Wotan nurses the infinite desire to possess both love and power, a desire that will in fact be the cause of both his own and the whole world's ruin. But it is the theft of the Rhine gold by a Nibelung dwarf to violate the sacredness of nature and cause the founding of an industrial empire "che ha le sinistre connotazioni della fabbrica ottocentesca" ("which has the sinister connotations of the nineteenth-century factory", 178). Paduano places the tetralogy at the heart of an epoch making reform of musical language; the analysis calls upon his abundant experience as a music expert particularly in the case of Wagner (here I need only cite Paduano 2011).

As witness to the rigorous structure of the book's development, the concluding chapter, "Il Novecento contro Aristotele" ("The Twentieth Century versus Aristotle"), follows the strategies which during the last century aided the rejection of a 'traditional' idea of representation, beginning with Pirandello, whose dramaturgy radically contradicts the basic theory of the *Poetics* where the personality of the characters is adamantly declared to depend upon their actions. The protagonists of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* are instead actually in search of a plot, after their creation on the part of the author has been interrupted. "Questa attestazione surreale di esistenza è subito bilanciata dall'attestazione di un vissuto esperienziale 'doloroso'" ("Such a surreal attestation of existence is immediately offset by the account of a 'painful' life experience", 182) narrated to the manager, who judges it impossible to perform (wrongly so, as exposition has

always been an integral part of dramaturgy). In this way the consolidated practice of metatheatre becomes in the twentieth century the instrument of a new conception of theatre paradoxically based on the actual impossibility of the performance itself. *Each in His Own Way* seems to return to the same relationship between existence and representation, but a last-minute reversal ascribes the victory over life to the art of the theatre, which had foreseen what the two protagonists, whose stories have become the plot of the play, would have done with their lives, driven by unknown and uncontrollable forces which constitute the deeper core of the drama. In *Tonight We Improvise* the freedom of improvisation that the director wants to experiment with does in fact liberate the actors from the rigidity of an established text, but produces in them a dangerous identification and empathy with what is happening on stage, thus engendering serious risks for their life balance and also “per quello della loro professione, quale l’ha definita Diderot” (“for that of their profession, as Diderot defined it”, 186). After Pirandello a special mention is reserved for Genet’s *The Maids* as a successful example of metatheatre (which has become a commonplace often with tedious and cloying results in its staging).

At the opposite pole of another of the fundamentals of Aristotelian poetics towers the ‘epic’ theatre of Brecht which sets itself, explicitly and deliberately, against catharsis as empathy with the passions unleashed on stage. His intention is instead that of enabling in the spectator to acquire a knowledge which is of use in the hoped-for participation in the real world. However, to the clearcut division between feeling and reasoning Paduano proposes an integration whose aim is that of emphasizing the presence of a decided strength of feeling in reasoning as well. He cites as proof of this his own experience and the profound emotion he experienced when reading the conclusion of *The Exception and the Rule*, a miniature masterpiece of hopefulness whose underlying message is as intense as it is humble:

quello che non è strano, trovatelo sorprendente!

...

Quello che è normale, trovatelo inspiegabile!

...

Quello che è la regola riconoscetelo come abuso,
e dove avete riconosciuto l’abuso,
li procurate rimedio!

(qtd at 189)

[Whatever is not strange, find it surprising! / . . . Whatever is usual, find it hard to explain! / . . . Whatever is the rule, realise it’s an abuse, / and where you have discovered an abuse, / Provide a remedy!].

What is more, the opposition between the rule (generated by the dominant class) and the exception (the single gemstone of humanity) loses the definition of its contours and enters an area of chaotic uncertainty. In *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, the pitiless violence of the male protagonist, a wealthy producer of

canned meat and typical representative of the capitalist system, is juxtaposed with the female lead Joan Dark (who retains traces of the character of Joan d'Arc from both Shakespeare's *Henry VI* trilogy and Schiller's *Maid of Orleans*). However, although she is moved by the best of intentions, Joan does not manage to find a solution and ends up by realising the heavy weight of Marxist conditioning on human behaviour, meanwhile attracting suspicions of ambiguity on her own part. Another ambiguous personality is the protagonist of *The Life of Galileo*, structured on the insidious relationship between science and power and between conscience and basic needs. In any case, the human being's fatal dependence on the social and economic context makes it impossible to gain any stable positivity. This indeed is the lesson of *The Good Person of Szechwan*, in which the protagonist, guilty of having loved her neighbour better than herself, in the end finds a source of absolute vital energy in motherhood. And it is also motherhood that ignites a spark of hope in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, where a good deed sets off a positive chain reaction, surprisingly resurrecting the old-fashioned category of poetic justice in a body of work which began from the most radical dramaturgic reform.

The theatre of the absurd is also founded upon a definite challenge to Aristotelian poetics, with Ionesco's defiance of the principle of causality, together with that of the identity and unity of the characters. Contradiction is now the name of the game, while violence on stage (and not only institutional violence as we have in *Victims of Duty*) is disconcertingly inevitable. In one of the most anomalous of his works, *Exit the King*, the principle of contradiction affects the original narcissism (among other things the king believes himself to be the author, not only of various inventions and enterprises, but also of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, an attribution Paduano judges as the wittiest solution to the Homeric question he has ever met with). This narcissism is empowered and at the same time thwarted by the subjective nature of his despotism. On top of all this there is his clinging on to life. And even if he admits the presence of others when he looks for someone to die in his place (just as Alcestis' husband did), what removes consistency both from his personality and from the story are the glances of real attention bestowed on things outside himself. Before this, in *Rhinoceros*, the transformation into a monster, always hovering on the edge of reason for human beings, is multiplied by a contagion which imitates the mechanism of mass psychology. The relationship between normality and deviation loses all meaning and value and is reduced to a simple quantitative ratio between majority and minority: so much so that accepted normality ends up by becoming an aesthetic standard. And yet, at the point of collapse, the unexpected voice may be heard of a humanity that will not surrender.

The volume ends with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: not a casual choice, as the reduction of dialogue to a purely phatic function and the breakdown of any real rational structure, together with the removal all possible means of orientation, represent the culmination of the anti-Aristotelian revolution. Above all, the choice is not casual because what is principally at stake here is time, the most

significant and disquieting factor of human life, here marked by an estranging 'waiting', at the mercy of unreliable perceptions. "Il tempo, che per Amleto era 'uscito di sesto', qui si dissolve nell'incosistenza irredimibile del vivere" ("The time, which for Hamlet was 'out of joint', here dissolves into the irremediable inconsistency of life," 203). The concluding words of *Teatro. Personaggio e condizione umana* put the finishing touch, in this way, to a profound coherency as they link up explicitly with the title and in the end express anguish before silence.

This evocative conclusion is typical of the particular characteristics of Paduano's writing which do indeed deserve a closer glance.

To start with, in a study made up in part of plot narration, the technique of summarizing, the choice of essential segments and their assembly is innovative. Even tangled narrative paths are made compelling and the storytelling is always able to capture the spectre of the human condition. The readers who already know the stories find themselves just as fully engaged in the unexpected suspense, almost as if they were cast into a landscape that was indeed familiar but had never before been accurately observed. From such a scrupulous critical progress there emerges at times a degree of feeling which is contagious and witnesses the presence of emotion within the exactitude of reason. All this is only possible to a scholar who is also a true story-teller, as indeed Paduano is (the temptation here is to suggest the writing of a novel, but this is already the case: see Paduano 2020). Besides this, the possibility of venturing into the *détours obscurs* of the text is encouraged by the reading of the original version of most of the material presented (and it is striking how German terminology is frequently used, as the author is aware that these words habitually lead the reader back to the original meaning, in a way similar to that of the Greek language). Another valuable resource that the book possesses should also not be forgotten: Paduano's remarkably extensive and prestigious experience as a translator. This is naturally a great advantage from a hermeneutic point of view. It is my belief that only a person who is faced with the often insuperable challenges of translation is able to understand the dizzy fascination of the word that comes from afar, or can recognise the enticement of jewels that risk perpetual burial in darkness and oblivion.

Other salient aspects of the volume have already been pointed out at the beginning: the ample space reserved for the secondary sources for a scrupulous and unembarrassed comparison which assumes the form of a diary of an intellectual adventure. During its development the author experiences the inevitably enigmatic nature of any text, and at the same time confronts the necessity for a responsible interpretation, reiterating the unacceptability of arbitrary or improvised judgements.

But here it is not simply the case of a need to offer the reader a comprehensive choice of interpretations. Paduano's commitment and dedication to his task demonstrates the special relationship he has with many works of art. It is always one of respect and awe, and it is transformed almost into an act of *pietas*, as if the

scholar were moved by the duty to protect the fragile trembling masterpieces from any misunderstanding or incomprehension.

Perhaps it is simply this special relationship which is the inspiration the incessant evocation of harmonies, leitmotifs, rhymes between the material presented. Certainly, there is the necessity for a wide and detailed knowledge here, but there is also an essential requirement for penetrating sensitivity, empathy and almost for an emotional tie, besides a passionate enthusiasm for and attention to mysterious affinities and correspondences. And last but not least a musical taste not simply reducible to mere competence, however fierce (it is not by chance that Paduano is the author of many brilliant programmes for opera and concerts and also of innovatory studies such as Paduano 1992, 2009).

Thus, the coming together of images and words apparently distant from and strange to one another seem to create a single shared desire to question the meaning of life, of art, of the world. In conclusion, the meaning of the human condition, of character and finally of Theatre.

Translated by Susan Payne (University of Florence)

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