

Futurism and Experimentation in Italian Theater in the Late 20th Century

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Abstract

This paper aims to understand whether and to which extent the Futurism theory of theatre and its practices have influenced the Italian contemporary scene. Common opinion still has it that Futurism has left little to no legacy in the Italian theatre, and we cannot properly speak of neo-futurism or of an active Futurist avant-garde. Nonetheless, taking a closer look at some of most significant figures in Italian experimental theatre (for example, Ivrea Manifesto's project, Carmelo Bene, Societàs Raffaello Sanzio) this paper aims to underline the many elements that trace back to Futurist's theatre, suggesting the need to re-read futurist artistic experiences – at least in the field of performing arts – as constructive practices aimed at the building of a new kind of theatre.

In this paper I shall try to understand whether and to which extent the shades of Futurism in and on theatre have been present on the Italian scene. Common opinion still has it that Futurism has left little legacy in the practices of contemporary Italian theatre. Differently from the visual arts, architecture and literature, futurist influences have often been local. According to Silvio D'Amico's and Renato Simoni's old and, in my opinion, no more valid belief, they are limited exclusively to scenography: «Forse, nel campo del teatro, le influenze futuriste più appariscenti si sono avute in materia di scenografia [...]. Da ricordare a questo proposito il nome del pittore Enrico Prampolini» (Probably, in the field of theatre, the most evident futurist influences concern scenography [...]. To this regard we shall mention the painter Enrico Prampolini)¹. Such a statement, however, takes into consideration only the written text and not the performance in all its parts.

¹ S. D'Amico, *Storia del teatro drammatico*, Rizzoli, Milano 1940, vol. 4, p. 302.

After D'Amico, the publication of Marinetti's theatrical works – edited by Giovanni Calendoli in 1960² – made new materials available and aroused the critics' interest for futurist theatre. This coincided all throughout the Sixties with the experiences of an Italian theatrical avant-garde, which invited the majority of scholars and critics to address the features of scenic writing as opposed to dramatic writing. In this perspective many futurist writers and artists were reconsidered as forerunners of Italian experimental theatre because of their modernity. Studies focused in particular on the influence of futurist theatre on the Italian experimental theatre scene of the time, with specific attention to new Italian avant-garde artists active all through the Sixties and Seventies. As a matter of fact, in the artistic development of each of these artists, many elements concerning poetics can undoubtedly be traced back to Futurism, in particular to the indications that we can easily find in manifestoes and in the texts of futurist theatre. Futurism thus became not only, as we know, the anticipating movement for the most revolutionary theatrical experiences in the twentieth century – Dada, Surrealism, Theatre of the Absurd – but also for the more recent experiences of the Italian neo avant-garde.

The starting point of the Italian neo avant-garde was the Conference of Ivrea – a small town near Torino – in 1967, where «theatre practitioners such as Carmelo Bene, Carlo Quartucci, Giuliano Scabia and Luca Ronconi subscribed to the project for a New Theatre based on a manifesto reminiscent of Marinetti's almost five decades before».³

I'd like to quote a few passages from the *Ivrea manifesto* (1967): «oggi s'impone la necessità di adeguare gli strumenti critici agli elementi tecnico-formali dello spettacolo, di affrontare l'impegno drammaturgico senza alcuna soggezione agli schemi prestabiliti» (Nowadays we

² F. T. Marinetti, *Teatro*, a cura di G. Calendoli, Vito Bianco Editore, Roma 1960.

³ D. Fischer, *The march of the avant-garde*, in AA.VV., *A History of Italian theatre*, edited by J. Farrell and P. Pappa, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 288.

must adequate our critical tools to the technical and formal elements of performance and face our commitment to dramaturgy without any uneasiness towards pre-established schemes)⁴. Not only: «il teatro deve poter arrivare alla contestazione assoluta e totale» (Theatre must be able to aim at absolute and total dissent)⁵; or «crediamo in un teatro pieno di interrogativi, di dimostrazioni giuste o sbagliate, di gesti contemporanei» (We believe in a theatre that is full of questions, of demonstrations, be them right or wrong, of contemporary gestures)⁶; but also: «questo teatro collettivo è essenzialmente un teatro senza pareti, nel quale deve essere eliminato qualsiasi diaframma tra palcoscenico e platea» (This collective theatre is essentially one without walls, where any partition between stage and audience shall be eliminated)⁷; and, last but not least: «favorire un'ampia libertà di frantumazione e profanazione del luogo teatrale» (We shall encourage a great freedom and profanation of the theatrical scene)⁸. The fundamental aim of the project was therefore to create a theatre of protest, against all dominant structures and here perhaps lay its inherent weakness, as the propensity for unconditional protest sometimes hindered a genuine drive towards artistic renewal. At a closer look, though, we realize that many things had already been said by the Futurists more or less fifty years earlier. «The Conference of Ivrea provided primarily an arena for discussion, but the variety of contrasting voices gave rise to a cacophony of disparate ideas»⁹. The same thing that happened, after all, at the end of many “serate futuriste”.

We shall now turn to analyze more in depth some of the protagonists of that artistic period. Carlo Quartucci, (born in Messina in 1938),

⁴ AA.VV., *Per un convegno sul nuovo teatro*, in F. Quadri, *L'avanguardia teatrale in Italia*, (materiali 1960-1976), Einaudi, Torino 1977, vol. 1, p. 136.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁹ D. Fischer, *The march of the avant-garde*, cit., p. 288.

for example «was primarily interested in reassessing the role of the actor, of the director and of the stage-manager, with a view to renewing the overall concept of theatre»¹⁰. After various experiences, his work during the Seventies «best reflected his concept of the relationship between actors and theatrical space. Avoiding all use of recognizable imagery, actors and objects merge into shapeless figures» (just think of the inanimate abstract human shapes shown in the photographs of *The Merchant of Hearts* by Prampolini and Casavola) ¹¹ «the word was linked to the actor's gesture and changed with it to create new phonetic sounds which defied any traditional representation of the text»¹². Theatre is a matter of the actor's body, Quartucci often said. As Donatella Fischer observes in her recent study *The march of the avant-garde*, «not only Artaud» – this is of course the most important reference – «but also the idiosyncratic features of much Futurist theatre emerged through Quartucci's works»,¹³ rich as they were in avant-gardistic elements and conveying a message of protest.

So, when analyzing Quartucci's production, but also more in general, the achievements of other representatives of the Italian avant-garde during the Sixties and Seventies as Leo De Berardinis, Carlo Cecchi e Memè Perlini, the elements that we can link back to the theatrical experience of Futurism are several: a stage laid bare; the representative component reduced to its minimum; provoking anti-illusionistic choices, the abolition of the supremacy of words, which are reduced to semantic or phonetic play; the choice of an anti-narrative and anti-psychological game dimension; the provocation of the public by discarding the usual separation between stage and audience.¹⁴ The

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ This was also noticed by Gabriella Giannachi and Nick Kaye in their recent essay *Staging the post-avant-garde: Italian experimental performance after 1970*, Peter Lang, Bern 2002.

avant-garde as protest against existing theatre forms found another representative in Carmelo Bene, a figure that has often been connected with Futurism.

The *enfant terrible* of Italian stage and screen, actor-director-writer Carmelo Bene, who has died aged 64, shared the distinction with Dario Fo of being a theatrical artist who also became a literary phenomenon. Though most of his writings were for the theatre and cinema, he also published several novels and two autobiographies – one in 1983 (Longanesi, Milano) entitled, somewhat brazenly, *Sono apparso alla Madonna (I appeared to the Madonna)*. Eccentric and gifted, Bene was undoubtedly the greatest *guitto* (barnstormer) of the contemporary Italian stage – a term that he relished. He succeeded in parodying the Italian histrionic acting tradition, as well as being its apotheosis. In the theatre his model was Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, while the moderns he respected most in literature and painting were Joyce and Francis Bacon. In the cinema he had little sympathy for film-making after Buster Keaton and Eisenstein, though he once confessed to liking Godard's *Pierrot Le Fou*.¹⁵

We know that the provocation of the public, often realized breaking stage pretense and the barriers between stage and audience has always been – and still is – a characteristic feature of experimental theatre. Carmelo Bene has been defined the most provocative, brilliant and contradictory theatre man of post-war Italy. In his work we can find recurrent references to Futurist theatre and its indications concerning the language of the actor; which confirms that Bene was an attentive showman even in the fundamental role which theatrical Futurism has in the historical avant-garde. To give you just one example reading what Marinetti himself wrote during his “*serate a sorpresa*” period in his *Promemoria sulla presenza in scena e stile futurista* and thinking of Bene's work (as well as the achievements of his contemporaries)

¹⁵ J.F. Lane, *Carmelo Bene. Actor and writer whose iconoclasm shocked Italy*, “The Guardian”, Monday 18 March 2002.

analogies are not hard to find: mechanization of the actor; extralogical discussion; synthetic deformation; integration of the actor into the setting. Marinetti's words (Eloquenza essenziale sintetica, Intonazioni alogiche organizzate, Gesti e andature espressioni facciali inventate, etc., etc. - synthetic essential eloquence, alogical organized intonations, invented gestures, facial expressions, and gaits)¹⁶ – as we can guess – reveal a specific attention to the problems arising from a new form of performance and are useful elements to single out the features of the ideal futurist actor. On his part, Carmelo Bene speaks more than once of a unity of action between man and his environment; evident in statements such as: “We must turn the actor into a machine”. In particular, his work on voice (in Greek: foné) witnesses his total agreement with the technological innovations proposed by Futurists.

Moving from actors to directors, it is worth mentioning Luca Ronconi, the artistic director of Piccolo Teatro of Milan. One of his first works is Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* adapted in collaboration with Edoardo Sanguineti and performed in many Italian “piazzas” (squares) crowded with people. The play shows a direct influence of Futurism, and an indirect one, evident in the happening. Simultaneity, surprise effects, aggression, are all fundamental elements of this performance. The connection is further confirmed by a less known document, that is, Marinetti's reading of *Orlando Furioso* in futurist key. The reading was made available by Giovanni Antonucci's recent discovery, one of great interest, for it anticipates some of the characteristic aspects of Sanguineti and Ronconi's play.¹⁷ In Marinetti's reading, held on the Mura degli Angeli in Ferrara, on July, 7th 1929, all of the main themes – simultaneity, aggression, dynamism – find a happy formulation. Marinetti highlights the concepts of speed, aggressiveness, tirelessness, which Ronconi would later realize so well in the

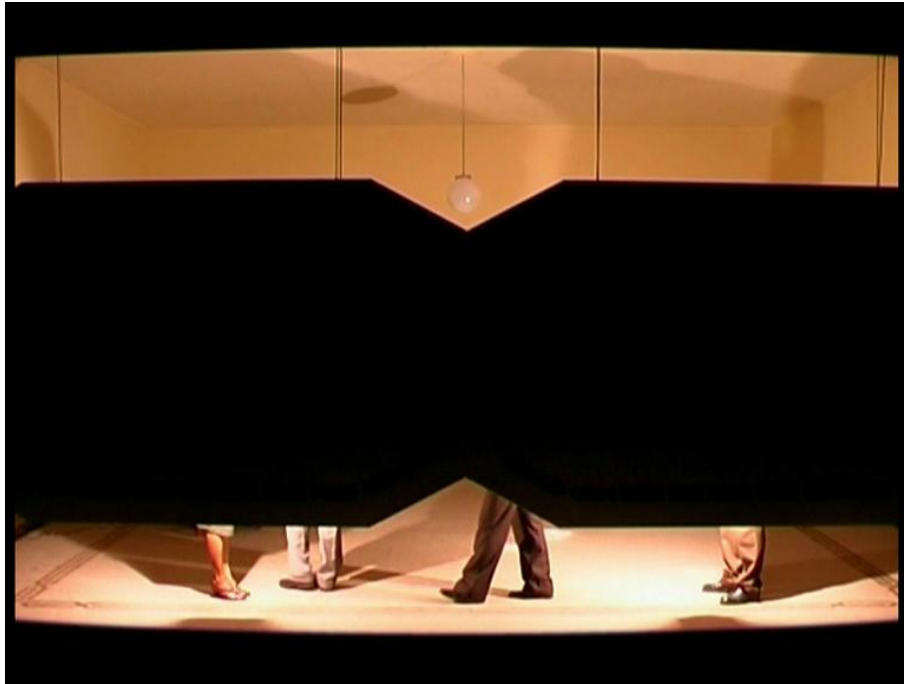
¹⁶ Cfr. L. Lapini, *Questioni di messinscena: l'attore, la recitazione, le rappresentazioni*, www.drammaturgia.it, 21/03/2011.

¹⁷ Cfr. G. Antonucci, *Storia del teatro futurista*, Studium, Roma 2005, pp. 167-169.

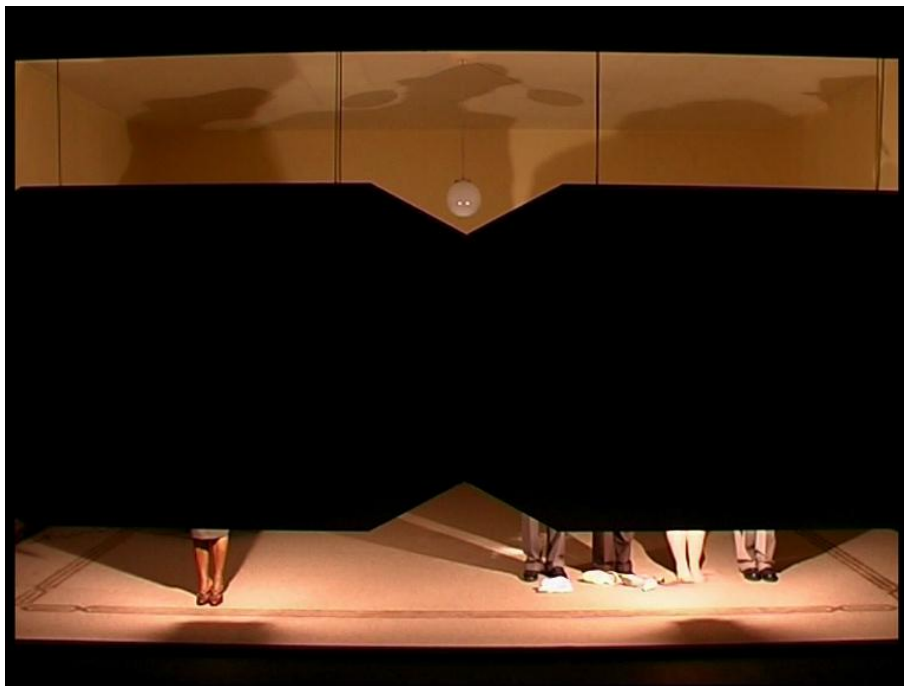
dynamism and performance of his actors. Worth noticing is then what Marinetti calls “senso aviatorio”, that is, the aerial movement of the hippogryph’s winged steed, which Ronconi and his scenographer Uberto Bertacca interpreted resorting to magic machines, in all their simplicity. We are indeed faced with a peculiar realization of the futurist idea of surprise and stupor. Nonetheless it must be said that Ronconi and his collaborators strongly denied any reference to Futurism. However, it is important to underline that quoting from Futurism or resorting to practices which are typical of Futurism, can be involuntary, not conscious. It is nonetheless always recognizable for anyone who has even the faintest idea of the history of Futurist theatre, with Marinetti and other writers.

Following this red thread, we can find many examples in Italian experimental theatre, which not seldom offers, as if they were new, things that had actually been theorized and realized one hundred years earlier by (our) Futurists. I shall therefore finish with a last example. I chose a group that is famous also outside of Italy and is considered the most visionary – and controversial – experimental group of our time: the Società Raffaello Sanzio. Italian director Romeo Castellucci founded this theatre company with his sister, Claudia Castellucci, and wife, Chiara Guidi, in 1981 and in the twenty eight years since, the group has staged some of the most radical and controversial performances of the Italian experimental Theatre. Over the past six years, the Società has engaged in a rumination on tragedy called the *Tragedia Endogonia*¹⁸. I will not talk about their performance; I’d just like to comment one scene.

¹⁸ Società Raffaello Sanzio, *Tragedia Endogonia*, by R. Castellucci, video memory by C. Carloni, S. Franceschetti, music S. Gibbons, director R. Castellucci, 3 DVD, 1 CD, and 86-page pamphlet, 2007.



Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3

As we can see in the pictures n. 1, n. 2 and n. 3, this short dramatic scene shows us a group – whose members are apparently criminals – interrogating a mother. The scene is violent, crude and very short: only seven minutes, with few words. The public can see only the inferior part of the scene, as if the curtain was only partially lifted, and can follow what is going on only by the movements of the actors' feet and legs. The reference to Marinetti is, I think, evident, since our thought goes back to Marinetti's *Le basi (feet)*. *Feet* consists – as we know – of seven short scenes in which the audience sees only the performers' feet, although their voices can be heard. All the actors appear on stage at the same time. The upper parts of their bodies are hidden by the curtain. The quotation (not conscious in my opinion) is thus evident.

We are now drawing towards our conclusion. So, is it possible to speak of Futurism as such in Italian experimental theatre in the Late 20th Century? The answer is: of course not. In the same way, we cannot speak of neo-futurism or of an active Futurist avant-garde.

However, if we take a closer look at every single manifestation of experimental theatre, we can recognize without too much effort things that Futurists said one hundred years ago. And in my opinion they are more evident than elements that we can trace back to other historical avant-gardes. Time has come, then, to re-read futurist artistic experiences – at least in the field of performing arts – under this light. Not only as provocations for provocation's sake, but also as constructive practices aimed at a really new kind of theatre. We can therefore say that futurist reflections still loom on the experimental theatrical scene in Italy.