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# Performer vs. Actor?

## Grotowski and the Tradition of Italian Theatre

### Abstract

This article is devoted to the provocative proposal of a plausible relationship between Grotowski's last season (above all his idea of the Performer) and a certain tradition of the Italian actor's theatre. We understand this relationship and this provocation essentially in terms of micro-theatricality and intra-theatricality. By intra-theatricality we mean that method of composition which is inscribed in the *tranches de vie* of layered, multi-generational actors, in their ability to reuse existential sequences and to reproduce on stage the complex relational routine that the company represents as a community. Apart from the fact that the distance between the twentieth-century Performer and the traditional Italian actor has often been emphasized, there is something in the traditional profile of the Italian actor that, in

the mid-twentieth century, paradoxically coincides with the mission that Grotowski assigns to the Performer. The purpose of this article is to explore these analogies.

## Keywords

Jerzy Grotowski, Italian theatre, actor, intra-theatricality

## Abstrakt

### Performer czy aktor? Grotowski i tradycja włoskiego teatru

Artykuł jest prowokacyjną propozycją ustalenia analogii między ostatnim sezonem Grotowskiego (przede wszystkim jego ideą Performera) a jedną z tradycji włoskiego teatru aktorskiego. Ten związek i wspomniana prowokacja opierają się na pojęciu mikro-teatralności i intra-teatralności. Intra-teatralnością nazywamy metodę kompozycyjną, która jest wpisana w *tranches de vie* wielowarstwowych, wielopokoleniowych biografii aktorów, w ich zdolność do ponownego wykorzystywania sekwencji egzystencjalnych, odtwarzania na scenie skomplikowanej rutyny relacyjnej, którą zespół reprezentuje jako wspólnotę. Często podkreśla się dystans między dwudziestowiecznym Performerem a tradycyjnym włoskim aktorem, jednak w tradycyjnym profilu włoskiego aktora jest coś, co w połowie dwudziestego wieku paradoksalnie zbiega się z misją przypisaną Performerowi przez Grotowskiego. Celem tego artykułu jest przyjrzenie się tym analogiom.

## Słowa kluczowe

Jerzy Grotowski, teatr włoski, aktor, intra-teatralność

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How distant is the silhouette of the Grotowskian Performer from the traditional Italian actor? There are multiple aspects that seem to reduce this supposed distance to the point of dissolving it altogether.

If we wanted to adopt a Grotowskian diction, we could assert that a genealogy of the Italian actor from the nineteenth century through to post-twentieth century stylistic features seems to show how, in a long-standing diachrony, the co-presence of the spectacular regime (of art as presentation) with vehicular forms constitutes a constant rather than an exception.

When we think of the Italian actor's routine, we have to understand they have always meant to direct their work primarily to their own company. It is what we have called *intra-theatricality*. In our view, intra-theatricality constitutes a development of Ferdinando Taviani and Claudio Meldolesi's theory of "micro-society"<sup>1</sup> combined with the more recent research of Richard Schechner. We call intra-theatricality that compositional method which is inscribed in the *tranches de vie* of layered, multiple generations of actors, in their ability to reuse existential sequences, retracing, on stage, the intricate relational routine that the company as a community represents. The whole of the best Italian theatrical tradition moves, then, toward the definition of an intimate line, in the effort to let circulate an internal message within the company.

Starting from this peculiar confidence, intra-theatricality is realized through this most delicate and constant attention to the profile of one's fellow actors. The determining element remains, as a corollary of the actor's art, that skillful lingering on existence between similarity and difference, in the uncanny profile he draws in, beyond and through life. At stake, as we shall see, are such complex issues as the notion of character, representation, and presence.

Beyond the fact that a distance between the twentieth-century Performer and the traditional Italian actor has often been emphasized, there is something in the traditional profile of the Italian actor that, in the mid-twentieth century, paradoxically coincides with the mission assigned by Grotowski to the Performer:

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<sup>1</sup> It is an ancient notion and one that an important witness such as Sergio Tofano fixed in his valuable memorial: "for so long comedians had formed a closed caste, kept apart from the other social strata, so that its members had no other road open than the one which birth had set them on: and their talent, not having been able to express itself in other directions, had all developed in that field where it was allowed to range freely," Sergio Tofano, *Il teatro all'antica italiana* (Milano: Adelphi, 2017), 89. This notion is clarified by Meldolesi and Taviani, who thematized the special routine of actors once and for all: "the actor was able to be as he was by virtue of his 'micro-society, half external and half internal to the societies of normal men,'" Claudio Meldolesi, *Pensare l'attore* (Roma: Bulzoni, 2013), 70 (unless stated otherwise, translations D. T.).

*Performer*, with a capital letter, is a man of action. He is not somebody who plays another. He is a doer, a priest, a warrior: he is outside aesthetic genres. . . . *Performer* is a state of being.<sup>2</sup>

This is an observation that has found authoritative reaffirmation in academia:

More specifically, a performer is someone who speaks and acts on his own behalf (as an artist and as a person) and thus addresses the audience, while the actor represents his character and pretends not to know he is only a theatre actor. The performer stages his own self, while the actor plays the role of another.<sup>3</sup>

Precisely, the more this textbook definition from Patrice Pavis seems to signal a difference between performer and actor, the more it offers a useful key to superimpose the special vocation of the Italian case. Then, one can therefore agree with Lorenzo Mango when, referring to De Marinis,<sup>4</sup> he asserts the difficulty and perhaps the futility of a terminological dispute,<sup>5</sup> at least from a certain chronological point onwards, when in any case, according to the scholar, the notion of Performer seems preferable, in terms of redefining the actor and acting:

Performer, then, would be the most appropriate term for what we are calling acting in the age of the avant-garde, as it broadens the field beyond the boundaries of what theatrology habitually defines as acting and, at the same time, defines the most authentic quality of what is believed to be the most intrinsic nature of the actor (where that “yes” is to be contextualized to the twentieth century and not used to allude to a universal category).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, “Performer,” trans. Thomas Richards, in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, ed. Lisa Wolford and Richard Schechner (London: Routledge, 1997), 376.

<sup>3</sup> Patrice Pavis, “Performer,” in *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, trans. Christine Shantz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 262.

<sup>4</sup> “The performer can be considered a more generic or more specific entity than the actor,” Marco De Marinis, *Il teatro dopo l'età dell'oro: Novecento e oltre* (Roma: Bulzoni, 2013), 69.

<sup>5</sup> “We, as you may have guessed, are trying to do an inverse terminological operation: instead of looking for a new term that serves to ‘illuminate’ the dimension of acting even outside the confines of the twentieth century, to attribute to a term in current use, as both actor and acting are, the possibility of also encompassing meanings other than those we institutionally give them. Perhaps this way it is easier to understand each other and we do not end up prisoners of terminological disputes,” Lorenzo Mango, “Studiare la recitazione nell’epoca delle avanguardie: Alcune questioni metodologiche,” *Acting Archives Review* 5, no. 9 (2015): 47, <https://www.acting-archives.it/images/Reviews/9/04.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Mango, “Studiare la recitazione nell’epoca delle avanguardie”

The moment we begin to frame the compositional dynamic of the actor's work as an integral part of an existential routine made by a customary canon of relationship, we understand how the dimension of the traditional Italian actor fits perfectly with the profile of the Performer.

In both cases, it seems clear that the first addressee of any theatrical action is, and should always be, the actor, not the spectator. The consequence of this awareness should completely change the perception of a dramaturgical score. In this regard, are we really sure that Grotowski intended to distinguish in such drastic terms the work of the Performer from that of the actor? We will simply add that Grotowski himself wondered with respect to a possibility of verifying certain inventive dynamics of the Performer's "art as vehicle" even within "art as presentation":

Can one work on the performative structure on two registers? On art as a presentation (the public performance) and, at the same time, on art as a vehicle? This is the question I ask myself. Theoretically I see that it must be possible; in my practice I have done these two things in different periods of my life: art as presentation and art as vehicle. Are both possible in the same performative structure?<sup>7</sup>

Even in art as presentation there can evidently be the possibility to emphasize the benefit of a higher aspiration, that higher aspiration that Mirella Schino recognizes, already in the Great Actor of the nineteenth century in Italy, as the ability to transcend:

The work of the Great Actor must be read in terms of transcending: the part, the story, even consistency. The Great Actor is the one who escapes from history: not only from that written by the author, but also from their own interpretation of the text. From a technical point of view, this was done through a process that consisted, first, of interweaving multiple threads and moving by jumping from one to the other.<sup>8</sup>

How to explore this peculiarity? A certain caution is necessary since we do not have for the season of the Great Actor a generous harvest of first-hand news, but the sense of a coherent continuity can be verified by a long-standing genealogy that defies time, reaching as far as what we have called dramaturgical genealogies

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<sup>7</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, "Dalla compagnia teatrale all'arte come veicolo," trans. Carla Pollastrelli, in *Opere e sentieri*, vol. 2, *Testi 1968-1998*, ed. Antonio Attisani and Mario Biagini (Roma: Bulzoni, 2007), 110.

<sup>8</sup> Mirella Schino, *Racconti del Grande Attore: Tra la Rachel e la Duse* (Imola: Cue Press, 2016), 16.

of the post–twentieth-century Italian actor. From Duse to Petrolini, all the way to Eduardo De Filippo, Carlo Cecchi, and Leo De Berardinis, passing through Carmelo Bene, it is not difficult to recognize this continuity:

Today’s actor-artists have elected Duse and Eduardo as their references: the latter through direct influence; the former through their sense of the beyond or rather their familiarity with lack. If Carmelo Bene for a long time drew on both, with his syntonic art, and if Cecchi then “found himself” through Eduardo, in Pontedera and elsewhere the Dusian relics have been (variously) re-translated in contrast to routine directing, while the same need to “go on stage to free oneself from the theatre” in the manner of Duse, central in De Berardinis, is taking root.<sup>9</sup>

All along this genealogy it is possible to verify the long story of a craft not necessarily addressed to an external reception, but rather circumscribed almost salvifically to our own community. Duse, like Eduardo, elaborates her own style that pivots on what hovers around the performance from life (from company life, in particular), through the dark false floor that precedes access to the stage:

Our greatest enjoyment do you know when it is? When, toward evening, we arrive alone at the artists’ entrance and walk through the dark corridors, and we climb the dimly lit stairs to find our companions waiting for the rehearsal. There are few lights on the stage, amidst the great slanting shadows of the wings, the stalls are gloomy and deserted, the boxes are like empty bunks. There is nothing but us performers, poor actors and poor actresses, dressed as we are every day, with only the company of the poet who wrote the play we have to learn. We are among ourselves, without strangers, without intruders, and we think only of our work and not already of the applause of all those unknowns who fill the theatre on other evenings. In those moments I feel like family, and sometimes I have the boyish illusion that we are there secretly among those few lights, as if for a conspiracy, a conspiracy, something clandestine and pleasantly dangerous.<sup>10</sup>

In this passage is echoed the idea of relationship that Schechner discerned between ritual and play. When Duse refers to the euphoric sensation of clandestinity experienced inside the empty theatre, similar to a speeding train into

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<sup>9</sup> Claudio Meldolesi, “Questo strano teatro creato dagli attori artisti nel tempo della regia, che ha rigenerato l’avanguardia storica insieme al popolare: Come un editoriale”, *Teatro e Storia* 11, no. 18 (1996): 12.

<sup>10</sup> Eleonora Duse quoted in Luigi M. Personè, *Fedelissima della Duse: Scritti di Enif Angiolini Robert* (Prato: Società pratese di storia patria, 1988), 22.

the unknown during that rehearsal's night, she uses unequivocal words that summon the reader into an atmosphere suspended between initiation and childlike simulation. Just as unequivocal is the reference to the audience. If there were still any doubts about the intra-theatrical physiognomy of the work of the traditional Italian actor as Performer, they can be quietly dispelled by such an agnition as "We are among ourselves, without strangers, without intruders, and we think only of our work and not already of the applause of all those unknowns who fill the theatre on other evenings."

The alienation of the audience noted by Duse seems evoked in perfect support of the perspective intended here, namely the radicalization of an idea of theatre that bypasses the theatre itself by a leap. Toward where? Toward the most intimate and palpating heart of theatre itself. Intra-theatricality on the one hand signals a closure to the outside, to "intruders" who think they can claim a function within a work that pertains only to those who are truly part of it.

It is something that, not coincidentally, does not escape, on the occasion of the resounding return to the stage of the "Divine" Duse, the scrutiny of such an attentive critic as Piero Gobetti (12 May 1921):

Duse does not play Ibsen but herself and to herself she adapts all the tragic elements, renewing them according to the intensity of her sentimental movement. Her sensibility of each moment decides the different setting and development of the play. Each retelling is in essence a new work. Thus of the *Woman of the Sea* she made in three evenings: a drama of gradual mystical aspiration, the first time; of gradual affirmation of free will, the second; of static anguished melancholy, later resolved into calm serenity, the third. Of this marvelous renewal no one can ask her reason.

In Duse's acting, there is an aspiration to go over all that is predictable and even logical in the scheme of representation. In its place, it pitches up, resounding and terrible, the existential profile of Duse herself.

In this perspective, Silvio D'Amico, pointing out next to Musco and Eduardo the diversity of Petrolini, unintentionally reiterated how the "difference" of Italian actors is a more pervasive and constant fact than we think: "Petrolini was immense when he was Petrolini, and that's all."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps, for a certain tradition of the Italian actor, the need not to play a part, indeed the opportunity to transcend it, becomes a virtue not a limitation. Between Italian actor and

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<sup>11</sup> Silvio D'Amico, *Tramonto del Grande Attore* (Firenze: La Casa Usher, 1985), 243.

Performer (in a Grotowskian perspective) an unexpected connection seems to be established. This is very evident even in the most recent testimonies, as in the case of Carlo Cecchi, who establishes a precise technical mode of annihilation of the representation at the very moment of the actor's work in the context of the representation:

If the actor is a signifier empty of all meaning, if the "character" is torn to pieces according to the techniques that had served its "construction," and if on stage remains the body of an actor who acts out this conflict in a physically extreme, violent manner, this opens a dangerous crack within "the performance of representation," a chasm that drags in all the terms of the theatrical relationship, modifies them and alters them in act, here and now.<sup>12</sup>

Even more significant is the fact that these words were written for Carmelo Bene who, already at the delicate moment of intersection with Leo De Berardinis, at the time of their *Don Quixote* (1968), declared:

I consider a man of the theatre . . . he who from evening to morning and from morning to evening devotes himself completely to this. That is the problem. Now I devote myself continuously to this. Can't the audience of the evenings, from 10 p.m. to midnight, come and understand, follow or even fall in love with it—no, absolutely not. Do you understand? They do it for fun and I do it for life. . . . He cannot two hours in the evening understand what I instead continue to live hour by hour.<sup>13</sup>

Carmelo Bene, who claims to surpass Artaud in radicalism,<sup>14</sup> theorized the vision he has been given of the advent, not only of a "possible theatre" but of being himself the possibility of a theatre.

This possibility is made explicit, paradoxically, as the destruction of any obstacle to the theatre of reality that is the reality of the actors; it is something that, once again starting from Duse, De Marinis notes as a paradigm of a certain tradition of the twentieth century, in which we need to rethink:

<sup>12</sup> Ettore Petrolini, *Un po' per celia, un po' per non morir...* (Roma: Newton, 1993), 205.

<sup>13</sup> "Carmelo Bene e i critici: Prove del Don Chisciotte con Leo de Berardinis," video, 1968, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qD2dYrdxM1>.

<sup>14</sup> "I completed the lesson that Artaud had just begun. He had limited himself to the double, to identity. I have taken the 'ego' off the stage . . . the theatre of the identikit, of identity, of the same, to talk about something else, to be spoken more than to speak," Carmelo Bene quoted in Antonio Attisani and Marco Dotti, eds., *Bene crudele: Cattivarlo di Carmelo Bene* (Viterbo: Stampa Alternativa, 2004), 18.



Duse in the light of the theatrical work of Leo De Berardinis and of the other leaders of the new Italian theatre, Carmelo Bene, Carlo Cecchi, and so on enumerating, who in their battle against the degradation of the art of acting in Italy often found themselves choosing not coincidentally in Duse a tutelary deity and a source of inspiration, more ethical-existential (and even political, or at least civil) than technical-aesthetic. . . . The pioneers of the new Italian theatre felt akin to the “divine” first and foremost because of a shared sense of estrangement, indeed of true rejection, toward the theatre of their own time; that same rejection that had caused Duse to issue the celebrated anathema revived by Craig: “To save the theatre, the theatre must be destroyed, the actors and actresses must all die of the plague. . . . they make art impossible.” In Bene’s, Leo’s, and Cecchi’s invectives against the Italian actor it is easy to find more than an echo of Duse’s call and a similarity too, starting with the fact that they were *vores clamantes in deserto*.<sup>15</sup>

Not coincidentally, a paradigmatic example of this device can be acquired from the dramaturgy of Eduardo De Filippo, who represents a real dramaturgical function throughout the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, Eduardo’s famous refrain (that “Theatre means to really live what others, in life, recite badly”) takes on meaning only if one accepts theatre’s impermanence.

To truly live what others in life recite badly is to take upon oneself the function of the Performer. But, again, this function does not belong exclusively to a customary or slavishly Grotowskian codification of the Performer. Rather, it belongs to the older sapiential heritage of Italian actors:

Why is it necessary to act even in life? Because acting means one very simple thing: to live intensely, to the point of consummation, an experience in order not to be able, not to have the curse of repeating it.<sup>17</sup>

In Leo De Berardinis and Perla Peragallo, the Company as an experience of life and art is closed in a context which seems to avoid the audience not only out of mere provocative spirit but also for the reasons of an art that no longer needs an external interlocutor to communicate with.

<sup>15</sup> Marco De Marinis, “La Duse, il nuovo teatro italiano e il degrado attuale dell’arte attorica,” in *Voci e anime, corpi e scritture*, ed. Maria Ida Biggi (Roma: Bulzoni, 2009), 565–566.

<sup>16</sup> Dario Tomasello, *La dramaturgia italiana contemporanea: Da Pirandello al futuro* (Roma: Carocci, 2016), 55–66; 89–110.

<sup>17</sup> Leo De Berardinis, *King LeOr*, video, 1996, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1b95mvwtsA>.

The performance is elaborated in the privacy of one's own workshop, in a dynamic that is inspired by the actor and returns to the actor. Therefore, we propose a chiastic scheme, intra-theatrical precisely, in which the actor is both the incipit and explicit of every dramaturgical instance: actor—dramaturgical idea—dramaturgical score—actor.

Meldolesi spoke of dramaturgy as a “moving object between author and actor.”<sup>18</sup> We believe that the circular mobility alluded to by the scholar is verifiable in the realm of intra-theatricality where either the author is also an actor as the best Italian tradition demonstrates or is still aware that the source of their work coincides with the addressee of it. The circle closes in the name of a radical research that is proper to the acting function. It is as if this radicality of the research determines a decisive coefficient of closure to the eventual interlocution with elements outside or extraneous to the acting *communitas*.

If we talk about *communitas*, we do so by quoting Victor Turner, who described an alternative model of organizing practices, not necessarily artistic:

there are here two major “models” for human interrelatedness, juxtaposed and alternating. The first is of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of “more” or “less.” The second, which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders. I prefer the Latin term “*communitas*” to “community,” to distinguish this modality of social relationship from an “area of common living.”<sup>19</sup>

The daily lives of actors, of those men who are akin to men, quoting Meldolesi: “the actor as a man akin to man, an enigmatic figure capable of dilating the meaning of normal living,”<sup>20</sup> is based on the contradictions of the relationship with the character. As Richard Schechner argues, the actor is not the character they play but neither are they the negation of it: “All effective performances share this ‘not-not not’ quality: Oliver is not Hamlet, but also he is not not Hamlet: his performance is between a denial of being another (= I am me) and a denial

<sup>18</sup> Claudio Meldolesi, *Fra Totò e Gadda: Sei invenzioni sprecate dal teatro italiano* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1987), 67.

<sup>19</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), 95.

<sup>20</sup> Claudio Meldolesi, *Pensare l'attore* (Roma: Bulzoni, 2013), 59.

of not being another (= I am Hamlet).”<sup>21</sup> In this oscillation between “not” and “not-not,” there is indeed a transformative possibility for the actor who makes ritual, in terms of crossing a limen, from every occasion, even the most repetitive one of any spectacular performance.

The character becomes in the reflection of contemporary Italian actors the instrumental possibility of effectively orienting the actor’s research:

It is not about interpreting but rather about finding a consonance that gives each person the impulse to express a very personal path. This does not mean that on stage we go to represent ourselves grappling with certain circumstances, nor does it mean “bringing to life” a character. Instead, it is essential to use the character as a tool to go beyond our everyday mask, to reach the intimate essence of our personality by showing it as it really is.<sup>22</sup>

Marco De Marinis noted “the extraordinary and, in all likelihood, not coincidental proximity”<sup>23</sup> of this paragraph by Leo De Berardinis to a highly apposite Grotowski passage:

It is not a question of portraying himself under certain given circumstances, or of “living” a part; nor does it entail the distant sort of acting common to epic theatre and based on cold calculation. The important thing is to use the role as a trampoline, an instrument with which to study what is hidden behind our everyday mask—the innermost core of our personality—in order to sacrifice it, expose it.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, in a sort of not-so-unpredictable parabola, we return to the controversial Grotowskian Performer and precisely because of the Italian actor’s art. As in Grotowski, so according to Leo and Italian actors, in terms of an ancient wisdom, the Italian actor (the Performer?) finds in the theatre and thanks to the theatre something that goes far beyond the theatre: “We need to recreate the total man, and this man can be the actor.”<sup>25</sup>



<sup>21</sup> Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 123.

<sup>22</sup> Claudio Meldolesi, ed., *La terza vita di Leo: Gli ultimi vent’anni del teatro di Leo De Berardinis a Bologna* (Corazzano: Tivillus, 2010), 158.

<sup>23</sup> Marco De Marinis, “Leo De Berardinis e il Novecento teatrale: Qualche ipotesi storiografica,” *Culture teatrali*, no. 28 (2019): 42.

<sup>24</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, ed. Eugenio Barba (New York: Routledge, 2002), 37.

<sup>25</sup> Leo De Berardinis quoted in De Marinis, “Leo De Berardinis,” 37.

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