

15. Performing Communities. Italian Experiences and Challenges

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doi.org/10.3280/oa-637-15

1. The Italian Fathers of Community Dramaturgy

In Italy, the historical and theoretical elaboration of the active and responsible role of the public in the dialectical relationship between scene and audience is chiefly due to two representatives of the academic world: Mario Apollonio and Sisto Dalla Palma. They have several aspects in common, revealing a thread of continuity and maturing reflection: both were refined scholars and holders of the chair of Theatre History at the Università Cattolica of Milan, both were actively engaged in political and cultural activities as well as in academia, both striving to put their thought to the test in the field, where practice in turn would enrich their theory. Apollonio was Dalla Palma's teacher and this constitutes more than a mere *trait d'union* between them. It marks the beginning of a new way of reading the history of theatre, going beyond the literary and spectacular closed forms that privilege the textual and visual component over the performative and dramatic one. This is not a purely theoretical shift; what changes is the method, that combines the philological-literary approach with the socio-anthropological one and considers the history of theatre as the history of the forms with which, over time, men celebrate and represent their being a living community in history, their collective and shared feeling, their identity as expressed by their values and social and political features. Therefore, Apollonio's thought should be viewed against the background of the Italy of the second post-war period, until the 1960s, while Dalla Palma's is substantiated by the profound changes undergone by Italy between the 1970s and the end of the 20th century. These changes influenced first of all the idea of human *societas*, which determined the semantic passage from the "chorus" to the "group" in order to express a "sense of community" that always needs to be specified. The same changes then had an impact on the idea of theatre, shifting its focus from the poetic word to the festive and ritual "summons", in order to express the meaning of the representation beyond any aesthetic, professional and

⁶⁹ This essay was conceived together by the authors; the writing was divided as follows: paragraph 1 was written by Carla Bino, paragraph 2 by Stefano Locatelli.

artistic element. Apollonio and Dalla Palma had in common, nonetheless, the belief that shared and responsible action was the generative principle of making theatre. Hence the idea that theatre is an expression and instrument of a “community in action”.

a) *Reversal: in the beginning was the chorus*

The centrality of the chorus is presented by Apollonio as a veritable reversal of the idea of theatre itself. In 1947 he made it the pivot of the foundation programme of the Piccolo Teatro di Milano: in opposition both to a petrified theatre of the word and to the consumer spectacle offered to a passive and unaccountable audience, he moved the generative fulcrum of the theatrical action from the stage to the “*platea*” (stalls, auditorium). The first point of his programme read:

The theatre remains what it is in its primordial necessity: the place where the community, gathering freely to contemplate and to relive, reveals itself to itself (Apollonio et al., 1947).

«Man’s industrious law», the theatre is articulated in word (the text), gesture (the actor) and audience (the spectators). It is, however, conceived as a dramaturgical process in three stages that has its centre in the audience, understood, however, not as an «undifferentiated and provisional entity» gathering occasionally to attend an event, but as a «group that experiences the need to gather [...] around an event that each of the components perceives as essential for themselves and for the group itself» (Antolini, 1993, p. 12). From this «tacit and intent chorus» is expected «the responsibility of moral life» (Apollonio et al., 1947). Between the 1950s and 1960s, Apollonio continued his reflection on choral theatre first in the pages of the magazine *Drammaturgia*, which he founded in 1954, and then in his essay *Storia, dottrina prassi del coro* (1956). The antithesis between show and drama is made explicit both on a theoretical and a historical level. On the theoretical level, it rests on two elements. The first is the chorus:

No kind of show can replace drama [...]. The drama, as long as its emphasis falls on the chorus, [...] as long as the protagonist is the group that gathers in a theatrical rite, so that the emotional, reflexive, ethical responsibility increases from the convergence of many into one [...], the drama is destined to have an influential role in the formation of a new culture committed to the person, aimed at the celebration of man (Apollonio, 1954a, pp. 22-23).

The second element is the poetic word conceived as the creative act of an individual who speaks “to” a chorus and “of” that chorus, becoming, with circular motion, an authorised interpreter of a collective feeling and responding to it. The theatre, then, is the «gulf of memory» where «what once was, returns in the act» and where the participating chorus is guided by the act to understand itself and its own history (ibid., pp. 24-25).

From a historical point of view, Apollonio identified the checkmate suffered by speech and chorus when the magic spectacle of the post-Renaissance era – the period of time called by Battisti «anti-Renaissance» (1962) – was invented, when the wonder of illusion triumphed, and prevailed during the 17th century. The Baroque becomes an example of an inauthentic spectatorship reduced to pure vision, understood as «a moment of distraction, of entertainment, not a concentration, nor a conversion» (Apollonio, 1954b, p. 29). Baroque spectatorship goes down in history as the device «most assiduously or irresponsibly accepted in modern theatrical custom» (ibid.). And if it holds true that «without spectators the theatre does not exist», these spectators are not to be understood as an audience that enjoys a merely aesthetic and leisure product, but as «authentic spectators, who know how to react and to emphasise, who know how to be a chorus, be it silent or vociferous» (ibid., p. 28). What distinguishes the chorus from the audience is the active and creative principle of responsible participation.

Chorus is the human group that celebrates within itself the image, verifies it in its own life of relationship, ensures it journeys into the world of the living, it follows a historical itinerary, it is inserted in a language where semantic and suggestive relationships are codified; and while the chorus welcomes the image, it gives itself to it in return, it feeds on it, and thanks to it, the chorus acquires a new living space. A relationship is established [...], therefore, between the creative freedom of the image and the active responsibility of participation. [...] And we use the word participation to better signify that the essential is not the aesthetic fact, neither the cognitive formula nor the practical norm that always derives from an aesthetic fact, but the profound commitment of being, the agreement of conscience: an ontological fact, in short; and in comparison with its profound being, everything else, word and sign, is superficial (Apollonio, 1956, pp. 25-34).

However, for Apollonio the chorus remains «an ideal to strive towards and a challenge for the present» (Antolini, 1993, p. 13), since it represents the intuition of the aggregative drives of a group. It is the place where the theatrical act is realised as an experience and where it triggers a process of elaboration which affects real life.

This choral dramaturgy of participation goes beyond the theatre: Apollonio explains it is an «active moment of culture» in the first issue of the *Annali della Scuola Superiore di Giornalismo e Mezzi Audiovisivi* (1966). Here,

starting from the assumption that the “essence of man” is freedom and that “the problem of society” is “that of communion”, [he] concludes that communication must be participation, [understood as] a fact of moral life (Carpani, 2016).

Hence the idea that a culture «open to the real» is a place of reflexive participation for a society meant as a chorus, which «aims at the unity of diversities, at cultural pluralism in the sense of symphonic creation» (ibid.).

b) *Refoundation: feast and summons*

In the same year in which Apollonio died, 1971, Dalla Palma wrote his enlightening essay *Verso una nuova drammaturgia* (towards a new dramaturgy) designing the theatrical refoundation project that three years later, in 1974, formed the foundations of the Centro di Ricerca Teatrale (CRT). Starting from the observation that the most recent theatre experiences were moving away from the evasive-spectacular logic of entertainment and distraction well fulfilled by the mass media, Dalla Palma expressed his belief that the time was ripe for the theatre to «question its *raison d'être*» with the «clearest awareness that a theatre [...] is possible to the extent that it returns to its social role» (Dalla Palma, 1971, p. 16). He distinguished, however, the social role of theatre from the fictitious and consolatory social use of a theatre that, limiting itself to a thematic and formal innovation or the search for a new audience, did not change «the process of [...] enjoyment of the theatre experience». The latter social use of the theatre was simply «a new way of doing the theatre of the past» (ibid., p. 17); it did not re-articulate nor renew the dramatic experience, but remained set according to the traditional scene-audience opposition that privileged individual creation. Dalla Palma, like Apollonio, identified the historical matrix of this theatre of «closed forms» that presupposed a passive and exclusively receptive audience, in the theatre of illusion that abdicated its social function. Whereas ancient dramatic forms were the ritual expression of the group's unity, after the Renaissance the theatre became the object of an aesthetic and disengaged gaze. It no longer had anything to do with practical life and no longer concerned the community. The alternative strategy Dalla Palma proposed for the refoundation of the theatre drew its inspiration from the «open forms» of Western dramatic civilisation, in particular from the feast. In the feast –

understood as a «time» and «device» of choral participation – theatre was instrumental to the expression and the transformation of society, becoming:

[the] focal point of the collective consciousness, the moment in which the group explored the reasons for its existence through the images offered by the poets in a place capable of mediating between the festive values and the weekday structures, between the demands of freedom and the conditioning of necessity. A theatre situated at the centre of society and its problems, not on its margins; because in the theatre the group gathered to meet and reflect on its own reasons and to redesign its adventure in the world, freeing itself from what could be experienced as worrying (ibid., p. 22).

To the feast Dalla Palma dedicated his essay *Teatro Popolare: Diversità dei vicini* in 1977, putting his ideas to the test in his projects for the Venice Carnival and in his work in Milan in the 1980s; of the feast he developed the historical and anthropological implications in connection with myth and ritual in the first part of the book *Il teatro e gli orizzonti del sacro* in 2001 (Dalla Palma, 2001b). Starting from the feast, he hypothesised a theatre where:

homogeneous groups, able to construct through the scene images more congenial to their own feelings, realise an experience of progressive and common awareness acquisition through an effort of elaboration from below (ibid., p. 25).

The refoundation of the theatre implies that it is no longer a product but a process «with an inductive movement that develops from the effective willingness of the community groups to “theatre” themselves» so that «the group, from the receptive condition of the audience that passively attends an event [...] returns to the condition of chorus» (ibid., p. 26). The aim is to «remake the theatre» for a different society, to nurture a different theatre that is a «dramatic event [...] that does not merely reflect the world, but contributes to changing it» (ibid., p. 27). Since the 1990s, the ideas of theatre as a process and of dramaturgy as an experience were translated into laboratory practices «capable of facing requests for relationality» (Dalla Palma, 1998, p. 243). Such «models of conviviality [are] in line with the demands of recomposition of the community fabric» (ibid., p. 244). This was the turning point towards «an ethical tension in which the connection with the founding structures of social reality poses itself [...] as a matter of relationship but also as a demand for meaning». The theatre was then called to:

test new models through which the mechanisms of reshaping collective identity are established within [...] social practices alternative to the

processes induced by the emergence of a mediatic continent that has disturbing features in the formation of people and groups (ibid.).

Thus the premises were laid for a «social and community dramaturgy» no longer aimed at the refoundation of the theatre but at the reconstruction of socio-cultural bonds between people.

2. Cultural Policies in Italy

As noted by Claudio Bernardi, the very roots of social theatre in Italy can be traced back to the founding in May 1947 of the first permanent public Italian theatre, the Piccolo Teatro di Milano. There was some internal conflict between Giorgio Strehler and Mario Apollonio on how to implement the programme, a contrast that has recently come to light and which can be partially interpreted as the opposition between the former, who hoped for the advent of a sort of enlightened democracy in the field of culture, and the latter, who upheld the idea of a generative process of theatre based on the ethics of small groups and rooted in the principle of the choir and the community (Bernardi, 2004; Locatelli, 2017). It was therefore a collision between two different and alternative ways of shaping cultural policy in post-fascist Italy.

If it is true that from a political, economic and institutional point of view the “Strehlerian” line clearly prevailed, it is also true that the “Apollonian” line did not disappear, but persisted inconspicuously until it re-emerged in theatre practices towards the end of the 1960s and gradually established itself also at institutional, political and economic level, with a process which is still in progress and will be the object of this contribution.

The birth of the Piccolo Teatro is closely linked, as is well known, to the affirmation of the notion of theatre as public service, proposed in Italy notably by Paolo Grassi between 1945 and 1946 (Grassi, 1946).

Its legislative repercussions were not long in coming. From a regulatory point of view, the Legislative Decree no. 62 of 20 February 1948⁷⁰, which systematically reinstated theatre subsidies after World War II, declared from its start (article 1) the commitment of the Italian State to «subsidise, both within the Republic and abroad, Italian theatre events of particular artistic and social importance».

It was certainly also a response to a stirring that came from below, from instances – as were those of the Piccolo – that were originally local but had

⁷⁰ Also referred to as Andreotti Law, from Giulio Andreotti then vice-president of the Council of Ministers, and chair of the Committee mentioned just below. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1948/02/25/048U0062/sg>

national aspirations. This generated extensive discussions, as attested by the minutes (only recently rediscovered and still unpublished, see Amato, 2020) of the first consultative Committee appointed by Prime Minister De Gasperi to quantify the disbursement of funds in favour of theatrical activities: a debate explicitly related to the notion of theatre as a public service of social value, which assimilated the Piccolo Teatro to other state bodies, such as the Ente Teatrale Italiano ETI and EIST⁷¹.

In particular, the term “social” featuring in article 1 of the Legislative Decree of 1948 was articulated by the Committee in two directions: 1) as economic support to allow access to quality theatre by the entire population; 2) as welfare support to the workers of the performing arts sector, who would otherwise have been out of work in the immediate post-war years.

In terms of cultural and economic policy, the second line was considered fundamental. Thus Andreotti concluded:

the prevailing reason why the rules were made is of a social and welfare nature [...]. If we were to make a purely artistic evaluation, our task would be difficult. We must achieve the result of employing the masses that otherwise could not work. I believe that this goal has been achieved. I believe that with the return to normality, the State can return to its limits, allowing private initiatives to take place (Amato, 2020, p. 275).

These words clearly document the early definition in Italy of an approach aimed primarily at subsidiarity, to support and guarantee artistic professionalism, a goal which was further underpinned by the principle of economic accessibility for the widest possible public to a cultural instrument traditionally considered the prerogative of the bourgeois class.

Despite these undertakings, in Italy as elsewhere working conditions in the performing arts progressively deteriorated from as early as the 1960s; it is not by chance that this coincided with the emergence of the so-called Baumol Syndrome (Baumol and Bowen, 1965), which was also identified as particularly pronounced in public facilities (Abirached, 2005, p. 106). This slip in the meaning of the idea of theatre as a public service is accompanied by the fading of both the perception of the theatre system as socially relevant and of its social vocation, which had been defined at institutional level in the immediate post-war period.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the late 1960s and the early 1970s, with 1968 constituting a significant turning point, saw the emergence of new and different forms of theatrical professionalism (paratheatre, group theatre, third theatre) characterised by a strong socio-anthropological vocation,

⁷¹ Italian bodies for theatre and for theatre exchange.

especially in the field of theatrical research, coinciding with attempts to decentralise and extend theatrical pluralism also in terms of public support and financing.

The institutional recognition by state policies of these experiences was, generally speaking, open and flexible, although tending towards their normalisation and homologation within the equilibrium of the theatre system; particularly relevant, also in terms of political and social repercussions, was among them *Animazione teatrale*⁷², which culminated in Giuliano Scabia's work between 1972 and 1973 in the Trieste psychiatric hospital directed by Franco Basaglia. It is widely recognised that his experience was fundamental to the definition of the so-called Basaglia Law, which in 1978 definitively closed psychiatric institutions in Italy (Scabia, 1976).

To evaluate the political involvement in the field of culture, and in particular of theatre, from the 1970s, it is important to take into account the intervention of the Regions. Established in 1970, through their cultural and educational departments the Regions began to launch intervention programmes in which the performing arts sector played an increasingly important role, even though these policies were often ambiguous, oriented as they were more towards an ephemeral and merely cultural promotion than towards community participation. This concerns regional and municipal activities equally.

Since the end of the 1980s, however, sometimes thanks to the coordination of local authorities (in particular municipalities and provinces), there was a proliferation of theatrical practices and community dramaturgies oriented towards community culture and localities in non-artistic areas, such as the domains of therapies, school, social marginality, social inclusion and migratory trends, down to the most recent interventions of urban regeneration (Pozzi and Minoia, 1999; Bernardi, Cuminetti and Dalla Palma, 2000). These were, more often than not, experiences born outside the circuits of research theatre, linked to the variety of volunteering and non-profit associations which to this day characterises in clear prevalence the phenomenology of social theatre (Bernardi, 2004 and 2015; De Marinis, 2011 and 2018; Pagliarino, 2011; Fiaschini, 2013; Rossi Ghiglione, 2013; Pontremoli, 2015).

With the exception of some local authorities, Italian politics remained, during this phase, mostly neutral, if not distant; on the other hand, there is no doubt that the recovery of the participative and social vocation of the performing

⁷² For an explanation of the meaning of *Animazione teatrale* see the *Notes on Translations* on p. 7. The expression is used in this sense throughout the paper.

arts in non-artistic contexts became, since the beginning of the 1990s, a widespread phenomenon elsewhere in Europe.

Particularly relevant, for example, were in the UK the Pro-Ams – amateur professionals linked to the development of community and public production strategies alien to traditional economic performance and effectiveness objectives (Leadbeater and Miller, 2004) –, and the Arts on Prescription (AoP) programme, launched in 1994 (Bungay and Clift, 2010). It is no coincidence that in 1992 the Arts Council of Great Britain commissioned the first discussion paper on the social impact of the arts, in addition to the more traditional studies on their economic and financial impact (Landry et al., 1993), followed by other reports and studies (on social impact see Matarasso, 1996; Reeves, 2002).

Between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, the first coordinated cultural welfare interventions started to appear in Italy (Grossi and Ravagnan, 2013; Sacco, 2017), thanks to increasingly active local authorities and especially to some banking foundations (Fondazione Cariplo, Compagnia di San Paolo), with numerous artistic and cultural practices aimed at well-being, health, social integration, even in some cases with the definition of urban regeneration plans which included articulated performance activities of social support (this is the case of the city of Turin). Following these developments, the subsequent introduction of medical humanities in university training courses and the recognition of art therapy by the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (the Italian national institute of health) were significant clues of the process of institutionalisation of social theatre practices (Cicerchia, Rossi Ghiglione and Seia, 2020).

In the last ten years, institutional interventions in the field of social theatre have become increasingly systematic. Just think of the inclusion of the category “Cohesion and Social Inclusion” in the article dedicated to Promotion activities of the Fondo Unico dello Spettacolo (FUS, state grants for the performing arts) from 2014. Although it remains an item to which only residual resources are allocated, its mention alone marks an important sign of recognition or at least an attempt to incorporate the value of social theatre into the traditional state support for artistic production. Along the same lines, article 1 of the so-called Codice dello Spettacolo (Performing Arts Code) «recognises the educational and training value of the performing arts, also in order to promote integration and to counteract social hardship» and acknowledges «the social utility of the performing arts⁷³».

In the same direction have been going some recent initiatives promoted by

⁷³ L. 175/2017 in *Gazzetta ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, n. 289 del 12 dicembre 2017, pp. 1-12. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2017/12/12/17G00189/sg>

National Theatres, moving beyond their usual operating scope, often with the financial support of the State, of local authorities and of banking foundations (who are frequently already active in the sector with their own specific calls and projects). For example, one should mention the Istituto di Pratiche Teatrali per la Cura della Persona (Teatro Stabile di Torino) or the participatory theatre projects launched by ERT-Emilia Romagna Teatro.

Some of these activities might have been, in some instances, attempts to intercept the ever-increasing public funds earmarked for social and cultural inclusion, which are sometimes very relevant, like in the case of Creative Europe 2014-2020, for example, and of the Horizon 2020 programme.

But the participatory and social vocation of the performing arts has become, on the other hand, to all intents and purposes increasingly central at political and institutional level. Explicitly recalled by the Performing Arts Code itself, the Reform of the Third Sector⁷⁴ has been of fundamental importance in recent years. It has introduced important innovations especially with regard to the definition of social enterprises on the basis of the social impact they achieve through the production and exchange of goods and services of social utility, despite their falling outside conventional economic indicators.

This does not only imply the recognition of a long-standing tradition of theatre activities led by third sector and voluntary associations, but also the reference to principles which are already at the centre of the attention of international bodies. Take for example the Indicators of well-being, sustainability and development, resulting from the OECD research of The Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress led by Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean-Paul Fitoussi (2010), which are the driving force behind many other studies and reports produced in various European countries. In Italy, for instance, the Italian National Institute of Statistics ISTAT has been producing since 2013 the Reports on Fair and Sustainable Well-being (ISTAT, n.d.).

Principles such as those of Impact Value Chain (Zamagni, Venturi and Rago, 2015), Relational Economics (Donati, 2017), Social Capital (De Blasio and Sestito, 2011) have thus increasingly entered the vocabulary and made it to the fundamentals of research dedicated to the impact and process assessment of social theatre in Italy.

These approaches can undoubtedly be extremely useful in overcoming more traditional attempts to measure the effects of social theatre in purely economic terms, attempts that are always prevailing where political requirements are at stake. The impact of social theatre in Italy is particularly

⁷⁴ L. 106/2016, *Gazzetta ufficiale della Repubblica italiana*, n. 151 del 18 giugno 2016, pp. 1-7. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2016/06/18/16G00118/sg>

difficult to quantify, if not by rough approximations, as statistical data prove of complex interpretation, despite some efforts of recent years (such as the report *Io sono cultura*⁷⁵). To this end, a systematic analysis of EUROSTAT data could perhaps be useful, if it was not limited to the Culture database, but also, for example, extended to include the Quality of Life and Youth sections. However, studies in recent years have demonstrated the effectiveness of developing and applying principles such as, for example, the SROI (Social Return on Investment) for the measurement in purely monetary terms of the value generated by an activity in the social sphere; in particular, it was applied in recent research on theatrical activity carried out in the Milan Opera prison (Giordano, Perrini and Langer, 2019; Giordano et al., 2019).

In conclusion, the insistence on the objectives of measuring economic impact is an ever-present danger, especially if the quantitative economic measurement is – even if only implicitly – considered useful to prove the necessity for theatre as the central, if not the primary, social and community tool, as well as an instrument of care.

It is a risk that is anything but negligible, and in some respects consistent with some recent neoliberal tendencies (Debord, 1967; Lipovsky and Serroy, 2013). Well in advance and with greater foresight than that shown in the theatrical field, using considerable financial resources and sophisticated analytical tools, the so-called aesthetic capitalism has been working for decades on the same basic principles of participation and performance, but has the different purpose of making them effective tools of aestheticisation at the service of an insatiable individual desire.

⁷⁵ <https://www.symbola.net/approfondimento/io-sono-cultura-i-dati-della-cultura-nella-ricerca-symbola/>