

# THE APOLLONIAN

A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies (Online, Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed)

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Vol. 1, Issue. 1 (September 2014) || ISSN 2393-9001

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Research Article:

## Three Great Pioneers for Russian Theatre Studies in Italy

*Maria Pia Pagani*

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## Three Great Pioneers for Russian Theatre Studies in Italy

*Maria Pia Pagani*

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In Italy, from the historiographical perspective, Russian Theatre Study has its roots in Ettore Lo Gatto. His lesson was developed by the pupil Angelo Maria Ripellino, famous theatre critic and poet, and by Gerardo Guerrieri, who was an appreciated translator of Chekhov and the first Italian editor of Stanislavsky.

The work of these three great pioneers was the starting point for the realization of important books which introduced Russian Theatre Studies in Italy, with the publication of anthologies of Russian and Soviet dramaturgy, investigations about the fortune of Commedia dell'Arte in Russia and the tours of Italian actors from the XVIIIth to the beginning of the XXth century.

As first pioneer, Ettore Lo Gatto (1890-1982) opened a new chapter in theatre history for the Italian public: his lesson was very important and his books are still used in Italian libraries. As translator, in 1919 he realized a version of *Uncle Vanya* with his wife Zoe Voronkova, who was also his "teacher" of Russian language. In 1923, he published his translation of *The Forest* by Alexander Ostrovsky. In 1925 he also translated *Beyond The Law*, a tragedy by Lev Luntz: the preface of this book was written by Maxim Gorky.

In his approach to telling the history of Russian theatre to the Italian public, Lo Gatto underlined his position of spectator, traveller and intellectual. In the 1930s he wrote and translated some articles for "Scenario," one of the most important monthly theatre review in the first half of the XXth century. Some of them are directly connected to his travels in Russia in 1931-1932, focalising the hardest problems of theatre life in USSR. He proposed to the readers a consideration about

the secular activity of the Alexandrinsky Theatre, some notes about the most famous Russian directors (also considering their interest in Western dramaturgy). In June 1936, the death of Gorky was the occasion to write a profile of him as dramatic author.

These experiences led Lo Gatto to become the author of the first monographs about the history of Russian theatre printed in Italy. The first step was *The Russian Theatre (Il Teatro Russo)* in 1937, also translated in Spanish in 1945. He continued to study this matter in depth and, in 1952, the second step was the publication of his monumental *History of the Russian Theatre (Storia del teatro russo)*, in two volumes, with excellent illustrations and bibliography. With this pioneering work, he won Marzotto Prize for history and literary critic in 1952.

In the first volume, Lo Gatto considered the history of Russian theatre from the Middle Ages to the end of the XIXth century. In his reconstruction, is evident the process of birth of the national theatre in Russia, and the influence of the Western theatre (Commedia dell'Arte, French culture, German artists, Shakespearean dramaturgy and so on). He had also a special attention for Russian music, with the analysis of the career of many composers and singers.

In the second volume, Lo Gatto considered the history of Russian theatre from the beginning of the XXth century to the 1950s, focalising the work of actors, dancers, directors etc. He illustrated the situation of Russian theatre with the tsarist system, under the Revolution and in the Soviet period. His favourite artists were Stanislavsky, Nemirovich-Danchenko, Meyerhold, Tairov. In fact, he met all these directors during his travels in Russia, and dedicated with nostalgia his *History of the Russian Theatre* to them.

Lo Gatto's attention for Russian dramatic literature was a way to underline the importance of translation for Italian press and its value for the stage: it was also "another" possibility to study Russian culture, literature and history. For these reasons, in 1955 he published the anthology *Russian Theatre: A Collection of Dramas*

*and Comedies (Teatro russo: raccolta di drammi e commedie)* with translations of plays by Anonymous (for popular theatre), Ablesimov, Tsarina Catherine II, Fonvizin, Griboedov, Pushkin, Gogol, Lermontov, Turgenev, Ostrovsky, Suchovo-Kobylin, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Andreev, Gorky, Zamyatin.

In 1960, in the anthology *Russian Theatre (Teatro russo)* edited by Leone Pacini Savoy and Dario Staffa, in two volumes, Lo Gatto proposed other new translations of Russian plays by Fonvizin, Griboedov, Pushkin, Gogol, Ostrovsky, Suchovo-Kobylin, Chekhov, Gorky, Mayakovsky, Vs. Ivanov, Kataev, Afinogenov, Shkvarkin, Kaverin, Olesha, Pogodin, Volodin, Hikmet Ran.

Moreover, in 1968 Lo Gatto edited the anthology *Soviet Theatre of the 1950s (Teatro sovietico degli anni '50)*, in two volumes, with translations of plays by Pogodin, Satrov, Leonov, Arbuzov, Sofronov, Shtejn, Shalinsky, Rozov, Finn, Volodin.

In 1976, in the autobiographical book *My encounters with Russia (I miei incontri con la Russia)*, he admitted that his interest in the history of Russian theatre was due to the folklorist Pëtr Bogatyrev – author of original research about popular theatre. Lo Gatto met him in Prague in the 1920s, at the beginning of his cultural enterprise towards Russian scene and the definition of its history for the Italian public. He also proposed his memory as spectator of Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Tairov in 1929, 1931 and 1932. In particular, he was spectator of the Moscow Art Theatre in Russia, in Prague, in Rome. And he saw the spectacles of Tatiana Pavlova and Pëtr Sharov – the two most important “heirs” of Stanislavsky in Italy.

In 1934 Lo Gatto did not receive the permission to travel in Russia again, so his best encounters with Russian theatre artists were in Paris – especially with Nikolai Evreinov and his wife Anna Kashina. In his autobiographical book, he underlined the importance of Evreinov's *Histoire du théâtre russe* (printed in Paris in 1947, while the Russian version was published in 1955 in New York) for his *History of the Russian Theatre*.

During the '50s and '60s, Lo Gatto used his books for some conferences (also for Swiss radio), with the aim to introduce a large audience to the history of Russian theatre. Now the manuscript, entitled *The influence of the Italian theatre on the Russian theatre* (*L'influenza del teatro italiano sul teatro russo*), is available in Rome (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Ettore Lo Gatto Archive). The first part of the text is entitled *From the origins to Commedia dell'Arte* (*Dalle origini alla Commedia dell'Arte*), and the other *From opera to dramatic art* (*Dal teatro dell'opera all'arte drammatica*). There is also a brief French version, entitled *Influence et echos italiens dans le théâtre russe*.

This cultural strategy was useful to define other two important aspects: the analyses of the success of Commedia dell'Arte in Russia and the tours of Italian actors. In fact, from the XVIIIth century, Italian theatre became a product of exportation in Russia: the effect of this cultural contact is still relevant today, and helps to understand the Russian theatrical fortune of authors such as Goldoni, d'Annunzio, Pirandello.

Lo Gatto never considered himself a theatre critic. But he sustained the importance of the knowledge of Russian theatre for the real spiritual comprehension of the Russian soul, and always recommended to his students in Rome (University La Sapienza) to continue with this study. His lesson was developed by the pupil Angelo Maria Ripellino (1923-1978), the second great pioneer for Russian Theatre Studies in Italy: he was professor in La Sapienza but also poet, translator, critic for "L'Espresso" and other important Italian reviews.

In 1952 Ripellino published a book review for Lo Gatto's *History of the Russian Theatre*, and underlined its importance in Western Europe and also in Russia: "this work will remain an inexhaustible mine for all the historians of theatre and a pride of our Slavic Studies" (Ripellino 348). In 1953 he published the article *About the Russian Popular Theatre* (*Del teatro popolare russo*), which can be considered a first declaration of his eternal love for Petrushka.

At the beginning of the 1950s, Ripellino was on the editorial board of the Italian encyclopaedia of performing arts: he wrote the items for many famous Russian actors and directors (for ex. Lilina, Granovsky, Lensky, Komissarzhevskaya), and interesting notes about the fortune in Russia of some Western authors (for ex. Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen). Then, this experience was very precious for the publication of two successful monographs: *Mayakovsky and the Russian Avant-Garde Theatre (Majakovskij e il teatro russo d'avanguardia)*, published in 1959 (with French translation in 1965 and Spanish translation in 1971), and *The Trick and the Soul. The Masters of Direction in the Russian Theatre of the XXth Century (Il trucco e l'anima. I maestri della regia nel teatro russo del Novecento)*, published in 1965 and winner of Viareggio Prize.

As translator, one of the most vivid result of Ripellino's work was with Bene! *Four diverse ways to die in verse (Bene! Quattro modi diversi di morire in versi)*, a great show realized in several editions by the famous actor Carmelo Bene (1937-2002) using poems of Blok, Mayakovsky, Esenin, Pasternak. Nowadays, another fascinating perspective is the analyses of the "contact" between Ripellino and Bene: in fact, their deep interest in Russian poetry generated original productions for Italian theatre from the 1960s.

Ripellino's work for Russian theatre is also reflected in his experience as director: for ex. in Rome (Teatro Abaco), in 1970, he organized with a group of his students called "Skomorokhi Troupe" a representation of Blok's *The Puppet Show* (in Academic Year 1970/71 his specialized course at University La Sapienza was entitled *Petrushka & C.*). Always in Rome (Teatro Politecnico), and always working on Blok, in 1974 he realized the representation of *The Unknown Woman*. Significantly, in 1977 he chose for his preface to *Lyric Dramas* the title *The theatre of young Blok (Il teatro del giovane Blok)*, with the subtitle *Directing Notes (Note di regia)*.

The third great pioneer for Russian Theatre Studies in Italy is Gerardo Guerrieri (1920-1986), who devoted all his life to activities related to the performing

arts. He studied Russian language in Rome, in the 1940s, with Raissa Olkienizkaia Naldi (1886-1978) – an émigré who was an admirer of Eleonora Duse, friend of Lo Gatto and translator for Pirandello and Evreinov. In 1944 he wrote the monograph *Meyerhold and the Russian Theatre (Meyerhold e il teatro russo)*, and became an appreciated translator of Chekhov. As critic, Ripellino always had deep respect and high consideration for Guerrieri's translations.

Guerrieri was also the first Italian editor of Stanislavsky, a great biographer of Eleonora Duse, an appreciated critic for several magazines and reviews. He was a close collaborator of Luchino Visconti (1906-1976), translating Russian and American plays for him. He also wrote the item "Actor" for the Italian encyclopaedia of performing arts, which is still relevant today, and realized many books worthy of note for Einaudi Publisher in Turin.

In 1957, with his wife Anne d'Arbeloff, Guerrieri founded "Teatro Club" in Rome: this experience was emblematic because introduced in Italy the Oriental dances (India, Tibet, China), The Living Theatre, Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, and other international artists that revolutionized the idea of theatre for the Italian public in the 1960s. Now Guerrieri's books and manuscripts are in Rome (University La Sapienza, Burcardo Library, Baldini Library), and represent a real treasure for Russian Theatre Study in Italy.

For historical reasons, only in recent years it is possible to study in depth another important aspect: Russian émigré theatre in Italy in the 1920s and 1930s. In fact, in this period the presence of Russian actors and directors in Italy is strictly connected to the diaspora created by the Revolution and the beginning of the Soviet period. For a Russian artist, especially if aristocratic, the possibility to play abroad became a form of voluntary exile: for its geographic configuration, Italy was the destination of touring artists who decided to settle definitively in Paris or in the United States (e.g. Evreinov, Pitoeff, Miklashevsky, Komissarzhevsky), but also the final destination of artists who obtained Italian citizenship and realized here the

most significant part of their career (Sharov and Pavlova, most notably). There are, however, cases of Russian directors who were on tour in Italy, but decided to return home (Nemirovich-Danchenko and Tairov).

In the 1920s and 1930s, Ripellino and Guerrieri were children. In that period, for Lo Gatto, the tours of Russian actors and directors in were part of his “everyday life” in Rome, and was quite impossible to understand their real artistic meaning – especially from the point of view of theatre direction (with a particular focus on the first generation of Russian directors). Moreover, it was impossible to consider the impact on our national staging and the artistic heritage.

Now the “re-discovery” of actors and directors who had chosen exile in the 1920s and 1930s, with the “re-discovery” of their activity in the West, is also a way to know better the background of the three great pioneers of Russian Theatre Study in Italy.

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