CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION:
POSTWAR ITALIAN DRAMA
AND THE THEATER
OF CARLO TERRON

In 1947 the Italian theater was characterized by two traditions: those of the star and the traveling company. Throughout Europe, the heyday of the great director (Stanislavsky, Reinhardt, and Copeau) had ended; however, in Italy, it had not yet even begun. Not everything in the Italian theater of this time was bad: despite their faults, the traveling companies meant that the theater was decentralized—and centralization continues to be one of the great problems of Western theater. (Decentralization has been
truly achieved—which is to say, on the highest artistic level—only in Germany.)

The Italian theater after the war, then, was cosmopolitan and bourgeois, even petty bourgeois. No doubt bourgeois theater is a twentieth- and twenty-first-century worldwide phenomenon, not a purely Italian one. In France, however, the reaction against it was more rapid: as bourgeois theater developed there, so did the antibourgeois, or rather a-bourgeois, theater. This did not occur in Italy, and the reason for this was Fascism. Beneath its revolutionary appearance and its military rhetoric, Italian Fascism consolidated petty-bourgeois tendencies, although in a few cases, it encouraged feeble attempts at an ideological theater of “corporate” inspiration. In other words, the Italian Fascists blocked any fundamental reform of the theater and cut off all communication with the living European theater.

One must recall here that the problems of the Italian theater were the fundamental problems of Italy. The most important of these was the problem of the Italian nation itself. For Italy was still a federation, only then—from the second half of the nineteenth century forward—in the process of becoming a unified country. There were insuperable obstacles to the diffusion of culture and to the diffusion of theater, not only between north and south, but even within these larger divisions—between the Venetian republic and the kingdoms of Parma and Bologna, for example. Yet every great modern theater (if “modern” is construed as the period of history after the Middle Ages) is linked to a nation. England had Shakespeare because it was already England. In Italy, however, there had been nothing since the Renaissance. Italian court theaters may have been born during the Renaissance, but they died with it as well.

The Renaissance is crucial to our understanding, for immediately after it, there was a double cleavage: between men of
letters and men of science, and between culture and the people. Italy still feels the effects today, particularly in the separation of its literature from the real life of the Italian people. Moreover, Italy’s common, everyday speech and educated or standard language are so radically different that one can say that the Italian people think as they do not speak and speak as they do not write. One of the great problems facing Italian writers and theater people, therefore, is this duality of language. The literary language is very rich and subtle, while the spoken language possesses extraordinary force and vitality. Italian intellectuals still know that these two languages must merge before the nation can have a great realistic art. Passing from a regional to a European phase without first passing through a national phase, Italy never had its French Revolution and continues to fight it morally as well as politically, only gradually assimilating its effects—not least of which is linguistic homogenization.

Other linguistic factors have also worked against theater in Italy. For example, the classical literary language is not theatrical but melodic; it is less easily played than sung because—contrary to what people usually think—its rhythm is rather slow. A supple language, Italian is slower than French, slower even than German. It takes a long time to write (a page of Giraudoux translates into a page and a half of Italian) and a long time to speak because every syllable is pronounced. Clear, simple, and lacking gutturals, however, Italian demands no special vocal effort and, consequently, can easily be sung.

Additionally, there are external—or nonliterary, nonlinguistic factors—that have kept Italians from the theater. Although it is not true that Italians “act” all the time, as is often said, their lives are theatrical; even their cities have a theatrical quality, and perhaps this is why the Italian people have rarely gone to the theater. Indeed, theater companies in Rome have been known to
complain about their “imprisonment” in theaters while outside there are the city and spring. Unlike Germans, then, Italians resist the theater, even rebelling against it—against dramatic theater, to be sure, for Italians do savor certain forms of spectacle: opera, or what might be called musical melodrama, which arose from Claudio Monteverdi and the court theater of the Renaissance.

Certainly, Italian dramatic theater lacks continuity, for, as I have implied, this theater is fragmentary, divided into the purely literary and the purely presentational or performative. Its actors are regional, its great authors—Goldoni, Alfieri, and Pirandello—represent isolated “summits,” and this is because ever since the time of the actor and patriot Gustavo Modena (1803–1861), when a united Italy and a federal theater were first dreamed of, the perennial difficulty of developing a truly popular, national dramatic language has resulted in a dearth of good plays. Such a language, solidly based upon the daily usage of the whole of Italian society, must await the solution of the traditional problems of the country since its unification—problems connected with Italy’s moral, political, and cultural life, which is too diversified from class to class and region to region to allow for the attainment of genuine national unity, be it of the governmental or the linguistic kind.

After the shock of the war, the Resistance, and the fall of Fascism, a sudden surge of hope opened up, it is true. But these were hopes or possibilities seized upon by the cinema, thanks to the flexibility and immediacy of the camera. The problems of a democratic Italy born of the twin crises of war and liberation found expression in fiction as well, but above all, they were realized in motion pictures—not in the theater. To wit, the neorealist films of Vittorio De Sica, Roberto Rossellini, and Luchino Visconti represented the most important contribution of Italian art to European culture after the Second World War. The cinema, by
its example, made even more evident the want of reality in the literary language that continued to be used in the drama. (The one dramatic exception may be Eduardo De Filippo’s group of dialectal comedies from the 1950s, which took a realistic posture in treating the difficulties of common Neapolitan folk during the war, the occupation, and the return to normalcy.)

In contrast to films, the theater seemed lost, in the popular arena as well as the artistic one, for it had been pushed out of its place as the king of popular entertainment not only by the movies, but also by radio, public sporting events, and later television. In addition, because of their complex interrelationship and the difficulty of combining them into a vital new dramatic idiom that can find a responsive public, the fruits of the theater ripen slowly—and only in those countries where, and at those times when, circumstances permit. For this reason, postwar events were reflected in the Italian theater confusedly and only after a time lag of several years. More often than not, this reflection was oblique in that it consisted of abstractions and symbols, of private confessions, and of morbid fantasies, which unavoidably pointed back to the dramatist himself, who was both protagonist and spectator, or masochist and moralist. The sufferings and concerns of the new society—the moral and spiritual abjectness of the new (yet perhaps same old) ruling elite, its intellectual impotence and political stagnation—were thus left unfronted, or facing only a mirror image.

Still, the most important development during the postwar period was the birth of subsidized public theaters and permanent theater companies. First among them was the Piccolo Teatro di Milano, which was founded in 1947 by Paolo Grassi and Giorgio Strehler. These theaters, or theater companies, assumed the difficult task of cultural updating that was so necessary after twenty years of Fascist isolation. They also
undertook to rebuild an intellectually open and lively public, which, more than ever before, had been estranged from the theater by the insipid dramatic repertory of the interwar years. The public wanted a different theater; they called loudly for new authors like Eugene O’Neill and Jean Giraudoux. And for the moment, this necessary cultural updating (aside from the issue of creating a representative or national dramatic language) delayed the possibility of developing a new, native Italian dramaturgy. As a logical reaction to the cultural autarchy of the Fascist period, then, Italian stages were dominated for ten years by the works of French, English, and American playwrights.

And for these plays, directors like Strehler were needed—that is, those who approach texts as great literary critics do, interpreting while at the same time creating, and who direct in such a way that their work, like the best criticism, is the distillation of a contextualized culture and a historical situation, of a moral attitude and a total psychology. (Despite their good intentions and even their genius, traditional Italian actors, with their undisciplined rehearsal techniques—not to speak of their ten-day rehearsal periods—were incapable of performing the new Euro-American drama.) The decisive figure in the development of such directors in Italy was Silvio D’Amico—though it is true that Renato Simoni and especially Virgilio Talli were important. (Talli was the first man, in 1922, to step down from the stage and direct his actors from the floor of the theater, an action that led him to ask his company to change its acting to a more contemporary style.)

At the start of the twentieth century, D’Amico published a pamphlet titled The Death of the Star. It had quite an impact, even though the Italian star actor did last a bit longer into the 1900s. Little by little, always embattled along the way, D’Amico
succeeded in founding the Academy of Dramatic Art, a state school, and, attached to the academy, a company of actors that was drawn from its best students. Tatiana Pavlova, a Russian émigrée actress and student of Stanislavsky, was head of the acting school and also became a director in her own right, while Silvio D’Amico taught the history of theater and drama. During the season of 1935–1936, the acting company of the Academy of Dramatic Art, under the direction of Alessandro Brissoni, Ettore Giannini, and Orazio Costa, produced Carlo Gozzi’s *King Stag* (1762), Pirandello’s *Tonight We Improvise* (1932), and Goethe’s *Faust* (I. 1808; II. 1832). And it was this season that marked the birth of modern theater in Italy—a theater, or theater art, of directors as well as actors.

But what about the playwrights? Well, the number of new Italian plays produced after the war was greater than ever before, because government subsidies compelled both touring companies and permanent (urban) theaters to present such original works. The level of their quality, however—given the obstacles and restrictions already discussed—was another matter. And it is precisely within the linguistic and geographic or regional limits imposed upon the authors of these plays that we can begin to understand postwar Italian drama. The generation born around the turn of the century, the writers who were successful at the same time as Luigi Pirandello (who, after all, came to the stage only at the age of fifty and at first almost unwillingly)—mostly members of the movement known as “theater of the grotesque,” like Luigi Chiarelli, Enrico Cavacchioli, and Luigi Antonelli—were themselves unable to overcome the double impasse of Fascism and war. Indeed, the Italian public discovered even Pirandello only after he had been consecrated abroad; native critical opinion, for its part, was largely hostile to him, often stubbornly insisting on its preference for
Pirandello the short-story writer or “minor” author of Sicilian
dramatic sketches (which date from 1898 to 1916).

The truth is that Pirandello fits better into the general European
picture than into a specifically Italian landscape. The despairing
solitude, the bitter uncertainty, the existential anxiety—all of
which are basic to the metaphysical as well as poetic meaning
of his drama (if, at the same time, they contribute to its social
evasiveness, or avoidance of the real problems of contempo-
rary life)—have nothing to do with the Italian stage between the
two wars, with the emptiness, superficiality, sentimentality, and
escapism of its so-called “drama of white telephones.” It was
not Pirandello, then, who became part of the life of the Italian
theater; rather, it was “pirandellism,” the banal imitation of his
dramatic paradoxes to be found even in such lesser-known plays
as The Rules of the Game (1919) and As You Desire Me (1930).
Because Pirandello was too exalted for the official Italy of Fas-
cism and too indirect or disengaged to offer any real civil (let
alone political) opposition to it during the years of Fascist rule
(1922–1943), he remained a much more isolated and anomalous
phenomenon in Italian theater than is generally believed—with
the possible exception, that is, of his influence on the drama of

The generation that followed Pirandello and his contempo-
raries reached maturity during Mussolini’s regime and more
or less adapted itself to Fascism. To be sure, there was only a
handful of openly Fascist plays, but the dramatists of this period
were nonetheless bound by necessity to conform to the world in
which they lived. And the playwrights who were in their early
twenties on the eve of the Second World War and who began
their careers under Fascism are our focus here, for Carlo Terron
is a part of this group. Let me begin by isolating the two major
tendencies in what could be considered a serious Italian theater
during the quarter of a century after the war: the dramaturgy of vaguely Marxist inspiration, on the one hand, and the dramaturgy of Catholic influence, on the other.

The most representative writers of the first tendency are Dario Fo (born 1926) and Luigi Squarzina (born 1922). In his more than seventy plays—particularly since the abolition of “preventive censorship” in Italy in 1962 and the political upheavals of 1968—Fo, also an actor in and director of his own work, has sought to attract a working-class audience with agitprop drama (sometimes genially comic, sometimes forcefully critical) satirizing capitalism, the Italian state, the Catholic Church, and (in his words) “other corrupt, powerful, and ineptly bureaucratic” enemies of the idiosyncratic communism that he champions. Fo’s cabaret-like satire (which was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1997) ranges widely in such plays as *A Finger in One’s Eye* (1953), *Mistero Buffo* (1969), and *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1978); whereas Squarzina, for his part, is the author of “straight” dramatic works inspired by the war and the Resistance. Outstanding among them are *The Three-Quarter Moon* (1953) and *The Girl from Romagna* (1959), in which Squarzina moves away from the poetic naturalism of Ibsen and Chekhov toward the historical materialism of Brecht.

The second, religious tendency in drama proposed to examine the many social and moral problems of the new, postwar Italy in light of the Catholic faith. Typical of this tendency is the theater of Diego Fabbri (1911–1980), whose most important works are *Inquisition* (1950), *The Seducer* (1951), *The Trial of Jesus* (1955), and *Armed Watch* (1956). Indeed, Fabbri’s can be called the drama of Catholicism, of the crises and resolutions in Catholics’ lives. Addressing himself consistently to the complexity of contemporary theological questions, Fabbri portrays the
dilemma of Christian man within a modern, secular environment but offers no facile solutions to spiritual dilemmas.

Fabbri could also be called the dramatic heir to Ugo Betti (1892–1953) in that both men often cast their plays in the form of an inquest, during which an attempt is made—however futile in the end—to determine responsibility or guilt for some incident. In such plays as *The Inquiry* (1941), *Corruption in the Palace of Justice* (1944), and *The Queen and the Rebels* (1951), Betti (himself a lawyer and later a judge) saw man as a contradictory character in need of (tempered) judgment by other men, as well as by a Catholic Christian God.

In their focus upon similar moral issues and even their occasional deployment of the trial or investigative format, the plays of Carlo Terron may be compared to those of both Ugo Betti and Diego Fabbri, as well as Pirandello. Terron’s theater is perhaps the most varied of his generation; his flexible talent makes each of his dramas a new experiment that reveals an intellectual faculty not bound by schemata or preconceptions. His works range from the grotesque to the sublime, from psychological drama to allegorical farce. Whether it takes the form of comedy or tragedy, however, Terron’s oeuvre is essentially concerned with an investigation of the roots of guilt, and as such it reflects the moral climate of post–Second World War Italy. In most of his plays Terron used his training as a psychiatrist to provide the intellectual framework for a world view in which human motives for action are seen as being so intertwined with the complex nature of life that it is almost impossible to fix individual moral responsibility.

In its exploration of the complexity and even inscrutability of human behavior, Terron’s drama has something in common with Pirandello’s “theater of the grotesque.” For such a theater not only investigates the gap or disjunction between appearance and reality,
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it also questions—like Terron—whether a more reliable truth can indeed be found after life’s masks are stripped away. Personality for these dramatists becomes the rigid (yet comic) mask we place over our features in order to placate the busybody’s—everybody’s—hunger to define and classify, while character itself is the suffering (and tragic) face: spontaneous, evanescent, finally unknowable. Thus realistic *persona*, dialogue, and detail or design are the tools of grotesque drama but not its material. With these tools, writers like Pirandello and Terron shaped a new dramatic world in which realism is only the play’s surface, just as appearance is life’s surface. And beneath this apparent realism—the illusion of reality, as it were—whirl the depths of chaos, contradiction, and paradox, ready to rear up at any moment and prove reality a lie—or to reveal the reality of illusion.

If Terron’s protagonists understandably reject judgment by others in such a quasi-absurdist world, where identity and truth are relative or subjective, they are very quick to accuse themselves; indeed, the theme of self-judgment and self-punishment was established in one of his earliest plays, *Liberty* (1943). Unable to resist the temptation to steal an old woman’s watch in this one-act comedy, Memmo Ventura afterward escapes from the police who caught him. Naturally, he does so in order to maintain his sense of freedom, but, ironically, Memmo then exercises his free will by turning up at the local jail and condemning himself to a year’s sentence. Thus has he come to understand the true nature of liberty, guilt, and punishment—not to speak of his own inner or private truth, to which the hasty action of a moment’s confusion, or a moment’s clarity, has provided him access.

The theme of self-judgment equally pervades the drama whose production in 1950 cemented Terron’s reputation as a playwright: *Judith*, which transposes the tale of the biblical heroine to the
time of the Italian Resistance. When German troops are quartered in her house, Judith finds in their general someone whose life, like her own, is in the service of the ideal of war. But whereas the general sees war as a political and racial affirmation, Judith sees it as a means to combat the very essence of war. She and the general are nevertheless drawn to each other, and she ends up becoming his mistress. Yet neither is able to forgive himself or herself for this abdication of moral principles, and the result is that Judith poisons the general at his own instigation, then arranges to have her other, Partisan, lover kill her.

Don Juan’s Wife (1944) continues Terron’s own drama of paradox as it presents a humorous situation in which a wife guarantees “possession” of her husband by pushing him into the arms of other women. No Peace for the Ancient Faun (1951) itself is a hilarious comedy concerning a male ballet dancer whose immorality is seen as “constitutional amorality” and who paradoxically ends in bourgeois respectability—surrounded by the 163 children he had fathered in a Damascus harem. I Had More Respect for Hydrogen (1953) is another “happy comedy,” according to Terron: it shows scientists at the mercy, in war, of their own discoveries and inventions, and the play concludes in universal destruction. Lavinia Among the Damned (1958) returns Terron to a more “serious” mood, as Lavinia’s illicit compulsions (to poison her husband and to make love to the priest who is her husband’s brother) destroy both her and her seemingly united, harmonious family by bringing to light the fear as well as the loathing behind each member’s social mask.

Included in The Theater of Carlo Terron are two of his best and most representative works, The Trial of the Innocents (1950) and Arsenic, Tonight! (1967), each in its own way a Pirandellian drama of the grotesque. “In this hell there is no guilty party, only victims.” Some of those victims are brilliantly
on display in *The Trial of the Innocents* and *Arsenic, Tonight!*; each of which is composed in a Shavian linguistic style that diabolically mixes lucidity and intelligence with irony, allusion, and even subversiveness. In the earlier drama, written in three acts, a “respectable” woman’s grown children discover that she has a young lover; they then begin to investigate her dubious past, which has been concealed until now beneath the mask of “mother.” By the time the “trial” is over, accusers and accused find themselves inescapably linked by the fatefulness of the human condition, which forces contradiction and uncertainty upon everyone.

The very title *Arsenic, Tonight!* invites uncertainty and contradiction: Arsenic for whom? For the audience? For the characters? Or arsenic for everybody? And why such a declaration or exclamation, as if some delicious specialty were being served for dinner? In *Arsenic, Tonight!* billed by Terron as a comedy in two acts, but something closer to a tragic farce or tragic grotesque, an apparently happy, middle-class couple is living in a Strindbergian hell: the wife is at once a workaholic and a nymphomaniac who operates her own funeral home, while the husband is an introspective bookworm who, though he has become sexually impotent due to his wife’s persistent criticism as well as her rampant unfaithfulness, manages nonetheless to play an active role in the running of her business. Together they remain prisoners of a marriage—ironically, the nucleus on which both the family and society are founded—in which each member both hates and loves, role-plays and acts out, simultaneously attempting to destroy the other and to rediscover the passion that originally brought the two of them together.

Although Terron’s fluid dialogue in *Arsenic, Tonight!* and other plays is suspenseful, allusive, and brimming with an intentionality that loads the words with manifold meaning, he, like
many other Italian dramatists, has been accused of a linguistic artificiality that robs his characters of life. While this artificiality probably does not come across as greatly in English translation, it—that is, the issue of dialectal versus literary language in Italian—is worth some additional comment, for it points to the larger conflict between the demand for realism (which, in Italy, requires the use of a regional dialect) and the quest for universality (which requires a more literary or standard speech). Yet this conflict did not exist in Italy until the sixteenth century, when it was a direct consequence of the progressive weakening of the process of linguistic unification.

Before the sixteenth century, the most genuine seeds of Italian dramatic literature were to be found, according to Pirandello himself, in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (ca. 1350)—which is less of a paradox than it at first appears. The reason is that in the *Decameron* (as well as allied short stories and chivalric romances written during the Renaissance), we see a slow but sure elaboration of spoken Italian, as well as of characters and dramatic situations that were often brought to the stage in other European countries. The potential of this literature for the development of a “national vernacular” was far greater than that of the Italian erudite comedy of the sixteenth century—even though the most vivid characters of this learned drama do indeed speak in dialect (Florentine in Niccolò Machiavelli’s *Mandragola* [1520], for example, and Neapolitan in Giordano Bruno’s *Candelaio* [1582]).

At the same time, the *commedia dell’arte* adopted the vernacular for its various masked characters, while the national language then called Tuscan was used only by the *commedia*’s elevated *inamorati*, or young lovers—significantly, the norm against which the linguistic peculiarities of such masks as Capitano, Pantalone, and Dottore were measured. So, even though Boccaccio had
dared to do it, the common people could no longer be made to speak the national language; they had already become the stock comic and dialectal characters of the stage.

Only the regional theater kept in close touch with the realities of the people, and, as a result, dialectal drama evolved there in its own closed circle, reserved for workers and lower-middle-class characters (while the middle-to-upper classes expressed themselves onstage in a standard Italian that seemed affected and stylized). This, to repeat, is the centuries-old problem of Italian theater: how to evolve from regional dialects—which have their moments of dramatic greatness—to a national language without becoming ossified in purely literary speech. Every generation resumes this labor of Sisyphus, which was also the task of the Venetian Carlo Goldoni (1707–1792) and the Sicilian Giovanni Verga (1840–1922). Unfortunately, the success of these writers, and to a certain extent of Machiavelli and Bruno before them as well as of Pirandello afterward, has not been emulated, and therefore no linguistic tradition like theirs has been established.

In the postwar period, attempts to assimilate the various spoken languages into a national, rather than regional, Italian idiom have been undertaken only infrequently. Older than Carlo Terron but nonetheless a kind of contemporary of his, Massimo Bontempelli (1878–1960) tried, for one, to follow Pirandello’s lead in using a language free from the encrustations of the past. But Bontempelli’s efforts in such plays as Hunger (1949) and Nimbus (1958) were met with hostility, and no one has followed in his wake—let alone tried to swim alongside him. Not Federico Zardi, Luca Ronconi, A. G. Parodi, Ugo Pirro, Aldo Nicolai, Giuseppe Patroni-Griffi, or Raffaele Viviani, all of whom, like Terron, have been engaged less in a linguistic search than in an existential and formal one.
In the formal sense, that quest has been to further the creation of a uniquely Italian dramaturgy; in the existential sense, the quest has been to extract from the Second World War and its aftermath both an understanding of history and a “morality” (as such drama was called during the Middle Ages) of human experience. All these men seem to know, then, that it is beyond the power of writers to forge a national language spoken by more or less every Italian character. They are waiting, in a way, for their country to catch up with them, or for common words to match their uncommon—that is to say, dramatic—deeds.