

Valentina Valentini

*New Theater Made in Italy 1963-2013**

Abingdon, Oxon and New York, Routledge, 2018, 176 pp.

Valentina Valentini's *New Theater Made in Italy 1963-2013*, a translation into English, by Thomas Simpson, of the author's *Nuovo Teatro Made in Italy 1963-2013* (Bulzoni, 2015), is an effective and innovative contribution to the study of contemporary theater, and more broadly of Performance Studies, as seen from an international and multidisciplinary perspective.

The significant novelty of the volume derives from the author's ability not only to apply scientific rigor to the social and cultural history of Italy during the period under review (1963-2013), but also to operate with impressive competence across a range of diverse artistic forms and genres, including the visual arts, music, poetry, photography, and Digital Arts, bringing them into fertile and original dialogue with more specifically theatrical concerns.

This continuous dialogue *inter artes* makes the book a necessary reference point for theoretical and historical discussion of Contemporary European Theater, Aesthetics, the languages of contemporary theater, Electronic and Digital Arts, and Performance Studies, as well as for any wider analysis of Italian culture.

It's important to clarify from the outset what Valentini's volume is and is not, so as not to disappoint the expectations that might arise from its ambitious title, which seems to promise a chronological overview of a major period in Italian theatrical history. The book makes no claim to constitute a comprehensive history of Italian theater in all its manifestations; more precisely, it is a map of the realm of what Italians

* English translation by Thomas Simpson.

loosely term *teatro di ricerca*. Valentini uses the term 'New Theater' following Franco Quadri's observation that it makes sense to accept the terminology by now widely adopted to denote a new aesthetic and organizational approach (rather than 'avant-garde', 'neo-avant-garde', 'research theater', 'experimental theater', etc.). The book traces out a map of a specific temporal arc during which New Theater arose in Italy, combining a chronological approach with a geographic, thematic, and theoretical outline of its trends, poetics, artists, and the groups that formed under the banner of theater research during the period embraced by the study. Like any map that reproduces reality on a simplified scale, Valentini's version delineates certain aspects of the phenomenon it examines, while necessarily excluding others.

The volume consists of eight chapters. Each of the first five take up a decade of activity in order, beginning with the first neo-avant gardes of the 1960s, then proceeding into the developments of the Seventies (including Third Theater, a crucial element which Valentini discusses only briefly), Eighties postmodernism, and what the author terms the "posthumous" postmodernism of the Nineties. Finally comes the theater of the new millennium. In this final period, artists' increasing reliance on new technology led to spectacles rejecting distinctions between the real and the virtual, between the organic and the inorganic. Once-separate physical, sonic and chromatic bodies combined into a single metamorphic aesthetic matter. Multi-dimensional performance space was packed with a shifting pop repertoire excavated from graphic novels, cartoons, songs, advertising, etc.

The next three chapters consist of critical analysis focused on specific aspects of performance activity. The first considers the text, with in-depth discussion of the work of Pier Paolo Pasolini, Giovanni Testori, and Franco Scaldati – the last of these unjustly neglected by critics and virtually unknown outside Italy. The second thematic chapter discusses the transformation of stage space; while the final chapter discusses the presence of the actor. Here, Valentini is particularly interested in the effects of intermedia on performance, including the disappearance of the character, the dismembering of logical development between a

performer's actions, the anti-performative actor, self-fiction, and the actor-manikin-sculpture-animal-cyborg.

As with any map, Valentina's necessarily privileges certain aspects while sacrificing others. The structural organization and thematic orientation of the book, its choice of movements, trends, poetics, artists and groups, reveals the author's deep background and interests in Performance Studies and New Media (Electronic and Digital Arts). The result is a distillate of decades of experience and publications focused on the contamination of genres, blending theater, literature, arts, and new media, with special attention to visual, electronic, and multimedia arts. As anticipated in her Preface, Valentini emphasizes performance that combines theater, art, music, dance, and new media, while dedicating less attention to other significant phenomena of the past half-century, such as, for example, the theater of narration. In this preference, the author reflects a tendency common to a certain proportion of academic criticism to marginalize work that does not fall clearly within the so-called "tradition of the new".

The attention dedicated to the diverse expressive forms of New Italian Theater (dance, music, visual art, new technologies) makes the volume unlike others in the panorama of historical studies of the arts. Of special value is the author's brilliant reconstruction of theater history into a highly useful synthesis of Italian society, politics and culture from 1963 to 2013. Her ability to move skillfully across borders between arts and genres is exemplified by the choice of the *dies a quo* that begins her retrospective: the year of 1963, marking not a specifically theatrical event, but the birth of the poetic-literary movement known as Gruppo '63. For Valentini, the poetics of this non-theatrical group, open to contamination among the arts, triggered the theoretical and aesthetic revolution that would soon overturn theater's established structures and practices.

A further innovative element of the volume is its transmedial character: the printed text is linked to a rich archival website, in both English and Italian, that contains both original and vintage audio-visual documentation, interviews, articles, reviews, and monographic studies of the artists, companies, and phenomena discussed by Valentini.

A word on the translation. This English edition of a text originally published in Italian represents a thorough re-reading of the material, with the inclusion of numerous alterations aimed at aiding the non-specialized English-language reader to understand salient aspects of the Italian socio-cultural context. The rigorous and accurate translation provides an engaging discursive flow, and thus succeeds in transmitting the infectious excitement of the period, the artists and the ideas which Valentini has so deftly evoked and brought to life.

The Author

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