

# Acting Archives Essays

ACTING ARCHIVES REVIEW SUPPLEMENT 18 - NOVEMBER 2012

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## THE ITALIAN “GRANDE ATTORE” AND NINETEENTH CENTURY ACTING\*

### *The Italian “Grande Attore”*

February 25, 1545: eight men appear before a notary in Padua to undersign the founding document of a ‘fraternal compagnia’, or ‘fraternal company’. This document is our oldest historical testimony to the birth of the *commedia dell’arte*. It can also be taken as the first Italian inklings of the nineteenth-century theatrical phenomenon known as the *grande attore* or grand actor. For it was the *commedia dell’arte* that created a favorable environment for the development of the great Italian acting tradition and laid the ground for the emergence of the *grande attore*. The *commedia dell’arte* meant also the birth of a closed community, a self-reproducing world of actors, from which in the nineteenth-century *grandi attori* descend:

Descendants of generations of actors, the “figli d’arte” where the disciples of the magnificent “virtuosi” of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth century, the heirs of the *commedia dell’arte* that had dazed the world, the great-grandchildren of the millenary “maschere” or masks of Latium and Campania and of the “mimi”, the mimes, of Sicily. As it is known, they made up for their frequent lack of education with intuition and for their lack of preparation with their talent for improvisation. Born on the stage, a childhood spent, twelve hours a day, between the proscenium and the rooms of the actors, these actors usually knew no life other than that they learned from the scripts and secluded in the style of the stage, nor other faces excepting traditional make-ups.<sup>1</sup>

With the *commedia dell’arte* was the route to foreign countries, the same routes that, after its decline, were re-opened by the *grande attore*, who renewed the success of the Italian *comici dell’arte* (comedians) who had preceded him. The actors of the *commedia dell’arte* and the *grande attore* had also another trait in common: through their art they often played a diplomatic role. Ambassadors of Italian excellence, the *comici dell’arte*, in the service of the Medici, the Gonzaga, the Estensi, and other *Signori*, also served to affirm the prestige of their patrons in the European courts. Similarly, the *grande attore* patriotically promoted the cause of a united Italy, which belonged by right to the nineteenth-century European scenario of national states.

But the *grande attore* was not a solely Italian phenomenon. As Alessandro D’Amico notes:

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<sup>1</sup> S. d’Amico, *Tramonto del grande attore*, with an introduction by L. Squarzina and an essay by A. Mancini, Firenze, Casa Usher, 1985 p. 30 (first edition: Milano, Mondadori, 1929).

With this term – “grande attore”, in quotes – Italian historiography has found a convenient way to designate that special type of actor, born in the Romantic period (the archetype being Edmund Kean), who ended up artistically and materially dominating the nineteenth-century scene, gradually expanding his presence at the expense of all other components of the play [...] The “grande attore” is therefore a European phenomenon, which began in England in the early nineteenth century and later affected France, Germany and Italy, where, however, it took on completely original characteristics and an importance and a weight far superior to the one it had had in other nations. The “grande attore” in Italy was formed and, we could say, born by the struggle for survival. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the condition of our actors was among the most miserable in Europe. Caught in the failure of the great resident companies of the Napoleonic period, suffocated by the competition of melodrama and ballet, lacking a decent national repertoire, shackled by the censorship of the various petty states in which the Peninsula was divided, Italian actors, around mid-century, were forced to make a number of choices that were to condition the life of our theater for almost a century. The choice was: abandoning the literary and cultural schemes similar to those adopted by the Compagnia Reale Sarda accepting a foreign repertoire (less expensive and safer), abandoning the idea of stable companies, reorganizing the nomadic model and of the role-based company, resuming tours abroad (the way of the actors of the *commedia dell'arte*), offering Shakespeare to the Italian public who still ignored him. These choices had already been identified twenty years before by Gustavo Modena (the greatest and perhaps only critical mind of nineteenth-century Italian theater and it is significant that this mind belonged to an actor), who however had not had the chance to pursue them. The ones who did enact them (although with a different spirit) were two of his disciples: Tommaso Salvini and Ernesto Rossi, and the ex-leading lady of the Compagnia Reale Sarda, Adelaide Ristori. Through them, theater was once again able to compete with opera. What Modena had not been able to do (compete with Malibran), was achieved by his followers, who kept their own against sopranos, tenors, dancers, based only on the force of their theatrical art.<sup>2</sup>

It is difficult to establish the first time the locution *grande attore* was used.<sup>3</sup> We do know that up to the time of Metastasio and Alfieri, professional actors in Italy were mostly comedians, so much so that *comici dell'arte* was a general name for actors. Part of the reason is that non-comic drama, such as sacred representations in medieval style, classical tragedies and erudite comedies were usually acted by amateurs. The *grande attore* instead embodied the ideal interpreter of both classical tragedy and middle-class nineteenth-century drama. This was a historical transition, as noted by Vito Pandolfi, the theater scholar who, in the 1950s, drew attention once again to this topic with his *Antologia del grande attore*, which, as the subtitle specifies, represents an organic ‘collection of memoirs and essays by Italian *grandi attori* from the Goldoni reform to the present day [1954], preceded by critical essays by the most important scholars of the time and an historical introduction’. Pandolfi summarizes the transition as following:

The increasing development of the middle class in Italy in the eighteenth century created a much more extensive public than the aristocratic one of before, and, at the

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<sup>2</sup> A. d’Amico, ‘Il teatro verista e il “grande attore”’, in AA.VV., *Il teatro italiano dal naturalismo a Pirandello*, ed. by A. Tinterri, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1990, pp. 28-29.

<sup>3</sup> ‘It is a fact, in any case, that nineteenth-century critics, from Costetti to Yorick, to Jarro, did not use the category *grande attore*. Nor is it mentioned by the “sovereigns of the stage”, Tommaso Salvini, Ernesto Rossi, Adelaide Ristori, although they have published memoirs and autobiographies’. E. Buonaccorsi, *L’arte della recita e la bottega. Indagini sul grande attore dell’800*, Genova, Bozzi, 2001, p. 7.

same time, more capable than the popular public to approach cultural products, and yearning for a literature that would express its aspirations and new ideological vision: Goldoni and Gozzi, Metastasio and Alfieri. As once the lower classes had imposed their kind of show on other classes, so did the new class, which after all had also the historical initiative. The *grande attore* interprets first and foremost the tragedy, as a clear sign of a break with and independence from the past era, from both popular sarcasm and aristocratic skepticism.<sup>4</sup>

Vito Pandolfi was a theater director with a diploma from the Accademia Nazionale d'Arte Drammatica, founded by Silvio d'Amico in 1935, and his book was also a response, after a quarter of a century, to Silvio d'Amico's *Tramonto del grande attore*, a sort of extended pamphlet, thinly disguised as an historical essay, which raised the question of the degeneration of the Italian *grande attore*, to which it attributed also the responsibility of having delayed the development of the director's theater in Italy, the theater of the *regista* (a term successfully proposed by the linguist Bruno Migliorini in May 1932, in a journal directed by d'Amico himself). D'Amico was fighting for the establishing in Italy of a drama school that would form the new directors that were necessary to the renovation of the Italian theater as well as of the new actors, no longer "figli d'arte" raised behind the scenes and then directly thrust onto the stage. New figures functional to the reformed theater, respectful of the poetic word of the author. He ends his introduction with the following rallying cry: 'The *mattatore* is gone, the *quitti* (strolling players) have disbanded; we want the birth of the new Theater'.<sup>5</sup>

In attacking the *mattatore*, the Italian word here used to indicate the narcissistic degeneration of the *grande attore*, and using for actors in general the derogatory term *quitti* or strolling players for actors in general, members of an isolated world he calls *quittalemmè*, Silvio d'Amico does not save even the greatest among them, like Adelaide Ristori of whom he writes:

to get an idea of their presumptuous, arrogant and distortive personality, one look at their memoirs will suffice: reread, for example, the passage in which Adelaide Ristori explains the criteria she followed in acting *Maria Stuart*: 'correcting it', recreating the 'truth', in all those passages in which, in her opinion, the author had modified history. Ristori, like almost all our old actors, had not the least inkling that her role was not to give the public the Mary Stuart of history, but that of Schiller, and that therefore it was Schiller and not history she had to study.<sup>6</sup>

Later studies however have allowed us to better circumstantiate the peculiarities of the evolution of the Italian nineteenth-century actor. In 1959 Giovanni Calendoli published his encyclopedic monograph, *L'attore. Storia di un'arte* (Roma, Edizioni dell'Ateneo); but it was in the 1960s that this topic really took off, with Wanda Monaco's *La repubblica del teatro. Momenti italiani 1796-1860* (Firenze, Le Monnier, 1968) and Claudio Meldolesi's *Profilo di Gustavo Modena. Teatro e rivoluzione democratica* (Roma, Bulzoni, 1971). Eugenio Buonaccorsi is the author of a number of essays on the subject, collected in *L'arte della recita e la bottega. Indagine sul grande attore dell'800* (Genova, Bozzi, 2001), and editor of the collective work, *Tommaso Salvini. Un attore*

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<sup>4</sup> V. Pandolfi, *Antologia del grande attore*, Bari, Laterza, 1954, pp. 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> S. d'Amico, *Tramonto del grande attore*, p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

*patriota nel teatro italiano dell'Ottocento* (Bari, Edizioni di Pagina, 2011). On the phenomenon of the *grande attore* and on the context that produced this figure see also the proceedings of the conference *Teatro dell'Italia unita*, edited by Siro Ferrone (Milano, Saggiatore, 1980); *Il teatro del personaggio. Shakespeare sulla scena italiana dell'800*, edited by Laura Caretti (Roma, Bulzoni, 1979); Gigi Livio, *La scena italiana. Materiali per una storia dello spettacolo dell'Otto e del Novecento* (Milano, Mursia, 1989); Claudio Meldolesi and Ferdinando Taviani, *Teatro e spettacolo nel primo Ottocento* (Bari, Laterza, 1991); and Roberto Alonge, *Teatro e spettacolo nel secondo Ottocento*, (Bari, Laterza, 1988). Among the most recent contributions: Donatella Orecchia, *Il sapore della menzogna. Rossi, Salvini, Stanislavskij: un aspetto del dibattito sul naturalismo* (Genova, Costa & Nolan, 1996); Teresa Viziano, *Il palcoscenico di Adelaide Ristori. Repertorio, scenario e costumi di una Compagnia Drammatica dell'Ottocento* (Roma, Bulzoni, 2000); Mirella Schino, *Racconti del Grande Attore. Tra la Rachel e la Duse* (Città di Castello, Edimond, 2004); Laura Mariani, *L'emancipazione femminile in Italia: Giacinta Pezzana, Giordina Saffi, Gualberta Beccari* (Torino, Loescher, 1990). Particularly significant for our perspective are the following essays, found in the second volume, *Il grande teatro borghese*, of the multi-volume work *Storia del teatro moderno e contemporaneo* (Torino, Einaudi, 2000): Claudio Vicentini, 'Teorie della recitazione. Diderot e la questione del paradosso'; Claudio Meldolesi, 'L'età degli avventi romantici in Italia'; Gigi Livio, 'Il teatro del grande attore e del mattatore'.

### ***The Birth of the "Grande Attore"***

According to Pandolfi, the *grande attore* developed originally with Alfieri's tragedies. The first and greatest interpreter of Alfieri was Antonio Morrocchesi (1768-1838), who was also the first to play Hamlet in Italy. Morrocchesi was the author of *Lezioni di declamazione e d'arte teatrale* (1832), an illustrated manual in which Morrocchesi, nominated professor of diction in Florence in 1811, outlines the principles of correct recitation: 'a theoretical masterpiece of our nineteenth-century theater, vibrant with reflections and premonitions'.<sup>7</sup>

Luigi Rasi (1852-1918), a learned actor and the author of the biographical dictionary *I comici italiani*, notes that, especially when one observes the images that accompany his book, one has the impression 'that Morrocchesi was a great artist of manners'.<sup>8</sup> Francesco Righetti (1770-1828), also an actor, saw Morrocchesi on stage and offers us this vivid portrait of his appearance and voice:

Elegant in his body, with arms, thighs, legs that corresponded to a body that was neither thin nor fat. A lively eye, an ample forehead, beautiful teeth, in short a handsome man. His voice was raucous, ill-suited to color tender expressions, imposing, terrible in the expression of violent emotions; his bearing, his gestures were noble and dignified [...] and if he sometimes deviated from the correct diction, and indulged in efforts that were more violent than necessary, it was not so much for lack of discernment and art, but for the burning desire to elicit from the public those roaring applause that inebriated him and of which he was almost always the master.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> C. Meldolesi and F. Taviani, *Teatro e spettacolo nel primo Ottocento*, Bari, Laterza, 1991, p. 198.

<sup>8</sup> Luigi Rasi, *I comici italiani*, Firenze, Bocca, 1897-1905, II, p. 167.

<sup>9</sup> Francesco Righetti, *Studj sull'arte drammatica*, Torino, Allia e Paravia, 1834, t. II, p. 125 and pp. 127-128.

Morrocchesi was a temperamental actor. Rasi refers that in one of the Florence replicas of *Saul*, at which Alfieri himself was present, Morrocchesi got so carried away in the finale that he hurt himself with the sword and lost consciousness. In his work, Morrocchesi tells an interesting anecdote that seems to anticipate to some extent Stanislavsky. Having received the news that his dearest sister had died, Morrocchesi acted with such sentiment that the public was moved along with him: 'From that moment I came to believe more and more that the greatest quality of an actor consists in truly feeling those emotions he wishes to arouse in others'.<sup>10</sup>

However, the leading man to truly embody the type of the *grande attore* and the noble progenitor of the so-called triad of *grandi attori*, Tommaso Salvini (1829-1915), Ernesto Rossi (1827-1896) and Adelaide Ristori (1822-1906), which was to dominate the Italian nineteenth-century stage, was Gustavo Modena (1803-1861).

When Gustavo Modena died in Turin, in the night between February 19 and 20, 1861, the city was still celebrating the inauguration, on February 18, of the first parliament of the newly established Kingdom of Italy. According to Gigi Livio, starting with the funeral of the 'patriotic actor', his political commitment to the Italian cause, which even led him to a break with Giuseppe Mazzini, who for Modena was too compromised with the Savoia household, has obscured the importance of Modena's artistic revolution.<sup>11</sup>

The work of Luigi Bonazzi (1811-1879) on Modena, *Gustavo Modena e l'arte sua*, partly confirms Livio's thesis. Bonazzi wrote his book in 1865, shortly after the unification of Italy and Modena's death, and was obviously influenced by the climate of the Italian Risorgimento. This is evident particularly in the initial pages, where the story of the journeys of young Modena in the midst of the turbulent political events of the time overshadows that of his artistic maturation. Here, the precision of the historian combines with a literary flair to offer readers romantic descriptions, as in the case of Modena's escape to Strasburg through the Swiss Alps, accompanied by his young wife Giulia Calame. However, thanks to his careful analysis of Modena's acting and the study of his motivations, Bonazzi rapidly emerges from the political-patriotic panegyric to address the crucial aspects of Modena's professional development.

The fact that the Bonazzi was also an actor who had worked with Modena is one of the things that makes the book most valuable. Bonazzi often complains about the fickleness of the Italian public, even the more interested one, and notes the difference in habits and tastes in the various Italian regions, at a time where Italy was still fragmented into many small states. The difficulty for strolling companies of catering to different publics was coupled with that of dealing with the variable attitude of the police and censorship. At the time, acting oscillated between the lofty academic style of the eighteenth century and the new Romantic style. Modena opposed the most vulgar aspects of romantic theater and sought to reform acting from within its tradition, using the repertoire that was available to him, from Alfieri to *Due sergenti*, from Delavigne's *Louis XI* to Dante, thus alternating the mediocre and the sublime, poetry and dramatic prose, which was never vulgar, but certainly more

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<sup>10</sup> Antonio Morrocchesi, *Lezioni di declamazione e d'arte teatrale*, Firenze, All'insegna di Dante, 1832, p. 212.

<sup>11</sup> See G. Livio, *La scena italiana. Materiali per una storia dello spettacolo dell'Otto e del Novecento*, Milano, Mursia, 1989, especially the chapter on *Gustavo Modena e la sua riforma* (pp. 29-50).

suited to contemporary taste. In this, Modena was true to theatrical art, in which innovation, to affirm itself, must develop from the best tradition.

In regards to Modena's interpretation of Alfieri's *Saul*, Bonazzi notes the importance of remaining faithful to the author and Alfieri's right to create freely, without having to faithfully follow the biblical account. From this perspective, the actor had to become an ally of the author, his role was no longer that of illustrating the character but to interpret its psychology, carefully respecting the complexity of the author's work: 'Saul, as represented by Modena, emerged from his tent deeply saddened, but calm'. Starting from this entrance, Bonazzi offers us a detailed description of Modena's interpretation, highlighting the novelty of his approach compared to traditional interpretations of this character.<sup>12</sup>

Bonazzi faithfully describes also a lengthy subtext of gestures, which serve as a counterpoint to the lines, integrating them ('And as he outlined this idea he turned upwards the contracted fingers of both hands') or anticipating them ('He wanders with a bewildered look on the stage, gazing at the various part of the sky for some sign of the coming divine wrath'), and creating a visual tapestry that was to become a key feature of the *grande attore* and one of the reasons, perhaps not the least of them, of their fortune abroad. In describing Modena's sculptural poses, Bonazzi invokes Michelangelo to convey their magnificence and expressiveness but he quickly proceeds to show how this outer appearance was accompanied by subtle internal vibrations, which attenuated its initial peremptoriness, combining the classic *beau geste*, with the new investigations of the character's psyche. In seeing David, Saul half draws his sword, held back by his sons: 'He remained for a long time in this picturesque position and, as David spoke, you could see the indignation gradually disappear from his face and love take its place little by little, as the sword slowly fell back into the scabbard'.

To underline the originality, if not the daring, of Modena's Saul, Bonazzi lingers over the second act to show us Saul who, pleased with his reconciliation with David, 'abandoned himself to naïve joy, I would say almost a wild joy, like that of those who are not completely right in the head'. But where Modena mostly detaches himself from his predecessors – Bonazzi tells us – is in the fourth act when, as the battle approaches, the emboldened Saul seems to have regained his youthful ardor showing his new mood from his entrance on the stage: 'he no longer comes out leaning on his spear, but with the spear on his shoulder, with a firm stride, feigning a vigor he does not have, a boldness he does feel in his heart [...] No trait of Saul's part in this act was free of slight comic overtone of wild bravado'. Livio correctly sees this as an anticipation of the grotesque, a trait that resurfaces in the Lear of Tommaso Salvini, the greatest of Modena's disciples, when the old king, in tatters, rips off a branch from a tree, grasps it as a scepter, and rising fully delivers the line: 'Ay, every inch a King!'. Here is another example, cited by Gerardo Guerrieri, of the 'visual correlative', I have mentioned above.<sup>13</sup>

Bonazzi dedicates three chapters to *Saul* (XIX-XXI, the first dealing with Alfieri, the other two with Modena) and another three to Modena's other great interpretation, *Louis XI* by Casimir Delavigne (1793-1843), the *pièce de résistance* of many Italian actors up to Ermete Novelli (1851-1919) and Ruggero Ruggeri (1851-

<sup>12</sup> Luigi Bonazzi, *Gustavo Modena e l'arte sua*, ed. by A. Tinterri, Perugia, Morlacchi, 2011, p. 83 ff.

<sup>13</sup> See G. Guerrieri, *Lo spettatore critico*, Roma, Valerio Levi Editore, 1987, pp. 56-57.

1953). This Capetian king was nicknamed “the spider” for his ugliness and ability to weave webs of intrigue. Modena represented the character with strong naturalistic tones, bordering on caricature, which Bonazzi describes as, ‘a touch of apoplexy, semi-paralytic, a thin, asthmatic, wheezing voice, and a convulsive movement of the lower lip’.<sup>14</sup>

Modena’s interpretation culminated in the fourth act, when, having learned from his doctor that he has less than a week to live, Louis XI, wracked by remorse, meets the Solitary of the Ardennes, a character remindful of St. Francis of Paola. The king confesses numerous crimes but justifies them with reasons of State; he speaks about the nightmares that trouble his sleep and of his remorse but then asks the saint to extend his life for another ten or twenty years, revealing himself to be more scared of the impending death than truly remorseful. With a dutiful expression and unctuous voice, he implores the saint to flatten his wrinkles, ‘rubbing his arm with the top of his fingers, rejoicing in advance, with almost childish pleasure, for the re-flourishing of his emaciated limbs’.<sup>15</sup> There were also comic moments, like when the brazen king, grown bold again, raises the ante and, after having begged for ten more years, cannot resist the temptation of adding another ten: ‘but the words *ten years* he proffered quickly, in a lower voice and turning his head sideways, then repeating them in a loud voice and directly as if it was a done thing’.<sup>16</sup>

When the outraged saint, upon hearing of the king’s murder of his brother, told him to bend his knee, Modena, shrunk in size until ‘he seemed nothing more than an shapeless reptile crawling at the hermit’s feet’, and trembled uncontrollably, ‘painting with that action the same verse that when reciting Dante he painted with his voice, arousing in both cases frenetic rounds of applause: *He stood there quivering in every muscle*’.<sup>17</sup>

When describing his nightmares, Modena used an extensive gestural score, described in detail by Bonazzi, to counterpoint his words (‘If I sleep, a demon comes and sits on my chest: I push it away and a bare blade is thrust into it and murders me’):<sup>18</sup> ‘In pronouncing the words, *a bared blade is thrust into it*, he mimed the act of slowly inserting with both hands a dagger in his heart, uttering a long wrenching cry that ended only when he mimed its extraction from his bosom’.<sup>19</sup> The impression caused by the scene was such, Bonazzi says, that the actor playing the part of the Solitary was fascinated by it as much as the public to the point of forgetting to voice his lines.

But one cannot speak of Modena without mentioning the so-called *dantate*, in which the actor offered a sort of *mise en abyme* of the *Divina Commedia*, reciting entire cantos while impersonating Dante Alighieri dictating them to an amanuensis. Modena had reached an incredible level of virtuosity in the recitation of the poem and his exhibitions, in Italy and abroad, invariably sold out. The *Divina Commedia* turned out to be his most successful *pièce de résistance*, thanks not only to his skill and

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<sup>14</sup> Luigi Bonazzi, *Gustavo Modena e l'arte sua*, p. 103.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112. All the passages of the *Divina Commedia* are from James Finn Cotter’s translation, *Divine Comedy* (March 13, 2012), [www.italianstudies.org](http://www.italianstudies.org).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

the beauty of the poem, but also to the civil passion that he imbued into it, consistently with the vision of the poet:

Dante, in his poem, is a man, a primitive man; an whole man, without veils, without mascara, irate, proud, intolerant, and he derides, mistreats, and talks and farts as he pleases, just like I would do, if I had his poetic genius, and if I felt the desire to invent a hell for all moderate caudate and opportunist doctrinaires; for those who, swimming in mallow juice, wish to drag into it also the feverish lion...<sup>20</sup>

Modena recited Dante in public in 1839, as an exile in London, and continued to do so upon his return to Italy, meeting everywhere with unanimous approval. The reason was that his recitation was not an academic exercise but a civil presentation of the poem whose color varied according to the historical moment, up to 1849 politics and religion prevailed in Modena's interpretation, under the influence of Mazzini, but after that things changed:

Modena's Dante was the sign of his political defeat. The great actor had no illusions of finding in art a compensation, he did not theorize – like some have said – ‘the power of the artist’ against the power of the government. Modena's Dante was an admonishment to his contemporaries and a message to the new generations, expressed in tones that were moral more than political, poetic more than religious.<sup>21</sup>

Luckily, many of the witnesses, among which important literary figures, have left us a description, in some cases a detailed description, of Modena reciting Dante. Among these, Leone Fortis tells us that, rather than adopting plastic poses, even if the text would have allowed them, Modena preferred to use pauses, suspensions, afterthoughts, with which he accompanied the recitation of the poem, to express his thought. Modena did not simply recite the *Divina Commedia*. Dressed as Dante, he dictated the text to an amanuensis and this gave him the opportunity to add comments, to interpolate variants, which he quickly corrected, reverting to the original, according to a dramaturgical approach that Fortis illustrates through the example of a tercet from canto XIX of the *Inferno*: ‘Ah, Constantine, how much foul harm was fostered,/Not by your conversion but by the dowry/ Which the first wealthy father took from you?’.

Fortis says that, after the first line, ‘rapidly continuing as if urged by the thought’, he began the second with ‘*And* your conversion’, then halting and, after a brief pause, uttering the original line, ‘Not by your conversion...’, which he recited ‘in a humbler tone of voice, expressing with it, and with a movement of his arm and lip the remorse of his reflection, almost as if giving in to the sentiments of the *future reader*’.<sup>22</sup>

To conclude, let us see what Claudio Meldolesi writes in the chapter dedicated to *Modena as Dante*, a title that hints to an interpretative approach that borders on identification:

<sup>20</sup> Gustavo Modena, ‘Interpretazioni di Dante’, in *Scritti e discorsi di Gustavo Modena (1831-1860)*, ed. by T. Grandi, Roma, Istituto per la Storia del Risorgimento Italiano, XXXIX, 1957, p. 303.

<sup>21</sup> C. Meldolesi, *Profilo di Gustavo Modena. Teatro e rivoluzione democratica*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1971, p. 93.

<sup>22</sup> Leone Fortis, ‘Ricordi d’arte. La Compagnia Sarda e Gustavo Modena’, *La Nuova Antologia* (June 21, 1893), p. 499.

Modena turned his interpretation of Dante in his creation. The more famous cantos (in London, Modena had recited the cantos of Paolo and Francesca, Ugolino, Capaneo, Manfredi, Farinata degli Uberti, the Simoniacs and the thieves, along with the invocation to Italy and the damning of the devils), Modena added others like St. Peter's speech against the corruption of the Church, he also acted more boldly on the medieval structure of the poem, separating the parts, taking the poetry out of the cantos and giving it a new meaning. In the past, he had hidden behind Dante, now Modena, in representing Dante, represented himself, he theorized his political rebellion. He replaced the identification, the passionate tone of the declamation, with a form of reciting that we could call, in modern terms, estranged, meditative. The residues of the romantic interpretation of the start were definitely discarded.<sup>23</sup>

Dante became thus a proto-martyr, the one who, before and better than all those who followed him, was able to give voice to the betrayed ideal, to express with noble and rightful words the indignation of many: 'He died in the desperation of disillusionment; and the long line of martyrs of the same illusion he had, ah! It is not over yet!'. These are Gustavo Modena's words in a letter to Salvatore De Benedetti (December 1859), which continues:

The hopes that now and again revived in him and always turned into disappointments, refueled his feverish wrath, so he would temper his suffering by placing new men and new things in the vast portrait of his comedy, which to him was a ledger he used for the only possible vengeance, that of words. This is why I believe I cannot better clarify the informing ideal and the episodes of the poem than by impersonating the poet as he ponders, corrects and completes his work.<sup>24</sup>

### ***The Triad of "Grande Attore". Adelaide Ristori***

Adelaide Ristori (1822-1906) began her career with the Compagnia Reale Sarda, where she worked for about three years, starting in 1837, working as *ingenua* (ingénue), then, the following year, as *prima donna e prima amorosa* (leading woman and leading juvenile woman), and finally as *prima attrice* (leading woman) in 1840, after Carlotta Marchionni retired, alternating with Amalia Bettini. After that, she signed on with Romualdo Mascherpa, director of the Compagnia Imperiale e Reale of Maria Luisa di Parma, and was immediately given the main role in Schiller's *Maria Stuart*. Judging from her memories, she was more worried than flattered by the offer:

Who would have thought that the acting of a character as important as Schiller's Mary Stuart could be entrusted to an eighteen-year old girl, who for the first time acted as the only leading woman? [...] When my father had me sign on with Mascherpa, he thought that, since touring Companies at the time rarely acted tragedies, there was little risk that I would be given more duties and responsibilities that I was not up to. Instead, with no regard for my youth and my inevitable lack of experience, the actor-manager immediately gave me the most serious, important and difficult task than an experienced leading woman can be entrusted with.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> C. Meldolesi, *Profilo di Gustavo Modena*, p. 96.

<sup>24</sup> *Scritti e discorsi di Gustavo Modena (1831-1860)*, p. 308.

<sup>25</sup> Adelaide Ristori, *Ricordi e Studi artistici*, ed. by A. Valoroso, Roma, 2005, pp. 118-119. At the time Adelaide Ristori was 19, having been born on January 29, 1822 in Cividale del Friuli, where her family, two modest actors, Antonio Ristori and Maddalena Ricci Pomatelli, chanced to find themselves at the time.

Being talented and scrupulous, but also a persevering self-taught professional, there is no reason to doubt her when she says she studied the character extensively, through a research that continued after her premiere, of which Teresa Viziano writes:

She documented herself as much as she could on the unfortunate queen and then entrusted herself to the benevolence of the public who was aware of her “trepidation” and of the “efforts” she had made. Her physical aspect, her blond hair done according to the historical fashion, her costume and bearing did the rest and brought her much praise and applause. The actor-manager however had a different impression. When Ristori asked his opinion, Mascherpa advised her to give up forever the tragic genre, which in his view was not her forte.<sup>26</sup>

In 1848, Adelaide Ristori married the marquis Giuliano Capranica del Grillo, a Roman aristocrat whose family owned the theaters Valle and Capranica in Rome. With that marriage, which the family of the spouse opposed at first due to Ristori’s inferior social position, Adelaide made her fortune, but also that of her husband’s family whose financial situation she helped stabilize. A unique actress, Adelaide Ristori adapted her repertoire to her new social status, specializing in regal parts, from the queen in *Maria Antonietta* and *Elisabetta regina d’Inghilterra*, both written for her by Paolo Giacometti on commission, to Lady Macbeth, and, of course, Mary Stuart in Schiller’s play. Ristori was extremely skillful at promoting her career, with her husband’s support. In 1855, preceded by a well-orchestrated press campaign, she went to Paris to challenge the great Rachel on her own grounds, Racine’s *Phèdre*, along with *Maria Stuart*.

We have already mentioned how Ristori had played Mary Stuart when she was very young, in the spring of 1841 in Trento. The role marked the beginning of her brilliant career and she kept it in her repertoire to the end, playing it in her last performance at the age of 63 in New York: a total of 576 representations and undoubtedly her most successful role.<sup>27</sup>

Besides being central to her career, Ristori’s Mary Stuart is also paradigmatic of the method used by Ristori to impersonate a character.

June 26, 1855: at the end of the third act the enthusiastic public gives her a standing ovation. During the interval, many come to her room to pay her homage, among which Théophile Gautier and Alexandre Dumas, who two days later on *Le Mousquetaire* cried: ‘Oh Schiller, why weren’t you there for your reward! Oh, monsieur Lebrun, why weren’t you there for your punishment!’.<sup>28</sup>

Rachel, in a farewell performance at the Comédie Française, also starred in Mary Stuart, before leaving for a long and extenuating tour to London and the United States, from which she was to return, tired and ill, only to die on January 3, 1858, at the age of only 37. In a letter dated July 26, 1855, to her friend Carlo Balboni, Ristori communicated the news as following: ‘Rachel, that hyena, has finally left yesterday. She insisted on doing Mary Stuart, she bought half the theater, but in spite

<sup>26</sup> T. Viziano, *Il palcoscenico di Adelaide Ristori. Repertorio, scenario e costumi di una Compagnia Drammatica dell’Ottocento*, presentation by A. d’Amico, Roma, Bulzoni, 2000 p. 49. This did not prevent the Compagnia Mascherpa from performing *Maria Stuart* 10 times between March 15, 1843, and September 29, 1844.

<sup>27</sup> This information is taken from Teresa Viziano’s extensive study *Il palcoscenico di Adelaide Ristori*. The chapter on *Maria Stuart* is on pp. 48-80 and contains 28 illustrations.

<sup>28</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 54. Pierre Antoine Lebrun was the author of the version of *Maria Stuart* used by Rachel.

of this my name went from mouth to mouth instead of hers. The night after I did Mary Stuart and the public gave me the prize. The newspapers did not speak of Rachel – what a blow'.<sup>29</sup> Yet, in writing to Giuseppe Montanelli on October 31, 1858, after the premature departure of her great rival, Ristori, who must have observed her closely, expressed her admiration for her skills, wondering how Rachel, who always mistreated the fifth act, because she was Jewish and 'it forced her to voice feelings that were completely foreign to her heart, how could she, I say, transmit to the public that deeply religious understanding of a faith she had abhorred since she was a child?!.<sup>30</sup>

Ristori's entrance on stage in the role of the queen of Scotland is effectively described by Pier Angelo Fiorentino, who emphasizes her bearing and the costume that supported it, an element to which Ristori always attached the greatest importance.

Her costume on stage is admirable: a dress of black velvet, ample, puffed, high-collared, tight at the waist; a bonnet of black satin; blond curly hair; a starched pleated collar, according to the fashion of the time, which stands out in its white candor on her dark and austere dress, she seems like a beautiful Van Dyck painting detached from its frame. From the very first words she utters, with that calm and resigned tone, one understands that the great artist, capable of turning words into music and intonation into melody, had further softened that organ, so marvelously soft, so caressing, so enchanting.<sup>31</sup>

Richard Wagner, who saw Ristori in Venice in September 1858, had a different reaction. In describing her to Matilde Wesendonk, while acknowledging her expressive efficacy, observed:

But in what lies the difference between the idealistic spirituality to which I refer and the realistic play of plastic effects? Think of the scene in the third act of *Maria Stuart*, when in the garden she bids farewell to her lost liberty and consider that Ristori has neglected the greatest part, almost everything, that, in the voicing of her feelings of hatred towards Elizabeth, did not offer her a pretext for her rapid mimic effects.<sup>32</sup>

Théophile Gautier also described the scene observing that when Ristori's Mary Stuart is in front of Elizabeth, 'she kneels at an acute and broken angle as if the iron hand of necessity were on her shoulder; it is fate that plunges her at the feet of her rival and not her will: all her body revolts itself against this violence. The sudden gesture that ends this terrible scene is beyond description'.<sup>33</sup> We are probably getting closer here to the secret of the Italian *grandi attori*, that which allowed them to be appreciated by all publics, from Russia to the United States, even when they spoke in Italian, thanks to Gerardo Guerrieri's above-mentioned 'visual correlative': the plastic pose that announced the words and reinforced their meaning.

We find something similar in Ristori's Mary Stuart when Mary, upon meeting Elizabeth for the first time, finds the force to humble herself, not, however, Ristori

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

tells us, in front of her rival but in front of God. Here too the crowd of emotions, the surfeit of feelings, is synthesized in a score of gestures, looks, pauses, which precede the line and clarify its meaning:

After such virtue of resignation, I raised by eyes to heaven, I pressed against my heart the cross hanging from the rosary that hung from my side, offered God the sacrifice I was ready to make of my dignity and, gathering my thoughts for a few instants, as if begging God to grant me strength and courage, with a firm voice and soft tone said to Elizabeth: ‘God, sister,/Has chosen your side, and placed victory/On your joyous head’.<sup>34</sup>

Ristori dedicated to Mary Stuart the first of her artistic studies, initially designed solely for herself, to serve as a guide in her study of the character. Only later, at the insistent request of editor Roux of Turin, they were published along with an autobiographical section called *Memories*. There was also a French edition of the work (Paris, Ollendorff, 1887) and an English one (London, Allen, 1888), as well as a non-authorized Russian edition. The program of the Théâtre Impérial Italien informs us of an exceptional performance delivered on August 13, 1855, at the time of above-mentioned Paris tour, which included, among other things, the first, the third and the fifth act of *Maria Stuart* and the prologue of *Die Jungfrau von Orléans*, both acted in Maffei’s translation. We should not be too critical of this apparent lack of respect for the unity of the work. The public time was made up of *connaisseurs* who knew the works well and like the public of the opera did not need the rest of the work to appreciate the quality of an air. In this it was closer to Brecht’s critical spectator than to the naïve spectator of bourgeois drama, torn between prudishness and half-suppressed voyeurism. Aside from the consistency of the character he had to give voice to, the nineteenth-century *grande attore* was not concerned with the faithfulness to the original text, on which we insist so much today, perhaps with an excess of philological pedantry. The text for him is a pretext, offered by the author, that the actor must interpret and integrate. *Maria Stuart* was also Ristori’s farewell performance, which took place in New York on May 12, 1885. That night Ristori acted in English, while a German company on stage with her answered in Schiller’s original language, with heaven knows what *Verfremdungseffekt*.

It should not come as a surprise that Ristori ended her career in the United States with a fantastic tour. She had gone there alone, taking along only the four queens of her repertoire: Elizabeth and Marie Antoinette, Mary Stuart and Lady Macbeth. She acted them all in English, using local actors. Traveling on a special train wagon, furnished like a private apartment, and attached to regular trains, she toured 62 different cities, acting every two days out of three.

After all, Ristori was the one who had expanded the stage of the *grande attore* to world-wide dimensions, when in 1873-1875 she had done her first world tour, starting off in Bordeaux and ending in Brindisi, after having visited North and South America, Australia and India, and come back through the Suez canal. A total of 600 days and 300 performances, at an average of one performance every two days. General Bartolomeo Galletti, a family friend, who participated in the expedition, has left us a detailed volume of memories of that memorable voyage. He tells us that

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<sup>34</sup> Adelaide Ristori, *Ricordi e Studi artistici*, p. 126.

throughout that world tour not once did the curtain open late, nor were there ever any variations in the program.

### ***Ernesto Rossi***

Ernesto Rossi (1827-1896) was born in Livorno, on February 27, 1827, of a middle-class family. His mother was Teresa Tellini and his father was Giuseppe Rossi, a timber dealer. Against his father's wishes, who wanted him to study as a lawyer, at the age of eighteen Ernesto entered the Compagnia Pietroboni, a second-rate theater company. A decisive turning point in his acting career was the meeting in 1846 with Gustavo Modena, who intuited Rossi's potential. Rossi acted with Modena for two years, even playing David in Alfieri's *Saul*. At the outbreak of the revolts of 1848, the company disbanded. After having fought on the barricades during the five day revolt in Milan, Rossi was signed on by Giovanni Leigh. In 1852, he became *primo attore* (leading man) of the Compagnia Reale Sarda, a first-rate outfit and a resident company, at a time when there were very few of them, in the service of the King of Piedmont and Sardinia. Three years later he followed Adelaide Ristori on her Paris tour, where he was particularly appreciated in the role of Paolo, in Silvio Pellico's *Francesca da Rimini*. In the Spring of 1856, starting with *Othello*, followed fifteen days later by *Hamlet*, at the Teatro Re in Milan, he began playing Shakespeare, like Tommaso Salvini was doing. Only a few years before, Modena had tried to offer Shakespeare but the conservative Italian spectators had reacted unfavorably. Traces of Rossi's passion for Shakespeare can be found throughout his writings, among which his autobiography in three volumes, *Quarant'anni di vita artistica*, curiously subdivided according to the countries in which Rossi had acted (I: Italy, France, Belgium, Holland and England; II: Russia, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Denmark and Norway, Spain and Portugal; III: Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Peru, North-America, Egypt, Constantinople, Asia Minor and Greece). Indeed, after 1868, Rossi had acted mostly abroad, acting in Italy in the intervals between tours, in line with the international vocation of the *grande attore*.

His repertoire, however, was not limited to Shakespeare. One of his earliest roles was in Alfieri's *Oreste* in 1846, when he still was with the Compagnia Calloud-Fusarini-Marchi: his Orestes was removed from the myth and placed inside a human dimension. He was not tormented by doubts, like Hamlet, but determined to achieve justice and subject to violent emotions and sudden impulses. His Orestes captivated the public, also thanks to the handsome looks of the young actor: 'I desired him to be handsome, first of all, because the beauty of his figure had to symbolize the purity and beauty of his feelings, reflected in his face, in his bearing, and so that the public should perceive that his entire being was pervaded by a superhuman power: fatality. And therefore I did away with any course barbarian attitude'.<sup>35</sup>

Gustavo Modena, who in the meantime had joined the company, complimented and encouraged him with words that evidence the pedagogical vein of the great actor but also his innovative view of acting, which was a central point to his reform. His words, as Rossi recollects them, were: 'Great! I like the way you interpreted him: it is a renovation: it is yours, you did not copy it from anyone: keep it: in time, you will

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<sup>35</sup> Ernesto Rossi, *Quarant'anni di vita artistica*, Firenze, Niccolai, 1887, I, pp. 35-36.

correct a few things, you are young now, do it like that. In fact, when we do Orestes again, I will play Pylades, and thus it was. – But what a Pylades!<sup>36</sup>

Notwithstanding the opposition created by critics between the ‘classic’ Salvini and the ‘romantic’ Rossi and the rivalry that surely existed between them, the two great actors both participated, along with Adelaide Ristori, in a memorable performance, held in Florence in May 1865, for the Dante celebrations, in which they recited Dante and Pellico’s *Francesca da Rimini*, with Rossi as Paolo, Ristori as Francesca and Salvini as Lanciotto.

In marked contrast with Diderot’s thesis, Rossi proclaimed the importance of letting go of feelings in order to identify with the character, albeit admitting the need to control expression. He was also a firm upholder of the social purpose and usefulness of art: ‘You think, you think, and your heart throbs in one with those characters throughout the performance. This art, which has exerted such a fascination on you, do you not judge it completely worth to have a role in the social economy?’<sup>37</sup> As for his physical and artistic characteristics this is how Giuseppe Pastina, who wrote the entry on Rossi in the *Enciclopedia dello Spettacolo*, describes him:

Rossi was an actor endowed with extraordinary physical means: handsome and fascinating, elegant and self-confident, a voice not particularly powerful and extended in range, but harmonious and full of evocative overtones, his natural qualities were one of the keys to his success [...] Two essential characteristics of his acting were his versatility and his exuberant temperament [...] he was reckless, impetuous, impassioned, never ironic or allusive: explicit and sanguine even in the doubts of Hamlet, the remorse of Macbeth, the folly of Lear. Of his Hamlet some details have remained famous, like the slow gesture, almost independent of his will, with which he replaced the sword in the scabbard when he should have killed the king as he prayed, the outbursts and the sudden rages against his mother or Laertes, his passionate tenderness towards Ophelia, the leap with which he attacked the king to kill him. [...] But in general, all testimonies agree on one point, on reproaching him for his lack of style; or for, which is the same thing, letting transpire, under the face of the character, that of the interpreter. From this perspective, one must accept the thesis, repeatedly upheld by his contemporaries, of Rossi as a romantic actor, in contrast with Salvini the classical actor. For, while Salvini aimed at psychologically constructing the character and a controlled acting (which some mistook for artificiality), Rossi knew no limits, completely abandoning himself to every role. Thus, in his interpretation of Othello. While many accused him of having highlighted only the sensual side of the character, Rossi’s interpretation can be explained rather as the result of a specific design, that of surrendering himself unconditionally to all the possibilities offered to his temperament by such an angle.<sup>38</sup>

Rossi was absolutely devoted to Shakespeare. He named his residence in Livorno “Villa Shakespeare”, constantly studied the playwright, wrote essays on him, where he offered a personal and certainly partial interpretation of Shakespeare’s theater. On Rossi’s Shakespeare, a crucial testimony is offered by Stanislavsky, who saw the aged Rossi acting at the Moscow Bolshoi with a ‘second-rate troupe’. For its prestige it is worth citing it in full to evidence the profound influence that the figure of the Italian *grande attore*, whether Rossi or Salvini, exerted on the great Russian director and actor. Rossi was no longer the romantic Hamlet with his thick and curly hair, who had

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>38</sup> *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, Roma, Le Maschere, 1954, v. VIII, c. 226.

enchanted the public throughout the world, nor the young Romeo who had made their hearts throb. Yet, the bulky aged man continued to play the role of the tragic lover and the public loved him.

Stanislavsky said that Rossi had surprised him for 'his extraordinary plasticity and his rhythm'. Although he was not an actor with a spontaneous temperament like Salvini or Mocalov, he was, according to Stanislavsky, 'a genius as a craftsman'. He possessed a special talent, which bordered on genius. He had, in a high degree, temperament, expressivity and a psychological force, and Stanislavsky remembers rejoicing and weeping with him at the theater more than once. Rossi's crying did not come from deep commotion, 'he owed it more to the logic of his emotion, to the continuity of his plan of the part he was playing, to the confidence of his interpretation, sureness of his craftsmanship and his effects'. In talking and gesturing, Rossi was, says Stanislavsky, 'extraordinarily simple'. Stanislavsky remembers seeing him for the first time in the part of King Lear: his first impression, upon his entry on stage, had not been very favorable ('a banal operatic costume, a badly pasted beard, an uninteresting make-up'). The first act was nothing special. Spectators simply tried to follow as best they could as Rossi recited in Italian. But Rossi gradually involved them by bringing them to the culminating points, and then returning to a natural pathos or adopt some stage trick. For Stanislavsky, Rossi excelled especially in the lyrical passages, in the love scenes, in the poetic description, for he had a gift for speaking simply, a beautiful voice, a unique capacity to control it, an uncommon clarity of diction, the right intonation.

This in spite of his physical aspect: he was short, stout, with a painted moustache, rough hands, wrinkled face. His eyes, however, remained magnificent, the true mirror of the soul. And yet, Stanislavsky adds with admiration, notwithstanding his age, Rossi played Romeo and, since he could not impersonate him, he marvelously painted his inner image, in bold, almost impudent, lines. For example, Stanislavsky remembers, in the scene with the monk, Rossi rolled on the ground in desperation: an old man with a round belly, yet he managed not to appear ridiculous.<sup>39</sup>

Stanislavsky mentions in passing the inferior quality of the actors who accompanied Rossi in his Moscow performances, a criticism that was voiced also in Italy by those who accused him of having recruited from the disbanded Compagnia Reale Sarda and put together a group of actors who was willing to follow him on his tours and act as a background for his exhibitions. This was in fact a typical "recipe" of the *grande attore*, who, on the strength of his talent, could afford to save money on everything else, from the quality of the actors, to scenes and costumes. These defects became in time decisive in the eyes of demanding critics like Silvio d'Amico, while a more understanding attitude was exhibited by an actor of the following generation, Giovanni Emanuel, who, while insisting on high standards for art, in 1887 wrote the following words to a friend from Montevideo: 'what a crime Polese, coming to America with such an outfit!... For, you know, let them scream all they want, but the system of Ristori, Salvini and Rossi is the only way to make money in America!... For, let them sing if they want, here all you need is the *mattatore*, the *mattatrice*, and besides them the bare necessities'.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> K. Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d., pp. 74-75.

<sup>40</sup> M. G. Barabino, 'Il Lear di Emanuel: temi e metodologia', *Teatro Archivio* (September 2, 1979), p. 131.

**Tommaso Salvini**

Tommaso Salvini (1829-1915) belongs to one of the most important families of Italian actors, starting from his father Giuseppe and his mother Guglielma Zocchi. In 1843, he joined the company of Gustavo Modena. A young actor uncorrupted by bad examples, he thus had a chance to study with a great master until 1845, when, after a quarrel, he left the company to join the Teatro dei Fiorentini in Naples, as *primo* and *secondo amoroso* (leading and supporting juvenile man). He later joined the Compagnia Domeniconi e Coltellini, acting alongside Adelaide Ristori, as Paolo in Pellico's *Francesca da Rimini*. In 1849, while his company was in Rome, he took part in the defense of the Roman Republic, proving his support of Modena's republican and revolutionary ideals. Through the years, he kept his political beliefs, while mitigating its outer manifestations:

From this perspective, Salvini, while starting from Modena's teachings and developing some of its premises and indications in regards to acting, detached himself from his master or, rather, adapted his teachings to the new times. Theater is no longer an immediate incitement to political struggle, a practical weapon in the patriotic battle: it mediates the final goals towards which society tends. In Salvini, as Vito Pandolfi acutely observes, what prevails is 'the sense of contributing to the construction of a civil society, of the spirit of a nation' and Salvini personally expresses 'this patient work of construction (which consists in establishing the moral basis for civil coexistence)'.<sup>41</sup>

In 1853, notwithstanding his young age, Salvini was already established as an actor, admired for his powerful and handsome looks, and his powerful and melodious voice. He decided, however, to stop performing for one year in order to study and prepare his repertoire (the leading role in Alfieri's *Saul*, in *Othello* and in *Hamlet*, and the role of Orosmane in Voltaire's *Zaira*). From 1856 to 1860, he worked with the Compagnia Cesare Dondini, where he met Clementina Cazzola, who was to become his companion in life and in art, and the mother of his children, among which Gustavo Salvini, until her premature death of consumption in 1868. In 1870, his Italian career practically ended, replaced by an endless series of tours abroad. In studying Salvini, one must necessarily start from Stanislavsky's memories where the director describes the profound impression that Salvini made on him in acting his celebrated Othello. Salvini acted in Russia on various occasions, but only after 1880. Therefore, like Rossi, he was over fifty, but like him, notwithstanding the contrast between the role and his physical aspect, he put on a powerful and persuasive performance: Stanislavsky admits that at first he reacted coldly to the Italian actor, who did not seem excessively keen on attracting the attention of the public. Stanislavsky carefully observed his costume and makeup which he disapproved of then and on later occasions: the long handlebar moustache, the excessive wig, the heavy, almost obese figure, the long oriental daggers stuck over his belly, which made him seem ever fatter when worn under his hooded Moorish cloak. All this was extremely ill-suited, in the outer appearance, to a soldier like Othello. But then Salvini approached the benches of the Doges, stood a moment in thought, concentrated and the public of the Bolshoi was suddenly in his hands. It seemed, Stanislavsky adds, 'that he did this with a single gesture', he 'grasped his hand without

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<sup>41</sup> E. Buonaccorsi, *Tommaso Salvini e il Risorgimento*, in *Tommaso Salvini. Un attore patriota nel teatro italiano dell'Ottocento*, ed. by E. Buonaccorsi, Bari, Edizioni di Pagina, 2011, pp. 31-32.

looking at the public, grasped all of us in his palm, and held us there, as if we were ants or flies'.<sup>42</sup>

In the above passage, Stanislavsky notes the concentration of the actor, the condensation of his interpretation in a powerful gesture. Immediately after, he describes himself spying on Salvini behind the scenes, in the hours before the evening performance, in an effort to understand the secret of his acting. From these observations came that intuition that one day was to develop into Stanislavsky's method. Salvini's dedication was impressive. The day of the performance he was agitated from the moment he got up, ate very little and after lunch, he would retire in solitude and refuse to see anyone. He arrived at the theater three hours before the show. He would leave his fur coat in his dressing room and then start walking up and down the stage. If anyone approached him, he would chat a little but then leave, meditate on something, remain silent for a while then lock himself up again in his dressing room. Shortly thereafter he would come out wearing his make-up gown or his dressing gown; after wandering on the scene, testing his voice on a few lines, making a few gestures, experimenting with some movements that were necessary to the part, he again retired to his room, where he applied the black polish to his face and pasted the beard on. Completely transformed not only on the outside but also, evidently, on the inside, he re-entered the stage with a lighter, younger gait. By this time, the theater hands had begun setting up the scenes and Salvini spent some time chatting with them.

Stanislavsky describes Salvini's to and fro, going to his room and returning with his wig, but no costume, then with his belt and his scimitar, then with his headband and finally completely dressed in Othello's general uniform. And while disapproving of his outer appearance, Stanislavsky was struck by the elaborate artistic and interior toilette through which Salvini gradually entered the body and soul of Othello.

It was this preparatory work, which Salvini deemed necessary to every performance, notwithstanding ten years of study and hundreds of performances in that role, that produced a lasting impression on Stanislavsky, influencing his entire artistic development. Stanislavsky adds that Salvini was right in saying that only after one hundred or two hundred performances he had understood who the character of Othello was and how he had to be acted.<sup>43</sup>

In 1883, in the course of one of his many tours abroad, which marked the last years of his career, Salvini visited the United States.<sup>44</sup> Henry James saw him perform in Boston and has left us a vivid portrait. Salvini acted in Italian, while the makeshift company of local actors answered in English. James criticized the grotesque effect yet proclaimed his enthusiasm for Salvini's skills. His repertoire, besides Shakespeare (*Othello*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*), included the mediocre *Le Gladiateur* by Alexandre Soumet and *La morte civile* by Paolo Giacometti. James loved the latter but more for Salvini's interpretation than the play itself, of modest theatrical value. As for Shakespeare, James criticized the quality of the Italian translation yet for him, too,

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<sup>42</sup> K. Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, p. 194.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 194-195.

<sup>44</sup> Edward Tuckerman Mason, a critic who between 1881 and 1890, followed Salvini in his US tours, was an exceptional testimony of Salvini's performances and has left us a detailed account of his Othello, now in R. Trovato, *La rappresentazione di Otello nella ricostruzione di Tuckerman Mason*, Genova, Erga, 2003.

the force of the actor's interpretation prevailed over the limits of the performance. In this case, too, one is struck by the description of the gestural score that counterpoints the words of the *grande attore*. James's attention to gestures was helped by the difficulty of the foreign language, which led him to concentrate on the visual aspects of the play.

An illuminating example is the case of Salvini's already mentioned interpretation of Lear's folly, on which Gerardo Guerrieri observed: 'Here is an example, among many, of "visual correlative". And for what could those actors have become famous and sought by publics who did not understand a word of what they were saying, if not by virtue of their scenic fantasy and their method of representation?'.<sup>45</sup>

The third and four acts are full of exquisite strokes; the manner, for instance, in which he replies to Gloster's inquiry, 'Is't not the King?' is a wonderful bold piece of business. He stares for a moment – his wits have wandered so far – while he takes in the meaning of the question; then, as the pang of recollection come over him, he rushes to a neighbouring tree, tears off a great twig, grasps it as a sceptre, and, erecting himself for a moment in an attitude intended to be royal, launches his majestic answer: 'Ay, every inch of a king!' I do not say that this touch will commend itself to every taste. Many people will find it too ingenious, and feel that the noble simplicity of the words is swallowed up in the elaboration of the act. But it produces a great effect. All this part of the play is a wonderful representation of madness in old age – the madness that is mixed with reason and memory, and only adds a deeper depth of suffering. The final scene, the entrance with the dead Cordelia, is played by Salvini in a muffle key – the tone of an old man whose fire and fury have spent themselves, and who has nothing left but weakness, tears and death. The 'Howl, howl, howl!' has not, on his lips, the classic resonance; but the pathos of the whole thing is unspeakable. Nothing can be more touching than the way in which, after he has ceased to doubt that Cordelia has ceased to live, he simply falls on his face on her body.<sup>46</sup>

Another moment described in detail by James is from the killing of Desdemona in *Othello*:

Some of his tones, movements, attitudes, are ineffaceable; they have passed into the stock of common reference. I mean his tiger-like pacing at the back of the room, when, having brought Desdemona out of her bed, and put the width of the apartment between them, he strides to and fro, with his eyes fixed on her and filled with the light of her approaching doom.<sup>47</sup>

Immediately after, James offers us another glimpse of the intensity that Salvini was capable of and of his capacity to concentrate in a single gesture or look the power of a character. James's description is a sort of freeze frame that succeeds in conveying all the suspense of the scene:

Then the still more tiger-like spring with which, after turning, flooded and frenzied by the truth, from the lifeless body of his victim, he traverses the chamber to rich Iago, with the mad impulse of destruction gathered into a single blow. He has sighted him, with the intentness of fate, for a terrible moment, while he is still on one knee beside

<sup>45</sup> G. Guerrieri, *Lo spettatore critico*, p. 57.

<sup>46</sup> Henry James, *The Scenic Art. Notes on Acting and Drama: 1872-1901*, edited, with an introduction and notes by A. Wad, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1948, pp. 179-180.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

Desdemona; and the manner in which the spectator sees him – or rather feels him – rise to his avenging leap is a sensation that takes its place among the most poignant the actor's art has ever given us. After this frantic dash, the one thing Othello can *do*, to relieve himself (the one thing, that is, save the last of all), he falls into a chair on the left of the stage, and lies there for some moments, prostrate, panting, helpless, annihilated, convulsed with long, inarticulate moans. Nothing could be finer than all this; the despair, the passion, the bewildered tumult of it, reach the high water mark of dramatic expression.<sup>48</sup>

James saw Salvini at the culmination of his artistic maturity, when his mastery of acting gave him the capacity to control and channel emotions that allowed him, along with his age, to do a difficult part like that of Lear. And the linguistic barrier does not prevent James from grasping the nuances of Salvini's acting, even at the level of vocal analysis. In the case of Lear's cursing of Goneril at the end of the first act ('Hear Nature, hear! dear Goddess, hear!'), James noticed Salvini's capacity to express, through intonation, in a short line, the contrasting feelings of the character: 'In this there was really a touch of the sublime, and the wild mixture of familiarity and solemnity that he throws into the "Ascolta - ascolta!" with which, in the Italian translation, the terrible invocation begins, was an invention quite in his grandest manner'.<sup>49</sup>

The fact that Salvini, endowed with a powerful voice, was capable of masterfully modulating it in peremptory or tender tones, is confirmed by the authoritative testimony of Meyerhold, who saw Salvini in Milan in 1902, one year before his final farewell to the stage. In the article written by letter for the newspaper *Kurier*, Meyerhold reassured the Moscow admirers of Salvini's talent that the actor had not aged at all since his last performances in Russia. His voice, Meyerhold said, had the same beauty and vigor, the same ease in going from one mood to the other, the same noble simplicity and that seducing suavity of which no other contemporary actor was capable.<sup>50</sup>

Through a painstaking research, Antonio Attisani has found three recordings, made by Tommaso Salvini and his son Gustavo, in the Milan branch of the American company Zonophone, presumably in 1903, and therefore around the period of Meyerhold's article. The recordings are from *Othello* (IV, 3), where they both act, the 'To be or not to be' monologue, recited by Gustavo, and Saul's dream in Alfieri's *Saul*, recited by Tommaso Salvini. The last recording especially suggests that one of the reasons for Salvini's interest in *Saul*, lay in the scene of the delirium of the protagonist, which Anna Barsotti calls a 'psychomachia'.<sup>51</sup> Antonella Di Nocera, in her excellent doctoral thesis on *Tommaso Salvini negli Stati Uniti (1873-1890)* (Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale", supervisor Prof. Claudio Vicentini) offers a convincing analysis of the recordings, attributing to the complex vocal score of the passage the attraction it exerted on Salvini and the reason he chose it to represent his art for posterity: 'The voice of the actor broke down, with effective and sudden transitions, into heavy and double sounds and then, as by miracle, into soft

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 174-175.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. V. E. Meyerhold, *La rivoluzione teatrale*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1975, p. 269.

<sup>51</sup> A. Barsotti, *Alfieri e la scena*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2001.

and high-pitched, almost feminine ones'. As Attisani tells us, through his technical mastery, Salvini had turned his voice into a superbly flexible tool:

The instrument was that art of breathing that allowed the actor to switch from chest intonations to head intonations unawares of the public. What was evident was his capacity to change register, in relation to the meaning of the text or the emotion that the lines aroused in the character, and this gave the impression that the words were "kneaded" together in such a way as to produce a melody, not a recitation. It was possible to identify some of the onomatopoeic attributes with which Salvini enriched certain parts of the text. For example, in the culminating moment of the telling of the dream, when vehemence prevailed over memory, Salvini, in the course of only two lines, used six words in which he reinforced the "r" sound. The crescendo was made up of the sequence, *strappa, corona, crine*, and then *crin* (again), *terra* and *crederesti*. Later, towards the end of the recording, the technique is used again with *rabbia, ami, trema*. In this last line, the actor seemed almost to roar those consonants like a lion, just as the astonished Americans had written!<sup>52</sup>

### **William Archer's Questionnaire**

It was Constant Coquelin, the famous actor of the Comédie Française, who in 1880, reopened the debate on Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, with an essay entitled 'L'art et le comédien'. Eight years later, William Archer published *Masks or Faces. A Study on the Psychology of Acting*, in which he collected the responses to a questionnaire he had given to the most important actors of the time, centered on Diderot's *Paradoxe*, in the hope of solving the controversy once and for all.<sup>53</sup> With typical Anglo-Saxon pragmatism, the critic chose to directly ask a number of great actors whether they thought it necessary for the actor to feel the same emotions of the character to offer a convincing performance and in what degree they controlled the tools they used to express themselves, such as voice, mimicry, crying. The questionnaire is extensively articulated in seventeen points through which it addresses fundamental themes such as the use of personal memories in the construction of the character or the routine effect generated by repeated performances, themes that were central also to Stanislavsky's studies on acting.

Adelaide Ristori also responded to the questionnaire. While admitting that she had never entirely followed her father's advice who, when she had to interpret a suffering character, would insist on her being melancholy all day, she added:

Time and again I too in playing the part of a daughter who loses her parents; or of a mother who watches her beloved children die, would feel my heart break and abundant tears fall from my eyes! There were situations in which I was so involved by the analogy of these events with my private life that, while making a great effort to control myself, I

<sup>52</sup> A. Attisani, *Actoris Studium*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell'Orso, 2010, pp. 50-51.

<sup>53</sup> William Archer, *Masks or Faces? A Study on Psychology of Acting*, London, Longman's, Green & Co., 1988. Claudio Vicentini has studied the question in all its complex aspects on more than one occasion, and particularly in C. Vicentini, 'Adelaide Ristori e Tommaso Salvini rispondono a William Archer', in AA.VV., *La passione teatrale. Tradizioni, prospettive e spreco nel teatro italiano: otto e novecento. Studi per Alessandro d'Amico*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1997, pp. 477-507; and in 'Teorie della recitazione. Diderot e la questione del paradosso', in AA.VV., *Storia del teatro moderno e contemporaneo*, ed. by R. Alonge e G. Davico Bonino, Torino, Einaudi, 2000, II, pp. 5-47.

would not always succeed! Naturally, the effects produced in such a mood are greater because they are closer to the truth.<sup>54</sup>

Ristori therefore takes the emotionalist side, in contrast with the anti-emotionalism advocated by Diderot, and basically seems convinced that the actor must identify with the character, that gestures and bearing count more than diction and, in general, that drama schools are of little utility. Nor could one expect any different from a daughter of professionals, who had grown up and had been educated on stage and behind the scenes. Salvini too is repeatedly cited by Archer in support of the emotionalist position.

This is confirmed by Salvini's article, 'Some Views on Acting', published in *The Century Magazine* (December 1890), and then in *Illustrazione italiana* (May 24, 1891). In the article, which, incidentally, evidences the wide-ranging communicative strategy that typified the *grandi attori*, Salvini writes: "The question boils down to this: must an actor actually feel the emotions he represents or must he be completely indifferent, entrusting on to his art the way he communicates with the spectators?"

But from the opening of the article, notes Vicentini, 'it is evident that for Salvini the essential role of the actor is not in the least that of effectively portraying the passions of the character on the stage'.

It is instead that of penetrating and expressing a complex individuality, which must be grasped in its most profound interiority, in its most intimate nature. The essential feature of the character, Salvini explains, is the uniqueness, the specificity of its internal world, and for this reason it is of 'supreme importance' for the actor to identify 'the mental and spiritual difference of the character', neglecting in the early phases the identification of the outer traits of the character, which are only 'trifles'.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, Salvini goes one step beyond the emotionalist position, according to which the actor must feel exclusively the feelings of the character, arriving, according to Vicentini, to a 'theory of acting as the assimilation in the very special personality of the actor of the profound and unique interiority of the character'.<sup>56</sup> In doing so, Salvini laid the ground for that complex process of identification of the actor with the character around which in the first part of the twentieth century, Stanislavsky's theories and practice was to be centered and which, through Lee Strasberg's Actors Studio, and the famous actors who attended it, from James Dean to Marlon Brando, to Marilyn Monroe and Robert De Niro, later extended its influence to the great Hollywood movie tradition.

### ***The "Grande Attore" and Italian Naturalism. Giovanni Emanuel***

February 7, 1879, Teatro Rossini in Naples: Giovanni Emanuel is staging *L'acquavite*, an adaptation of the novel *L'assommoir* by Emile Zola, the most recent work of the leader of French naturalism (1877). Emanuel (1848-1902) was in his early thirties, but had already worked as actor-manager for six years and was anxious to establish his artistic theories. Alcoholism, prostitution, hunger, suffering: the

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<sup>54</sup> C. Vicentini, 'Adelaide Ristori e Tommaso Salvini rispondono a William Archer', p. 479.

<sup>55</sup> C. Vicentini, 'Teorie della recitazione. Diderot e la questione del paradosso', p. 45.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

questions that connoted Zola's proletarian characters, like Gervaise the washerwoman or Copeau the worker, were of such social import that they made a great impression even in Naples, where naturalism was less established than in Milan.

Edoardo Boutet describes the attention with which Emanuel prepared himself for the part: 'To perform this *delirium tremens*, Emanuel had not only studied in books this horrible form of dying, but had also gone several times to the Ospedale degli Incurabili to see its characteristics, from the early symptoms to agony: a marvelously realistic reproduction that was impossible to resist to'.<sup>57</sup>

'Emanuel's originality', writes Molinari, 'lies in the fact that his adhesion to Naturalism did not concern only the repertoire he chose but also and indeed, mainly, the art of the actor'.<sup>58</sup> Emanuel gave a first demonstration of his artistic goals in 1880, when, under the pseudonym of John Weelman di Terranova he published a pamphlet entitled *Rossi o Salvini?*, in response to an article celebrating Ernesto Rossi published in the *Sport* of Naples (August 19, 1880). The article was signed by Scalinger, an invented name behind which Emanuel believed there was Giacomo Brizzi, the secretary of Rossi, whom Emanuel suspected of being the ultimate inspirer of the article. Emanuel was so vehement in his defense of Salvini that the ensuing polemic almost led to a duel. But aside from all that, and more important, the episode offered Emanuel the opportunity to express his ideas on Shakespeare and on theater, and invoke a naturalist form of acting.

Giovanni Emanuel was not born of a family of theater professionals. He had attended a lyceum but had been unable to go to university due to his family's problematic financial situation. Instead of taking a regular job, he joined the Compagnia Luigi Bellotti Bon, one of the best of the time, as *secondo brillante* (second comic actor). His love of Shakespeare, led him to study English in order to be able to personally revise the various translations of Carcano, Maffei and Rusconi.

Emanuel showed a new respect for the text, compared to the time when the author was treated like a company poet, the provider of rough drafts that the actors could rework. These at least were the principles he advocated, for in his practice Emanuel too was not always exempt from bending the text to his purposes, like the *grande attore* was prone to do.

The fact remains that, at a time when the public did not applaud Shakespeare as much as Rossi's Hamlet or Salvini's Othello, Emanuel criticized the notion of actors as autonomous artists and insisted on their role as interpreters. The actor did not create anew; Shakespeare pre-existed the actor and his texts expressed dramatic poesy in its highest forms: 'the actor create where the author has created. True, sometimes, the actor can highlight traits that seem obscure in the author: he can adorn with liveliness passages where perhaps it is possible the author had fallen asleep a little, but this is not creating'.<sup>59</sup>

From this premise derived the notion of an interpreter who carefully avoided raising his voice above that of the author trying instead to put himself in the service of the author's poetic message. Emanuel's horror of easy effects, his control over acting, which had to be normal and true, monotonous if necessary, his aversion for

<sup>57</sup> M. G. Barabino, *Il Lear di Emanuel: temi e metodologia*, p. 169.

<sup>58</sup> C. Molinari, *L'attrice divina. Eleonora Duse nel teatro italiano fra i due secoli*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1985, p. 20.

<sup>59</sup> John Weelman di Terranova [Giovanni Emanuel], *Rossi o Salvini? Risposta ad un articolo del giornale "Lo Sport" di Napoli*, Bologna, Società Editrice, 1880, p. 38.

the hardening of genres into a collection of stereotypes, led Emanuel to maintain that to all authors 'classic, romantic, idealist or realist' had to correspond a single type of natural actor: 'It is one thing to adapt one's individuality to the personality of the character, it is different when one adapts it to the genre, to the style of the author'. The actor 'must not have a voice and a gesture for the classic, another for the romantic, and another for the natural. Thus, in *Oreste*, he must move and speak like he would move and speak in one of Dumas's plays'.<sup>60</sup>

Emanuel's distaste of rhetoric was so strong as to lead him to redefine Hamlet's tragedy from a naturalist perspective:

And what is Hamlet? They say the *tragedy of thought*, the *personification of doubt*, *reasoning madness*, *delirious reason*, and other devilries; but for us comedians what is Hamlet? He is a miserable young prince, with a murdered father, an adulterous mother, a fratricidal uncle, false friends, spying courtiers, and the duty of vengeance. He sheds tears, he pants, he loves, he raves, he pretends, he hesitates, he thinks. And then... he thinks, hesitates, pretends, raves, loves, pants, sheds tears... and then kills! But to do all these things he does not need supernatural overtones! These are things that, especially to us comedians, happen everyday, that is... every night.<sup>61</sup>

But if the limit of Rossi's Hamlet was, according to Emanuel, that of revealing from his first entrance the presence of the *actor*, of the *commediante*, what was to be the style of the new actor? Emanuel's precepts coincided with the instruction Hamlet imparts to the actors: 'Natural! Not too cold, nor too furious, do not saw the air with your hand, not to tame, not mannered'.<sup>62</sup>

Emanuel then proceeded to compare Rossi's Othello with Salvini's. The first wild and excessive, the second civil and controlled in his reactions, like a true officer of the *Serenissima*. Besides his heroism, Desdemona is attracted by his poetic nature, and this is then Emanuel's instruction to the actor: 'The *poetry of a character* lies in *simplicity*, the sublime in art is *simplicity*'. In the bad interpreter, emphasis and manner go together.

In fact, in writing his pamphlet, Emanuel was looking for an authoritative supporter of his reform. To do this he sought to locate himself within a progressive tradition which had in Salvini his best representative, whereas Rossi represented a dangerous step in the wrong direction. This need to identify his position with Salvini sometimes obscured the clarity of his position. At times his arguments even bordered on the ridiculous, as when he thought to downplay the distance between Salvini's older romantic poetics and the new naturalist one: 'Or would you criticize Salvini for those thunderous outbreaks and classify them as mannerisms? But it is God who gave him the chest of Samson and it is not his fault if that chest allows him to grow clearly in his passions, without rattling and wheezing, but thundering like an angry Jove!'.<sup>63</sup>

In January 1887, in a letter to the director of the *Fieramosca* of Florence, Emanuel responded to those who had criticized his Othello, restating the principles of his reform: 'Since my mind opened to art I have had but one master: the author. I have

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 21-22.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., pp. 23-24.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

had but one goal: the truth [...] The laws of truth are intangible, like the greatest and most sophisticated expression of truth is simplicity'.<sup>64</sup>

Being aware that the greater the talent, the harder one must fight against oneself, Emanuel recognized in himself the signs of the weaknesses common to many actors but, as proof of his integrity, he said about his Hamlet: 'In the past in the first Act I was unable to resist or at least I was unable to subtract myself to the ecstasy of the applause, and two or three I would obtain almost sacrilegiously: soon reason prevailed and I repudiated them. Nowadays my Hamlet is naturally more monotonous for the majority, but it is more consistent with Shakespeare's principles'.<sup>65</sup>

According to a contemporary witness, Giuseppe Costetti, this rigor led Emanuel to an excess of didacticism and the search for a natural style ended up result in a monotonous diction, obsessed by the need to avoid all excesses ('this fading of the expressive hues and this lowering of emotional expression is the distinctive feature of the new school'). In Costetti's view, this style was a degeneration of Gustavo Modena's teachings: 'The Modenian one was the true, the substantial reform, the only one that could be done. Going beyond Modena in naturalness and preserving for interpretation the right coloring, is an impossible thing. Trying to do so is presumption; pretending that others do it, is a fault; tolerating it, is foolishness'.<sup>66</sup>

Emanuel died in 1902, aged only 54. The public of the popular performances at the Arena del Sole of Bologna had been among his favorite ones and in this preference Livio sees one of the signs of the new times, the indication of the deep tie between naturalism and populism. Actors too were changing. While Emanuel retained the distinctive traits of the *grande attore*, his "pupils", first and foremost Ermete Zacconi, embodied the new phase of the *mattatore*. Emanuel, and with him Giacinta Pezzana, represent the crossroads between two generations, the link in an epochal transition, which coincided with the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century.

### ***Giacinta Pezzana***

On July 26, 1879, again Naples, again an adaptation of a novel by Zola, *Therese Raquin*, this time at the Teatro dei Fiorentini. The star is Giacinta Pezzana (1841-1919), once *prima attrice* (leading woman) of the short-lived resident company of the Teatro dei Fiorentini, along with Emanuel as *primo attore* (leading man), Achille Majeroni, *attore di parrucca* (a multi-role actor), and the Eleonora Duse, as *prima attrice giovane* (leading juvenile woman).

Pezzana, though only thirty-eight, decided to play the aged Raquin, choosing the role of the mother over that of leading woman. In this way, she left the role of Therese to Eleonora Duse, who had remained with her after the resident company had been disbanded, and Duse was thus promoted from *amorosa* (leading juvenile woman) to *prima attrice* (leading woman). According to Cesare Molinari, in Duse's interpretation, Therese became 'the embodiment of an anxiety that was both

<sup>64</sup> The letter is cited in full in V. Pandolfi, *Antologia del grande attore*, pp. 270-273.

<sup>65</sup> M. G. Barabino, 'L'Amleto di Emanuel: divenire di un personaggio', *Teatro Archivio* (May 7, 1984), p. 96.

<sup>66</sup> G. Costetti, *Il teatro italiano nel 1800*, Rocca San Casciano, Cappelli, 1901, pp. 392-393.

existential and metaphysical': the fact of having believed in an impossible escape becomes for her a sin that must be expiated and the disillusion was the same experimented by the actress in her restless escaping. The tragedy of Mother Raquin is different, a slow metamorphosis from *mater dolorosa* to an Erinys of classical tragedy.<sup>67</sup>

Rasi describes Pezzana, after her great performances in Goldoni's *Zelinda* and Legouvé's *Medea* as following: 'Her manly and vigorous voice in tragedy, found in modern drama tones of ineffable sweetness. No actress of her time, including Ristori, could boast of such a range in her repertoire'.<sup>68</sup>

Besides her artistic talent, Pezzana was special also in her utopian aspiration, which came out in her acting and in her transgressive behavior, in ways that sometimes seem to anticipate Duse's nervous sensibility, though Pezzana saw herself more in line with Modena's severe principles:

I sometimes flatter myself that I bear some slight resemblance to Gustavo Modena! Not in the greatness of Art, mind you. No, but in the lack of patience for the *theatrical milieu* in the aspirations for a motherland *internally free* in the profound and restless contempt for the ugly *commercial* compromises of an Art which, emanating from the soul, should be free of them.<sup>69</sup>

The uncompromising personality of Pezzana, who was a republican and a follower of Mazzini like Modena, was cause for her of defeats and disappointments. From 1887 to 1895, she retired from the stage to isolate herself in Sicily, in a sort of voluntary exile. In 1905, she returned to the theater and took part, among other things, in the effort to create a stable repertoire company in Rome, at the Teatro Argentina, along with Edoardo Boutet and Ferruccio Garavaglia, which was followed by the project of establishing, also in Rome, a company who was to act in Roman dialect and explicitly orient itself on themes of social relevance. Gigi Livio comments:

At the root of all these projects, so different among themselves (but all equally failed) one can detect the strong the pedagogical drive that animates Pezzana's art. On the eve of the birth of the Roman dialect company (which, in the words of Pezzana, was supposed to 'correct the brutal costumes of the people, entertaining them at a low expense' and which turned out to be a great fiasco), the actress wrote Sibilla Aleramo: 'This theater truly of the *people* is my old dream: I must try to create it, either to see it blossom or to get over this artistic-humanitarian obsession!'<sup>70</sup>

Before dying, Pezzana succeeded in acting in a movie, *Teresa Raquin*, directed by Nino Martoglio and shot in 1915 (one year before *Cenere*, Eleonora Duse's only movie).

But the artistic and existential story of Giacinta Pezzana is interwoven with another great question of her time, the battle for the emancipation of women, in which Pezzana showed the same 'lay and democratic' commitment. Her independence disconcerted theater critics:

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<sup>67</sup> C. Molinari, *L'attrice divina. Eleonora Duse nel teatro italiano fra i due secoli*, pp. 32-34.

<sup>68</sup> Luigi Rasi, *I comici italiani*, II, p. 270.

<sup>69</sup> Letter to Stanislao Manca (December 10, 1903), cited in G. Livio, 'Il teatro del grande attore e del mattatore', in AA.VV., *Storia del teatro moderno e contemporaneo*, II, p. 638.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 639.

An independent, free, bold, impetuous, strong, straight, firm, uncompromising, disdainful, proud, self-assured, energetic, unconventional, modern, risk-loving... all these definitions recurred in Pezzana's case, to indicate problematic virtues that easily became insurmountable obstacles to her career, namely: inadaptability to expedients, lack of elegance, scarce ambition, refusal of publicity, rigidity, excessive protection of her privacy, contempt for the taste of the public, excessive sincerity [...] It is no chance that she was given nicknames like 'oil tycoon' and the 'great gypsy'.<sup>71</sup>

Giacinta Pezzana embodied, like Emanuel, the new interpretative principles of naturalism and, from a political perspective, the aspirations of post-unitary Italy in which, having achieved national unity, the debate on the type of political model to adopt had re-opened. In this, Pezzana proved herself as radical as Gustavo Modena. Compared with the previous generation, the most evident comparison is with Adelaide Ristori. Laura Mariani, a scholar of Pezzana who has studied not only her artistic personality but also her contribution to the cause of the emancipation of women, writes:

Giacinta Pezzana acknowledges the genius of the Ristori but pursues a personal difference: her restlessness lead her first of all to find her identity in the romanticism of actors, regenerated in Italy by Gustavo Modena, in the refusal of artistic or social homologation. She thus became identified as the subject of a new triad, that of the 'last romantics', in relation to the innovative role taken by some women in the first decades after the birth of the nation. Besides her, the triad includes Adelaide Tesserò and Virginia Marini, who, however, lack Pezzana's critical spirit, which was fed by a political passion that, in Rasi's opinion, 'almost surpassed her art'. [...] the idea was already fully hers that, in this area, sexual difference is secondary: for her, who was particularly sensitive to this problematic, characters and their passions have no sex. Thus, in her search for ways out of both social roles and traditional repertoire, she searched for herself also through Hamlet.<sup>72</sup>

Let us entrust our conclusion to the words of Giovanni Calendoli, the author of a ponderous study on the art of acting, which serves as a companion to Pandolfi's work cited at the beginning. In a sort of epigraph to the era of the *grande attore*, Calendoli writes:

But of the more ambitious reforms to which Modena aspired – those more closely connected to the spirit of the Italian Risorgimento – little remained in his successors. The new generation took it onto itself to develop the naturalist premises contained in Romanticism and that of ennobling its acceptance of the foreign repertoire to which it had basically given in, departing more and more from Italian theater. Ernesto Rossi and Tommaso Salvini in particular had the merit of establishing on the Italian stage the tragedies of William Shakespeare, which Antonio Morrocchesi, Francesco Lombardi, Gustavo Modena and Alamanno Morelli had never been able to act with true success. Modena in *Othello* had even been booted.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>71</sup> A. Buttafuoco and L. Mariani, 'I volti di Messalina. Note sul rapporto tra emancipazionismo femminile e teatro', in AA.VV., *Il teatro italiano dal naturalismo a Pirandello*, pp. 194-195.

<sup>72</sup> L. Mariani, *L'attrice del cuore. Storia di Giacinta Pezzana attraverso le lettere*, Firenze, Le Lettere, 2005, pp. 10-11.

<sup>73</sup> G. Calendoli, *L'attore. Storia di un'arte*, Roma, Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1959, p. 459.