



Three Italian practitioners seeking a more popular audience for Shakespeare

by Margaret Rose

In Italy Shakespeare's plays have never reached a truly popular audience, as they did in England in the 16th and early 17th century, when working men and women, artisans, merchants and the upper classes went to Shakespeare's Globe and the other public theatres in London on a regular basis (Gurr 1987: 49-79). Moreover, even if Shakespeare productions in contemporary Britain enjoy a more elitist following among the adult population than in Shakespeare's day, there's a great deal of work going on to make sure that children of school age from all social classes and ethnic groups not only study Shakespeare as part of their school curricula and go to see some Shakespeare plays, but also get an opportunity to take part in theatre workshops devoted to the Bard during their school careers¹.

Differences between Italy and England, regarding audiences for Shakespeare doubtless derive from the two very divergent theatre histories characterizing the two countries. In Italy the history of productions can be gleaned from Leonardo Bragaglia's study, *Shakespeare in Italia: personaggi e interpreti: fortuna scenica del teatro di William Shakespeare in Italia* (2005). The author's catalogue of the many Shakespeare productions and the place of their première, from the first in 1792 until 2004, is extremely useful, and evidence that nearly two centuries went by after their first performances in England before Shakespeare appeared on the Italian stage. By and

¹See the 'National Curriculum', English Government website, 2013 and websites of the Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon and the Globe Theatre, London.



large cultured Italians became acquainted with Shakespeare's plays by reading translations (in Italian but often in French) that slowly appeared in the 18th century. These were only subsequently used as the basis for theatre productions, targeting a mainly middle and upper-class audience.

As Lorenzo Bianconi argues, it is worthwhile remembering that it was Giuseppe Verdi's operatic versions of Shakespeare (starting with *Macbeth* in 1847 and followed by *Othello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893)) that worked "the miracle of bringing triumphant to the Italian stage a kind of theatre that previously had never left the reading room." (Bianconi 1986: 56). And of course the advent of Shakespeare on film, beginning in the early twentieth century,² together with a parallel trend characterized by Shakespearean citations of various sorts in films not principally about Shakespeare (Tempera 2005: 49-60), contributed significantly to bringing Shakespeare to an ever larger audience.

The present essay, however, does not purport to discuss Shakespeare productions in the whole of Italy, where the presence of Shakespeare in theatre seasons and the typology of audiences vary considerably according to the different Italian regions. Aware of this diversity, Anna Anzi in *Shakespeare nei teatri milanesi*, presents Shakespeare productions onstage in Milan from 1904 to 2000 (see Anzi 1980; 2001). For each production the author provides information about the venue, date and name of the company, director and actors, together with a critique of the production and a survey of critical reviews.

The scope of this contribution is much more limited, focusing on several Shakespeare productions by three contemporary Italian directors, Massimo Navone, Marco Ghelardi and Riccardo Mallus, who live and work in Northern Italy. While their directorial style is very different, they aspire to create Shakespeare productions capable of communicating with a wider audience from the point of view of age and social class than is usual in Italy today. Navone and Mallus have made their own adaptations (or have collaborated on adaptations) of Shakespeare plays, while Ghelardi sets about making a new translation for each of his Shakespeare productions. All three of them are seeking new audiences, including people who never go to the theatre, and if they do, they prefer more entertaining, contemporary, cutting edge theatre. These directors, moreover, sometimes opt to work in site-specific locations, shunning regular theatres. While a site-specific trend is widespread in Britain (two important UK groups are Knee High and Grid Iron), America and Canada, it is much more unusual in Italy³. For the above reasons, Cristina Cavecchi and I, as curators of the Festival-Conference, "Shakespeare Forever Young", decided to invite these three directors to discuss their work in a panel discussion⁴.

²See J. Jorgens (1991: 1-35) for an overview of important Shakespeare films until 1990.

³See N. Kaye (2000) for a discussion of site-specific theatre.

⁴See <<http://portalevideo.unimi.it/media?mid=581>> (07 July 2017) for the panel discussion.



1. A GLANCE AT THE HISTORY OF SHAKESPEARE PRODUCTIONS IN ITALY

While none of these directors – Navone, Ghelardi and Mallus – mentioned the history of Shakespeare productions in Italy during the panel discussion, their wish to develop innovative Shakespeare productions emerged very clearly, as did their intention to forge a new role for themselves as directors. They did allude to the present state of affairs in Italian theatre, pinpointing its stagnation and the unfair distribution of funding, as factors which made them feel frustrated and, at times, angry. I would also add, that they seem to take their distance – maybe unconsciously – from the previous supremacy of the figure of the director in Italy and the style of Shakespearean productions achieved by these figures.

From the 1950s, directors such as Luigi Squarzina (1922-2010), Giorgio Strehler (1921-1997) and Luca Ronconi (1933-2015), born in the 1920s and 1930s, were instrumental to the development of what critics have defined as “regia critica” or “critical staging.”⁵ In the immediate aftermath of World War Two, Squarzina and Strehler reacted strongly against the nineteenth century tradition of the Great Actor, such as Tommaso Salvini and Ernesto Rossi⁶. At that time Italian productions of Shakespeare tended to be abridged versions of the original plays that were performed in translations which were far from exact, linguistically speaking. Instead both Squarzina and Strehler staged many classical authors – including Shakespeare – with the aim of bringing the original plays in their entirety to Italian audiences for the first time. For *Amleto* in 1952, Squarzina’s first Shakespearean production, he dealt with the staging, but also made a fresh Italian translation, seeking a linguistically more accurate one from previous translations. In his re-envisioning of the tragedy, Squarzina also delved into the psychology of Shakespeare’s characters in some depth, rejecting the 19th century interpretation of Shakespeare’s characters. According to the director, he had carried out this exploration so that “the character, freed from the romantic and post-romantic commonplaces, *could* find once again his or her coherent function as a mirror up to an epoch in crisis” (Squarzina 1995: 11). Such psychological probing was accompanied by a single stylized set, rather than the traditional painted scenery that had characterized 19th century stagecraft (Bosisio 2005: 38).

Instead in the context of the newly founded Piccolo Teatro (opened in 1947) Giorgio Strehler produced some nine Shakespeares from 1948 to 1953, presenting the plays in their totality, commissioning new translations, and, importantly for the subsequent development of Shakespeare in Italy, proving that Shakespeare’s plays were quintessentially theatrical (Bosisio 2005: 41)⁷. In 1978 the Piccolo Teatro director achieved what most critics consider to be his most outstanding Shakespeare production, *La tempesta* (*The Tempest*), thanks to an outstanding cast (Tino Carraro as Prospero and Giulia Lazzarini as Ariel) and a creative team of great talent (Luciano

⁵See P. Bosisio (2005) for a perspicacious discussion of this phenomenon concerning the Bard and C. Meldolesi (2008) for the most authoritative study of “Teatro di Regia”.

⁶See M. Carlson (1985) for a comparative analysis of acting styles adopted by Shakespearean actors in 19th Century Italy, England and America.

⁷See also D. Hirst (1992: chapter 4) for a general discussion of Strehler’s *Re Lear* and *La tempesta*.



Damiano designed the set and costumes, while Fiorenzo Carpi created the musical score). No less important was Strehler's work with Agostino Lombardo, who made the translation⁸. It should also be said that early in his career Strehler, together with the co-founder of the Piccolo Teatro, Paolo Grassi, as can be seen in their inaugural manifesto, expressed the need to create, "Un teatro d'arte per tutti" ("An Arts Theatre for Everybody"), an aspiration which in part succeeded, but with the passing of time lost its momentum.

The third director often placed in the category of critical directors is Luca Ronconi, who staged his first Shakespeare, *Misura per misura* (*Measure for Measure*) in 1967. During a long career – Ronconi died in 2015 – he worked continually on classical authors, including Shakespeare. While achieving productions of indubitable aesthetic worth and linguistic accuracy, regarding the translation, Ronconi was always concerned they should chime with the present, as is true of his *The Merchant of Venice* in 2009. This production stayed close to the Shakespearean original, being based on an Italian translation, combining two different translations by Agostino Lombardo and Sergio Perosa, translators well known in the field of Shakespearean translation in Italy. In this case Ronconi's staging felt the impact of the then recent global financial crash in 2008. As the play opened, huge, silver scales, a startling feature of Margherita Palli's set, pointed to where his interest lay, namely the world of finance. The production explored the "merry bond" which Shylock stipulates with Antonio, while highlighting the way Portia is likewise embroiled in the financial wheeling and dealing of the society where she lives. The realm of Belmont, which has often been staged as a fairytale place, in Ronconi's vision, became a dark, cruel abode, inhabited by a Portia who was at times manifestly angry and ruthless in the treatment of her suitors.

From the early 1960s until the present, moreover, a large number of directors have produced Shakespeare, their productions differing hugely as far as their directorial style goes and the nature of their experiments. Carmelo Bene, Franco Branciaroli, Leo De Bernardinis, Elio De Capitani, Carlo Cecchi, Pippo Delbono, Serena Sinigaglia, Marina Spreafico are among the most significant. While indubitably influenced by the Shakespeare productions of the Great Actors in nineteenth century Italy and the work of Squarzina, Strehler and Ronconi, the directorial styles of these practitioners, from different generations and from different parts of Italy, has also been shaped by International Shakespeare productions, thanks to periods they have spent abroad or productions they have seen by touring companies visiting Italy. In Milan, for instance, in recent decades, the Piccolo Teatro, CRT and Franco Parenti theatres, among the most important Milanese theatres, have hosted a number of international Shakespeare productions, by companies such as Edward Hall's Propeller, Eimuntas Nekrosius's Meno Fortas, Thomas Ostermeier's Schaubuhne ensemble, Lev Dodin's Mali Theatre.

⁸See R. Colombo (2007) for a detailed and illuminating study of the theatrical and translation process and production.



For reasons of space it is impossible to discuss the many Shakespeare productions of these talented directors. I would just like to mention one 'Milanese' Shakespeare that has drawn big and popular audiences over a period of thirty-five years. The teatro dell' Elfo's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has been in the company's repertoire since 1981 when Gabriele Salvatores, today a stellar film director, created the first production as a rock opera, spiced with Italian music and song during which the Mechanicals morphed into an emerging rock band⁹.



Sogno di una notte di mezz'estate, directed by Gabriele Salvatores, Teatro dell'Elfo, 1981.

Following the first production, which was turned into a film, with the celebrated rocker Gianna Nannini, Elio De Capitani has directed the play in two different versions. In 1986 he produced the so-called 'dark version', using a translation by poet Patrizia Cavalli. Then in 1997 he worked on a very different version, based on Dario Del Corno's translation, which opened at Verona's Shakespeare Festival. This last production has played in nine seasons, until the most recent in 2016. Thanks to a talented cast, including De Capitani in the role of Bottom, whose language and accent recall the Bergamo dialect and wink at the Italian Commedia dell'arte tradition, the Elfo's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* continues to attract new and mixed audience members.

⁹See Alessia Rondelli's critique (Bentoglio, Rondelli, and Tisano 2013: 44-54).



2. SHAKESPEARE IN TOWN!

Director, translator and festival curator, Marco Ghelardi (born 1975), trained at the London School of Speech and Drama and subsequently worked in London in theatre and in opera, an experience which has shaped his directorial style and his conception of theatre. Following his stay in the UK, he returned to his native Savona, a town on the Italian Riviera, where he founded his company, Salamander. Since 2005 Marco Ghelardi has organised an annual Shakespeare festival, "Shakespeare in Town!", targeting audiences in Savona and its hinterland. The festival includes a variety of Shakespeare connected events which seek to involve and lure the local community, including people from all social classes, ethnic groups and ages, to attend plays and readings about Shakespeare, workshops, films, meetings, conferences, interactive events, flash mobs, book crossing, etc. The festival regularly ends with a full-scale production of a Shakespeare play directed by Ghelardi at Savona's Chiabrera theatre, a former opera house.

During the panel discussion Marco Ghelardi expressed a need to work independently of the conventional Italian theatre system, which in his opinion tends to be morally corrupt and static. He also remarked that Italian theatre can be quite cold and detached from its audience, so he and his associates seek to create a more vibrant audience-performer relationship, more like the one between the audience and the musicians at a rock concert. Savona is a town of some sixty thousand inhabitants, but boasts only one largish theatre, the Chiabrera, with a seating capacity of six hundred. This "empty black box", as Ghelardi termed it, usually hosts touring companies. While he has no alternative but to use the Chiabrera for his full-scale Shakespeare productions, in order to reach out to new theatregoers, the director seeks alternative venues, such as restaurants and pubs, for some of the small scale productions and events in the festival programme. These venues are often abandoned places in the suburbs of Savona, where very little happens culturally speaking. Today some of these venues are being used by other companies and cultural associations, one very positive outcome of the "Shakespeare in Town!" festival.

While for "Shakespeare in Town!", Ghelardi has programmed some of the Shakespeare plays that regularly do the rounds of Italy, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*, he has also presented *Antony and Cleopatra*, *All's Well that Ends Well*, *Julius Caesar*, rarely performed works. With each Shakespeare play, Ghelardi makes a new Italian translation from scratch, often working from the original quarto or folio editions, a strategy that is not unlike the 'critical directors' mentioned earlier. In so doing, he hopes that the translation in contemporary Italian might communicate with the mixed audiences who attend the festival.



Giulio Cesare, directed by Marco Ghelardi, Teatro Chiabrera, Savona.

In 2015 he made a daring decision to translate the first 1603 edition of *Hamlet*, in light of its immediacy and marked theatricality. This meant that the 2015 Festival included a national première of a version of *Hamlet* that had never hitherto been performed in Italy. Ghelardi described, moreover, how he exploits the conventional proscenium theatre of the Chiabrera in unconventional ways. For instance, in *All's Well that Ends Well*, several audience members were called up onstage and involved in Helena's choice of suitor, so breaking the usual rigid division between audience and actors in a proscenium arch theatre. A similar interactive device was adopted for the casket scene in *The Merchant of Venice*, when audience members were called on to advise Bassanio, regarding his choice of casket. According to Ghelardi, if you choose to break conventions in this way, you take the audience by surprise and so energise the production.

The director's use of a philologically 'faithful' translation coupled to an innovative production, including interactive staging techniques, have attracted good box office sales, together with coverage by national newspapers, like *La Stampa* and *Secolo XIX*. During the 2016 festival the production of *Julius Caesar* sold 2,800 tickets during a five night run. In 2008, moreover, this talented director received the Ligurian Award for Theatrical Achievement, clear acknowledgment of the festival's impact on the surrounding territory and its population.

3. TOURNÉE DA BAR

In agreement with Ghelardi, Riccardo Mallus (born 1984), stage director of the company, Tournée da bar (Bar Tours), underscored the reluctance of many young or youngish theatre practitioners to work in a system that appears trapped in a self-perpetuating dynamic that is no longer in touch with contemporary society. In order to experiment with new ways of making theatre, in 2012 actor and storyteller Davide Lorenzo Palla created Tournée da bar, a site-specific company. Palla and his associates went on to develop an interactive style of theatre performed in these site-specific venues that are now part of an informal circuit, operating parallel to the more conventional theatre circuits. In the early days of the company Palla wrote and staged new plays by contemporary authors, but in partnership with Riccardo Mallus, he soon switched his attention to Shakespeare.



© Massimo S. Volonté
Davide Lorenzo Palla and Tiziano Cannas Aghedu in *Otello unplugged*.

So far he has adapted *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello* and *Hamlet*, giving himself the lead role in what is a reduced version of the play, a tendency which recalls the Shakespeare productions of the great nineteenth-century actors mentioned earlier.

A typical Tournée da Bar show starts with a warming up exercise aimed to break down the barriers between audience and performers. Audience members might be asked to imagine they are at a rock concert and the performers are rock stars. As the show gets underway, loud music, ranging from Led Zeppelin to Nino Rota, invites spectators to scream and shout, and even to pretend to faint as their 'rock idols' step onto the stage. Then, on a makeshift stage, depending on where the group is performing, Palla begins telling the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, or *Othello*, accompanied by a musical accompaniment by Tiziano Cannas Aghedu, a sort of one-man band, who plays eight different instruments. The musical score provides momentum and atmosphere as Shakespeare's story unfolds. At intervals the delivery of Shakespeare's story is interrupted by short scenes from the Shakespeare play, performed by one or two actors. Using a Brechtian distancing technique, Palla regularly steps out of his role as a storyteller, to comment on topical events and issues, before returning to Shakespeare. Riccardo Mallus, like Ghelardi, also exploits interactive staging techniques, sometimes asking audience members to perform a small role in the play, or interact with the actors. Such dramatic techniques allow the cast to hold the attention of audience members who are often multitasking. Spectators might be drinking, enjoying a chat with friends, while watching the show. There are moments, however, for example in the *Othello* adaptation, when spectators focus their complete attention on the performance. When Desdemona is about to be murdered, Mallus pointed to a deathly silence descending on the crowded bar, when even the barman does his utmost to shake the cocktails as quietly as possible.



The Tournée da bar Shakespeares, then, are lively and entertaining adaptations, combining storytelling, short scenes from the original play and an extra-textual commentary. The rather detached audience-performer relationship, characterizing Italian theatre mentioned by Marco Ghelardi, in the case of Tournée da bar is subverted by the company's choice of venue, namely bars and clubs. Riccardo Mallus's experiments, moreover, with interactive techniques between actors and audience also play an important part in this immersive style of theatre.

While the company started operations in Milan, their circuit is fast expanding. In 2016 they performed in fifty-two venues in six Italian regions¹⁰. Riccardo Mallus underscored, moreover, that their ever-growing number of Facebook followers is mostly made up of people who are not theatregoers. This very mixed audience can also be attributed to the group's clever online marketing campaign, which allows them to keep in touch with audience members after the show. The latter are invited to give feedback on hashtag #HamletTw. In 2015 Davide Lorenzo Palla and his company received the CheFare award, in recognition of the social impact and cultural innovation characterizing the project. The fifty thousand Euro prize money, together with support from Milan City Council and the Carcano theatre in Milan, have enabled the company to continue creating shows, which are free of charge, even if some profit is made from spectators' donations and the sale of gadgets, such as T-shirts.

4. FROM A DRAMA ACADEMY TO COUNTRY COURTYARDS AND MILONGAS

Massimo Navone (1957) is a stage director and the former head of Milan's Paolo Grassi Drama Academy, one of Italy's leading acting schools. He directs Shakespeare in regular theatres and in site-specific situations, seamlessly moving between the two sectors. Having worked with theatre practitioners, like Franca Rame and Dario Fo, it comes as no surprise that he should underscore Shakespeare's role as a popular dramatist, capable of communicating with very mixed audiences, in regular theatres and site-specific venues. Thanks to his long experience teaching students, Navone has developed the art – as he defines it – of “working with fragments from Shakespeare plays since in class there is never enough time to rehearse and perform an entire play.”¹¹ It is from these fragments that he goes on to assemble a brand-new show. This practice was already evident in his production, *Shakespeare Love* (1983), which, as he proudly recalled, predated Tom Stoppard's film, *Shakespeare in Love* by fifteen years.

Shakespeare per una notte (“*Shakespeare for a Night*”, 2009), one of Navone's most recent Shakespeare productions, is a site-specific show that took place in a large courtyard and an adjacent park and wood in Montecucco, a hamlet in Southern Tuscany. The show was made possible thanks to a partnership between the Paolo Grassi Drama Academy, Fondazione Montecucco, a private foundation, and the

¹⁰The company will be giving 50 performances in six Italian regions in autumn 2017.

¹¹Massimo Navone speaking at the panel discussion at the University of Milan during the Festival *Will Forever Young*, 9 November 2017.



Grosseto Repertory Theatre. For the production, Navone brought together students from the Paolo Grassi academy, two colleagues and two groups of local people. Following his usual method, he developed fragments from various Shakespeare plays, choosing iconic moments, like the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, the scene in *As You Like it*, where Orlando hangs love poetry on trees, and the scene in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, when Elena is spurned by Demetrius, her lover. While these scenes were assigned to the student actors, Navone involved musicians, dancers and storytellers from the local area. Consequently the Mechanicals scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was performed by Tuscan artisans and musicians, who introduced a distinct blend of satirical humour for which the Tuscans are famous. Similarly the scenes, featuring the fairies, were performed by dancers hailing from Montecucco.

For the promotion of this site-specific Shakespeare, Massimo Navone decided against using Facebook or other social networks, but adopted a strategy similar to companies at the Edinburgh and Avignon festivals. Prior to the debut, he and the cast toured the villages adjacent to Montecucco, flyering and performing short scenes from the show. Unaccustomed to such marketing strategies, the local people were taken by surprise and decided to attend a performance. Another important promotion strategy helped to attract spectators. As Navone pointed out, if you have a cast of sixty, many of whom are locals, and each of them brings ten friends and relatives, you immediately have an audience of six hundred. The production ran for five nights and was sold out. Navone expressed his deep satisfaction that many of the audience members who flocked to see the play, were locals and not regular theatregoers, while others were tourists both from Italy and further afield.



Gianni Rosso as Othello in *Otello, ancora un tango ed è l'ultimo*, directed by Massimo Navone, Teatro Menotti, Milan 2012.



In 2012 Massimo Navone directed *Otello, ancora un tango ed è l'ultimo* at the Menotti theatre, a conventional Milanese venue. Even if on this occasion he didn't work with fragments or in a site-specific setting, he still aimed at attracting a more mixed audience than the usual over fifty, middleclass theatregoers who generally attend Shakespeare productions in Milan. While the director translated Shakespeare's play prior to the start of rehearsals, he deftly adjusted it, as rehearsals progressed, calling on the actors to contribute to the process. He also worked as a dramaturg, relocating the entire Shakespearean tragedy to Cyprus, where Othello and his men are waiting to fight. Similar to the Tournée da bar Shakespeares, part of Navone's *Othello* was narrated and the remaining scenes, performed. While the Elizabethan playwright imagines that Othello carries Desdemona off to the Sagittary inn, a place that has given rise to much critical debate, Navone chose to set the play in an equally convivial location, a tango 'milonga' (ballroom). It is of course not by chance that Navone chose the tango, a deeply sensual dance, where passion culminates in the celebrated tango of jealousy. In the production three sets of tango dancers can be seen performing parallel to the play's action and in the interval, when the audience are invited to join in.



Gianni Rosso as Othello in *Otello, ancora un tango ed è l'ultimo*, directed by Massimo Navone, Teatro Menotti, Milan 2012.

In Milan the director was able to tap into a huge surge of interest in tango, resulting in the involvement of a large group of passionate tango dancers, of all ages, many of whom never go to the theatre. He recruited these dancers through auditions, during which he selected and signed up sixty dancers from two hundred and sixty candidates. He was, moreover, adamant that he did not want the dancers to create a mere choreography, but rather to play an integral role in the production. Their involvement was carefully orchestrated by an ever-vigilant assistant director, positioned onstage, who gave instructions as to when the dancers were to perform



and interact with the actors. Therefore the passionate love affair between Othello and Desdemona was embodied not just in the protagonists, but in the swirling, mesmerising movements of the tango dancers, who created a very special atmosphere and bestowed a distinct rhythm on the show.

In this case, too, Massimo Navone managed to attract a very different audience from the usual one for Shakespeare in Italy. The play drew on average an exceptional (for Milan) four hundred spectators a night during a four-week run. Even more important, many of these people were not regular theatregoers, but had heard about the show through their tango dancing friends and acquaintances.

In conclusion these three directors have created productions of Shakespeare's plays which certainly attract very different audiences from the usual ones who attend Shakespeare productions in Italy. Their success can probably be explained by their imaginative adaptations (Navone and Mallus), their stageable translations (Ghelardi and Navone) and their choice of site-specific venues (Navone and Mallus). Last but not least the conviction they all share that Shakespeare is still a playwright, who can pull in a very mixed audiences, empowers and energises their work.

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