

## *From Greece to Stratford, and Back. Teatro dell'Elfo: Half a Century with Shakespeare and the Classics<sup>1</sup>*

*Martina Treu*

Adaptations from classical texts have constantly intertwined with Shakespeare's plays, for the past fifty years, in the history of an Italian theatre company: since 1973 the group of Teatro dell'Elfo (Milan) has always combined a rigorous and coherent scenic practice, a preliminary study of the original texts, a free attitude in adapting and directing ancient and modern plays. The members of the company share a collective approach to theatre, and they work together to this day, alongside their personal projects. This study focuses on Ferdinando Bruni (as a playwright, director, actor, translator, performer and painter, costume and set designer) and on Ida Marinelli, who has shared the stage with him since 1973. The paper explores a few productions among those based on classical and Shakespeare plays, with special attention to the different roles and functions which Bruni takes on simultaneously: in particular, as a director – or co-director, with other members of the company (Gabriele Salvatores, Elio de Capitani and Francesco Frongia) – of many productions where he and Marinelli share the stage with fellow actors (Corinna Agustoni, Cristina Crippa, Elena Russo Arman, Luca Toracca). Rather than aiming to identify causal links between the classical and Shakespearean adaptations, this essay focuses on the unifying aesthetic and theoretical premises of the theatre collective that have allowed it to breathe new life into its adaptations, by discussing the different phases of its activity.

**Keywords:** adaptation, myth, tragedy, comedy, Teatro dell'Elfo

### *Teatro dell'Elfo: a collective history*

The subject of the present paper involves literature and theatre, but also the complex work of an Italian company, from the study of a

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text to the final phase of its performance: our case-study is the Teatro dell'Elfo (Milan), whose constant practice has alternated, for the past fifty years, Shakespeare's plays and adaptations from classical texts. In my opinion, the coexistence and continuity of these sources of inspiration create exceptional conditions: the productions emphasize, on stage, possible connections and affinities between the ancient authors and the Bard. Rather than aiming to identify causal links between the classical and Shakespearean adaptations, this essay focuses on the unifying aesthetic and theoretical premises of the theatre collective that have allowed it to breathe new life into its adaptations, by discussing the different phases of its activity.

Since 1973, all the members of the company (who call themselves, in short, "Elfi", i.e. 'Elfs') have shared a common, collective approach to theatre. In this regard, they are almost an exception among Italian theatre companies: since 1973, the first historical core of founders has remained the same, although younger members have since joined the project<sup>2</sup>. Today, the founding members still work together, although they have also developed personal projects. They all combine a rigorous and coherent scenic practice, conducting a preliminary study of the original texts, and exhibit a free attitude in adapting and directing ancient and modern plays. This study focuses on Ferdinando Bruni (as a playwright, director, actor, translator, set designer, costume designer) and on Ida Marinelli, who have shared many projects since 1973. They have acted as a couple on stage, both in female and male roles: Clytemestra and Electra in *Electra*, Orestes and his mother in *Oresteia*, Oberon and Titania in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hamlet and Gertrude in *Hamlet*, Admetus and Alcestis in *Alcestis*. Notable *solo* performances include *SdisOré* and *The Tempest* (Bruni) and *Cassandra* by Christa Wolf (Marinelli).

These productions, in my opinion, testify to a coherent approach to the classics and to Shakespeare, respectful and yet modern, based on a deep study of the texts, aimed at staging them with a personal, innovative touch, without restraint, so that they are revitalized,

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2 In the seventies, many theatre groups formed and disbanded in Italy: very few are still active today. Two remarkable examples are Teatro delle Albe (Ravenna) and Ensemble Teatro Due in Parma. About the former see Treu 2013a; 2013c; 2024a; about the latter Treu 2013b; 2014: one of their founders and members, the director and actor Gigi dall'Aglio, worked in several productions by Teatro dell'Elfo. Unfortunately, he passed away in 2020.

and made accessible to a contemporary audience. In this regard, it is important to stress that the dominant attitude in Italian theatre companies and audiences (especially towards Greek and Roman drama) has been rather conservative until recently, with few exceptions (see Treu 2024a). Strict control, if not censorship, on texts and translations has been the general rule, with limited access to new texts, or to any author suspected of 'unfaithfulness' to the classical heritage<sup>3</sup>. The major festivals (for instance at the Greek theatre of Syracuse) have only recently, and slowly, opened their doors to adaptations.

In this context it is remarkable that the 'Elfs' have always distinguished themselves for their unconventional attitude towards the classics, which is one of the main reasons for their long-lasting success: over 50 years, they have been able to conquer an increasingly wide, heterogeneous audience of many thousands. In the seventies, their spectators were on average very young – they literally grew up with the actors – but new ones have joined the audience every year, especially after the pandemic halt, from the urban and suburban area of Milan, from Northern Italy and further, as the company regularly performs on national and international tours. Affinity, acquaintance and 'continuity' between the Elfs and their audience have created a tight relationship, which has been strengthened over the years. Spectators, as the Elfs have repeatedly claimed, are not 'consumers', but 'citizens'<sup>4</sup>. Those who have followed the company throughout the years have been able to perceive links between the productions, and appreciate changes and innovations with respect to the previous ones (for instance, by watching different versions of *Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Hamlet* alternating with adaptations of classics such as *Oresteia* or *Oedipus Rex*).

For their part, the Elfs have always enjoyed involving their audience directly. Well before the contemporary social media age, spec-

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3 For instance, in 1957, an adaptation of Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen*, directed by Luigi Squarzina, was banned from the Roman theatre of Benevento: see Treu 2013c, 951-952; in the early eighties, the Sicilian trilogy *L'Oresteia di Gibellina*, by Emilio Isgro', based on Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, was not allowed to be performed in the Greek theatre of Segesta (Treu 2024b).

4 The artistic directors claim: "I primi 'portatori d'interesse' a cui facciamo riferimento sono gli autori di teatro (viventi e non) e gli immediati fruitori sono i cittadini – non semplici consumatori e neppure solo spettatori – ma interlocutori fondanti del nostro Teatro" (Bentoglio *et al.* 2013, 28).

tators have often been called upon to provide their point of view, in many ways – through public conversations and debates, surveys and polls – and occasionally admitted to rehearsals, so that they could see a production “under construction”. The most competent members of the audience have been able to appreciate the Elfs’ meticulous work on texts, on stage, on costumes and set design, but also compare roles, interpretations, and the metamorphoses of actors – a crucial aspect taken into account in this study.

*Memory, body and voice*

I have been following the Elfs for the past three decades, and since 1999 I have also worked as a *Dramaturg*, i.e. adapting texts for the stage<sup>5</sup>. My paper is largely based on direct experience: I shall examine a few selected case-studies, with a focus on practical issues – actors’ practices, audience perception – to discuss how texts are translated, studied, rehearsed, and staged, and the ways in which they talk to each other. This continuous dialogue is affirmed by the most important productions, based on the classics and Shakespeare plays, in the past 50 years. I aim at showing how each of them implies the work on the previous ones, with regard to the actors’ memory, bodies and voices: each actor ‘wears’ his/her roles, one after the other, without ever taking them off, but adding each new one to the previous one. The spectators are not only witnesses of this metamorphosis, but they take part in the whole process.

It is also important to stress that most of the Elfs started their careers as amateurs, rather than professionals. Bruni was the only member to have already studied arts and drama in the Accademia di Belle Arti (Brera, Milan) and he used his skills in many productions (see below, p. 122), while Marinelli attended a drama school in Verona (see below, p. 138). Other members had different degrees of education, but they were not trained as actors or were self-taught. Later, they gradually specialized, and grew as a company. They were

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5 *Dramaturg* is the German word currently used (in Italy as well) to define an assistant in charge of translating and adapting texts for the stage. Since the nineties, I have been working with Italian companies in many classical productions, translating and adapting ancient texts, attending the rehearsals, watching the performances and writing about them.

inspired by the idea of an *ensemble*, where each personality has its own distinctive skills, and features, but they all discuss the choices of the company, and contribute to the projects of the group as a whole. Their having forged a path together is precisely their strength. Among their models they cite Pina Bausch, the Schaubühne company in Berlin and the Théâtre du Soleil directed by Ariane Mnouchkine.

As a result of this organic process, their adaptations from ancient texts and Shakespeare's plays are strongly interconnected, with continuous echoes and correspondences: we may compare the company's work to a vessel, or portal, which allows us to travel in space and time, to go back and forth, from Greece to Stratford. In this regard, an outstanding case is Bruni's work as a *playwright* in the widest, most complete sense of the word: like the ancient Greek term *poiētēs* (from *poiēō*, 'to make') this is a complex category which fits authors such as Aeschylus and Shakespeare. We may recall, on this subject, Nadia Fusini's editorial in the first issue of *Memoria di Shakespeare*, and it is worth reporting her words in full (Colombo and Fusini 2014, 11-12):

*Playwright* is the most appropriate definition for Shakespeare. It translates into a more common, vulgar linguistic register, the time-honored profession of the dramaturg, or dramatist – the creator of dramatic texts, be they comedies or tragedies. The playwright produces stage-plays: produces, not writes; because *wright* does not allude to the act of writing, has nothing to do with *writer*, despite the similar sound, which is pure coincidence. The word *wright* refers us instead to the verb *to work*, and thus to the action of the person intent on forging some kind of matter; it alludes to a craftsman or builder, so that we say *wheelwright* or *cartwright*, for example, to refer to the person who makes wheels or carts. In short, the term *wright*, like the more archaic *wrytha*, is used to refer to someone who makes things, objects which exist in the world because man has made them. In this minimal, microcosmic way, yes, man is a creator and Shakespeare one who makes plays. Shakespeare is not Milton. He is not Dante. He is one who works for the theatre. He is a poet in the same sense in which are *poietes* the very first playwrights in Western literature whose works survive: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides. For them too the term *poietes* was used with a connotation that put the accent on *making*. And so it is with the term *playwright*, that in fact translates *poietes*, as referring to the person who performs that special act of *poiesis* – that consists of producing a spectacle, which in a broader sense may include forms of entertainment, such as acrobatic games, leaps and somersaults, flawless exhibitions [...]

The word *play* is an interesting one. Reflecting on Old English, Huizinga notes that within the semantic area of *play*, alongside *lâc* and *plega*, there is the word

*spelian*, which has the precise meaning of ‘doing something for another’, ‘to be in the place of another’; thus, to represent someone, to act on his behalf – and here the semantic field of ritual and acting opens up. Someone ‘playing’ another. The crossdresser, someone in disguise, ‘plays’ another being. He is actually another being. And what is being represented is a drama – that is, an action performed as representation. At its most ancient stage, the mood of drama is Dionysian ecstasy, festive excitement, dithyrambic enthusiasm, in which the actor is transported into the extraneous I, which he does not represent but embodies, drawing the spectators along with him into the metamorphosis. Which is just what happened at the end of the sixteenth century to those who went to ‘see’ Shakespeare. Huizinga explains that ancient tragedy and comedy were born within the spheres of play and competition. The ancient poets indeed created their works for the Dionysian contests. In the broad sense of the original word, *poiesis*, poetry arises within the domain of play and this consciousness of its playful nature is preserved especially in the theatre, where the drama, the action, is *play*. And there is weeping and laughing, just as with Shakespeare, because the true poet – we have Socrates’ word for it – is at once comic and tragic.

Premises such as these play a crucial part in evaluating the work of the Elfs, specifically their adaptations of classical texts, and Shakespeare’s plays. Bruni, in fact, is a true *playwright*, as he literally *makes* theatre. Besides being a talented director and versatile actor, he has translated for the stage six Shakespeare plays (Bruni 2023): *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *The Winter’s Tale*, *The Tempest*. He has also written, adapted and translated other plays and poetic texts (<https://www.elfo.org/artisti/ferdinando-bruni.htm>). Throughout his career he has also designed and made costumes, often by recycling and assembling parts of old garments and fabrics gathered and collected over the years. He has personally designed and created sets and scenes for many productions: for example *Alice underground*, *Rosso* (where he played Mark Rothko and painted live on stage during the whole show), *Re Lear* (2024), where a mountain of broken furniture, chairs, objects, formed a bizarre, disturbing base for the king’s throne; in *The Tempest* (a splendid solo version where he played Prospero) wooden branches, wrecks and relics not only made up the set, but inspired the concept of the whole show (see below and Rondelli 2024, 72-73).

These are only a few examples of their work, which I have had the opportunity to examine closely, working with the Elfs and interviewing them on many occasions. In what follows, I summarize the most relevant features of their theatrical journey.

### The Seventies

In their first shows, the Elfs used a number of ingredients which are still their trademarks today: their textual adaptations respect different styles and languages, often by stressing humorous, grotesque, ironical and sarcastic aspects, in an effective balance with tragic and sad moments; they produce a mixture of the old and the new, high and low registers, through stage directions, music (especially pop and rock), exaggerated and anachronistic make-up, non-naturalistic acting, unconventional scenes and costumes. A strong common thread is woven through all of their productions: some texts were revisited several times, like *Midsummer's Night Dream* and *Hamlet*, and a few key emotions have regularly been explored for decades – such as suspicion and jealousy, wrath, despair.

Until 1979, the Elfs did not own nor rented any theatre: they only played in temporary spaces, or as guests of other companies. Their first 'home' was a former cinema (in via Ciro Menotti, Milan), which hosted their first 'classical' adaptation: Petronius' *Satyricon*. Not a drama, but a novel, not Greek but Latin (later they preferred the Greeks, with the exception of Seneca's *Oedipus*, in *Verso Tebe* and *Edipo Re. Una favola nera*: see below, p. 141). This choice at first surprised their audience. Ten years before, Fellini's movie (1969) made the *Satyricon* famous, as a future LGBT+ *manifesto*. The Elfs adapted the queer world depicted in the novel to their own, contemporary poetics, creating a bizarre mixture of old and new characters, dark, grotesque, gloomy tones (see Bentoglio *et al.* 2013, 96; <https://www.elfo.org/spettacoli/1978-1979/satyricon.htm>). The set designer Thalia Istikopoulou 'razed' the theatre hall to the ground, removed the seats, built an arena with stands on three sides. Once inside, the spectators could not leave: they were literally part of the show.

Another important asset was the music, composed by Demetrio Stratos (a talented Greek-born singer, with a unique voice, the former frontman of the Area musical group: see [Demetriostratos.org](http://Demetriostratos.org)). Corinna Agustoni and Ida Marinelli were taught to sing and vocalize, by Stratos himself, over several months, in order to personalize and enrich their characters. Bruni was the young Encolpius, Elio De Capitani was Trimalchio, Cristina Crippa was an old hag in search of men for her nymphomaniac daughter. The original characters were transformed into 'freaks'



of our times, in a timeless present where the fulfilment of life pleasures – sex and food, above all – was presented as a mystery to be explored. The characters were treated with humour, if not sarcasm, though tempered by a sort of inner melancholy, a sense of loss and imminent death. Such a mixture of tones and feelings – joy and pain, sadness and the grotesque – made the audience think. Audience members were moved and surprise, might even have felt uncomfortable, but alive. It is upon this foundation that the company proceeded to build all their future productions, including the classics, and Shakespeare's plays.

Critics and spectators were generally shocked. Those who liked the previous, more joyful productions, were at least surprised, if not disappointed, by such disturbing, unprecedented choices. On the other hand, the Elfs had captured a wider, heterogeneous audience, including the LGBT+ community. Most of them were new spectators, who did not attend theatre shows regularly: they were curious and ready to accept new challenges. A great number of these "new converts" elected the Elfs as their favourite company and followed them faithfully for many decades (Bentoglio *et al.* 2013, 44)<sup>6</sup>.

### *The Eighties*

After *Satyricon*, the company experimented with a Greek 'divertissement', *Il gioco degli Dei* ("The Game of Gods"). The text, by Bruni and Salvatores, was loosely inspired (in Bruni's words) by "Homer's *Odyssey*, science fiction novels, and comics", and set and costumes were also designed by Bruni<sup>7</sup>. In the same years, the company wrote a collective adaptation of Ben Jonson's comedy *Volpone*, based on Bruni's translation, with a pop music score by The Doors. In the production, directed by Salvatores, Agustoni, Crippa and Marinelli wore strange

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6 In order to allow an increasingly large audience, the Elfs hired first the Teatro Portoromana, and finally moved to the Teatro Elfo Puccini, formerly an opera theatre. The large space, with a substantial restoration, was divided in three theatre halls, of different sizes, which were named by the Elfs after their 'mentors': Shakespeare (the largest hall, 500 seats) Fassbinder (medium, 300 seats) and Bausch (small, 100 seats).

7 Première: 19 July 1980, Castello Sforzesco, Milan. In June 1984, the production was reprised with a new title, inspired by the critic Ugo Volli: *Sognando una sirena coi tacchi a spillo* ("Dreaming of a mermaid in stiletto heels"): Bentoglio *et al.* 2013, 146.



masks – as if in a grotesque carnival – while Bruni and De Capitani took turns in playing the protagonist (Bruni and Cheli 2004, 26).

The following production, in 1981, was a musical based on Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (the play most frequently staged by the Elfs, which became their trademark)<sup>8</sup>. The first version was titled *Sogno di una notte d'estate* – "Summer Night's Dream", but the Elfs called it in brief "Il Sogno" ("The Dream"). The production was a rock opera: Salvatore translated and adapted the original text, which (as he himself highlighted) is rich in rhythm, sound and musical effects, and therefore perfectly suitable to being transposed into song (see also Bentoglio *et al.* 2013, 44-46). The cast did not include professional singers or dancers, only the members of the company. Salvatore – a musician and a guitar player himself – asked musician and composer Mauro Pagani to write an original soundtrack, so that the songs were 'tailor made' for each actor, considering their particular skills and training. Choreographers Elisabeth Boecke and Titta Facchini helped the actors find the right moves and dances, in keeping with their peculiar acting style. They worked day and night for months, and the result – a musical with a shocking, provocative touch – was a huge success. The overall approach was faithful to the original text, but still contemporary, and the three 'plots' of the play (respectively the storylines involving Oberon and Titania, the two young couples, Bottom and the artisans) perfectly intertwined, without confusion, and successfully mixing tragic and comic elements (they emphasized the ironical aspects of the love affair, and of the artisans' show).

The production attracted 200.000 spectators: it soon became a cult show, a hymn, a manifesto for an entire generation<sup>9</sup>. Bruni captured the audience with his mobile, irreverent and sarcastic Puck: a sexy, androgynous creature, in a black *guepière* and boots. His voice alternated high and low tones, his magnetic presence made him a *deus ex machina*. Crippa was an alcoholic, half-naked Titania (Bruni and Cheli 2004, 18); Marinelli played an ironical, clever, sophisticated Helen.

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8 Though the name 'Elfo' was chosen well before the staging of this play, it is no coincidence that elves, fairies, goblins, and other mischievous creatures with their concrete actions, and physical presence, played a crucial role on stage.

9 See Quinque 1981 and Bruni-Cheli 2004, 6-7. Salvatore later directed a movie (*Il Sogno d'una notte d'estate*, 1983) with Dante Spinotti as director of photography (Bruni-Cheli 2004, 18-19).



*Fig. 1* *Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1981. Ferdinando Bruni and Ida Marinelli  
(photo by Andra Strigelli).

Music and dance dominated the stage, and joyful, energetic aspects prevailed. However, Salvatores also introduced a 'bittersweet' tone,

especially in the final scenes: the 'traditional' happy ending did not satisfy him. Rather, he followed an invisible thread embedded in Shakespeare's plays: men and women are often not able to fulfil their true desires but accept their destinies (for example conventional marriage). Without altering the text, the company stressed its hidden meaning through non-verbal signs, movements and expressions of actors.

Later productions of the same play, directed by Elio De Capitani (1988, 1997) further strengthened its most ambiguous and darkest implications. De Capitani's interpretation was based on the scene in which King Theseus recalls his own love story: he fought the Amazons, he won the war, he tamed and conquered their Queen. Following these premises, the Amazons' submission was strongly underlined on stage, where a splendid Marinelli – in the role of Queen Hippolyta – became a crucial character. The prologue also recalls the fight between Achilles and Penthesilea, a prototype of the violent and deadly love made immortal by Von Kleist<sup>10</sup>.

The director De Capitani has commented on this dynamic during a course he taught at Iulm University (2023/2024), as well as in previous interviews and other writings (see Bentoglio *et al.* 2013), tracing his inspiration back to the German theorist and dancer Pina Bausch, who publicly denounced the hidden violence against women as the 'other side' of war, inside and outside homes, also in times of peace. Thus the opening scene literally shocked the audience: an aggressive group of males in uniform chased and attacked a small group of breast-naked women, barely covered by military coats. The soldiers shot and killed them all on stage, except one – Marinelli – who was undressed with violence, then swathed with ribbons and ropes, and forced into an elegant, feminine gown, and high heels. These were clearly meant as a sign of sexual submission, and a token of violence against women. Over the years, this production acquired the status of an exposé, premonitory of contemporary civil wars, with their mass rapes and massacres, such as those in Rwanda and Yugoslavia.

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10 In the same years, significantly, Marinelli was also the protagonist of a huge success of the company – Fassbinder's (*Le amare lacrime di Petra von Kant – Petra von Kant's bitter tears*) where she played a strong, proud woman, who revealed onstage her fear of being abandoned and humiliated (Bentoglio *et al.* 2013, 49-50).



Fig. 2 *Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1988. Ida Marinelli (photo by Armin Linke).

Subsequently, the entire production appeared as “a Dream which becomes a Nightmare”, as De Capitani told me in a private conversation. He focused on Shakespeare’s black humour – which he emphasized as much as possible – and on the most ambiguous features of the original text (such as the fights between lovers, or the Puck’s deceitful trick). However, this ‘dark side’ was effectively balanced by the humorous ‘third plot’, i.e. the story of Pyramus and Thisbe performed by Bottom and the craftsmen. Especially in the third version of the play (1997), De Capitani/ Bottom /Pyramus dominated the scene with his comic inventions and explosive physicality<sup>11</sup>.

In the same years, these adaptations of “*The Dream*” were alternated with ‘different takes’ of *Hamlet* (first staged with its original, complete title *The Tragedy of Hamlet-Prince of Denmark*). The company aimed at removing from the text the layers and stereotypes which had previously influenced the reception of Shakespeare’s tragedy – as they claimed

<sup>11</sup> In his career, De Capitani has always alternated comic and tragic roles, including Claudius in *Hamlet* and the main roles of *Othello* (2016) and *King Lear* (2024): see <https://www.elfo.org/artisti/elio-de-capitani.htm>.

– in order to get back to its core. To do so, in 1984 and 1985 they chose two poetic translations, respectively by Cesare Garboli and Patrizia Cavalli: both texts were cut to the bone, reduced to the essential, brought towards a contemporary interpretation. 'Rarefaction' became the Elfs' trademark: the actors played as if moving in a void, their voices resonated thanks to microphones, their words acquired greater sense and power. Accordingly, the director De Capitani created an innovative scenography with set designer Carlo Sala, devoid of decoration: the labyrinth of the Danish palace was merely evoked by a mechanical system of moving decks and rotating platforms. In the final version, only transparent, plastic curtains and basic furniture were left onstage. The focus was entirely on the actors, in a contemporary-classic *Hamlet*, dry, rigorous, increasingly spare and essential, with no frills or scenic objects.



Fig. 3 *Hamlet*, 1995. Centre, Ida Martinelli, bottom right, Ferdinando Bruni (photo by Bruna Ginammi).

Bruni was praised by Italian and international critics as a vigorous, magnetic, ironical Hamlet: "Standing still, he emanates energy (so do all other actors, notably Marinelli as Gertrude and Giancarlo Previati as Claudio). In Bruni's case, it is intellectual energy (As it happens, Bruni is not only an actor, but also a director, translator, designer and painter)"<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Macaulay 1999.



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## THE ARTS

## THEATRE IN MILAN

# The Italian job on Shakespeare

Alastair Macaulay reviews new productions of 'The Merchant of Venice' and 'Hamlet'

*Il nostro nome è Shylock?* Milan (a name that in Shakespeare's plays is pronounced with the stress on the first syllable) possesses two of Italy's leading live theatre companies; both of which at present are playing Shakespeare. The Piccolo Teatro is presenting *The Merchant of Venice* (*Il Mercante di Venezia*) at the old Piccolo. Meanwhile the Teatrithalia, is giving *Hamlet* (*Amleto*) at the Teatro di Portofranca. I watched both last weekend, and with

**What a difference it makes when a director puts all the focus on his actors – as in 'Amleto'**

markedly different reactions.

How come Stéphane Braunschweig now passes in Europe as a Shakespearean director of consequence? In recent years, Britain has seen both his franco-phone staging of *The Winter's Tale* and his anglophone account of *Measure for Measure*. Both were cerebral, analytical, static affairs. Alas, despite the presence of one of Italy's leading actors as Shylock, the same is true of his new italo-phonie *Merchant of Venice* at the Piccolo. (Italian translation by Agostino Lombardo.) His spirit is especially alien to Shakespearean comedy and to the line-by-line mobility of Shakespeare's thought.

No actor makes a great impression in a Braunschweig production. The director predominates alone. His sets physically constrict his actors, and often keep them onto the apron of the stage. His Venice is modern-dress, his

Belmont is period-dress. The difference between Shylock and the other modern-day Venetians is minimal – the full nature of the Christians' anti-Semitism only becomes forcibly apparent during the trial scene, visibly crushing Shylock – but Bassanio has to transform himself drastically into a Renaissance courtier to woo Portia (in Italian, Porzia). In the final scene, he is devastated to find that Porzia has taken the liberty of becoming a man, and a successful man, and in Venice. He, Bassanio, flinches out, slamming a door after him. Although Porzia soon follows him, it is unclear whether the marriage will survive. This might be revealing – England has seen reinterpretations of the play during the 1980s more radical than this (some successful), especially in terms of reinterpreting its gender politics – but the theory is more interesting than the practice.

Shylock is Roberto Herlitzka, the best actor of the cast. He catches Shylock's cunning and his wit. The way he folds to the floor at the end of the trial scene makes some impression. But neither this nor anything else about his performance exert great force, because Braunschweig will not let them.

What a difference it makes when a director puts all the focus on his actors! Much about the Teatrithalia *Amleto* might seem whacky, and certainly the expressionistic production – directed by Elio de Capitani – is wholly unlike almost every *Hamlet* seen in London in recent years. But everything here seems to frame and complement the actors' work. (The Italian translation – in the hendecasyllables that are as natural to Italian expression as the iambic pentameter is to English – is by Cesare Garboli.)



Intellectual energy: Fabiano Fantini and Ferdinando Bruni in 'Amleto'

Whereas the frequent s'asis of the actors in the Piccolo *Merchant* seems contrived, here the frequent stillness of the actors is natural, riveting, wondrously expressive. And Ferdinando Bruni – he and De Capitani are the company's artistic directors – commands the play as few *Hamlets* ever do; commands it by sheer force of mind. Standing still, he emanates energy. (So do all the other actors, notably Ida Marinelli as Gertrude and Giancarlo Preati as Claudio.)

In Bruni's case, it is intellectual energy. (As it happens, Bruni is not only an actor but also a director, translator, designer, and painter. He has recently translated Rimbaud's *Season en Enfer* into Italian.) He is slight of physique, but elegant

and absolutely assured; his voice is a dark, incisive, supple bass-baritone. And so we hang on Hamlet's thought; and so the whole play fall into place.

I think we would hang on his thought even more if the production had less intrusive recorded noise; if the gimmick of speaking certain speeches into a microphone were more selectively used (though it amplifies them, it reduces their effect); and if there was less nonsense with transparent plastic curtains whose rise and fall during the action is more distracting than we need. But the basic modern-dress economy of the staging works well. The

Ghost, naked and given an exceptionally eloquent physical performance by Fabiano Fantini, really does seem to come from Purga-

tory. Polonio (Ruggero Dondi) dominates his family with unusual force; Laerte's neurotic rage and Ophelia's madness both grow, clearly and interestingly, from his repressive control. Ophelia (Paola Rota) really is a beauty; and both Luciano Scarpa (as Orazio) and Alessandro Quattrone (in several roles) make very fine impressions. The tension between the essentially classical but always natural acting style of the company and the expressionistic framework of the production is remarkable. The stage world seems surreal; the actors make it real.

'Amleto' at the Teatro di Portofranca, Milan, until April 30. 'Il Mercante di Venezia' at the Piccolo Teatro, Milan, until April 18.

Fig. 4 Review of *Hamlet*, «Financial Times», 1999.



Fig. 5 *Hamlet*, 1995. A portrait of Ferdinando Bruni (photo by Armin Linke).

Bruni's interpretation was extremely modern and thoughtful. He captivated the audience and created a climax of emotions scene after scene: surprise, dark humour, authority, sorrow, and finally despair. He was disappointed by his mother's behaviour. He was sarcastic when he talked to his enemies, contemptuous and yet sympathetic when he pitied Ophelia for her unhappy destiny. Human, above all. These feelings were shared by the actors and spectators. Particularly moving was Marinelli's interpretation, as she gave Gertrude a personal touch (much appreciated by her faithful audience). She was by no means a conventional wife, and mother, but a sophisticated lady; magnetic, and fascinating in her stylish haircut (peroxide blonde, as usual) and black mourning dress. Irresistibly seductive when she kissed Claudius, she was able to morph into a melancholic, tormented woman, eager to please her beloved son. Over the years, Marinelli has always cited Gertrude amongst her most beloved characters, the ones that "stayed with her" (in her words) while she was playing in duets with Bruni and many other productions (such as Heiner Müller's *Quartet*, Steven Berkoff's *Decadences*, Pasolini's *Orestiaide*: see below, p. 134)<sup>13</sup>.

In 1985, the directors Bruni and De Capitani designed and played the Italian version of a foreign production based on Sophocles' *Antigone*: the anti-apartheid play *The Island* by Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona (set in Robben Island prison, where Nelson Mandela spent 27 years of his life: delegated members of his party attended the *première*). From South Africa to Italy, the Elfs adapted the text to their own context, with clear political implications. The directors also played Antigone (Bruni) and Creonte (De Capitani)<sup>14</sup>.

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13 Marinelli, as Petra Von Kant, in the cited play by Fassbinder (see above, n.10) used her own memories, gestures and objects in order to make her character more effective and 'real'. In the first scene, for instance, the stage lights were intense, while she was lying on a bed, her eyes covered by a textile eye-mask (which the actress used in everyday life, due to her frequent travels). She got up without taking it off, until she stood in front of the audience. Silently, she raised it – like a curtain – and looked at the spectators, into their eyes, creating an intimate connection with them before starting her personal confession.

14 See Bruni-Cheli 2004, 52-53.



### *The Nineties*

In the early nineties, the company was involved in *Alla Greca*, an adaptation of *Greek* (1980) by the British playwright and actor Steven Berkoff: a parodic, satirical, iconoclastic version of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* set in a dirty, poor, modern London. With this choice, the Elfs continued their research on the tragicomic and grotesque aspects of classics, which they adapted as always to the present time. They focused on the 'dark side' of family, and of love affairs, with a black humour borrowed from the original text (brimming with puns and criticism directed at British society and the Thatcher era). The protagonist is an aggressive, vulgar, East-enders Oedipus – called Eddy – who leaves home in conflict with his stepmother and stepfather; by accident, he finds and kills his real father, unbeknownst to him (he literally provokes his death in a powerful verbal fight). After the killing, Eddy falls in love with his own mother, marries her and, quite surprisingly, finds success and happiness<sup>15</sup>. Berkoff ironically subverts the model of a classical tragedy, by changing the original plot, to allow mother and son to love each other. In the final scene, Eddy refuses to gouge out his own eyes "Greek – style" and explodes in a glorification of incest, joyous and free of any sense of guilt or moral restraint<sup>16</sup>. In this respect, Berkoff anticipated future choices by British playwrights such as Sarah Kane, and Marc Ravenhill, whose work was also staged by the Elfs years later<sup>17</sup>. The adaptation was based on an excellent Italian translation (Manfridi and Clerici 1990)<sup>18</sup>. It was directed by Elio De Capitani, with a musical score composed and played live on stage by Mario Arcari. Bruni was an irreverent, seductive

15 See Macintosh 2004 and 2009, 178-179 and Gilabert Barberà 2013.

16 Berkoff's *Greek* inspired an opera with the same title by Mark-Anthony Turnage, first performed at the Munich Biennale in 1988 and Edinburgh (see Macintosh 2009, 173).

17 In 1996, the British playwright Sarah Kane 'challenged' the classics with iconoclast fury (*Phaedra's love*). On its Italian production (2011) see Treu 2011; on another *Fedra*, by Agnese Grieco, see below.

18 Manfridi also wrote another comic adaptation of *Oedipus Rex*, *Zozòs* (Manfridi 2018), staged by Teatro dell'Elfo in 1994/1995 (one year after their production of *Alla Greca*): *première* with Ida Marinelli, Alida Giardina, Danilo Nigrelli, Matteo Chioatto, directed by Andrea Taddei (set designer of the Elfo production of *Alla Greca*). In England, the play was translated into English by Colin Teevan and staged by Peter Hall (*Cuckoos*, 2000: see Macintosh 2009, 162, 188, 189).

Eddy, Crippa the waitress who was found out to be his mother. Eddy's father was played first by Gigi Dall'Aglio, then by Elio De Capitani (the same happened in the second and third version of *Sogno*). Marinelli was the feminist Sphynx who attacked Eddy and was defeated. Brought to stage first in 1993 as a 'study', and a year later in its complete form, the production was a huge success (it was reprised in 2004 and in 2020)<sup>19</sup>.

In the early nineties, Bruni and Marinelli also worked on another Greek tragedy, *Electra* by Euripides. In a recent interview, Marinelli called it "Elettra mai nata" ("Never Born Elektra"), because unfortunately their stage rehearsals were not followed by a true production, due to a lack of funding. However, a private show was viewed by other members of the company (in a large room located in via Pietrasanta, Milan) and partly filmed by De Capitani, in an amateur video which Marinelli kindly allowed me to see: in the first scene, she sat on the floor, then started to clean it – as if washing away blood – while she waited for her brother Orestes, sadly talking to herself. Suddenly Bruni appeared as a monstrous Clytemnestra, with heavy make-up (white face, red lips). He was bundled up in an enormous wedding dress. He held a spear at the height of his genitals. Red blood poured down, at first, then Clytemnestra's costume opened up and Orestes (played by Bruni himself) came out of his mother's womb.

After a period dedicated to Fassbinder (with *Petra Von Kant, La bottega del caffè, I rifiuti, la città e la morte*), Bruni and Marinelli returned to Shakespeare (with the third version of *Sogno*, 1997: see above) and to the classics: in 1998, Bruni directed *Fedra*, a peculiar version of Euripides' *Hippolytus* mixed with Seneca, Ovid, Racine, and modern authors. Phaedra's love for her stepson was narrated from the "feminine side", with an all-female cast. The author of the adaptation was also a woman, Agnese Grieco, an Italian playwright and philosopher (Grieco 2005): Bruni saw it in Germany and asked to acquire the rights for an Italian production, where Marinelli played the goddess Aphrodite, Phaedra and the chorus (with Alessandra Antinori and Rossana Piano: see Bentoglio *et al.* 2013, 156).

Soon afterwards, in 1999-2000, the Bruni-Marinelli couple was on stage as Orestes and Clytemnestra in two major productions, *Coefore* and *Eumenidi*, based on Aeschylus' *Oresteia* translated by Pasolini.

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19 For the first performance see Treu 2005, 72, 86, 87 and Treu 2009a, 72-73; for the reprise in 2020 see Tentorio 2020.

The subtitle, *Appunti per un'Orestiade Italiana* ("Notes for an Italian *Orestiad*") quoted Pasolini's movie *Appunti per un'Orestiade Africana* ("Notes for an African *Orestiad*"). The director De Capitani conceived the project with Giovanna Marini (the late Italian singer, musician and composer): in 1999, they started by staging the second drama of the trilogy, *Coefore* (*Libation Bearers*), as they wanted to recreate on stage the choirs of mourning women in funeral rites of southern Italy, and they created powerful choral parts in Italian and ancient Greek. In 2000, they staged the third part of Aeschylus' trilogy, *Eumenidi*: the demonic chorus of the original text allowed Marini to compose a musical score for feminine voices in lower tones, perfectly fit for revenge goddesses (I collaborated mainly to the dramaturgy of the choral parts). In the third part, Bruni and Marinelli were again Orestes and Clytemnestra, De Capitani played Apollo and Crippa was Athena.

Unfortunately, a lack of funding prevented the company from staging *Agamennone*, in 2001: in their intentions, Aeschylus' first play was meant to be staged as third and last of the entire trilogy, surprisingly cast as a flashback, a prequel, or a new beginning. According to De Capitani, the final scene was to be a warning: if the spiral of violence is not broken once and for all, we will soon descend back into it. The feuds and killing will never end<sup>20</sup>.

This general, 'pessimistic' view influenced both productions, where Bruni appeared as a 'prematurely aged', weary, disillusioned Orestes: in the prologue of *Coefore* he wore glasses, and a travelling coat – the signs of age, after a long exile – and he had by his side Pylades (Massimo Giovara) and later Electra (Alessandra Antinori, who has just played in *Fedra*, 1998: see above). She entered on stage with the women's chorus, in an impressive funeral march, and met with her brother on their father's tomb (Treu 2022). It is by praying with her that Orestes gathered strength and courage for his revenge: the chorus members advised him, and in the crucial scenes formed a circle, to surround and support him. Brother and sister stood still, kneeling over

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20 Such a cautious, if not 'negative', interpretation of the trilogy has often prevailed over the 'happy ending' in most productions of *Oresteia* during the past decades (see Isgrò 2011, 33-34; 47-48; Bierl 2005 and 2012; Treu 2005; 2009a; 2024a; and the production database at <http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/> for a list of past productions), including the recent *Oresteia* directed by Theodoros Terzopoulos at Epidaurus and Vicenza (Teatro Olimpico) in 2024: see <https://www.tcvi.it/it/classici/>.

the tomb – the symbolic pivot of the entire dramatic action – while the others sang and moved around them. Orestes is never alone, unlike most characters previously played by Bruni, specifically *Amleto*, where he appeared as a monad isolated in a void, even during the dialogues.

In the peak moment of *Coefore*, Marinelli as Clytemnestra faced Orestes: their most faithful spectators instinctively recalled their previous Shakespearean productions, where the couple was on stage together – in particular the latest *Sogno* and *Amleto*, which were stamped in the audience's memory. As if the audience could see through their costumes, the actors showed themselves in their flesh and bones. Their intense duet on Agamemnon's tomb was the culmination of the tragedy and of the entire trilogy. The mother asks for her axe, to kill again, but she soon understands it is too late. Like other characters played by Marinelli, she has had an infamous life, and reacts in the only way she knows how. She tries to make her son understand her, pity her. Orestes feels a hint of tenderness and compassion. He hesitates, then questions Apollo's will – "Should I kill my mother?" – but Pylades reminds him of his mission. Orestes thus drives his mother away violently and kills her off stage. When he finally reappears with his victims, Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, the women in the chorus onstage suddenly change into the Erinyes: they attack Orestes with loud cries and cause him to flee, as suggested by Aeschylus.



Fig. 6 *Coefore*, 1999. Ida Marinelli and Ferdinando Bruni (photo by Bruna Ginammi).

In the following production, *Eumenidi* (2000), the chorus of female revenge demons named Erinyes was mostly formed by the same actresses / singers in the previous one. They chase Orestes to Delphi, where they then fall asleep. In Aeschylus' prologue, the ghost of Clytemnestra appears in their dream: in this production, she literally 'comes out' of Orestes' bed (De Capitani set the prologue in a psychiatric hospital). She moved like a newborn, emerging from her mother's womb (the couple reversed the mother-son dynamics once again). Behind the actors, dark oneiric images were projected on a huge screen (Francesco Frongia had filmed and edited them). In the following scenes, Bruni was once again the pivot of the action, surrounded by the chorus in a "magic circle" of enchantment and revenge. Athena's verdict and her message to the Erinyes – ideally turned into 'benevolent' Eumenides – aimed at stopping the revenge feud and finally bringing peace (although the final scene, in the director's intentions, anticipated a new advent of blood).

### *The New Millennium*

The decade after *Eumenidi* was extremely productive for the Elfs: in 2000, the company returned to early modern English drama and staged a queer, extravagant, provocative version of Marlowe's *Edward II*, which symbolically marked the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium. Bruni translated the text, co-directed it with De Capitani, and played the protagonist in peroxide blonde, a complete metamorphosis that made him almost unrecognizable, compared to his previous interpretations. This production was a unique experiment and a turning point; in a sense, according to the co-director De Capitani, it was also a clear dissociation, a distancing from many of the texts which Bruni had translated, directed and played before.

Another step in a new direction, for Bruni and Marinelli, were their collaborations with 'outsiders' such as Agnese Grieco (for her *Fedra*, see above, p. 133). She wrote and directed an *Alceste* based on Euripides' *Alkestis*, staged first as a study (19/06/2001), then in complete form (3/4/2002)<sup>21</sup>. The author herself called her text "An

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21 See Grieco 2005, Bentoglio *et al.* 2013, 161-63.



Alcestis for two”: she converted the original plot – a wife who sacrifices her life for her husband’s sake – into a “game of life and death” within a couple, perhaps a mental projection of imaginary characters (see Treu 2025, forthcoming). It was no chance that only two actors played all the roles: Bruni was Apollo and Admetus, Marinelli was Thanatos (the god of Death, who claims Admetus’ life), Alcestis, Admetus’ father and – surprisingly – Heracles (in Euripides’ *Alcestis*, the hero helps his friend Admetus, bravely rescues Alcestis and brings her back from the underworld).

Bruni’s Apollo wore dark sunglasses and talked with brilliant, loud, and frivolous tones; on the contrary, his Admetus was melancholic, pale, sorrowful from his first appearance. Marinelli not only played a superb Alcestis, a perfect symbol of love and sacrifice, but she constructed a different ‘outfit’ on her red dress which corresponded to a new character each time it changed. As Thanatos, she acted rigidly, spoke and moved in a strange and jerky manner; as Pheretes, she wore a grey, military cloak and a monocle, clearly marking distance from his son Admetus; finally, as Heracles, she wore a lion head and an armour on her chest, and characterised the hero with exaggerated and boastful gesturing, and a harsh voice.



Fig. 7 *Alcestis*, 2002. Ida Marinelli (photo by Bruna Ginammi).

This performance allowed her to show her 'comic side', which she had previously and successfully used in parodic, grotesque roles, in minor or major parts. For instance, in *La bottega del caffè* (a free adaptation by Fassbinder of Goldoni's comedy: 1991/2003) Marinelli endowed her naïve character (Victoria) with doll-like movements and a funny accent with a 'countryside' touch (she imitated the strong, typical accent of Bergamo, in Northern Italy). In a similar manner, years later she created a comical character when playing Juliet's nurse in a ground-breaking production of *Romeo and Juliet* (Roman theatre of Verona, 2008). Unlike most of the actors who had played the character in the past, she created a maternal figure for Juliet, with a 'real' personality, comic and yet tragic at times. On that occasion, in rehearsal, she recalled her native accent, the intimate memories of her childhood in the countryside of Verona, and the most amusing characters in her hometown: she borrowed from them terms in the local dialect, as well as slang and colloquial forms, and created a splendid character. The director Ferdinando Bruni had hired local actors from Verona and its surrounding area to play Juliet and her father, to add 'an authentic' touch<sup>22</sup>. Five years before, in the same Roman theatre of Verona, Bruni had played a magnificent Shylock in *Il mercante di Venezia* (*The Merchant of Venice*, 2003). His interpretation was provocative, human and painful, especially in Shylock's famous monologue.

In the same year (2003) Bruni was also celebrated by critics and spectators, and granted an important award, for the monologue *SdisOré* (directed by Frongia). This was a free adaptation of ancient texts regarding Orestes, written by the Italian playwright Giovanni Testori in a poetic language partly based on his own dialect (Northern area of Milan, Italy), partly on new terms which he invented with creative sensibility. Throughout his career, Testori wrote several plays inspired by historical or mythical figures such as *Cleopatràs*, *Edipus* (from *Oedipus Rex*) and *SdisOré* (a pejorative which means, basically,

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22 Other members of the company staged and interpreted other classics: for instance, Cristina Crippa was a member of the chorus and Orestes' nurse in Pasolini's *Orestiadè*, Deianira in *Trachinie* (*The Women of Trachis*) by Ezra Pound, based on Sophocles' tragedy (2003), Medea in the trilogy dedicated to the Argonauts by Heiner Müller (staged in 2006: [http://old.elfo.org/programmi\\_sala/materialemedea2006.pdf](http://old.elfo.org/programmi_sala/materialemedea2006.pdf)), Lady Torrace in *La discesa di Orfeo* (*Orpheus Descending* by Tennessee Williams, 2012).



an “anti-Orestes”): ancient stories are recreated in the imaginative, itinerant show created by a wandering actor (named “Scarrozzante”), who plays all the roles, by changing and transforming himself under the eyes of spectators (see [giovannitestori.it](http://giovannitestori.it)). This peculiar text gave Bruni the opportunity to play many characters in histrionic mode. He appeared onstage with heavy make-up: a white mask on which two red lines ran from both eyes to the corners of his red mouth, like tear drops (Bentoglio *et al.* 2013, 113-114). His face was a thousand-faced palette, his voice changed into manifold voices, in an astonishing, continuous metamorphosis.

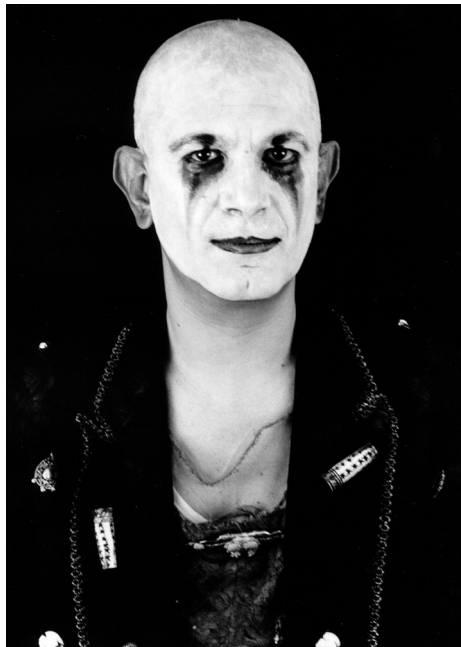


Fig. 8 *SdisOré*, 2003. Ferdinando Bruni (photo by Alessandro Genovesi).

Bruni played many other characters in the decade following this successful monologue. In a brand new, surprising version of *The Tempest* (2005), as a solo show (translated by Bruni, directed by Bruni and Frongia: Rondelli 2024, 72-73) Bruni – Prospero not only acted as a director, a magician, an illusionist on stage: he became a sort of demiurge / creator. He played all the roles, like a puppeteer engaging with his puppets and stage servants (the dynamics of power and submission are a recurrent feature of many productions).



Fig. 9 *The Tempest*, 2015. Ferdinando Bruni (photo by Luca Piva).

He later played Leonte in *Il racconto d'inverno* (*The Winter's Tale*, 2010) and again Eddy in Berkoff's *Greek* (only recently has he been replaced by a young and talented actor, Marco Bonadei). At the same time, Bruni continued to work on his own 'Oedipus'. He created an intertextual experiment which combined Sophocles' text with many authors both ancient and modern: Seneca, Dryden and Lee, Hofmannsthal and Cocteau, Mann, Dürrenmatt and Berkoff. After many years of work, the text was first staged as a 'study' with the provisional title *Verso Tebe. Variazioni su Edipo*, in February 2020, soon before the closure of Italian theatres due to Covid-19. As stated by Bruni and Frongia in their theatre programme, "The story of Oedipus through the centuries becomes the

mirror in which the anxieties of those who have read it again are reflected"<sup>23</sup>. The middle hall of Teatro Elfo Puccini (sala Fassbinder), like the theatre Menotti which hosted the company's *Satyricon* (see above), was transformed into a ring, surrounded by grandstands for spectators: a bare stage, with just a few stage props and four music stands where Bruni and three gifted younger actors stood still and read their parts.

After the pandemic break, Bruni and Frongia fashioned their show into a complete version, and on a wider scale, in the major hall of Teatro Elfo Puccini (Sala Shakespeare): in *Edipo Re - Una Favola Nera* (*Oedipus the King, a black fable*, 2022) the same four actors, surrounded by great scenes and screens, were dressed in gorgeous costumes by the artist and stylist Antonio Marras<sup>24</sup>. After this successful production, Bruni translated *King Lear* and co-directed it with Frongia in 2024. Elio De Capitani was a superb protagonist (<https://www.elfo.org/spettacoli/2023-2024/re-lear.htm>).

### Conclusions

In this paper I have examined a few selected productions and historical phases of an Italian theatre company – Teatro dell'Elfo – whose work has created a constant dialogue between the classics and Shakespeare for the past 50 years. Since 1973, the members have mostly remained the same, so they are now able to rely on both personal and collective memory (shared with their faithful audience) when they choose and stage a new text, as well as on a fertile exchange of ideas and thoughts.

The company itself is an ensemble, conceived as a collective enterprise, open to developing individual talent and hosting external collaborators. Their motto is, "Se vuoi andare veloce vai da solo, se vuoi andare lontano vai in gruppo" ("If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together": Bentoglio *et al.* 2013, 13). Each member is different – a unique combination of peculiar skills and talents – and the actors often play multiple roles. Among them, Bruni is also a playwright, writer, translator, actor, director, set and costume

23 See <https://www.elfo.org/spettacoli/2019-2020/verso-tebe.htm>, Tentorio 2020; Treu 2021 and Rondelli 2024, 134-35.

24 See his gallery of photos online: <https://antoniomarras.com/it/blogs/journal/edipo-re>, and Tentorio 2022a.

designer. As a director he has worked with Gabriele Salvatores, Elio de Capitani, Francesco Frongia. As an actor, he is capable of modulating his voice, changing his body, and making his age unpredictable (he could look older as a young man and is now able to 'rejuvenate', if necessary): from the sensual Puck to the repulsing usurer Don Marzio (*La bottega del caffè*), he has adapted to all roles, from one production to another or even within the same performance, as in *SdisOré* (Bentoglio *et al.* 2013, 116).

The individual paths of the actors intersect, but they also follow their own inspiration. In the productions I have examined, Bruni and Marinelli played respectively mother (Bruni) and daughter (Marinelli) in *Elettra Mai Nata* (rehearsed, never actually staged), the protagonist and his mother in three versions of *Hamlet*, and in *Oresteia* (Marinelli as Clytemnestra and Gertrude, Bruni as Hamlet and Orestes). They shared the stage in three versions of *Sogno di una notte d'estate* (based on *Midsummer Night's Dream*). Bruni also played Eddy in *Greek* (by Steven Berkoff), Apollo and Admetus in *Alcesti* (by Agnese Grieco), Orestes in *Coefore* (*Libation Bearers*) and *Eumenidi* (*Eumenides*) from Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. He was also the protagonist of Testori's monologue *SdisOré*; he translated and performed *The Tempest*, directed by Bruni and Frongia as other recent productions (*Verso Tebe*, *Edipo Re*, *Re Lear*). Marinelli was also the protagonist of *Fedra* and *Alcesti* by Agnese Grieco and of Wolf's *Cassandra* (directed by Francesco Frongia).

Over the years, they have played a wide range of characters and also exchanged roles in different productions (Marinelli, for instance, was Helen-Elena in the first *Sogno* (*Midsummer Night's Dream*), Hippolyta in the second, and Titania too in the third edition. Bruni played Puck first, then Theseus and Oberon in the latest versions. These peculiar features not only make the Elfs excellent actors, but ones that are capable of wearing new roles on their skin like new clothes, layering one new role on top of the others, without shedding any of the previous ones. All the additional roles, including new, subsequent interpretations of a same character, are never erased or weakened by the others; on the contrary, they remain in the memory of the actors, in their bodies, minds and voices. They become integral parts of their own personalities and identities.

The entire company shares a basic, strong idea of their collective, coherent, and continuous research: as a consequence, correspondences

between texts, and respective productions, are far from episodic and casual accidents. Rather they are sought, desired, pursued and maintained over time. The work of the *playwright*, together with directors and actors, lends continuity to the whole process. They have thus been able to treat the classics and Shakespeare with the same attitude: aiming at revisiting ancient and older texts with the complicity of their audience. They have made the classics their own, and ours, by transforming them without any empty veneration: literally bringing them back to life.

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