

Contemporary New Play Development in Italy: A Playwright Shares Her Experience

By Margaret Rose

When Anne Hamilton wrote to me, asking for a short piece dealing with “the new play development process in Italy”, I immediately translated the word ‘process’ into a very definite plural. While Italy this year is celebrating 150 years as a single nation state, in many fields any sense of unity is still tenuous. Theatre and contemporary playwriting are no exceptions to this rule.

Associations for the support and development of playwriting are fairly recent and thin on the ground. *Teatro delle Donne. Centro Nazionale di Drammaturgia (Women’s Theatre. National Centre of Playwriting)*, founded in Florence in 1991, includes an archive for plays written by women (today numbering nearly 1,000). It also runs a cutting-edge theatre season at the Teatro Comunale Manzoni in Calenzano and in 2004 writer Dacia Maraini set up a *National School of Playwriting* at the theatre.

In 1998 Angela Calicchio started *OUTIS, National Centre for Playwriting*, with its offices in Milan. This association also has an archive housing contemporary plays and organizes readings of new work and festivals of contemporary plays, where emerging writers (Italian and foreign writers in translation) can find a platform for their writing.

In addition, throughout Italy theatres and drama academies manage a variety of playwriting courses, targeting aspiring dramatists who wish to learn the tools of the trade and in some cases benefit from assistance in getting their work produced professionally.

But what are the processes through which a playscript can develop into a full scale production? As I think is true of other countries, the attainment of this goal

largely depends on the writer’s ability to network and establish a relationship with a theatre company. Since I feel unqualified to speak about Italy in general, what follows are my own experiences of that process.

The first play I had produced derived from a university project I set up at Milan State University in the mid-1990s devoted to the writing of one-person plays. I was researching a book at the time on one-woman plays (Ruth Draper, Joyce Grenfell and living writers like Rose English and Ali Smith)

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and set about exploiting the theoretical knowledge I’d gained in this study to hone the creative writing techniques I sought to develop in the creative writing workshop.

Together with director Alessandro Quasimodo and actor Mario Cei, I encouraged a group of about fifteen M.A. theatre and English Literature students and teachers, attendees of the workshop, to write a play. Alessandro was involved in the workshop from the very start and went on to rehearse and direct the cluster of one-person plays that came out of the seminar. These were performed in the tiniest theatre I have ever worked in, a twenty-seater cellar-cum-basement below the editorial offices of the Italian theatre magazine *Sipario* in the heart of Milan.

In 2002 I succeeded in setting up a much more complex and challenging process in collaboration with director and actor Annig Raimondi at Milan’s Teatro Arsenale. In the case of *Shakespeare’s Videodiary* the writers’ group was much smaller just

three M.A. students and I. Our aim was to co-author another one-man play, the central thrust of which explored what was probably one of the most dangerous moments in Shakespeare's career: 1601 and the Essex Rebellion when he had a close shave with the Lord Chamberlain's office.

During a court hearing one company member was called to give evidence regarding the staging of a play - very probably *Richard II* - which had allegedly stirred the people to revolt. Background research entailed the group reading some Shakespeare biographies and critical works on the staging of Elizabethan drama and on collaborative writing in the Elizabethan period.

The play, I decided, would be performed by a single actor, whose only "prop" would be a videotape - this was 2002 so VHSs were still around. The actors from Teatro Arsenale also worked with students from Milan's Film School to make the video film featuring figures like Queen Elisabeth I, the Earl of Southampton, and the barman at the Mermaid Tavern.

This mix of research, creative writing and improvisation came together in *Shakespeare's Videodiar* which, I hope, was written in a spirit of collaboration similar to the one Shakespeare probably experienced when he teamed up with fellow writers for the *Thomas More* play. Our work was first performed in the round at Teatro Arsenale, a ninety seater theatre in central Milan, and later became part of an education kit on Shakespeare's theatre targeting secondary schools.

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order to continue developing, over the last decade I have worked mainly in the UK and in professional theatre. In the context of the research project, "Italian-Scottish Identities and Connections", which Emanuela Rossini and I set up in Edinburgh in 2000, we penned the play *Six Months Here Six Months There*. In this work Emanuela and I wished to dramatise the experience of a group of Italian women immigrants to Scotland in the period from World War Two to the present.

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The process entailed archive researches into the Italian-Scottish community and interviews we conducted with women migrants mainly from the Trentino region in Northern Italy. This area was chosen because part of Emanuela's own family migrated to Scotland from this part of Italy. Some of the women interviewed had lived through the war, while others had heard stories related by members of their families. We didn't, though, want to use the stories we'd heard to create verbatim theatre, but drew on the accounts to create fictional characters whose lives evolve against a historical-political backdrop which we wished to be as truthful and accurate as possible.

The resulting play was performed in Glasgow and Edinburgh as part of a symposium festival targeting academics and the general public, including members of the Italian-Scots community. The process continued with two very different and challenging metamorphoses: a new version of the play, *Mary e le altre* in Trentino dialect, which toured villages in the Trentino region. And second, Emanuela and I reworked the play into an eleven-part radio play for RAI (Italian National Radio).

Quote of the Month

“I’ve often called the lighting for the stage the “music for the eye”, because it has the same way of making an atmosphere, making a landscape, changing fluidly from one place to another without seeming effort.”

– Jennifer Tipton

[TheatreNow!](#) – Season Two, Episode Five

For reasons of space, I shall skip a number of individually written plays and co-authored works to explore a piece whose developmental process differed greatly from those described above. For the 2003 Edinburgh Festival, together with Carlo Iaccucci and Wilma Stark, I’d co-authored *Scars of War*, a play which was triggered by my encounter with Eduardo Paolozzi’s multi-part artwork, “The Manuscript of Monte Cassino”. In the wake of that project I had a niggling feeling there was another play waiting to be born.

This time the image that kicked off the process was one of Paolozzi’s small sculptures, *Shattered Head*, which in the end gave the new play its name. This time my co-author was not a writer but director Graham Eatough, who holds a keen interest in the visual arts. From the beginning of the process in 2009, Graham imagined the play visually, especially the sections related to collage.

Part of Paolozzi’s early output consists in a series of stunning collages, where simultaneity and juxtaposition of disparate images prevail. I likewise drew on Charles Marowitz’s experiences and writing in the area of theatre and collage. Graham and I subsequently wrote two kinds of scenes: first, fairly naturalistic dialogues exploring Paolozzi’s experiences during World War Two, his relationship

with the art Establishment in London and with his Italian family. And second, what might be called “kinetic interludes”, where inanimate objects from some of the artist’s collages are embodied and brought to life by actors. Due to a lack of funding, we were unable to organize a writing workshop and wrote separately most of the time. This resulted in our writing two separate plays nourished by the same research and exchange of ideas, rather than a single co-authored one.

I am currently working on the project, *Caliban’s Castle*, which kicked off in 2008 with the writing of the play *Caliban’s Castle. If Pigs could Fly (Plays International, London 2008)*. The present is a multi-part project, including a one-man play that imagines Caliban arriving at Prospero’s castle in Milan in the present. In my interpretation, Caliban is a man who loves his native island and the natural environment and is able to exploit this knowledge and passion in his new land. Once he has taken over the Sforzesco castle, he attempts to turn Milan – a polluted and environmentally unfriendly city – into the greenest city in Europe.

Together with the play, I have plans for an urban garden and teaching centre, directed by a Caliban figure, where young people will be able to take part in activities, like gardening and growing things, creative writing, and artwork which explore these experiences. I am hoping the Milan 2015 EXPO committee will take the project on board.

Margaret Rose teaches British Theatre Studies at Milan State University. A writer, translator and dramaturg, she spends part of the year in the UK for her writing and research. She is a member of Playwrights Studio Scotland and the Scottish Association of Playwrights. Her stage and radio plays, reflecting her interest in issues of migration and multiculturalism as well as reworkings of Shakespeare, have been produced in the UK and Italy. She may be reached at margaret.rose@unimi.it.