

from “classical dramaturgy,” not a disrupting narrative, but a dramaturgy to “help stories be understood” (26).

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Alberto Benedetto. *Brecht e il Piccolo Teatro Milano: Una questione di diritti*. Milano: Mimesis Edizioni (Collana Filosofie del Teatro), 2016. 196 pages.

Massimo Bucciantini. *Un Galileo a Milano*. Bologna: Saggi Einaudi, 2017. 272 pages.

The privileged relationship between Bertolt Brecht and the Piccolo Teatro in Milan (PTM) is no secret, the PTM was the center of the “divulcation” and of icastic installations of Brecht’s plays. Yet, the role the PTM played as a mediator between the holders of the rights to Brecht’s estate, Helene Weigel and Suhrkamp Verlag, and all other Italian theaters had never been considered in depth before Alberto Benedetto’s *Brecht e il Piccolo Teatro. Una questione di diritti (Brecht and the Piccolo Teatro. A Matter of Rights)*. Benedetto, since 2009 production manager at the PTM, has delved into the PTM archive to uncover unpublished correspondence that sheds new light on the complex mixture of artistic vocation and ideological protection as PTM’s directors Paolo Grassi and Giorgio Strehler attempted to balance and exploit the grey area between exclusivity and exclusion.

Founded by Grassi, his wife Nina Vinchi, and Strehler on May 2, 1947, the PTM opened on May 14 with Maxim Gorky’s *The Lower Depths*. The PTM was the first municipal theater in Italy. Antonio Greppi, the socialist mayor of Milan after the Liberation, granted Strehler and Grassi the Broletto Theatre in Via Rovelli, in the heart of the city, which the infamous Legion Ettore Muti, the political-military body of the fascist police, had made their headquarters during the Repubblica Sociale Italiana (1943–45). Strehler would later recall “the blood stains on the walls” (Bucciantini, 68). Thus, the PTM acquired a symbolic charge even before it started. The symbolism of the PTM and its setting is summed up in this passage from Grassi: “Theater . . . because of its intrinsic nature, is . . . the best tool for spiritual elevation and cultural education available to society among the arts. . . . [It] has to be considered . . . a collective necessity, a citizen’s need, a public service, like the underground and firefighters,” Paolo Grassi had written in “Teatro, Servizio pubblico” (“Theater as Public Service”) one year before the theater’s founding on April 25, 1946 in the socialist newspaper *Avanti!* (Bucciantini, 78). Consequently, the program of the PTM reads: “Every civilization develops according to a process that combines and integrates groups in their variety and multitude. For this, we will recruit our spectators as much as possible from workers and young people, in factories, offices, and schools, offering simple and convenient forms of subscription

. . . while still providing high-level artistic performances at prices as low as possible. . . . [A] theater of art, [a] theater for all.”

Almost immediately after its founding, the PTM sought to establish contact with Brecht. Between 1948 and 1953, Paolo Grassi submitted many unsuccessful requests for the performing rights of *Antigone*, *Mother Courage and her Children*, and *The Threepenny Opera*. It took several more years and negotiations until the *The Threepenny Opera* premiered with acclaim on February 10, 1956 at the PTM.

Brecht’s interest in the PTM’s mission and vision is attested not only by his presence at the premiere but by his attendance of the dress rehearsal and the second performance, which was organized in collaboration with the trade union for factory workers. The production was an enormous success, and Brecht wrote two notes (27, 28), one to Grassi and one to Strehler: “Mr. Paolo Grassi, the performance is superb. Many Thanks, Bertolt Brecht”; “Dear Strehler, I would like to entrust you with every single work of mine for all Europe. Thanks, Bertolt Brecht.”

These lines are the *corpus delicti*. Suhrkamp Verlag, ignorant of the Italian theater scene, followed suit, at least as long as Peter Suhrkamp was alive, and entrusted the PTM with the granting of performing rights to Italian theater companies as well as the rights for translations and song recordings. Grassi and the PTM controlled the rights to Brecht’s work in Italy, although Suhrkamp Verlag never committed to a written contract nor remunerated them for this service. The only written evidence of this arrangement is a letter by Helene Weigel from 1962, confirming that the PTM and Strehler had absolute priority concerning the choice of Brecht’s plays and their staging in Italy (Bucciantini, 94). Benedetto’s book documents how, over the course of twenty-four years and with indefatigable energy, Grassi attempted to obtain official recognition for the PTM’s role as the referee—he often used the German word “Zentrum”—for the staging of Brecht’s work (with Strehler as its artistic director); comparable to the case of Robert Voisin and the magazine *Théâtre populaire* in France—as Benedetto points out (92).

At stake for Grassi was not so much the PTM’s monopoly but “its artistic responsibility”—often reformulated and finally extended to “aesthetic, cultural, moral, civic, and ideological responsibility”—towards Brecht’s theatrical legacy. In a letter to the councilor Alfio Beretta (Democrazia Cristiana) from May 22, 1963, he describes his objectives as follows: Responsibility means to “produce at an accepted standard the greatest works of Brecht and . . . (to) make sure that (his) works are produced in a worthy way, so that their meaning and the prestige of the author are not compromised.”

On the Italian front, Grassi’s “manipulating” power produced “fearful subjection” to him among theater directors and producers wanting to stage Brecht. Very often, they turned to him first, before even contacting

Suhrkamp Verlag. Needless to say, this position also allowed Grassi, who had the Italian law on his side, to eliminate possible competitors. Staging the same play at different theaters in the same season was not permitted.

This “censorship” exercised by the PTM over many years began to annoy not only Italian theater directors but also the rights holders themselves, so that they began to question the privileges granted. Apparently, Helene Weigel moved towards a more pluralistic policy and finally met with other Italian directors. The municipal theaters of Genoa and Turin, for example, were granted performing rights originally reserved for Strehler. When the students’ protests in 1968 made Strehler leave the PTM, Grassi remained behind with an even more arduous task to tackle.

Only Weigel’s death in 1971 and Strehler’s return in 1972 changed the situation again. In 1972, Grassi took over the direction of the La Scala opera house, but before leaving the PTM he finally managed to achieve his long sought-after goal. The first written agreement with Suhrkamp Verlag was signed on May 1, 1972 in Frankfurt between him, Strehler, and Suhrkamp (represented by Siegfried Unseld). It guaranteed Strehler a monopoly concerning the representation of Brecht’s work.

The correspondence is chronologically ordered and annotated with considerable contextual information, and Benedetto largely abstains from providing commentary. Nonetheless, he succeeds in creating a mosaic of tactics, vetoes, (cultural) misunderstandings, relationship breakdowns, alliances, and controversies. One of the book’s great achievements is that all of the protagonists maintain a certain ambiguity. Grassi, for example, might have been manipulative, but the arguments he lays out in his letters are often convincing. As far as the debates on and engagement with Brecht within the larger Italian theater scene are concerned, the author has chosen, for better or worse, the PTM’s point of view in preference to other positions. There was something like a “Brecht inflation” in 1960s Italy: Brecht, at this time, was “consumed like a football match”—so the theater critic E. Capriolo in “Brecht come bandiera, medicina e strenna” (“Brecht as Flag, Medicine, and Gadget,” *Sipario*, December 1970, 15). In this sense, Grassi probably was not entirely wrong in claiming that in Italy “we should do less, but better” (Grassi to Strehler, June 29, 1964; Bucciantini, 238).

The book closes with a letter by Strehler to Helene Ritzerfeld from April 13, 1979, which summons up what the debate and the battle were about and laments the “dramatic state of misunderstanding” of Brecht’s theater “which has been turned into a Theater of Cruelty, Irrational Theater, or Horror Theater . . . a theater which is basically fascist even if it claims to be revolutionary.” Strehler appeals “to those who believe in a theater of reason, of humanity” to defend “an aesthetic and ideological correctness that seems to have disappeared outside the Berliner Ensemble and the Piccolo Teatro” (173).

That the battle for Brecht in Italy was a battle for hegemony also becomes perfectly clear from *Un Galileo a Milano* (Saggi Einaudi, 2017), an exciting and richly documented journey into the genealogy of Brecht’s *Life of Galileo* and its Italian premiere at the PTM on April 22, 1963, directed by Strehler. The journey begins in Nazi Europe and ends in Milan during the so-called economic boom, via California, New York, and Zurich. Massimo Bucciantini, the book’s author, teaches the history of science at the University of Siena and has several publications on Galileo in his portfolio. Here, the object of his interest is the “biography” (xviii) of a theater production legendary far beyond Italy. Within the context of the author’s larger research interests—the history of ideas—his study is meant to be a contribution to the construction “of a secular and civic memory” of the country (xix). *Galileo* figures as a “bright luminous point” in the construction of this memory, urgently needed to be remembered and reflected upon.

Strehler’s *Galileo* was a show of superlatives. It lasted over five hours and involved more than one hundred people on stage; forty actors, a chorus of children, mimes, acrobats, and a dwarf. It required four months of rehearsal and the closing of the theater for two months for the construction of the set. There were more than 160 sold-out performances in Milan alone and many more in other Italian cities. A cycle of conferences with young philosophers such as Pier Aldo Rovatti and Salvatore Veca—explaining and discussing Ludovico Geymonat’s recently released study on Galileo—as well as an exhibition of documents by the astronomer in the atrium of the PTM were part of the side program. Production costs ballooned to sixty million lire (some say 120 million), but the play made more than twice as much at the box office.

Bucciantini’s book opens, however, with the list of the main protagonists of the production’s development: first, and surprisingly, Georgi Dimitrov, the Bulgarian communist politician accused of having set fire to the Reichstag. (Brecht had already dedicated two poems to him.) His Galileo quote in his defense at the trial in Lipsia in September 1933 may have been the inspiration for Brecht’s play. Its working title reads *Die Erde bewegt sich* (*The Earth Is Moving*). As the author explains, the play was first completed in 1938 in Skovsbostrand, where Brecht was in exile. Galileo figures as an illuminist *ante litteram*, making use of subterfuge for his survival, much like the fleeing Brecht. (However, Brecht did not seem satisfied with the emotional involvement his character elicited.) Bucciantini then discusses at length Walter Benjamin’s critical comments as well as Brecht’s conversations with Otto Frisch (i.e., Lise Meitner’s nephew and a collaborator of Niels Bohr) and his correspondence with Albert Einstein after Otto Hahn and Fritz Strassman’s discovery of nuclear fission, which had suddenly put the Galileo theme into an altogether different perspective. We follow Brecht fleeing the advancing *Wehrmacht* to Sweden, then to Finland,

and to and through the Soviet Union where his beloved Grete Steffin succumbs to tuberculosis and he finally boards a ship to Los Angeles.

We learn about Brecht's difficulties in Hollywood, and plenty of space is dedicated to the friendship he developed with Charles Laughton, whom he met at Berthold and Salka Viertel's house where all the exiled European intelligentsia in Los Angeles would sooner or later show up. With Laughton, Brecht began to work extensively on *Galileo*. After the atomic bomb, physics lost its innocence, it ceased to be a discipline with the potential to liberate people from their irrational worldview and to relieve them of the drudgery of existence. Galileo had become a traitor, the archetype of a scientist who refuses to accept his responsibility. Brecht and Laughton worked together on the translation of the play into English. They also spent some time at the New York Public Library studying drawings and sketches by Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and Pieter Bruegel the Elder for the costumes and props.

The play was first produced at the Coronet Theatre in Los Angeles in 1947 (and later in New York) under the direction of Joseph Losey. Among the audience were Charlie Chaplin, Ingrid Bergman, Anthony Quinn, Gene Kelly, Billy Wilder, and Frank Lloyd Wright. The production fell short of being a success. The McCarthy era was about to begin, and Brecht returned to Europe. The Berlin premiere of the play in 1957 took up many features of the California production; however, a truly memorable and path-breaking rendition was not delivered until Strehler's stage version at the PTM in 1963.

Bucciantini enumerates a great number of factors that had made this production possible. He first traces the path that had led to the publication of Brecht's work in Italy, initially at Rosa e Balbo, where Grassi curated the theater section. He takes a close look at the major restructuring of Einaudi and at the creation of new publishing series such as Einaudi Politecnico and Einaudi Universale, which included play collections by theater authors: Vito Pandolfi was in charge of the "Project Brecht." Brecht's contacts with Einaudi made him even consider moving to Northern Italy. Bucciantini then discusses the postwar cultural atmosphere, which was so readily receptive of Brecht, as well as the political activism and the Gramscian ideals which animated the Brecht promoters. They had all actively fought fascism in the *Resistenza* and played key roles in the founding of many institutions such as the PTM, the Casa della Cultura (House of Culture), the Circolo Filologico (Philological Circle), and the Jesuit Centro San Fedele. These institutions, which were intended to be places of dialogue across generations, were real "laboratories" of democracy (66). The author also points to the abolition of censorship in 1962 as another decisive moment for the staging of *Galileo*. Other Italian directors such as Ivo Chiesa had tried to produce the play before but had not succeeded. The play was considered an attack on the Church's authority and a falsification of the historical character of Galileo. Bucciantini provides an overview of all Brecht productions in Italy

until 1963 and the controversies caused by them, before finally turning to the massive preparatory work that had gone into Strehler's staging.

Strehler went, for example, on a two-month retreat in Venice with his set designer, Luciano Damiani, a former scholar of Giorgio Morandi at the Art Academy in Bologna. The scenic design gives an idea of the intensity and quality of their working method. They wanted to use "harsh white light" and build a "place of reason." They found their inspiration in Leonardo's *Atlantic Code* for the truss, which is at the same time church and laboratory, as well as in Piet Mondrian's white and grey tones. In contrast to this, they used sounds and colors for the carnival scene, in which an authority-desecrating procession takes place (scene 9), as well as for the vestment of the Pope (scene 12). Some of the sketches as well as photos of the production are reproduced in the appendix.

Once exposed to the staging, in the context of the cold war and new nuclear threats, the audience saw instantly that *Galileo* was not just a historical play but a play about power, politics, and the purpose of science. The controversy was manifold and began even before the show. It started with the choice of the main actor: not the popular in-house actor Tino Carraro but Tino Buazzelli (who was as corpulent as Charles Laughton). Politically, the most conservative currents of the Democrazia Cristiana—Milan was the first Italian city to have a center-left city council on which both the Democrazia Cristiana and the Socialist Party were represented—and the Church as well as the newly founded, radical Catholic group Gioventù Studentesca massively tried to prevent the show and to withdraw its financing. They used the same arguments that censors had used before: anticlericalism, blasphemy, and historical distortion. The struggles went on for weeks and coincided with the local election, in which the center-left council prevailed again. The PTM received twice as much funding for the next season, but the construction of an urgently needed new and larger theater was refused. It would open only twenty-five years later when Grassi and Strehler were already dead.

Bucciantini digs deep, not only into the history of *Life of Galileo* and its revision but also its production history. Equally thorough is his reconstruction of the two postwar decades in Milan and of the impact Brecht's theater had on the discourse of the time (the bibliography consumes one quarter of the total number of pages). The book has a cinematic quality—it is easy to follow also for non-specialists. It is an intriguing and exciting account and provides an excellent starting point for reviewing patterns of (Italian) politics which, in times of populism, everybody should be aware of.

Cinzia Rieveri, Berlin