

GIORGIO STREHLER

The art of making theatre, between intuition
and intellect

by Rita Levi Montalcini, Alberto Bentoglio and Marco Blaser
with reminiscences by Claudio Magris





“Theatre is man’s active reflection about himself” - active reflection that the stage director and grand master of theatre Giorgio Strehler always knew how to reconcile with his life’s work.

In fact, he managed to counterpose life and the stage, where all liberties are possible.

His impressive artistic output is the best testimony to the cultural growth that now unites Italian theatre with its European counterparts.

For fifty years Strehler directed the Piccolo Teatro in Milan, which he and Paolo Grassi founded in 1947. Over the course of his career, Strehler managed to develop a theatre rich in poetic realism by staging the works of great playwrights such as Shakespeare, Goldoni, Pirandello, Brecht, Bertolazzi and Chekhov. Not only was he engaged in theatre and also opera, but his knowledge of music gave him plenty of opportunity to use his skill in “updating” certain old-fashioned theatrical traditions, bringing about an epiphany in Italian theatre, an entirely new theatre that offered the audience (at all levels of society) a fantastic kaleidoscope of the world of art, poetry and music.

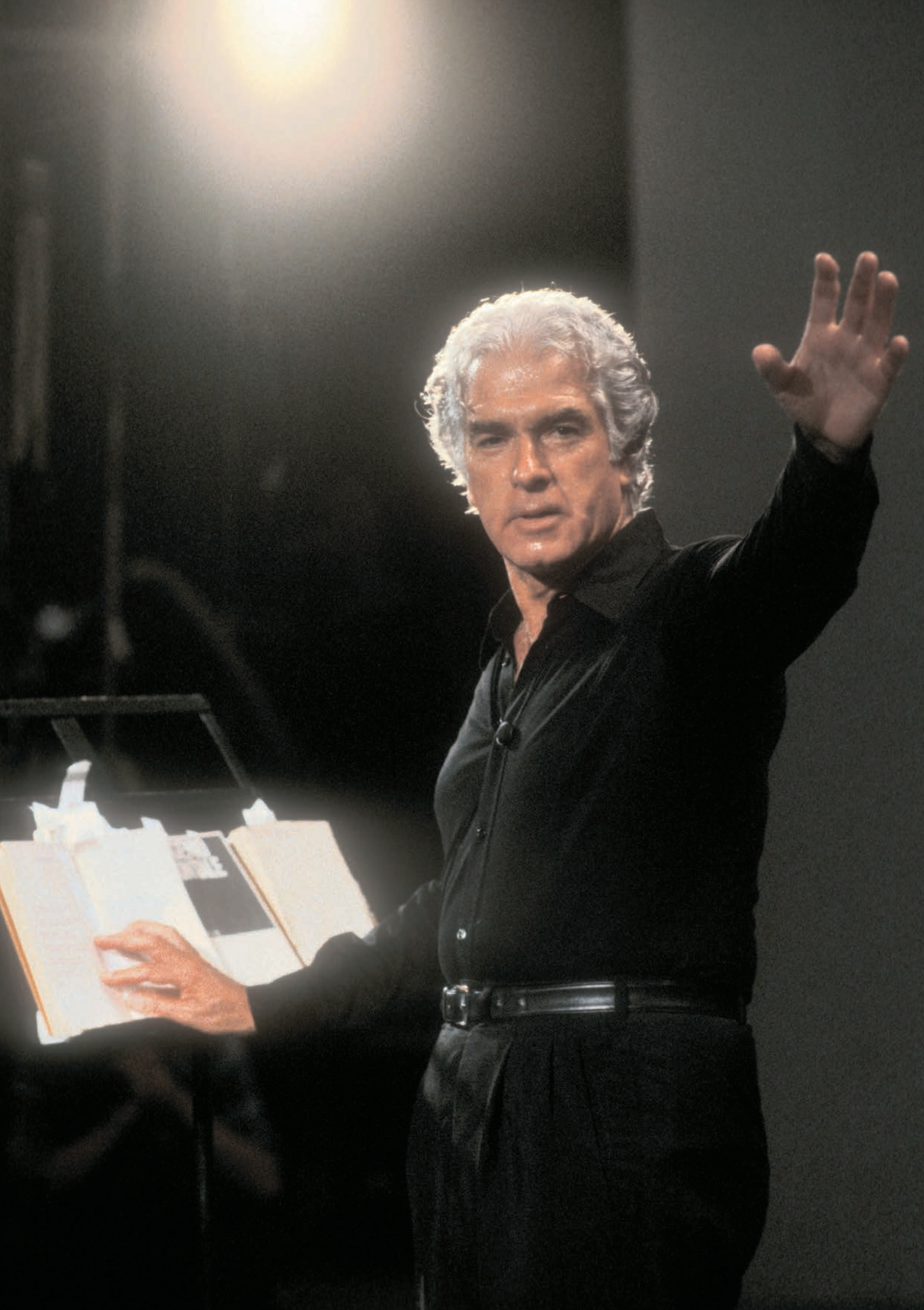
Words and music directed the life of Giorgio Strehler, just as he himself directed music and the theatre.

Page I:
Giorgio Strehler, 1974.

Left:
Scene from
*Faust – Frammenti. Parte
prima* (1988-89) with
Strehler in the lead role.

On this page:
Strehler on stage in
*Elvira, o la passione
teatrale* by Louis Jouvet
(1985-86).

Rita Levi Montalcini



Giorgio Strehler: a theatre professional par excellence

by Alberto Bentoglio *



*The most important thing, believe me, is that theatre always exists, that it grows and that the public loves it.
We artists, we are only the instrument of the poetry of theatre.*

Giorgio Strehler

Left:
Strehler reading Montale
(1981).

On this page
Entrance to the Piccolo Teatro
(Teatro Grassi) in the Via
Rovello in Milan.

While it is known that on Christmas Eve of 1997 Giorgio Strehler died in Switzerland, in his beautiful home on the Lake of Lugano, it is not so well known that it was also in Switzerland – in Geneva, in fact – where in 1944 Strehler decided an artistic vocation was his destiny, his calling in life was to be a director of theatre. “It was like a divine conviction culminating from my circumstances at the time”, remembers the Maestro. “The conviction grew partly from my own decisions. My thoughts go back to that moment at the Comédie in Geneva when the lighting needed to be adjusted for one of Eliot’s plays. I’d never done it before. But I did it [...] with a certainty that couldn’t have come from practice. I invented, so to speak, a technique that no one had ever taught me. It was, in a way, a sign”. Indeed, the liberal city of Geneva had offered him all the means necessary to refine his cultural education, to make a name for himself and, finally, to become a champion of the arts. “In that climate of total openness which encouraged study and work, ‘says Giovanni Pini’ who shared that period with Strehler’, his artistic values were able to emerge, as did the human values that typified him and which manifested, for instance, in our long friendship based on genuine affection”.

But let’s go back to the very beginning. On 14 August 1921, Bruno Strehler (who was born in Trieste in 1896 to a family originally from Vienna) received the announcement that his young wife Alberta Lovri? had given birth to a son, Giorgio Olimpio Guglielmo, in the town of Barcola on a beautiful stretch of the Trieste shoreline. For Bruno, however, the joys of family life were short-lived, as he died of typhoid fever just three years later. Despite the early loss of his father, Giorgio Strehler had a happy childhood and adolescence, first in Trieste and then, from 1928 onwards, in Milan, where he attended the Pietro Longone college, graduating in classical studies. Strehler identified closely with Milan, the city that he would later refer to as his adopted hometown.² Theatre became a major part of his life in 1938, when, having been an enthusiastic theatre-goer (especially at the Odeon, where he was part of the *claque*), he joined the Accademia dei

Filodrammatici to train as an actor (he graduated in 1940). At this time he formed a close friendship with the young Paolo Grassi, who was a gifted organiser. After finishing acting school, Strehler travelled extensively throughout Italy for several years, performing with classical theatre companies and experimental groups, which offered him the opportunity – in the course of his military service – to stage some plays himself and thus quickly discover how behind the times Italian theatre was then.

On 8 September 1943, Giorgio Strehler was called to active military service as an infantry lieutenant, but owing to his opposition to the fascist regime, he refused to take up arms under the Republic of Salò and joined the Italian Resistance instead. Recognised as a militant socialist and an active anti-fascist, the young actor-partisan was sentenced to death *in absentia*, whereupon he was urged by the Italian anti-fascist group Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale to flee to Switzerland with his wife Rosita Lupi. Once in Switzerland, he first lived in the military internment camp in Mürren, a sunny village facing the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau mountains in the Bernese Oberland. Later, he relocated to the cosmopolitan city of Geneva, rich in history and culture and at that difficult time a particularly important centre of university life that attracted many exiles. There he



Giorgio Strehler
as a child in Barcola,
his birthplace.

Poster advertising the first piece brought to the stage by Strehler (under the pseudonym Georges Firmy), which opened in Geneva on 14 April 1945.

met and had frequent contact with many leading Italian political and cultural figures, including the economist / politician / journalist Luigi Einaudi, the journalist / politician Amintore Fanfani, the director Dino Risi, the playwright Franco Brusati and the Latin scholar Concetto Marchesi. It was in Geneva that Strehler had the chance to cultivate his irrepressible passion for the theatre. Pini, his friend and roommate at the time, says “During his free time, he would constantly work his puppets in the theatre [that he had built] in our room, using puppets made from breadcrumbs. In those moments, Strehler was thoroughly enraptured, in a frenzy, focussed on creation, and... talking, talking all the time. He had a new kind of theatre in mind, a more open theatre about which he would say ‘you just wait and see, as soon as I return to Italy, I’m going to create it’, looking at me, as if to challenge me”.

Geneva afforded this future great director above all else the opportunity to work with his first theatre company: “The decisive moment for me as a man of the theatre and as a director”, reminisced the Maestro, “was during my time in exile in Switzerland, when I set up the Compagnie des Masques with some other ‘refugees’. Prior to this, during the few years I spent as an up-and-coming actor touring Italy with some travelling theatre companies, just like the old troubadours with their carts, I had gradually become more and more dissatisfied and embroiled in an internal struggle. Was this what I really wanted to do with my life? To continue to perform with a measured degree of expertise in plays that I wasn’t really interested in? To become a more or less good actor and perhaps famous for that kind of theatre? Or did I want more? The dilemma was all too present for me. I believe that the need to ‘make theatre’ developed within me in those years: rather than just acting, I needed to be an animator, a reformer, an impresario, a theatre director. Hence I began to think more about theatre as a whole rather than just acting. I started to imagine how it could be done, given that it was impossible to do this in current practice, and also to review my past and view it from a distance”.

In April 1945, while still in exile, Strehler



(under the pseudonym of Giorgio Firmy, his maternal grandmother's surname) directed T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* at Geneva's prestigious Théâtre de la Comédie. “I remember entering the empty stalls to prepare the lighting for Eliot's play without having ever done it before, and I did so with a confidence and understanding of the ‘business’ that couldn't have come from practice. Was this a sign? I don't know. I've continued to do so ever since”. During his stay in Geneva, Strehler - like many other Italian intellectuals, including Luigi Einaudi - spent much of his time in the city's well-stocked libraries studying the theatre classics, discovering the works of new authors and unearthing those by “political” playwrights that Italian Fascism had censored and were therefore practically unknown. Albert Camus was his most recent discovery; thus, when his version of Eliot's play was warmly received by the public in Geneva, Strehler followed with the world premier of his *Caligula*. Then he set his sights on the American Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, but while preparing this play for the stage, the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale recalled him to Milan.

On returning to his adopted hometown, he soon realised that one of the effects of war was a dearth of young actors and that, in order to reform Italian theatre, he had to prove himself capable of guiding the various movements of culture, art, technique and custom. And to do that effectively he

had to restore the balance and form a new entity which would create order and structure. In close co-operation with his old friend Paolo Grassi, Strehler directed his own theatre company, organised cultural events and shows for the peace celebrations and became involved in the spring 1946 election campaign for the Socialist Antonio Greppi, who was reconfirmed as mayor of Milan. A few months before reopening the rebuilt Teatro alla Scala, on 19 March 1946, Strehler staged the Swiss musician Arthur Honegger's dramatic oratorio *Jeanne d'Arc au Bûcher* (Joan of Arc at the Stake) at the Teatro Lirico, marking the beginning of his long and fruitful activity in musical theatre.

In February 1947 his political activities, artistic ideas and organisational reforms all came together in Strehler's most significant creation: the Piccolo Teatro in Milan. This marked a turning-point in Italian theatre and was an inevitable moment for reflection. The Piccolo Teatro was the first publicly run permanent theatre in Italy, destined to introduce the practise of publicly subsidised theatre, already a reality in other European countries. Taking advantage of a favourable moment in the cultural history of Milan – post-war reconstruction – Strehler and Grassi managed to obtain a small municipal loan and, most importantly, a building – the old cinema in Via Rovello, which they renamed in homage to the Malij Teatr in Moscow (the famous “little” theatre in Moscow as opposed to the “big” Bolshoi). The old cinema was rather small and in bad condition, and the stage was tiny

and poorly equipped. But it was, after all, a beginning. “Giorgio, do you think you can create a permanent theatre in this place?” asked Grassi. Strehler didn't reply immediately. “Let me think about it until this evening”. And he stayed there for four hours to think alone. Then he called his friend Paul: “If you think you can, then I can too”. The new civic theatre was headed by a politically diverse Board of Directors, mirroring the composition of the Constituent Assembly. On 21 January 1947, the Milan town council, chaired by Antonio Greppi, approved the proposal to use the building adjacent to the Palazzo del Broletto as a theatre and appointed an Arts Committee: Mario Apollonio, professor at the Catholic University of Milan, Paolo Grassi, Giorgio Strehler and the film director Virgilio Tosi. The programme was set out in an open letter signed by these four commissioners and published in the January-March 1947 issue of Elio Vittorini's *Politecnico*, a non-conformist, politically independent publication of the day. In it the authors addressed topics that would form the premise for the poetic aspects of the Piccolo and Strehler's work: a “theatre of art for all”, as opposed to a theatre as a “sophisticated rite”, an “abstract homage to culture” or a variety theatre. A theatre that would be a “place where a community could freely meet and express itself, a place where the community could listen to ideas and either accept or reject them”. Strehler, like Grassi, chose, therefore, not to be subordinate to political parties and market dictates, but to honour a practical, ethical and moral commitment



Giorgio Strehler
(third from the left)
with Paolo Grassi
(first from the left)
and the technicians of
the Excelsior in a group
photo from 1946.

Strehler 1950
during rehearsals for
William Shakespeares
Richard III.



to the culture of Milan and Lombardy. Strehler wanted to stand up against the conditions typical of traditional theatre – where there was a constant willingness to bend the programming choices to meet the demands of the box office – and to aspire to a modern theatre of great quality, culminating from informed poetic choices and in-depth development of staging ideas, but at the same time a theatre designed to be “popular”, i.e. intended to attract and cater for a large audience and, especially, for those sections of the population that had traditionally been excluded on the basis of age, class and culture.

On 14 May 1947, after twelve days of rehearsal, the 25-year-old Strehler inaugurated the Piccolo Teatro with a performance of Maksim Gorky's *The Lower Depths*. From that moment onwards, Strehler's life was joined inextricably with this Milan institution, which quickly became his first and most beloved home. During the next twenty years, from 1947 to 1967, Strehler spent most of his time on the stage of the Piccolo Teatro (and, from 1963 onwards, also on the larger stage of the Teatro Lirico, which started hosting some of the Piccolo productions), rehearsing dozens of plays over and over. His only diversion, if you like, was the staging of several operas at the rebuilt Teatro alla Scala. Thus, by the time of his thirtieth birthday in August 1951, Strehler had directed no fewer than 52 plays and 16 operas (ranging from Sophocles to Sartre, from Cimarosa to

Berg). By 1967 the Piccolo theatre company could boast more than 4300 performances of the plays staged by Strehler in 142 Italian locations and 116 foreign cities in Eastern Europe and Western Europe, the United States, Canada, South America and North Africa.

But Strehler was not just a director, as challenging and important as this activity was to him. In the post-war period he pursued several serious interests that led him to become increasingly active in all areas of show business. For example, in 1951 he helped out at the Milan School of Dramatic Art at the Piccolo Teatro (now known as the “Paolo Grassi” school), where, for several years, Strehler taught acting (teaching was a passion of his throughout his life). Then, in 1957, he drew up – with Paolo Grassi – the first draft of a national bill with the purpose of formulating comprehensive legislation for prose theatre, followed in 1964 by the manifesto *A new theatre for a new theatre*, a lucid analysis of the Piccolo Teatro's achievements in its first 15 years of existence. He was also involved in many film, musical and editorial projects in the 1960's, some seen through to completion, others left on the drawing-board.

The twentieth anniversary of the Piccolo Teatro, celebrated on 14 May 1967, was for Strehler another moment to reflect on his past and future. In his personal life, he had a new partner, Valentina Cortese, an actress of extraordinary talent and beauty who would be at his side for many years to come. In his professional life, Strehler was proud of his artistic achievements, yet still felt a deep sense of unease about the Italian political and administrative institutions, from which he stubbornly expected a definite commitment to provide stability for his theatre. Perhaps these were the reasons why Strehler started radically rethinking his role as a man of the theatre within a permanent public structure. Though his distrust of the theatre system was not the only factor. Italy in the late sixties was in the throes of great civil unrest, in which most everything, including the theatre, was subject to question. The role of the director and the overbearing authority with which directors dominated the Italian scene after World War II were matters for heated



debate. The term “director” had become synonymous with “stage despot”, and the role of director had become the subject of criticism by voices emerging who rejected the central position of a single individual in creating theatre and instead wanted to see collective solutions.

Hence, in July 1968, Giorgio Strehler took a decisive (and sensational) step: he resigned and left the Piccolo Teatro in the hands of Paolo Grassi. This move was motivated in part by the discomfort that he as a director of acclaim felt in an environment marred by distrust of the work that had in fact facilitated the emergence of a profoundly new theatre in Italy. But it was also a response to a sincere need of his to “return to the trenches” and make a personal contribution at a time of major political and cultural renewal. No doubt his resignation was also provoked by the increasing differences in opinion between himself and Grassi concerning the direction of the Piccolo. His relationship with Grassi had gradually changed since 1947 and, although they still shared a genuine friendship, by the late 1960’s they had reached a critical point together. In the autumn of 1968, while the student protesters in Paris stormed the Odéon, the temple of French theatre, Strehler quit the scene and left his theatre in Via Rovello. Although conscious of leaving an unbridgeable gap, Strehler did not hesitate at this critical moment to set off with a large group of enthusiastic actors and loyal employees for Rome where they founded the cooperative-based Gruppo Teatro e Azione, the name of which clearly reflects the director’s will for regeneration through a stream of new activities and the scorching heat of political and cultural protest.

Strehler continued to keep an eye on Milan, though, and in 1972, when Paolo Grassi left the Piccolo to take up the post of superintendent at the Teatro alla Scala, Strehler promptly concluded the Gruppo Teatro e Azione venture to return to Milan as the sole director of the Piccolo Teatro. The group of artists, technicians and musicians that accompanied Strehler on his extraordinary return to the Piccolo rallied closely around him to work on major new artistic and technical projects, and among several

newcomers was the actress Andrea Jonasson, whom Strehler would later marry in 1981. The director’s excellent results in that period are in great part thanks to these people, as Strehler knew how to communicate his messages to them and stimulate them to give their best, from the first reading of a new play to the final rehearsals and performances, creating autonomous and independent art of the kind so typical of his theatre.

Strehler believed that a director cannot and should not be a solitary “illustrator”, or a simple *metteur en scène*. Far from limiting himself to just providing an illustrated comment of a script, the director should offer two ways of “reading” the play. The first (exterior) approach is to “reconstruct” the play, by respecting the script and imagining how it should be staged, and placing it in its historical context, i.e. turning the play into a vehicle to enhance the public’s understanding of the culture and civilisation it expresses. The second (deeper and sometimes hidden) approach is the link that the director must grasp between the text and the current situation, especially the socio-cultural conditions of the day. On stage this approach expresses in his actions as a director, saturating the spaces left by the playwright to express his own critical creativity and skill in composition. And yet the director must always respect the script, while at the same time creating a personal and thoughtful interpretation of the play to produce a new and often original work of art, without actually manipulating, adapting or digressing from the original text. Strehler therefore believed that the *artistic act* was born from a knowledge of reality necessarily coupled with something that we cannot explain (or do not want to explain). It must be a poetic and moving, yet real, summary in which the director presents all he knows or presumes to know in a magical atmosphere of “poetic realism”. First used by Strehler in 1975 when staging Carlo Goldoni’s *Il Campiello*, this expression is the perfect way to describe the director’s interpretation of theatre - he combined the reality of the text with a poetry that softened it and, at the same time, enhanced its effect. For Strehler, reality as a whole is often miserable, mortifying and therefore

Salvo Randone in
a scene from Maxim
Gorki’s *The Lower
Depths* (1947), the
piece with which the
Piccolo Teatro opened.

“ugly”. However, it is also a form of poetry or at least has some features offering “poetic potential” that may at first glance seem insignificant, but which may contain hidden meanings. A realism of “poetic potential”, often stretching beyond the real constructs of life, which the director views through the filter of poetry: a filter that can blur the edges, and thus enhance the appeal and effect of the performance. In other words, Strehler’s way of “making theatre” was to stage reality directly – even when ugly – and yet also increase its “poetry” via the abstraction of the “great poetry of the scene”, drawing on reminiscences or invocations of fantasy to create it ever anew. When the Piccolo Teatro celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in 1977, Strehler estimated he had by that time worked with roughly 3,000 artistes (actors, singers, musicians, set designers, costume designers and others). A veritable universe. And he didn’t just concentrate on productions in prose. It is now universally acknowledged that Strehler was the first to export to opera the seriousness, method, total conception and creative richness which has made him one of the world’s top directors. Thanks to his productions, the role of the director is now indispensable for any operatic production, with the scenery and staging crucial elements to its success: the “backdrop” is no longer generic, but original and carefully studied to suit the score or acting, at the same time abandoning the conventional static stances of the singers. Even more important, the staging is charged with connecting and integrating the different compositional elements. Alongside his extraordinary and tireless efforts in the field of prose and opera, Strehler was also actively involved in civil

and political issues. Indeed, these gradually became more important for him. Upon his election as a member of the Italian Socialist Party, he became a European Member of Parliament (Bettino Craxi’s successor) in Strasbourg from September 1983 to July 1984, fighting for a “human” Europe, one capable of communicating with the modern man and pursuing the goals of a theatre of art, rich in content and conceived as serving the community and not the mere marketing of a cultural product. A Europe of people and communities, ideas and culture. “Europe is both a socio-economic adventure, calling for a common effort and sacrifice and coming at a courageous and dear price, and a great spiritual adventure. The only real Europe capable of solving some fundamental problems of our near future (not hypothetical but actual problems) won’t be achieved by mere agreements”, said Strehler. “I’m convinced that we need to give the people in each European nation, town and city the chance to understand for themselves the profound unity of the European man: born of a common culture, rooted in the very heart of Europe. A common character that’s also the result of homicidal wars, which didn’t just spill blood. We Europeans haven’t just killed each other over the centuries, we’ve created life, ideas, feelings, identity and links. A unity that is still obvious today and will remain so, despite our different (yet not opposing) languages, habits and customs”.³

In 1987 Strehler resigned from the Socialist Party and ran as an independent candidate with the Italian Communist Party in the general elections that year. Elected Senator of the Republic (10th legislature: 1987-1992), he concentrated on drafting a framework law for prose theatre, which, however, was not debated or voted on during that legislature. At the same time, Strehler’s artistic and poetic theatre activities were transcending national boundaries, an undeniable expression of their European dimension, which Strehler repeatedly pointed out, “We believe in Europe, but we want a Europe that isn’t just one of profit at all costs, of desperate consumerism or one aimed at protecting a miserly concept of property. We want a Europe based on people who work and produce, who create things and



Logo of the Piccolo Teatro at the time of its founding.

During rehearsals of
Io, Bertolt Brecht
(1966-67).

culture, objects and even dreams. We want a Europe that's not only concerned with small everyday interests, but also seeks a different "sound" for this life. A life that is the same for all of us and oh so short". Strehler staged various productions (prose and musical) in the 1970s and 1980s in major foreign theatres (Salzburg, Vienna, Hamburg and Paris), while also cultivating a European theatre project, which in 1983, thanks to the joint efforts of the then French Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, and the President of the French Republic,



François Mitterrand, came to fruition on 16 June 1983, when the Théâtre de l'Europe was officially established. It was an entity intended to stimulate dialogue between people in the theatre and the European public and to create a system of co-production and theatrical exchange throughout Europe, an institution with its own annual budget and headquarters located in the Théâtre National de l'Odéon in Paris. Strehler was appointed director for the first three years; he was entrusted with the task of selecting the new works and programming the co-productions. In October 1989, Jack Lang succeeded in having Strehler named as President of the Union des Théâtres de l'Europe, a body whose purpose was the coordination of many of the major European national theatres, based on the guidelines originally developed by Strehler for his Piccolo Teatro in Milan.

Yet, Strehler still found time to open a new theatrical school in 1987 at the Piccolo Teatro (the first course is named after one of his mentors, Jacques Copeau), which incorporated the latest pedagogical standards and offered a considerable infrastructure.

It is now regarded as one of the world's most important theatrical schools. Strehler was always interested in the training of actors and finally managed to fulfil his dream of running an acting school intimately linked to the "Piccolo" tradition. The courses also afforded Strehler the chance to make an in-depth study of Johann Wolfgang Goethe's masterpiece *Faust*, leading to two plays (lasting a total of eight hours) performed at the Teatro Studio: *Faust Fragments. Part One* and *Part Two*, in 1989 and 1991 respectively, which also saw his return to the stage when he played the part of the protagonist.

The 1990s saw a hitherto unknown side to Giorgio Strehler emerge: the director-manager who, with extraordinary clarity and vision, was committed, as director of the Piccolo Teatro, to defining the risks and benefits associated with the theatre – and, more generally, with art – in the shape of a model of management for cultural marketing. More specifically, he stressed the danger of simplistic solutions, seeing this as a reduction of art, swinging between the two poles of the law of the market: supply and demand. According to Strehler, art is "a subject with its own life and deep roots. It is the self-generated demand from the whole of mankind. And the needs it satisfies are deep and fundamental, and thus all too often hidden and dulled today by a myriad of immediate and superficial needs. It is a hard task to decipher this demand, give it voice and weight and grow our awareness of it, and it is something that can only be done through close cooperation between dynamic experts in market research tools and the "stubborn guardians of authentic artistic creation". Far from considering theatre and cultural institutions as places of static conservation of the past "passively waiting for a desire for education on the part of citizens", Strehler courageously argued for the autonomy of artistic creation, independent of market logic. For this reason he preferred to speak of "works of art" (rather than "products") which have the power to exert an effect on the spectator, whom he saw confused by the many stimuli clamouring for his attention. "We need to modify this, re-introduce cultural values, expand horizons and mark the different stages in

human creativity through the programmes offered. We need to develop our capacity for a critical understanding of the world, of the forces at work and how these function". The renewed call for the autonomy of a theatre of art was an ideal opportunity to reconnect with the ideas that had led him to establish the Piccolo Teatro some fifty years earlier. The consequent refusal to passively adapt to the wishes of the public was, according to Strehler, the only tool capable of curbing the risk of cultural degeneration inherent in the trend to "make art" in response to the laws of the market: "Supply and demand form a loop of *feedback* that may develop into a perverse cycle of lowering cultural levels, with a

involvement with the Piccolo Teatro in question, overshadowing his great merits. While Strehler received awards, honorary degrees and the highest honours around the world, the town council in Milan arrogantly accepted his resignation, after forcing him to take early retirement. When the Piccolo Teatro finally moved to its new premises, Strehler was not at its inauguration. He died on 25 December 1997 at the age of 76, during rehearsals of his beloved Mozart's *Così fan tutte*. Talking about the staging of an opera, he said: "There is no absolute, perfect staging; we can only try to get as close as possible to the truth contained in these works of art, not just by trying to understand what their creators were



snowball effect, and a diminishment of taste to the horror of evening-time entertainment. It is a phenomenon we've been witnessing for some time now and has been referred to as "homologation". This we must oppose with all our might, no matter how insignificant we may be". Theatre should not "submit passively to the "drugged" need for consumable and recyclable shows". On the contrary, today more than ever before, theatre should be capable of "awakening the critical conscience of the individual and the community to which he belongs".

During his final years, Strehler was unfortunately involved in a painful struggle with the civic administration of Milan, which led to several dramatic events that put his

saying in their own time, but by realising what they can still say to people today".⁴

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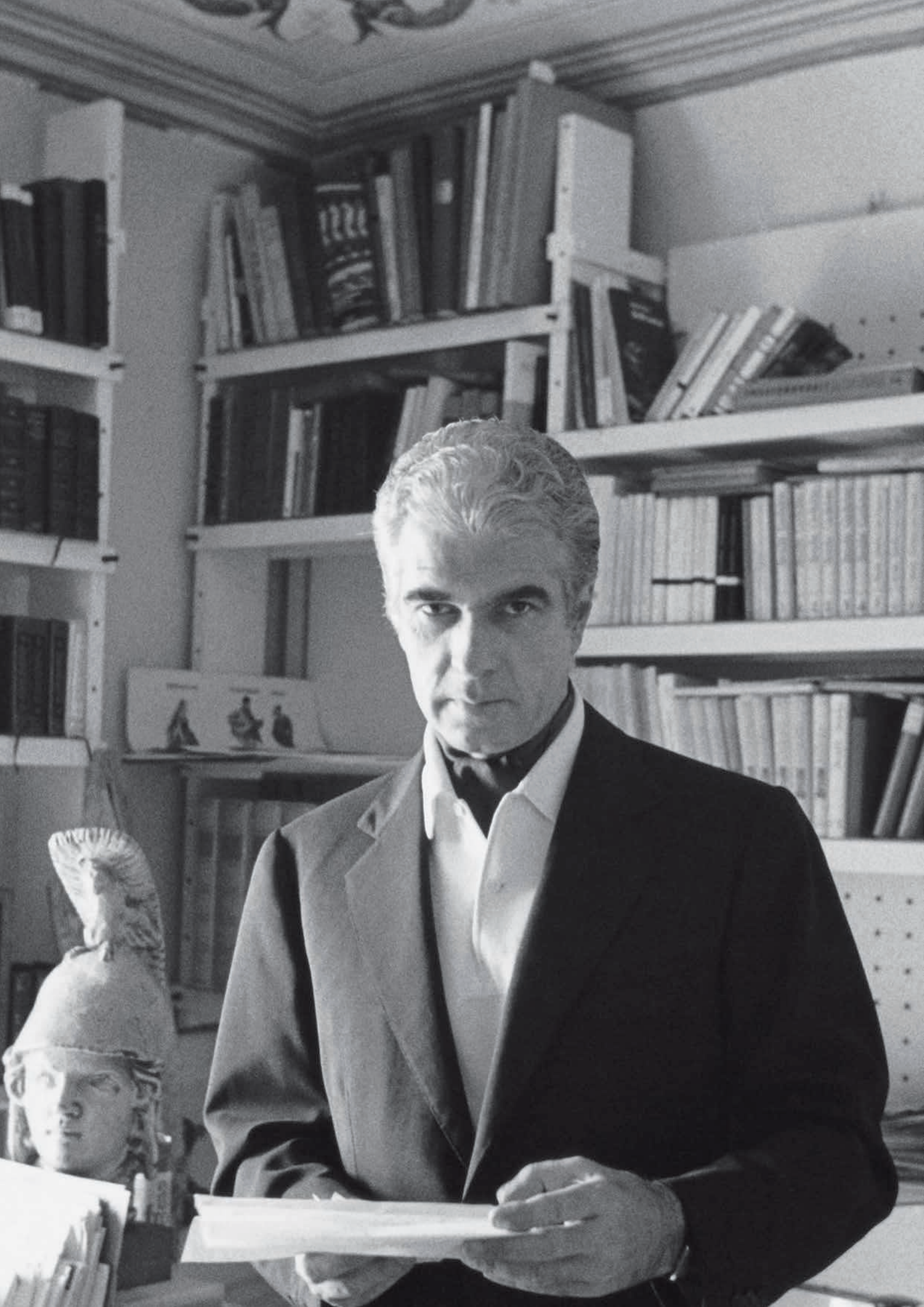
Così fan tutte, the last opera directed by Giorgio Strehler (1997-98).

¹ Quotations taken from the article by Giovanni PINI, *Quando un giovane internato italiano stupì tutta Ginevra per il suo grande talento* (When a young Italian refugee amazed all Geneva with his great talent), extract from the “Banca Popolare di Sondrio Newsletter”, no. 76 (April 1998), pages 2-5.

² Further information on Strehler’s infancy and family can be found in the extensive catalogue accompanying the exhibition entitled *Strehler privato: carattere affetti passioni* (Strehler, the private man: character, loves and passions), by Roberto Canziani, Trieste, Municipality of Trieste, 2007.

³ I should mention here the recent publication entitled Giorgio STREHLER, *Nessuno è incolpevole: scritti politici e civili* (No one is innocent: political and civil writings), by Stella Casiraghi, Milan, Melampo, 2007, and Mariagabriella CAMBIAGHI’s, *L’avventura del teatro d’Europa, in Giorgio Strehler e il suo teatro* (The adventure of the European theatre, in Giorgio Strehler and his theatre), by Federica Mazzocchi and Alberto Bentoglio, Rome, Bulzoni, 1997, pages 101-109. Plus many of Strehler’s own writings now online thanks to the Piccolo Teatro website, www.strehler.org (Text – Political writings).

⁴ It is impossible to mention all of Giorgio Strehler’s writings here and the huge critical bibliography on his work. See the Piccolo Teatro website – www.strehler.org – which is constantly updated, and the bibliography in my *Invito al teatro di Giorgio Strehler* (An invitation to the theatre of Giorgio Strehler), Milan, Mursia, 2002, pages 195-198.



Lugano: a place to stop and think for Giorgio Strehler

Terry D'Alfonso's reminiscences, recorded by Marco Blaser *



Left:
Strehler at his villa in
Portofino in August 1969.

On this page:
Giorgio Strehler in *Faust – Frammenti*.
Parte seconda (1990-91).

"Hello Blaser, how are you?" Giorgio Strehler's calling me. The reception is poor and his voice sounds a bit nervous. "I'm in Lugano and I'm meeting with Terry d'Alfonso. I need to contact her, but I've lost her number. Can you help?". I usually met Strehler in the autumn at Campione d'Italia for meetings of the "Maschera d'Argento" jury, the prestigious theatre awards sponsored by the President of the Italian Republic. Strehler had been chairman for several years. His friendly phone call was typical for our relationship and the bond we formed in Milan at a banquet organised by Winterthur Insurance, in honour of Mikhail Gorbachev. By chance we happened to sit next to each other at the end of the long head table, a perfect spot from which to observe the festivities. Like students, we laughed at the many faux pas we witnessed, made by people from Milan's high society, ignorant of the etiquette on such occasions. That evening gave us many funny anecdotes to later share, and it was one of the last times I saw Strehler. The prestigious director from Trieste, who had founded the Piccolo Teatro in Milan with Paolo Grassi, was currently going through a very difficult period of worsening relations with the Northern League city council and its mayor, Formentini. When he phoned, he had just returned to Lugano to see Terry D'Alfonso. He carefully took down Terry's mobile number. Terry had been working for Swiss Italian television for some time by then. The Italo-American director and screenwriter had several cultural programmes afoot, including two documentaries dedicated to Strehler: one of him as a theatre personality, the other on his personal life and history.

So how did Terry D'Alfonso first meet Giorgio Strehler?

"I was a student at the Faculty of Arts at New York University when I met Strehler during the Compagnia del Piccolo Teatro's tour of America. I saw a performance of his version of Goldoni's *A Servant to Two Masters* and was deeply impressed. Later I went to Italy to study at the Piccolo with Strehler and then became assistant director".

Although Terry only worked sporadically with Strehler, the Italian director had a huge influence on Terry's work. Terry has a

good reputation for her Pirandelli productions (both his famous and lesser known works). She has received several major awards, including the Pirandello Award for directing *La favola del figlio cambiato* (The Changeling) with Milena Vukotic. In 1995 she returned to New York when, as part of the festival entitled "Italian creativity and genius in the 1900s", Strehler directed Pirandello's last work, *I giganti della montagna* (The Giants of the Mountain).

"To return to my city was an emotional experience. On that occasion Strehler presented *Trovarsi... oltre*: a collage of various magical and surreal works by Pirandello I had staged with young actors at the Piccolo Teatro".

What were the most influential lessons you learned from him?

"He filled me with a respect and love for the audience. He believed that every aspect of theatre that you confront the public with should offer them an element of hope. Without overshadowing the messages inherent in the text, you must be able to engage the audience during the two hours of a performance and let people forget their everyday problems and worries. You must arouse their feelings, let them reflect on things and provide a sense (even if only a weak one) of optimism and hope. He loved to say that the theatre had forced him to learn how to reconcile passion, joy and a commitment to one's work with the reality of human existence, and never to fail to respect the public, towards which one must always be positively inclined".

These attitudes forced him sometimes to soften his position as a left-winger and committed promoter of an order based on freedom and social justice, but they were the convictions that led him to set up the Piccolo Teatro in Milan with Paolo Grassi. This publicly run, non-profit permanent theatre opened in 1947. The Piccolo also taught him the dangers inherent in this model of management and he frequently reared up against the structures when he felt obstacles were put in his way that would limit his freedom of expression, though at times he had to soften his stance towards those who provided the financial support. A two-edged system that he sometimes fiercely criticised and that contrasted

starkly with his own cultural background, which was rooted in Trieste and thus Central Europe and was therefore liberal, progressive and anything but provincial.

“Strehler never hid his ideological leanings and often reaffirmed his socialist thinking”, says Terry D’Alfonso. “He always maintained that it was useless to try to conceal our beliefs because every day we act in lots of ways that have clear political connotations. The citizen is, in fact, a transparent being, revealing his ideological position through the simplest gestures, such as when we smoke a cigarette, sing a song or applaud an athletic performance: we reveal our thoughts unequivocally. Life itself is a jigsaw puzzle of political acts”.

“He was totally dedicated, and an extremely demanding man. He was hard on himself

and, therefore, he expected a lot from others. During breaks in rehearsals, if he saw that an actor was not giving of his best, was ‘saving’ himself, as sometimes happens, Giorgio would jump onto the stage and shout: ‘I always throw myself completely into my work... I never save myself’, making it clear that he was totally committed in all he did at all times. He would ‘take possession’ of the bare stage when preparing Shakespeare, Eduardo, Brecht or Goldoni. That’s how he appears in some of my film sequences: cloaked in absolute darkness, lit by a single spotlight, he radiates his indomitable energy with ease and grace. At moments like that he really exerted his whole talent. He modulated his voice, giving it an intonation that came from his deepest most level. When we started



Poster for the US tour of the Piccolo Teatro (1960).



Left:
Giorgio Strehler and
Terry d'Alfonso in
Portofino (1969).

reading a script, he would slip from one part right into the next and eventually make himself the protagonist of the whole piece. He was convinced that to be truly good, a director must also be an actor. Someone who, along with all the technical and intellectual baggage, must also know how to fully identify himself with the part he has been given. Only then can a director understand the mechanisms that allow actors to assume different characters. With more than a bit of pride he liked to let people know that he had also been an actor when younger, and he enjoyed telling a story about how he was once summoned by a leading actress, and he was therefore firmly convinced that he had been given a bigger role, but instead she told him rather brusquely to take her dog out in the garden to pee... a job he proceeded to do, as he pointed out, with great dignity and discipline! Strehler returned to the stage later on in life, as Goethe's Faust. He said that a man of theatre is a true craftsman who, with application, passion, humility and sacrifice, knows how to achieve wonderful things: he gets messages across, he convinces people of things and can even teach the basic principals of co-existence between human beings. For him, theatre was also a political matter, as it revisited the past experiences of men and women who expressed different points of view and therefore became a mirror of society, while at the same time stressing a citizen's rights and duties by making the audience consider the problems they face in real life".

Who were Strehler's favourite authors? Of course, he loved Brecht and Pirandello. But he also staged plays by Shakespeare and Goldoni. So, did he believe that classical texts still contained food for thought for the modern theatre?

"He convinced me of this in long, deep discussions we had. He said then that the classics (when truly classic, i.e. written by major writers who express fundamental aspects of the human spirit) are never new or old and so cannot be classed as being of yesterday, today or tomorrow, but are timeless! He insisted that Shakespeare's plays are just as important today as they were in the past, as they deal with themes that are still meaningful today. A director's role is to

guide actors in their performance and interpretation of these plays, focussing on given aspects. The director's approach to a play is crucial in order to link it to our modern world".

Giorgio Strehler had a particular fondness for Goldoni, didn't he?

"He used to say that Goldoni had taught him to love life and his minor characters, who are sometimes more important than the main characters because their rich humanity encourages us in our cultural and social growth. Strehler strongly believed that Goldoni's theatre lets us learn how to compare our ideas with those of others. The courage of Goldoni, who died in poverty in 1793 in exile in Paris, lies in having been able to portray complex and difficult situations with great ease and always showing compassion for those who are in the wrong. A message of great spiritual value. Strehler also explained to me once why he liked Ibsen's *A Doll's House* so much: The piece brought about a striking change in the life of a couple with whom he was friends, a change which he himself experienced in them. Shortly before the couple was to divorce, they went one last time to the theatre together, watched the play completely absorbed, and then went home and plopped down, dejected, on the sofa. They talked about what the key messages of Ibsen's play were for each of them, and spent the entire night analysing the relationship. This dialogue enabled them to recognise their own mistakes, understand each other and re-discover the harmony they had somehow lost during thirty years of marriage. With a new sense of mutual understanding, they decided to give their relationship another chance. For Strehler, this, too, was theatre: an imparting of ideas and feelings that can awaken the child in us, that inner voice that must never be stifled and that is often our best part, deep within us. He believed that contemporary society needs theatre to keep it alert and aware".

"Strehler believed that the greatest risk we run is forgetting that we are human, failing to keep our human values alive and strong. He compared it to being next to someone who's falling asleep and, seeing a beautiful landscape, you wake him up and say: 'Look! Look!' And so he opens his eyes and says:

Left:
Milva and Strehler
rehearsing *Io, Bertolt
Brecht* (1960-61).

‘Thanks, I’d never have seen it if you hadn’t woken me up’. We have a duty to arouse joy in our neighbours, stimulate them to act and not let them be lulled by the steady movement of a car speeding silently down the motorway towards a precipice”.

Strehler lived a full, rich life, devoted to the theatre. He lived life constantly with great intensity. He had passions, joys and loves. He never denied that he had loved and been loved, that he had betrayed and had been betrayed, that he had suffered heartache and also broken the hearts of others. A lot has been said and written about the women in his life. One of his most important relationships was with Ornella Vanoni. For her, he was the teacher, the professional, who taught her all she knew, from the importance of a broad gesture to how to guaran-



tee a presence on the stage. They met during the 1950s. Still a student at the Piccolo Teatro school of acting, she went to Swiss Italian radio (RSI) and as a guest of Eros Bellinelli she recorded the series entitled *Le canzoni della mala*, with *Ma mi* and *Le Mantellate*. Ever repeating, she says with a sigh, “... and we both loved each other so much”. Another of his students, Milva, he discovered when she appeared in a show honouring the Resistance, at which partisan songs were performed. He “adopted” her and made her his leading lady in his classic Brecht repertoire. But Strehler’s greatest and most passionate loves, were Valentina Cortese and, later, Andrea Jonasson. Terry D’Alfonso, truly one of his closest friends, was sometimes called upon to mediate or to smooth over his explosions of joy or anger, enthusiasm or despair. He, who turned his soul inside out for his theatre and students, was by no means a man of half measures.

With Valentina he experienced the magic of a symbiotic love, made even more wonderful by the stunning moments of great theatre they shared.

‘I’ll never forget’, says Terry, “the beauty and skill Valentina brought to Bertolazzi’s *El nost Milan*, her magnificent interpretation of Liuba in Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* and her Queen Margherita in Strehler’s *Il gioco dei potenti* (*Power Games*) based on Shakespeare’s Henry IV, where she revealed the dichotomy in the character between a ruthless murderer hungry for power and the anxious lover of Duke of Suffolk. ‘The lovers here show a different side to their characters, not the political coldness we otherwise see’, said Strehler. ‘Murderers can fall in love, just like the rest of us’. Valentina and Strehler shared a passionate relationship, one which was also full of conflict. Like Picasso, whose art reflects the love relationships he had, so too was Strehler’s work influenced by the women he loved. He would never have achieved one of his best examples of poetic drama, *The Cherry Orchard*, if there had been no Valentina. At that time, he was already smitten with a growing passion for Andrea Jonasson (he covered the walls of his office





with her photos). He created an unparalleled production of Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan* for her, translating the work specially for his new muse so as to take account of her German inflection.

"Giorgio and Andrea", continues Terry D'Alfonso, "had a great love story full of joy and sorrow. In times of crisis, she would confess that it was very difficult and tiring to live with someone like him. But the moments of depression were offset by times of overwhelming happiness. It was a love full of mystery. The two also hurt each other and frequently argued, but could also touch each other in the deepest most intimate of ways. Once, when Strehler was preparing Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, he gave the actors an example of the nature of their love to help them understand the young lovers Miranda and Ferdinand: I was in the kitchen with Andrea, and some hot coffee spilled on my hand. But I didn't feel it, because I was with her. We were there, facing each other and nothing else counted. That's what you have to make us feel". Together they created some truly exciting art, from Lessing's *Minna von Barnheim* to Pirandello's *Come tu mi vuoi*. Andrea

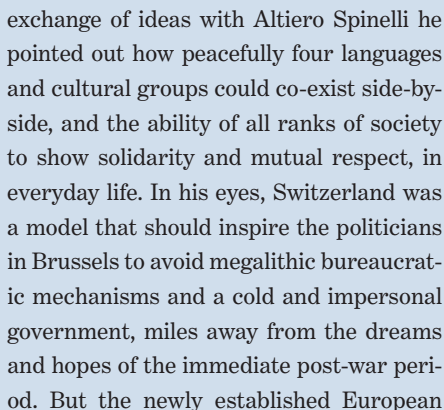
Jonasson was known to have said "He will never be a faithful man. He can't keep himself from having affairs..".

Meanwhile the crisis with the municipality of Milan was deepening. The conservative factions of the Northern League and Polo disapproved of his work, and virtually took "his" Piccolo Teatro away from him. The municipality's ignorance and inability to understand him filled his final years with bitterness. What transpired on the stage at Via Rovella was not exactly a Shakespearean tragedy, but certainly a brutal insult to creativity and freedom of thought and to the dignity of men of culture and free spirit.

Strehler emigrated to Lugano and lived in Ruvigliana. He spoke often of Carlo Cattaneo, of the Capolago printers in Ticino, who published revolutionary pamphlets in Cattaneo's day, and of his "flight from the power of imbeciles", by which he meant his return to Switzerland, which represented something of a déjà vu experience. Strehler had first crossed the Italian-Swiss border at Brusio on 14 October 1943 as a political refugee. He was interned in a camp in Mürren, in the Bernese Oberland. Within a few weeks he had organised a film club for the refugees and gathered together other exiled artists to form a theatre troupe. By early 1944 he had begun staging Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*. Then, in the ballroom at the Grand Hotel, his services having been commandeered by the army, he staged Pirandello's *The Man with a Flower in his Mouth*. In 1945, at the end of the war, he moved to Geneva where, under the pseudonym of Giorgio Firmy, he made his debut as director and staged the world premiere of Albert Camus' *Caligula* and other productions. Then he started directing plays for the Théâtre de la Comédie. At the beginning of 1947 he returned to Milan where, with Paolo Grassi, he founded the Piccolo Teatro. Switzerland had an important lasting influence on his political thinking. He remarked to Terry D'Alfonso that the Europeans and the Italians in particular should stop grinning when they talk about Switzerland, and stop automatically mentioning chocolates, clocks and cheese. For him, Switzerland was a cradle of democracy, an example for the new Europe in the making. In his

Left and over:

Valentina Cortese in *El nost Milàn* by Carlo Bertolazzi (1960-61 in Teatro Alfieri, Turin) and in *The Cherry Orchard* by Anton Tschechow (1973-74).



XXIV

Andrea Jonasson in Pirandello's *As You Desire Me*, which played at the Piccolo from 1987 to 1993.

had afforded an important lesson in politics. Gorky's *The Lower Depths*, which he had staged in 1947, was, he felt, an accurate, timely portrait of the post-war misery and an example of how theatre can make a political statement. Strehler, an antifascist like Paolo Grassi since the late 1930s, was also a Socialist MP in the 1950s and later a Communist senator after leaving Craxi's PSI. His uncompromising stands were later blamed for increasing the rift between himself and the "well-thinking hypocrites" of the Northern League and the Polo.

Mara Bugni, a beautiful young girl with large blue eyes and a student of Philosophy at Milan University, followed Strehler to Ruvigliana. She was some forty years younger than him. She would say that he had taught her to swim in the small swimming pool at Ruvigliana. In the quiet of the slopes of Mount Brè he would look back at the various chapters in his life, a man of both culture and action. He was involved in a series of projects for the half-century celebrations of the Piccolo Teatro, a jubilee for which he wanted to revive Goldoni's *A Servant to Two Masters*, Pierre De Marivaux's *The Island of Slaves* and L. Jouvet's *Elvira or*

A Passion for the Theatre, in which he wanted to play the part of Louis Jouvet to retrace the seven lessons in theatre and life given to Claudia, played by Giulia Lazzarini, a famous actor at Via Rovelli. At a preview, an excerpt from the Swiss musical by Terry D'Alfonso *Tropico dei Sensi* was presented, featuring Milena Vukotic and young actors from the Piccolo Teatro, which was co-produced by Rete 2, the Swiss Italian radio cultural broadcaster.

Terry D'Alfonso and her husband Mario Perego lived for years on the banks of Ceresio, giving them the opportunity to strengthen their business relations and friendship with Strehler. "We had introduced some of our friends in Ticino to Giorgio", says Terry. "Fulvio and Daniela Caccia, Chicco and Ornella Colombo, Giancarlo and Danna Olgiatei... One evening, when we were celebrating my birthday with the Formenti family, Giorgio delighted us with a brilliant imitation of Japanese Nō drama. Another very dear memory", continues Terry, "is of Christmas Eve 1993. It was snowing. Strehler was speaking with obvious nostalgia about Christmas when he was a child. He had found some decorations from back then, and had decorated the tree himself that year. We were all waiting for Giulia Lazzarini and Carlo Battistoni to arrive. They were already in Ruvigliana, but couldn't find the house. Wearing only a black silk kaftan, Giorgio rushed outside with my husband Mario, and they made their way through the snow and ice to meet our friends from Milan. My husband, Giulia and Carlo were all dressed in warm winter coats, and were terribly worried that Giorgio would catch cold in just his kaftan. We finally sat down to enjoy a turkey that Andrea Jonasson had prepared herself, following a special recipe handed down in her family for 50 years".

Terry D'Alfonso still has a clear memory of how Strehler described the vision he had of tomorrow's world, the third millennium. Already back in September 1995, speaking about today's disoriented youth, he said: "We leave them a planet that we've virtually destroyed, full of great contradictions, with many problems still to be faced, with inconceivable racial difficulties, with massive injustices. We leave future generations a



terrible task". It was a very bitter opinion he expressed as he gazed at San Salvatore. During evening get-togethers he would willingly speak of his production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* for the opening of the new Piccolo Teatro premises. He wanted to create a fresco of all the bitterness caused by human relationships and life-destroying evil. It would have been a message for the Milan that had betrayed him. During those weeks Strehler worked with all his typical passion. He was one of the few directors in the world capable of working with scores, but fate stepped in and he never lived to see what should have been a historic moment, perhaps even one of reconciliation or of beginning unification of the Left - a dream he never gave up on - beyond what he called "the antechamber of the death of culture", namely "conformism and banality". Busy with rehearsals, for several days he commuted between Milan and Lugano with great enthusiasm and admirable agility. He would spend Christmas in Ruvigliana. Mario Perego and Terry D'Alfonso, Giorgio, his partner Mara Bugni and their maid Luigia sat down to celebrate Christmas on the evening of 24 December 1997.

"That night Giorgio was restless. He wanted to watch the video of the sequence of Faust's death. He also wanted to review a song from my musical *Tropico dei sensi*. We

took a group photo around the tree he'd decorated. He recounted with joy the excellent progress of the *Così fan tutte* rehearsals and enthusiastically told us about the modern scenery he'd developed with Ezio Frigerio, with whom he'd already worked on fifty other productions. The innovation came about by achieving a weightlessness in the set, with the scenes relying more on the impact of the direction than classical stage scenery, and with movement being created by veils and metallic reflexes. A Strehler idea that was never used". At about two in the morning, Terry and her husband Mario left for home. Mara called Mario Perego (a doctor) at four in the morning, shouting "Help! Giorgio's on the ground. He can't breathe". Mario told her to call the emergency service, while he rushed with Terry to Ruvigliana. Upon their arrival, Mara shouted down to them from the top of the stairs "He's dead, dead!" The doctor and nurses, who had immediately responded to Mara's call, certified that he had died of a heart attack. Mario Perego and Terry D'Alfonso undertook to call his wife Andrea Jonasson and the management at the Piccolo Teatro. The news was flashed all over the world during the next few hours. Strehler's body then lay for three days in the old Piccolo Teatro in Via Rovello, where friends and work colleagues



Milena Vukotic and Pia Lanciotti in Musical *Tropico dei sensi* by Terry d'Alfonso on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Piccolo Teatro (June 1997).

Giorgio Strehler (centre) and a group of Ticino friends at a birthday party for Terry d'Alfonso on 16 November 1993. From the left: Danna Olgiati, Mario Perego, Mirella Formenti, Terry d'Alfonso, Paola Tavazzani, Andrea Jonasson.

kept vigil over their teacher and friend.

"I remember that around three in the morning a very modest man entered to pay his respects. He removed his hat, silently approached the coffin and made the sign of the cross. Then he knelt and kissed the coffin, and finally slowly moved away backwards and saluted Giorgio with a timid wave. It was the last goodbye by one of those small characters that Strehler had so loved in Goldoni's



works". On that Christmas Day in 1997, theatre lovers around the world and the international cultural press reeled from the loss of a major craftsman of the theatre, a rigorous "Central European" convinced of the value of human solidarity, a cultural figure who managed to balance the sense of his death with the sense of his life.

** Journalist, former Director of the RTSI*



My memories of Giorgio Strehler

by Claudio Magris *



The *Threepenny Opera* by Bertolt Brecht in the 1958-59 production with Giusi Raspani Dandolo and Tino Buazzelli (left) and the 1972-73 production with Gianrico Tedeschi (top).

Shakespeare's
Tempest in the Teatro
Lirico 1977-78:
Opening scene (on this
page); Giulia Lazzarini
in the role of Ariel and
Tino Carraro as
Prospero (opposite
page).



I always spoke to Strehler in the dialect of Trieste, no matter what the topic. We would talk about anything and everything. Not just memories of Trieste or our childhoods or our common love for guinea pigs... We'd crack jokes and tell funny stories. And we always spoke in dialect when we talked about the theatre, productions, directors, actors' performances and interpretations and so on. Right from the start we shared a rapport as professionals and good-natured scoundrels. And this was certainly one reason I was able to enjoy an easy-going, free relationship with him, on an absolutely equal footing, free of that almost reverent respect and essentially appealing brand of pride that could though sometimes be quite stifling in its excess, and which - at least according to what you heard or read - he loved to be in the midst of. It was never like that with me, not because we didn't know about or understand the difference in artistic stature between us, between his skill in direction and mine, but because, without having to say it, we both knew (even if sometimes we forgot) that every relationship is always equal, because it is of the moment, each meeting, each conversation and even each clash of opinion. At such times one can never know how the spirit blows, regardless of what either may have achieved or created previously.

I met Strehler the man a number of years after having met Strehler on the stage and having been lastingly influenced by his extraordinary productions. I can remember

the emotion I felt when I saw his *The Threepenny Opera* and other works by Brecht, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and many other plays that now are firmly established in world theatrical history. I initially met with him personally to discuss a script I'd written and sent him: *Stadelmann*. He called me and spoke in dialect, of course, and started discussing my work. "*Perché el se copa?*" ("Why does he kill himself?") he asked me. And added immediately "*Te poderia risponderme: rangeve, mi conto una storia e voi dovè capir coss'che la vol dir*" (You could answer me: I'm telling you a story and you've got to understand what it means yourself). He planned to stage *Stadelmann* at the Teatro Studio, but, unfortunately for me, he was totally absorbed by his huge Faust project and concentrated on that to the cost of everything else.

I attended many of the Faust rehearsals, always giving him my honest opinion. Once, after a scene, he turned to me and asked me: "*Te piasi?*" (Did you like it?) I said "No" and he "Oh". So he repeated the scene and then again turned to me with a bow, "And now?" Those rehearsals were also rather disconcerting, for a very simple reason. When he corrected his actors about a line or move he felt was wrong, he slipped into the part and character with incredible genius. He was perfect, a really great actor who also appreciated and taught others, his actors, the depth, the peculiarities, the unique identity of a given character, gesture or moment. But when he himself acted, like when he played the role of the protagonist

in *Faust*, he was a disaster. Rhetorical and pathetic, you couldn't even actually say that he acted badly, but it was as though he weren't acting at all. His identification with the character and the way he lived the part seemed to slip away into a turning in upon himself. Unbelievable that this could happen to him, the man who had so brilliantly staged the works of Brecht and had portrayed Brecht's alienation so poetically, the exact antithesis of identification! I believe at that moment he was overcome by egocentrism; he felt he was Faust, the great Faust who represented man struggling with the devil, in the battle between good and evil, progress and barbarism. He lost sight of his limits, and it was almost painful to see how Graziosi, playing Mephistopheles beside him, showed him up with his brilliant acting.

I remember this episode, because I believe it is important to always be perfectly frank and never to flatter or purposely overlook a person's weaknesses, especially if that person is considered "great". There's no point in acting blind or ignoring a person's limits, as was often the case with many of those in Strehler's entourage. Either way, his greatness as a director and as an artist cannot be diminished. He will always be an exceptional figure in the history of theatre in the 20th century. I am glad to have been able to spend many pleasant hours with my friend Strehler, sharing good, honest conversation with a fellow Triestine.

* *German scholar and author*



Collection of quotes for the thematic pictures of the annual report provided by Pier Carlo Della Ferrera.

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Sources and photographic references

Archivio del Piccolo Teatro di Milano, p. I, II, III, IV, V, VIII, IX, X, XII, XIII, XIV, XVII, XIX, XXII, XXIII, XXIV, XXV, XXVIII, XXIX, XXX, XXXI

Luigi Ciminaghi, p. I, II, III, IV, V, XIII, XIV, XVII, XXII (left), XXIII, XXIV, XXV, XXVI, XXIX, XXX, XXXI

Terry d'Alfonso, p. XVI, XX, XXVII

Claudio Emmer, p. X

Ledino Pozzetti, p. XXVIII

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Quote on the first cover
page:
Giorgio STREHLER,
letter to the ensemble
of Shakespeare's
Tempest
(3 November 1983).

Picture:
Ezio FRIGERIO,
Stanza in casa di Otto
Marvuglia, sketch for
La grande magia
(1984-85).