



Margherita Palli, architect of visions

by Antonio Calbi

Just as it may occur in directing, in stage design too, there are scenographers that adopt a rudimentary, nuts-and-bolts approach and there are scenographers as originators that think outside the box: the scenographers that simply 'package' go hand in hand with those directors who limit themselves to throwing together the few elements that serve to put on a show, devoid of an interpretative idea, lacking in depth or originality, without a signature style or poetics. It is lazy theatre, that of the hireling, the hack - or if we really want to go for the jugular - of ennui and the superfluous, and a betrayal of the original sense of this very special art form that is theatre, thereby relinquishing the capacity to light the flare of its aesthetic and political power, its cultural and social significance, which conversely have kept theatre animate and vital for millennia. On this point let's be clear, we are not enamoured of 'meat-and-potatoes' 'pack 'em and stack 'em' scenographers but of inventors of spaces, because we are convinced that the scenic space is not merely an ancillary element supplement to the organic nature of opera or prose theatre but rather a central, instrumental component, even when opting for the bare-bones paucity of an eighteenth-century stage or the verity of a natural site. The space in general, and more so that which is generated by a creative act, is always significant; it speaks to us, it tells a story, it testifies, it excites emotion, it encourages reflection, it shakes us up or surprises us, it leaves an impression. As patrons, it further stimulates our imagination, as spectators we are either drawn in or alienated by the space. Is not theatre the primal visual art that humankind has developed in order to better understand the meaning of life? Perhaps - even antedating the prehistoric cave paintings of Altamira - replicating or reenacting the scenario of something already experienced contributed to the birth of culture and the arts in general.

The masters who contributed to reforming, innovating or revolutionising the scenic space throughout the twentieth century were in a minority: from pioneers Appia and Craig to *sensei* such as Svoboda, Wilson and Peduzzi while in Italy we have Damiani, Frigerio, Balò and Castellucci, to

name but a few, plus a scattering of others. Margherita Palli excels among the Italian names of prominence in the field of scenography for theatre and opera performance, having happily crossed boundaries between genres and disciplines by also designing for exhibitions, events, fashion shows, and other projects. As in the most fortuitous cases, Margherita Palli is an authentic artist, a skillful craftswoman, an honest intellectual. She invents rather than packages, she conceives and not copies, creates, not replicates; with grace and personal style she creates a dialogue between the imaginary and the real. In so doing, Palli is well placed within the perpetuation of the “tradition of the new” which marked the entire twentieth century, characterized by its break with the past, by innovative drive, by the avant-garde and by continual and inexhaustible experimentation.

The prime element that characterizes her research is that, in its near totality, this has produced built scenic spaces, habitable environments that are concrete, real, architectural, scions of three-dimensional Euclidean space, combined with the fourth dimension. The time spent within them, that of the actors and the characters they portray, that of the audience that observes and often admires, seized with amazement; and finally, the tempo of movement which animates and transforms these scenic spaces, that of the stage machinery or of the elements that characterize a particular scenic design project and which almost always takes place *in vista*. This three-dimensionality, this creation of volumes as opposed to mere surfaces is rooted in Palli’s training to be a scenographer at the Accademia di Brera in Milan. In that same year (1976), she marries a fellow nonconformist (or eccentric) in the creation of scenic space: the architect and designer Italo Rota. The following year, Palli worked with Pierluigi Nicolin at the Triennale in Milan, in the Palazzo delle Arti designed by Muzio, destined primarily for design-related disciplines: urban planning, architecture and design. Therefore architecture very soon played a significant role in both her personal and professional life. It’s also worth mentioning her passionate interest in sculpture, almost to the point of nurturing an ambition to become a sculptress, which for a period led her to work alongside the sculptor Alik Cavaliere, whose works are never locked within themselves but always dialogue with the space that surrounds them.

However, it was Margherita Palli’s experience gained as assistant to that other master of design which was to determine the architectural valence, often of monumental proportions, of scenic spaces of her own creation. I’m referring to Gae Aulenti, who for a brief period experimented in theatre at the legendary theatre design workshop - the Laboratorio di Progettazione Teatrale di Prato - directed by Luca Ronconi (between 1976 and 1979), where leading lights in Italian culture such as Umberto Eco and Franco Quadri collaborated.

Palli when in her thirties worked with Aulenti in Paris, in that original undertaking that was to be the transformation of the Gare d’Orsay into one of the most inspiring museums on the planet (inaugurated in 1986). At which one simply cannot fail to notice the extensive experimentation of diverse solutions and inventions that are attractive as well as functional while observing walls and partitions, niches, halls and rooms, stairways and galleries, a highly original colour palette, floors on different levels, views in perspective and clusters of sightlines. The result is that of a highly scenographic museum, that is already a form of theatre, of an architecture the entire structure of which is spectacular. Of the hand-coloured final technical drawings, perspectives and cross-sections which were presented to President Mitterand, Palli is extremely proud. From Gae Aulenti, beyond the language Palli absorbs the method, the organizing of work and the meticulousness in its execution.

It is 1984 when Palli breaks into the world of theatre with an approach that can already be defined as individual and with a design determination that is uncommon among scenographers that are oriented towards a volumetric aesthetic or even materico, mixed media, almost constructivist or as a work in progress. She debuted with the director Luca Ronconi, with whom the architect and designer Gae Aulenti had experimented with theatre, in particular in the aforementioned workshop in Prato, *the* place to go in a very special moment in the history of Italian theatre. In fact that year marked her first built stage design: a monumental dome of an astronomical observatory, with openings and slits through which to gaze at the heavens, conceived for Racine’s *Phèdre*, directed by Ronconi, again at Prato and starring one of his best loved actresses, Anna Maria Guarnieri. This

unusual seventeenth-century volume with its perspective a tilt made quite an impression, but an even greater surprise was provided by the walls of real brick and plasterwork, constructed with building materials and not set materials in substitute. Once again the scale is monumental, this time for *Ignorabimus*, the work by Arno Holz, which Ronconi created at the Teatro Fabbricone in Prato in 1986, for which he chose an all female cast – male roles included - their faces sporting latex masks, with the novelty that this space was inhabited both by the players and by the audience, and with the oversized sets corresponding with the protacted run-time: a cool 12 hours. An exhausting yet electrifying experience. This architectonic realism indeed references, yet perhaps unintentionally, the walled proscenium that the great Ronconi wanted for the itinerant *The Bacchae* with Marisa Fabbri in the leading role, this too in Prato, with spatial analyses and inventions by Gae Aulenti.

Therefore, if Palli's academic training is rooted in scenography and the fine arts - which persists in being a little musty, to tell the truth, despite the ferment that enlivened alternative culture in the 1970s - her hands-on training in the field is as an architect, practical experience that was to clearly score Margherita Palli's methodology in the creation of her almost 200 spaces designed for diverse disciplines and events. Hence a method that is closer to that of the designer as opposed to the scenographer: she would certainly think of the two-dimensional view that the spectator will have from the auditorium, framed by the proscenium, without forgetting the visual gestalt, but she would never neglect the concrete habitability of the stage on the part of the performers, beginning with the materials used. This being the second element that connotes her work: the continuous inventiveness in architectural, scenic, environmental, constructive solutions are associated with and run parallel to experimentation on stage, and not only on stage, of materials of every sort that are natural and artificial, standard and archaic, innovative and traditional, theatrical or deriving from other disciplines or environments. That touch of genius that led her and Ronconi to adopt a black tulle, in effect a lightweight netting used as weatherproofing in agriculture, when designing for the wonderful exhibition on the Chinese warriors in terracotta at the Scuderie del Quirinale museum in Rome. The netting creating a hazy, nebulous impression on so much magic, an oneiric effect of faintly altered perception at the sight of such superb artifacts from a culture so distant from ours in time and space. Or that artificial turf on which to promenade and embark on a virtual voyage around the marine coastal areas, in a representation of the boot-shaped Italian peninsula designed for another exposition mounted in a stately location, the formal royal residence of the Reggia Sabauda di Venaria in the Piedmont region, for a tour around the *bel paese*, devised to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Unity of the Nation. There have been dozens of scenic design projects for shows and exhibitions, two of which spring to mind: those dedicated to the beloved medium of painting - a virtuoso of the brush such as Van Dyck, mounted in the Sala delle Cariatidi (lacerated by bombardments during the Second World War) at the Palazzo Reale in Milan in 2004, and the exhibition held in 2008 at Palazzo Venezia in Rome, dedicated to another great artist, Sebastiano del Piombo, both in partnership with Ronconi and both innovative, highly theatrical not least in the lighting design, memorable for its perfect fusion of exhibited works of art and the exhibition design project itself. Among the most recent, one dedicated to Italian design by women, in the 2016 edition of the Triennale and for another, the storefront window display to mark the centenary of La Rinascente chain of department stores (its name suggested by none other than Gabriele D'Annunzio) located a few hundred metres from Teatro alla Scala, original in its upcycling archive materials from this temple of operatic art in a canny combination of brands so upmarket and celebrated, though associated with loosely related settings (in the splendour of the opening night held on 7th December to inaugurate every season, for example).

But the third element proves the most significant, which makes Margherita Palli a shining star in the European constellation of scenographers (born and raised in Switzerland, with home and studio in Milan housed in a former famous art gallery; and as an artist of the Swiss confederation her work has garnered her the national Theaterpreis award, a kind of Oscar dedicated to the arts and creativity) by dint of her inventiveness, the originality of each scenic design project, its beauty and functionality. As in all the best architecture and design projects, the beautiful and the useful are one item, they go hand in hand right from the outset, they have a common genesis; though neither

twinned nor siblings however they are but one creature, or better yet, a single creation. Scenic spaces that are purely visionary, or spaces that are concrete, tangible, real, perchance inspired by history, spaces of pure invention and unexpected, meaningful spaces, spaces that speak to us, symbolic or metaphorical spaces, mental spaces, "dramatization" of the space that are generated jointly with the director, at times together with the opera or the show's creator, or in total solitude and in complete freedom. Discussions, exchange of views, contrasting dialectics, germinal ideas with the initial outlines, the sketches, through to the final projects, the maquettes and 3D-models, the scrupulous step by step monitoring of their execution in the workshops, the fit-up on the stage, the testing of their functionality and the reviewing of their expressive and aesthetic value, the retouches and the changes when needed or requested, right to the moment of curtain-up, each time unveiling a marvel. It is that collective sense of amazement noted earlier, which evolves when an opera is underway, as the drama unfolds, in the secular ritual of being at the theatre to watch a performance. The movement, and therefore the tempo, hence the stage mechanics and machinery frequently form a part of this whole idea of scenography, of this conception of the scenic space, perhaps advocated by that first director with whom Palli worked for a period spanning thirty years, namely the afore-mentioned Ronconi, in whose theatre vocabulary the static was always intended as incorporating movement, the dynamics (it recalls to mind the ever-changing tableaux vivants in a medieval saraband in the piazzas in his *Orlando Furioso* and in another version designed by Pizzi for RAI television network when Palli was still a student at Brera).

Among the series of designs that have remained impressed in our memory, other than the sets built for the previously mentioned *Ignorabimus*, there are others, chosen without any scientific criterium save those impressionistic flashes of memory, as indeed it should be in the case of theatre, collective art, or experiences to share that we metabolize, thereby spawning an existential biography parallel to the life of every spectator. And if we fail to recollect, it would mean that these shows were low-key and uninspiring affairs, devoid of ideas and of stunted emotion to the point of leaving no trace within us. Memorable sets include the cutaway of the half coach - half cruise ship designed to reveal the interiors of Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* or the immense vertiginous staircase for *L'uomo difficile* (*Der Schwierige*) by Hofmannsthal, both staged in 1990, again for Ronconi; *The Makropulos Affair* from Karel Capek's play set to music by Janacek, for the Teatro Regio in Turin (1993) and then at La Scala in Milan (2009), with asymmetrical interiors, empty space and totemic bookcases. Among Ronconi's masterworks, the sudden collapse – an authentic *coup de théâtre* – of the facade of the apartment building in Via Merulana, a key element in the 1994 staging of Carlo Emilio Gadda's *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* (*That Awful Mess on Via Merulana*) while he was director of the Teatro Argentina in Rome. An entire wing of the stage keeled over onto the group of performers portraying characters from the story placed like statues around the entire stage area yet spared injury as their positions were calculated to the millimetre thus ensuring they remained unscathed save some disarray of a hairdo and the odd flutter of a costume caused by doors and windows flying open in the colossal balconied facade that came crashing down squarely like a pack of cards, leaving the audience aghast. Also astonishing, her scenery suggestive of cinemascope created for that "transatlantic" stage in the Teatro Strehler in Milan designed by architect Marco Zanuso, and in particular for the impeccable *Professor Bernhardt* by Schnitzler, staged in 2005, in our opinion one of the most accomplished and compelling shows of the Ronconi-Palli partnership. But also the reimagining of American lines of dialogue, between irony and affectation, for *Lolita*, the 2001 stage version of the screenplay from the film adaptation of Nabokov's novel, starring Franco Branciaroli, for which Palli created a number of sets, shorter than the version for Ronconi, but no less interesting: from *Murder in the Cathedral* to *End Game*, from *Don Quixote* to the volumes entirely in black for *Macbeth*, the latter an almost paradoxical negation of the scenic space consisting of scenery created by black panels and drop curtains in continuous movement, for a direction that acknowledges the tragedy as an inner nightmare that torments the drama's eponymous lead. In *End Game* (2006) Palli experiments with the lighting for the sets, something quite different from lighting a set already up and running: with the help of Artemide, notable world leader in upmarket designer lighting solutions, she invents a quadrate of lights to place within the framed set

thus allowing for colour change. Doors, choreography and clockwork timing in scenery for Goldoni's *Due gemelli veneziani* (*The Venetian Twins*) or the disturbing monochrome sets for *Quel che sapeva Maisie* (*What Maisie Knew*) by Henry James, at the Piccolo in Via Rovello, Milan, both directed by Ronconi. The timeless trilogy for the Greek Theatre of Syracuse, subsequently adapted for indoor theatres; Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, an almost metaphysical, abstract space characterised for once not by naturalistic elements but by gigantic alphabet-letter blocks rendered different colours by neon tubing. To say nothing of the two editions of *The Merchant of Venice*, one for Paris, with its shifting of mixed media curtains and the use of resins to create different ambiances, the other staged at Milan, entirely dissimilar in its metallic, frosty, minimalist setting, perhaps worthy of Kubrick. Margherita Palli's six Premi Ubu awards are highly deserved, alongside many other accolades, among which a listing in the Guinness Book of Records for the world's largest video-wall ever created, for the 2007 Triennale in Milan, to mark twenty years of broadcasting *Striscia la notizia*, the highly popular satirical TV show, brainchild of producer Antonio Ricci. So to round up with her most recent projects and those still in the making: the challenge of creating spatial concreteness out of Umberto Eco's most celebrated novel, his masterly fictional world in *The Name of the Rose*, which Palli condenses into a constructivist set of metallic and wooden structures, in a scheme of levels, staircases, ambiances suggestive of Piranesi in their composition - the only way to represent on stage the intrigue of mystery and death in the medieval convent with tower reconstructed by Eco. Or the multiple inventions and solutions for Umberto Giordano's *Andrea Chénier* staged at Milan's Teatro alla Scala on the season's opening night of 7th December, directed by Mario Martone (with whom she had already created sets for other operas such as *Otello* and *La cena delle beffe*, (*The Jester's Supper*)) inspired by historical events, dramatic yet devoid of reverence, paying tribute to an invention from the turn of the last century: the revolving stage, extremely functional in seamlessly revealing the multiple sets required for the storyline, plus inspiration gleaned from neoclassical and romantic painting, from Delacroix to Géricault to David. The French Revolution is in full swing, between trials and executions by guillotine, with animated crowd scenes and others more intimate or of brilliant design, like that of the tribunal with the chorus acting as spectators, an apparently simple solution though its symbolic simplicity expresses a perfect flawlessness. Or those convex mirrors reflecting images that are doubly distorted to convey contrasting versions of the same truth or the impossibility of an organic unity. Or to allude to the transformations of revolutions in their antithesis. Margherita Palli's set designs are not limited to the translation on stage of the author's indications or the director's requirements, but go way beyond the obvious precept, of the norm, of the provision and of predictability: they are scenic spaces that branch from a fact of reality to then transform it, reinvent it, translate it into wholly creative and artistic expression, though within that collective creation that constitutes a stage play or a lyric opera.

The constant vitality, the curiosity never dampened coupled with a healthy eclecticism and the rejection of classification and identification with preconceived settings enable Margherita Palli to operate simultaneously on a stage show, an opera or on the design and preparation of an exhibition; they enable her to constantly evolve while remaining true to herself, and while she is fully occupied in the creation of new stage designs for other opera productions for the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin, again with Martone, for Verdi's *Falstaff* conducted by Baremboim, or Bizet's *Carmen* at Théâtre Royal in Liège, directed by Henning Brockhaus. All this without neglecting her teaching, this too characterised by great competence and generosity, and which represents for Palli an ulterior motive to continue to keep pace with changes brought about by new generations and by new technologies - at NABA in Milan, where she heads the scenography course, at the Università IUAV in Venice, and at the Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio, founded and directed by another Swiss celebrity the likes of architect Mario Botta. It was precisely for her comprehensive design know-how, her zest and her inventive spirit attuned to pragmatism that he wanted Margherita to partner him in the training of future architects and designers in general.