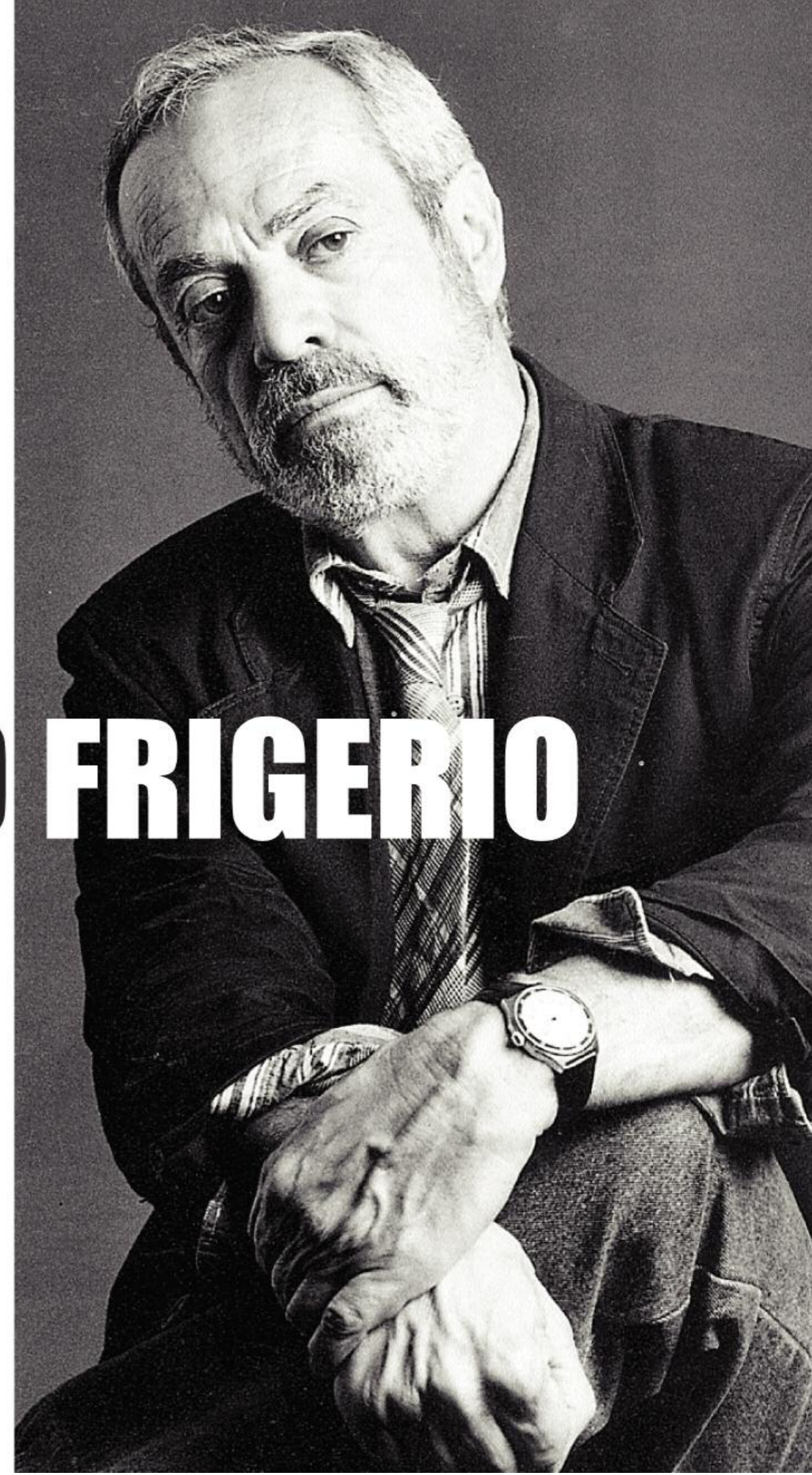
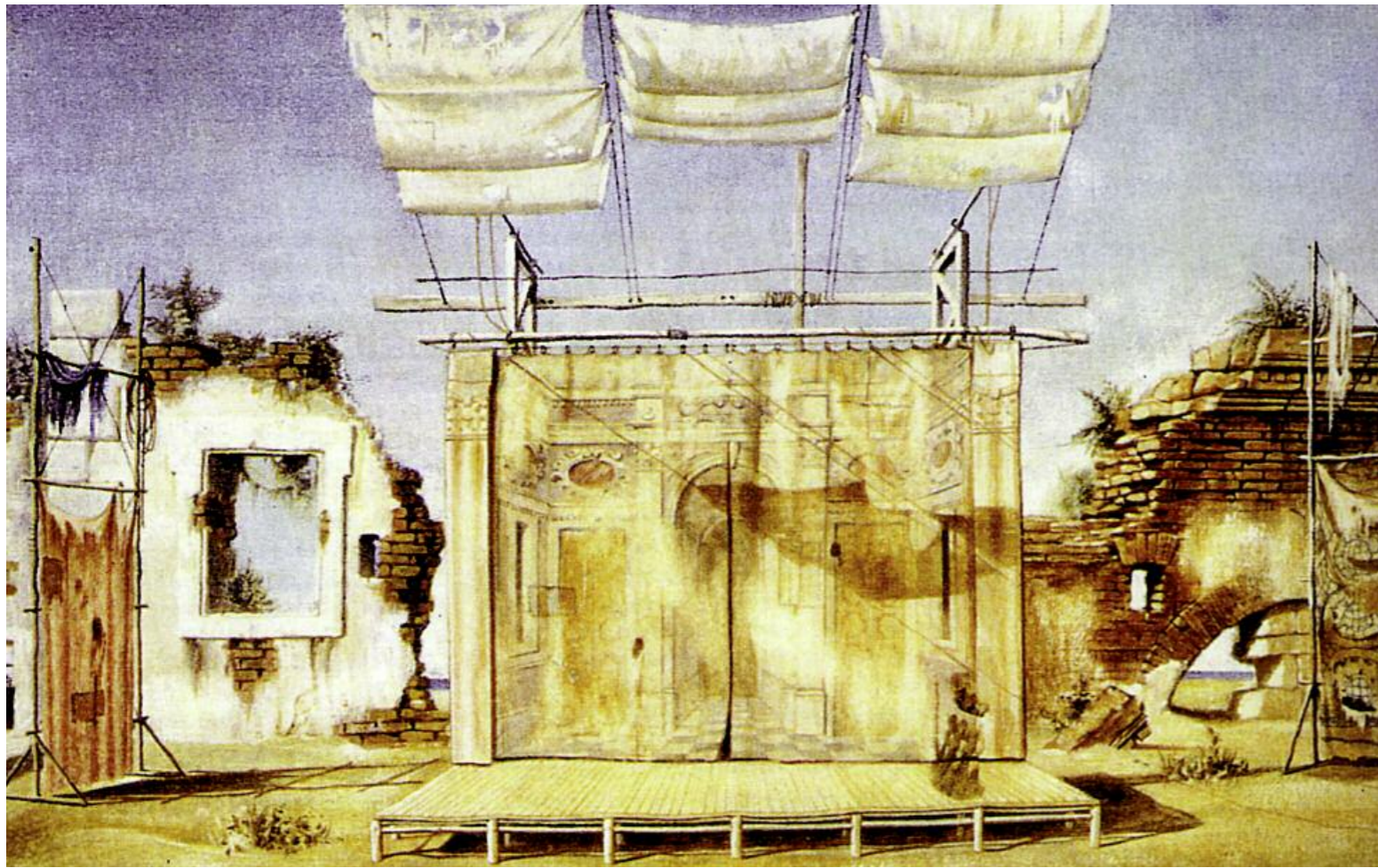


EZIO FRIGERIO



by Paolo Felici

There are periods when artistic expression seems suddenly to come alive again. The reason for this can be found in many and unexpected causes: the joining together of people who are capable of transforming exterior stimuli into something new, the identification of a place in which to operate and a fresh encounter with a knowledgeable public. Just as unexpected are the results that are attained: rapid transformations and new goals which were unforeseen. Ezio Frigerio's work began during one of these fortunate periods: the beginning of his career as a set and costume designer was linked with a meeting with Giorgio Strehler in 1955 and his collaboration with the Piccolo Teatro in Milan.



Carlo Goldoni *Harlequin, Servant of Two Masters*. Piccolo Teatro, Milan - Direction: Giorgio Strehler

A forceful inspiration and continual development of a figurative idea have been characteristics of Frigerio's enormous output. It is possible to count over two hundred and fifty productions for the most important theatres in the world: it is sufficient to mention some of the directors with whom he has worked, such as Giorgio Strehler, Luca Ronconi, Edoardo De Filippo, and Roger Planchon. At the beginning of the Sixties, Frigerio began designing for the cinema ("I sequestrati di Altona" directed by Vittorio De Sica). He subsequently worked with Liliana Cavani and Bernardo Bertolucci. He has also designed extensively for television. In 1974 he married Franca Squarciapino, a costume designer, and his companion in life as well as work.



In your opinion, set designing is a profession or an integral part of the world of art?

I would say a bit of both, even though I think the professional aspect is predominant. Designing sets does not necessarily mean producing works of art; only sometimes is a set design a work of art. We can find similarities with other forms of craftsmanship. Usually a craftsman is limited to producing furniture for everyday needs. However, there are pieces of furniture that have gone down in history and were made many centuries ago but we know the designer. Let us take for an example the case of Cellini, a very elegant sculptor; even though all we have left of his works are a few sculpted pieces, it cannot be denied that he was a great artist. However, I also think that to speak of set designing as a profession is too limiting. I would prefer to think of it as an expression of craftsmanship in the highest sense of the word: a type of quality craftsmanship that can create a work of art. We know some excellent set designers who are excellent professionals. But some of them, like Danilo Donati for example, have gone beyond.

What sort of training is required for a set designer?

I think it is essential to have a good base of general culture, which often my colleagues lack, especially the younger ones. It is not enough to have a culture only in the field of visual art; how can one read and interpret a work of the 18th, 17th or 16th century without knowing what happened at that time and working only on a documentary basis? Again I return to what I said before: a documentary base can make a good professional but a deep and rich general culture will make a true set designer, one who will be remembered in the history of set

designing. There are not many true set designers.

In which art period do you particularly feel at home?

My great passion is the Italian Renaissance period, especially the early Renaissance. I think I have absorbed the rigorous composition and the purity of the composition. I do not say that I do not love the Baroque or do not admire greatly the 18th century, the period that came before the Neoclassic. I certainly do not love the ivy that corroded the Roman ruin. Arcadia and the late Romanticism are not the periods that I love the most. But I do not think that a set designer should love the age nearest to his culture; if the theme to be dealt with means entering into a world that I do not know well, I try to feel close to it.

Is there a reason why you frequently use an architectural frontal vision? Is this anything to do with your passion for the Renaissance?

I love the Renaissance but I am not a Renaissance set designer: many layers of experience and many infinite cultural filters reflect my approach to the architecture of that time. This entering into the Renaissance is to live through a complex experience that is not limited to reproducing a certain type of vision. How could I forget the Baroque and the Romantic era when I study the Renaissance? My interest in this historic period is the fruit of youthful passions: I am now fairly old and come from the late romantic and middle-class world. The impact of the architecture and an extremely pure, essential painting could not help but create a strong attraction. However, it remains a youthful passion and a great deal of other experience has been accumulated.

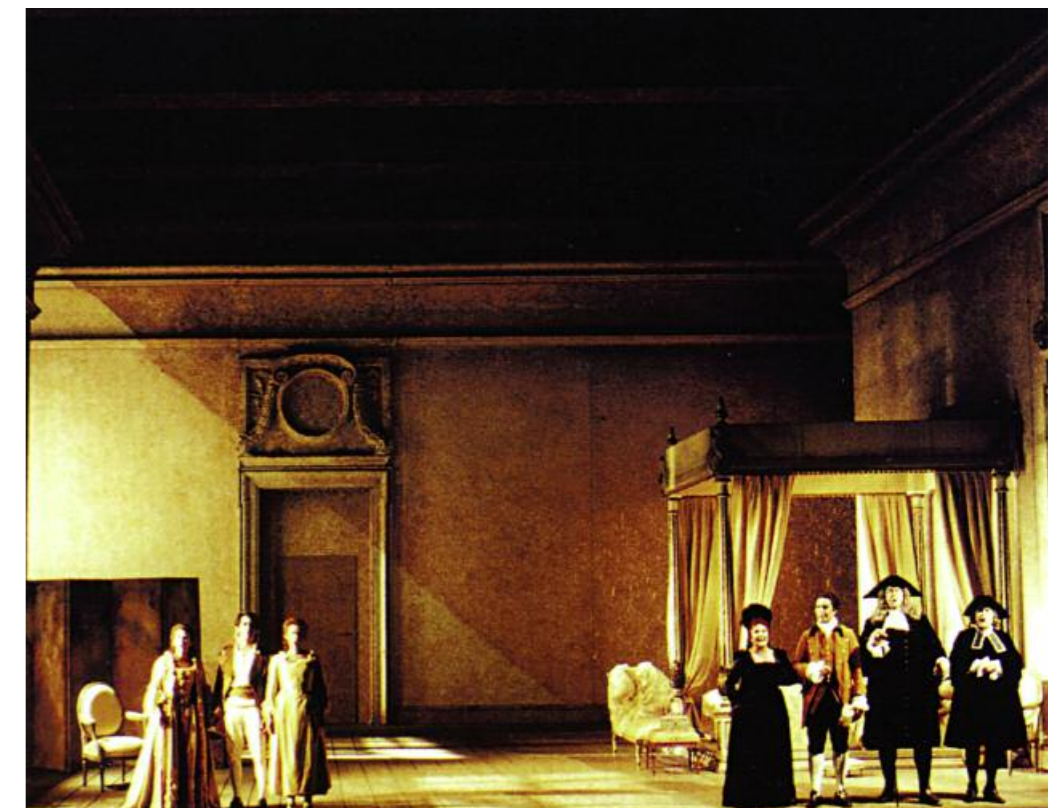
What kind of relationship is there between the world of figurative, plastic arts and set designing?



The different arts move parallel into infinity and therefore the plastic arts do not meet with set designing. The claim that some set designers have made that the two worlds are linked, is absurd and misleading. Some painters who have produced abstract designs have only reproduced old things: those who in 1940 produced set designs in the style of Mondrian forgot that Mondrian was a painter who lived between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Whereas Mondrian painted, set designers presented the new realism by placing on the stage the carcasses of real oxen. In the relationship between set designer and plastic arts there have been moments of violent alternations: there have been periods when the historical time produced a marriage, a marriage which to my mind is unnatural. When Strehler and Damiani created a certain type of theatre, they were linked to a certain historical moment. Repeated at a distance of some years, their productions were less interesting, even though at that time it seemed that the puritan line of setting the scene was the definitive approach. After a few years, Strehler himself needed to have something different to say.

Which teachers and authors have contributed to your development?

I deny having had a relationship with my ancient predecessors. In the 18th century a certain type of set design was carried out which favoured the portrayal of an anonymous site. The magic was provided by the very rich fantasy in the composition. In the 19th century, set designing had assumed a more illustrative character. I would not dare to say that either of these two forms were relations of modern set designing that was born at the beginning of the 20th century and which explored the work more deeply. Today the set designer can be defined, if we want to use a horrible word, as a co-author with the director. The work is no longer a representation of itself but it is interpreted. The director's interpretation is the point of departure for the set designer: it will be for the set designer to produce projects based on the purely intellectual proposals given by the directors. The director does not interfere with the production of the projects. This is an



absolutely new process; before the end of the 19th century it did not exist. I am trying to find predecessors in the 1900s: Appia, Gordon Craig are my ideal mentors: I have spoken about Damiani, who was for me a great maestro, and I must also speak of many modern architects. I created set designs based on architecture, using architecture as a language, not as an image in itself.

Your realistic approach to set designing is often spoken about. Isn't this a limiting definition as it does not take into account the evocative character of your productions which are linked to memory?

I have always maintained that set designing is not a creation but a suggestion.

I have therefore used the architectural element in a suggestive form and never as an expressive form. Set designing has succeeded if it moves something in people's hearts: even with realism it is possible to obtain this effect. Our sensitiveness is fed by what we have experienced in various moments of our lives and one of the most important periods without doubt is childhood. This store of emotions produces images and it is very difficult to understand where they come from. The connection that exists between my set designs and my study of modern architecture is hidden in the text on which I am working and by my personality. It is very difficult to discover the true origins of my ideas: they are even mysterious to myself.

Therefore you arrive at selecting light and materials in a purely intuitive manner?

Even though I do nothing with my hands I am very interested in, and I think I have a great feeling for, materials. Still at my age the choice of the right material for a work stimulates and fascinates me. I think it is necessary to adjust the work which is being staged to the materials that are available today through new techniques. To use modern materials carelessly is one of the great mistakes which many of my colleagues make, the



Bertolt Brecht *Threepenny Opera* Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris. Direction: Giorgio Strehler 1986

young and the not-so-young. It is easy to succumb to the fascination of material for the material itself. But fundamentally the matching, and the motivation that calls for its use, goes beyond the pure and simple knowledge of the material itself.

Can you define the concept of space for us?

The stage is a mysterious place. Sitting in a seat in the theatre, the curtain rises and a space appears, sometimes very small. The Piccolo Teatro stage has been the scene of many of my designs. It is a space not much bigger than this room where we are speaking now: the proscenium is three metres wide and five metres deep. And yet within that space an immensity has been created: emptiness, the horizon, a serene sky, thunderstorms.

How did you manage to do this?

The Piccolo Teatro has a very small space with which we struggled. And then I and some of my colleagues understood that in the end it was for us to dictate and invent space. Instead on other occasions it was necessary to reduce spaces that were much too big. Everyone who sees the famous and notorious "Nozze di Figaro" asks why the rooms are so small. But in reality they are not small at all. The rooms in the "Nozze di Figaro" are immense. However the culture of distance makes it possible to proportion the scene in such a way as to create this illusion. The manipulation of space is a fundamental part of a set designer's life, but it is very difficult to explain it in purely technical terms. If you asked me how I managed to obtain certain results, I would not know how to reply.

One characteristic that all your productions have in common is the study of detail, both of the set and the costumes. What method do you use to decide on the details?

In all my productions there is always a vision that is more spatial than analytical. Analysis is like the patina of time. Any object we see has its marks, its corruptions: there is nothing that has not acquired its patina in our eyes. And it is this patina that seduces the person who

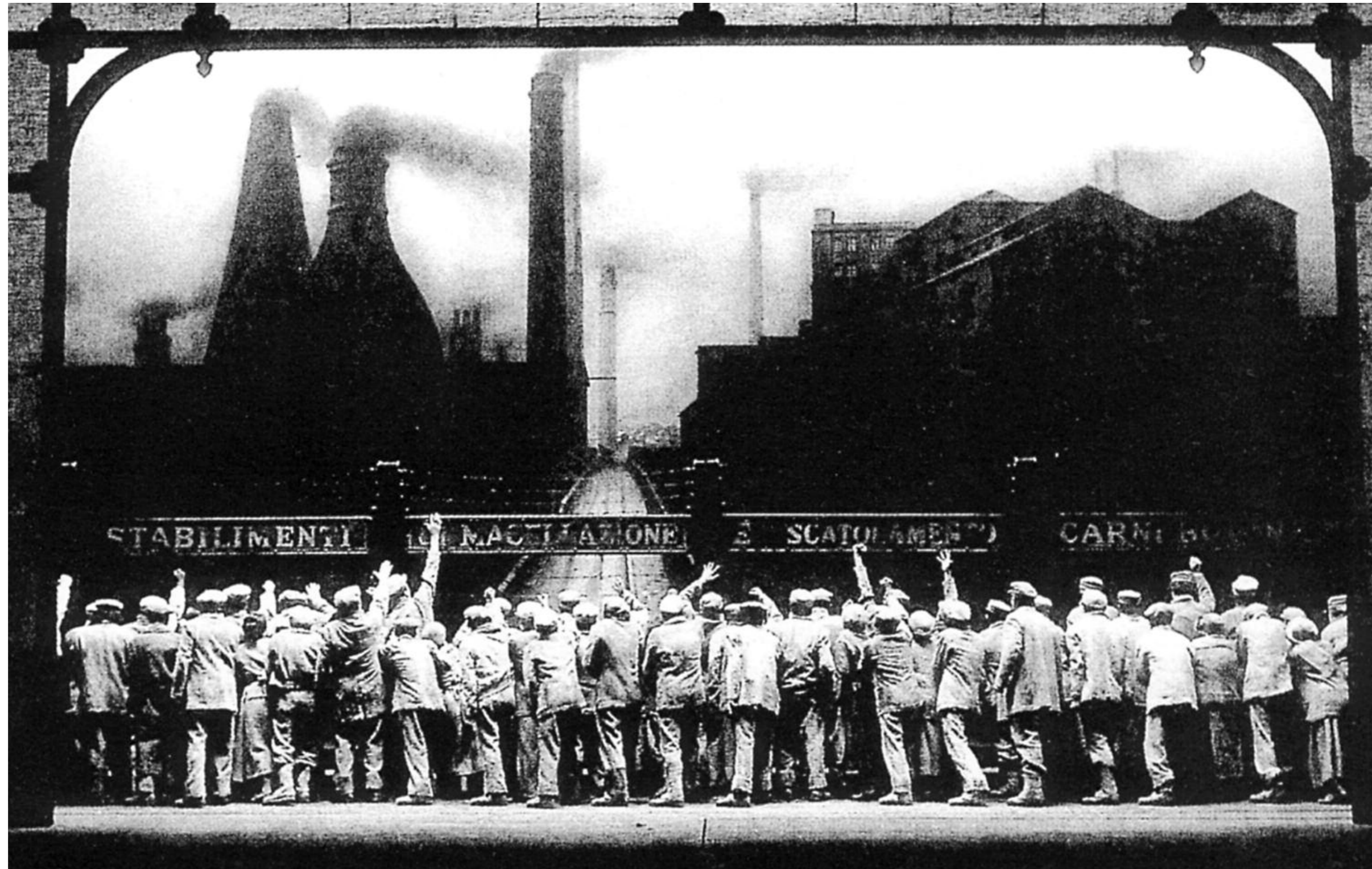
This sketch springs from the idea inspired by a photo by Bill Brant, "Shadows of Lights": the ideal background for a representation set in Chicago in 1929.

The whitened faces of a violently Expressionistic make-up, the tail-coats, the top hats, the cigars of the great capitalists, the fragility of *Giovanna Dark dei Capelli Neri*.

looks at it; it allows us to see an image that would otherwise be too cold. All my life I have created images that are apparently cold and afterwards I have worked with my sensitiveness and memory on these images, making my set designs seem more realistic than in fact they were. In fact, my set designs have a solid architectural base, humanised by the crust that I apply to them. I think, however, that nearly all my set designs were valid even without this realistic detail.

Let us return to origins. How did you begin in the theatre, what was your first approach?

The beginning was completely casual. During my adolescent years I never thought of becoming a man of the theatre: I did not like the theatre. I do not know if I lie or not: in fact many of my childhood friends maintain that even as a young child I lived in a sort of theatrical world. When I came of an age to decide, I chose to do other things. In the period between



For *Santa Giovanna dei macelli* (1970) Frigerio opens up the space with an arrangement of grey-walled factories, framed by iron and jute, vaguely echoing a painting by Sironi.

eighteen to twenty-two – twenty-three years I had no clear ideas. First I wanted to be an architect, then a painter; for a while I thought of being a great traveller and I sailed. Then I was called to design the costumes for the play "Twelfth Night" by Shakespeare. The set designer was Mario Chiari and he did not want to do the costumes. At the beginning I committed myself to costumes and costume-making only because I was unemployed: then the game began to captivate me.

When did you begin to work as a set designer?

When I was twenty-four years old, with the small store of this first experience, I had the impudence to present myself to Felci, asking to do set designs. First he laughed a bit, then he gave me a theme design to resolve: it was a theme by Lorca, something that was fairly easy. When he saw my work he said that I would become a set designer. First I had to start as a costume designer,



and then I would be a set designer. So, a bit by chance, began this passion from which I have never managed to free myself.

And your rapport with the cinema?

That came about by chance too. I had a very rapid career: when I was thirty years old I left the Piccolo Teatro because at the beginning there was someone there who was stronger than me. Stronger in the sense of being more clever. Having left the Piccolo Teatro, I ventured into a more commercial theatre. Commercial in a manner of speaking: at that time the theatre produced many very serious works, even on a commercial level.

What time are we speaking about?

We are speaking about 1958. I met Lucio Ardenzi. I introduced myself as an established set designer and he believed me. I worked on shows like “Spettri”, and collaborated with companies where Albertazzi was working. They were pretty important works. And I found myself at only thirty years of age as one of the most important set designers in Italy. Then after many years De Sica decided to direct in the theatre: “Liola” by Pirandello. I was introduced to work for him. And from that came the contract for the first film: “I sequestrati di Altona”. The film was based on a theatrical work and was fairly near to my world. I did some work in the cinema for a few years and then, for reasons of my own, I moved away. Strehler called me again and made me work in the theatre. Afterwards I worked with Bertolucci and Cavani. I had important but not steady contacts, also because, due to my character, I am not part of the cinema clan. I am very fond of the theatre and there are aspects of the cinema profession that rather bore me.

And television?

I do not belong to the television clan either.

But you worked on important productions like “Leonardo” and “The Brothers Karamazov”.

At that time the television proposition was different and there is an overall

memory of what was achieved.

What is your opinion on television set designs today?

I remember with enthusiasm “Leonardo” with Castellani: the set designs were a great undertaking. And then there was the period of great books: the “Karamazov”, “Il cappello del prete” ... Today I think that there is little quality, but I’m not sure if the cause is due to the subjects or the people. Too often television is banal and prolific. Very professional and that is all. However, in shows and publicity there are sometimes interesting things, although conditioned in the manner of using the materials.

It happens that all set designers come across the same work more than once during their career. What sort of crisis does this produce?

It depends on the work. “Arlecchino servitore di due padroni” is a particular case: “Arlecchino” from a certain time onwards became my production. I think it is important, even though it was not the most important set design in my life. “Arlecchino” was a logical development without conflict or difficulty. “Arlecchino” was of my age, and that of Strehler, and Soleri and Moretti before that. It is a work that has slowly aged with us. I was a young man when I worked on the production for the first time. Then as my life became richer with poetical and human knowledge, the more age veiled a certain youthful enthusiasm. Instead, other productions have been a struggle. I have redesigned “Le nozze di Figaro” with great difficulty because I could not free my mind from the famous Paris production followed by the one at the Scala. One would like to redo some productions when one realises that one has made a mistake. Other productions are the fruit of a true intuition: and there it would be more difficult to work on them again.

You have designed drama productions as well as the opera. How do you change your way of planning the scenic space?

It is difficult to understand the difference.

My job is to create the time and place in which the action occurs. The times and places of action are very different in drama, in opera and in the cinema. The cinema uses times and places that are based directly on reality: a reality that although filtered, must be recognisable, easy to read. The theatre is moved by deep psychological reasons and allows an exploration of places and events in a more cultural way. The basic material in opera is more magical, more poetical. The main theme is not the spoken word but the music: the set designer is carried to far off frontiers, very distant from the language of drama or the cinema.

A question: what would you like to produce and what have you never had the opportunity to do?

I have done little Shakespeare in my life. I love Shakespeare very much and I would have liked to have had the opportunity to have undertaken the works of this great playwright. The difficulty is not to do Shakespeare but to find someone who does Shakespeare in Shakespeare’s way. I am very close to Strehler and, to tell the truth, I have rarely had the chance to work with directors who are able to give me such strong stimuli. So while for drama I feel very linked to this person, for opera I feel more free. Strehler himself, when he directed opera, gave me more freedom.

A set designer never works alone. Can you tell us about your relationship with your collaborators?

The relationship with collaborators is something that sooner or later comes to an end. I think that in our lives there are many moments for all of us. There was a time that lasted for many years, perhaps thirty, when I needed confirmation. I needed confirmation that what I imagined could be done. However I found the production of the images rather boring: I was afraid that if I dedicated myself personally to them I would fall in love with the images as I did them. I remember excellent creators to whom I gave the raw material: they produced the images and I selected them. For this I had

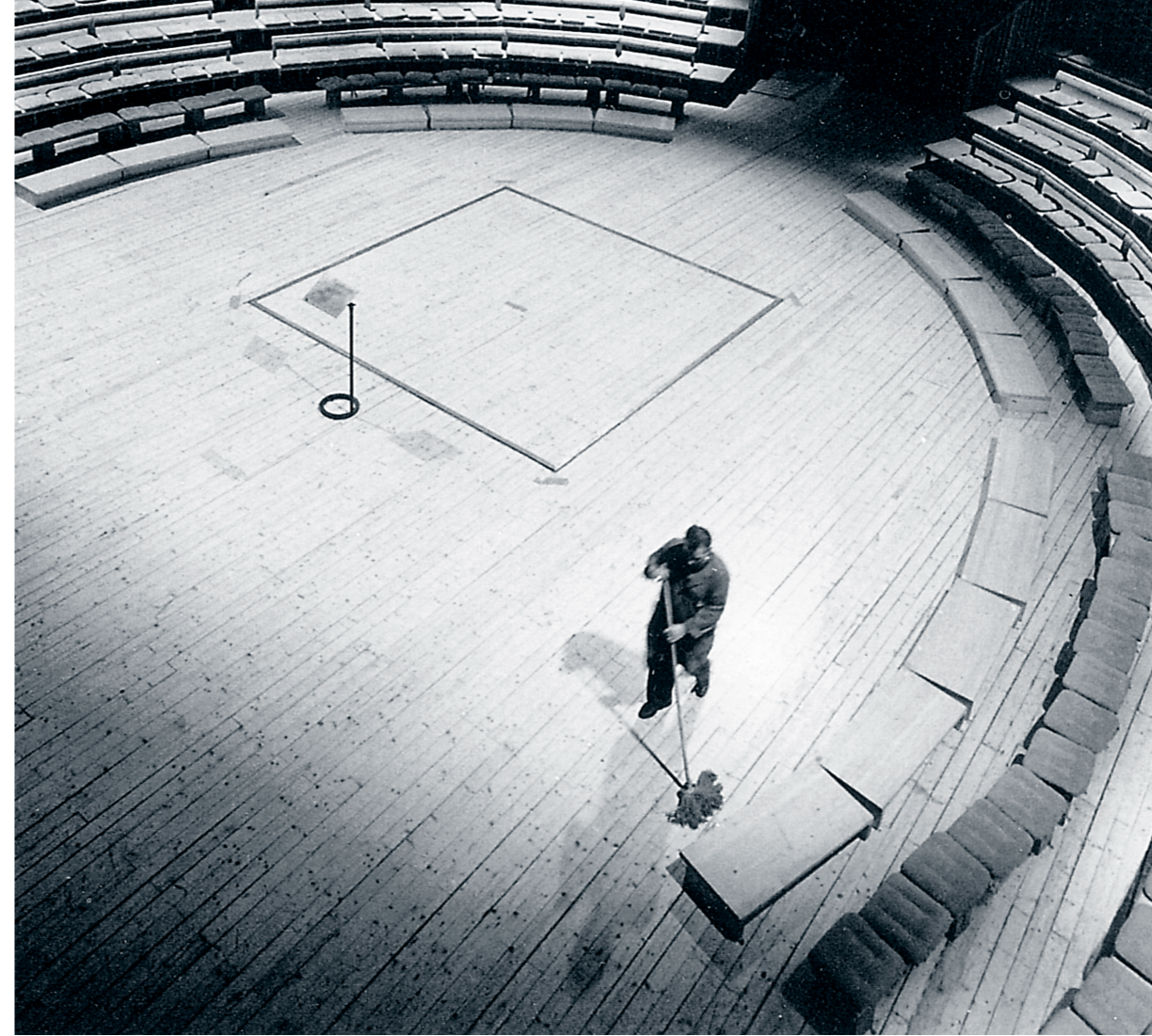


Photo by Gérard Uféras

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or a detail will not change anything fundamentally.

For the would-be set designer is the Academy, the studio, or the workshop most important?

Neither one nor the other. To work in the workshop can help train professionals. The Academy is no use because one learns practically nothing, there is too much freedom. The Academy does not exist any more. The word ‘Academy’ has a precise meaning: it indicates a place where one learns academic subjects. If the Academy of today has become a synonym for absolute freedom it has lost its function. At one time it was required to prepare people who had to carry out one type of set designing but that now belongs to the past. Today it has to provide the means that are required to create for a window or a large department store; many small publicity productions, small sets, large sets, as well as the furnishings. The Academy represented a certainty for the future. Today the future is no longer certain. How is it possible to teach people who do not know what has to be done to be a set designer? At least the cinema is based on a very precise technique and takes place in surroundings that have been chosen following a clear criterion; but what can be said for the theatre? One can only say that this does not come out of the Academy. Frankly, I do not know which is the best school.

Perhaps experience?

I don’t know. I am very uncertain because I think that the set designing that I did should finish. I am a follower of an exhausted system of set designing. I don’t know and cannot see what our descendants will do. I cannot see anything that seems to me interesting to suggest as a new way. I think that is a sign that the culture is ending. When a previous civilisation does not teach a future one, it means that its culture has ended. I think that decadence does not only involve set designing: painting and architecture are fumbling about and searching but cannot see the future.

many assistants who are now well established, like Tommasi and Pagano, for example. In the present period of my life I find that I do not really need assistants.

Can you tell us about your working day.

At one time my working day began by going to the studio at nine o’clock, leaving at seven o’clock in the evening and going to bed after watching a little television. Today it is very different: I move around and travel a great deal. When I have worked on the idea for a production I call the people in to make a mock-up of the set. In a few days the production is finished. I no longer have a maestro-pupil relationship with my collaborators.

How could the profession of a set designer develop?

I think the ways are relatively important:

the set design is the fruit of one’s mind. Before, I used to work a great deal on design; I made my assistants do hours and hours of prospective work. Now it does not interest me any more. I have arrived at the point at which the creation is completely mental; the representation of the idea has now assumed a secondary role.

When do you decide that the set is finished?

I think the set is finished when it comes out of my head, when it has been designed and is represented by a model. I do not believe in the theory, which Strehler also maintains, that the set is made in the theatre. The set is made in the studio in the set designer’s head. When it arrives at the theatre the set design is all right. If it is not all right at that time, it will never be right. If it works, the adding of an object