



The Scenographer presents

Homage to Piero Tosi

(costume designer)

When I arrive at the Gino Carlo Sensani costume department accompanied by a student of the National School of Cinema, it does not in the least surprise me that Tosi receives me whilst keeping his back to me, intent on making some adjustment to a student's problematic sketch. He pronounces a rapid greeting then lets pass a perfect lapse of time, neither too extended nor too brief, before turning to face me. Thoroughbred of the stage and screen, director of himself and in part an incorrigible actor, with an acknowledged debt to Norma Desmond and to those who still know how to descend a staircase with an outstretched arm on the banister, prompting those in attendance to take off their hat.

I have known Pierino for many years, less in person, more through the words and the verbal accounts of Fellini, which almost never coincided with those of Tosi, yet traced a portrait with indelible colours. There is also a vague suggestion of witchcraft, from the moment in which the man ceased to change, neither from within nor from without. No sign of ageing, of the passing of time, preserved in a bubble of glass. Immutable, this is how Pierino Tosi appears to me, though he has no need of these compliments, neither does he fish for them, with always a foot placed on that shadowy line beyond which it is so easy to vanish, to fade away. Our mutual long-term acquaintance with Fellini draws us inevitably back to that climate. And for my benefit Pierino mimics Federico's soft, high-pitched voice, poking fun of it he teased: "This time can I have from you perhaps just a teeny weeny little shoe?"

With each new film the great seducer encircled him, courting him behind a veil of mockery.

The more he chased, the more the other scuppered away, but not merely for the sake of coquetry: "I couldn't handle it, he wouldn't leave me any space. I don't know how to defend myself, I'm not like Danilo [Donati] who could slip out of his clutch and lie low for a while. I, too have an independent spirit, perhaps more so than Danilo, and yet I let myself get caught. He would bundle me into the car and take me off to Fregene, all the while talking about work. He was the same when at home. If Giulietta tried to join in the conversation by mentioning something that had happened to her during the day, she was cut short with an "Oh, really?" and he would be off again. He would follow me to bed and he would turn back the covers before giving me a goodnight kiss. And at five in morning I would hear his feet shuffling across the shingle. Tock, tock... He would knock on the door: "Are you awake, sweetie?" And off he would go again. There was no escaping him.

He was the complete opposite of Visconti, with whom on the set you literally held your breath, the tension was constant and unbearable, but following the day's shoot the problems of the film were completely set aside and we would spend the entire evening, at table, talking about other things, even if the subject was futile or banal or perhaps of a trifling nature, no matter, as long as it wasn't about work. There wasn't that inescapable obsession, that need which drove Fellini to cling to the febrile atmosphere of the set, forever chasing new ideas, constantly changing his mind. The Count would arrive at the theatre in the morning having already made his decisions from which he would not waver. There were no doubts and no discussions: that's how it was and that is how it would remain. Even if it happened to be a wrong decision, he would stick to it without hesitation, inflexible to the last. He was a commander, a captain who knew the route, the winds, the sails, and reassured the crew in as much as he himself did not fear being shipwrecked. That was his force, he had extremely precise, clear ideas, he knew what he wanted and he knew how to get it. In this he could become ferocious, cruel, medieval. Then with the passing of time things changed a little, old age had mellowed him, had softened his character. Who knows, perhaps I had also changed, or I experienced him in a different way."

It was natural for us to start off with Danilo Donati, so recently departed; and that from Danilo we would pass to Fellini, and from Fellini to Visconti. The conversation took flight by itself, choosing its path without following a fixed route or particular aim.

"You know when I miss Danilo the most? In moments like yesterday evening, because I watched a re-run of *I Clown*. What he knew how to invent and create for *I Clown* is up there with the Gods, pure poetry. I would have liked to have picked up the phone, to tell him; he liked hearing my praises and I was so happy to be able to offer them, to transfer my emotion to him! But instead it wasn't possible. By now there are more friends who are no longer around than friends who I can still reach."

The friend-rival, Danilo Donati

With Danilo we had a similar background, the Institute of Art, then the Academy...But his childhood was different from mine, he came from Suzzara [a town in the Veneto region], his parents were well-off, his mother adored him and always made sure he had money. In Florence he could afford lodgings which were almost luxurious, the *Pensione Bandini* in Piazza Santo Spirito, where many foreigners lodged, in general wealthier than the Italians. The boarding-house was in an imposing sixteenth century palazzo, very aristocratic, and the rooms looked out upon a portico which ran the length of the façade and each side of the building. We would often linger under that portico, sitting on the floor with our backs propped against the wall, talking the night away. Moments of absolute happiness, unrepeatable. The curfew, the same that Danilo wrote about in his book, plunged the city in eternal darkness but one night, in the silvery glimmer of a full moon, the street was suddenly filled with the sound of mandolins. "Un angolo di Paradiso", do you know it? An entire orchestra of sixty mandolins all playing in unison "Un angolo di Paradiso" (he hums the motif): it was as if they invaded your soul.

Poor and Ugly

"We were unattractive, poor, badly dressed, not very clean. And yet we had such faces! Each one of us was unmistakably an individual. When I look at Albanians today it reminds me of how we were, desperate but not indistinguishable one from the other. Sure, the American soldiers in our eyes were like "gods", tall, handsome, naive, like grinning overgrown schoolboys. They smelt of soap and Camel cigarettes. Oh, the smell of those Camels, to make your head spin! Now, when I see a packet carrying that same image, I have to open it up, I sniff it in search of that odour. But it has changed, it's no longer there.

When the war ended I worked for two years at the General Hospital in Pratolino. I always worked to maintain myself when I was a student. I even worked in a cemetery, at Trespiano; I worked on the cremations. I collected the ashes then took them to Florence on a handcart.

At the hospital in Pratolino, though, I worked in the operating theatre; there was a constant stream of injuries. I prepared the surgical instruments and sterilized the gloves. When everything was finished I had to clean up the operating theatre ready for the following day, that's if there weren't any emergency admissions that afternoon or operations that couldn't wait. For my breaks they gave me the plaster room. You can't imagine the stench of cancrene that infiltrates the plaster casts! In compensation meals were provided. For breakfast you could choose from coffee, chocolate, jam, butter and white bread. I was small, rather delicate and skinny, not really built for heavy work. When they saw me cleaning the corridors with these huge, gigantic floorcloths the American boys would stop to lend me a hand, they were strong, cheerful, they had fun helping me. But then we would hear the distant click of heels and everyone would fall into line: they were from the WAC [Women's Auxiliary Corps], American Army officers who came to check on the cleaning done. They made sure they were feared, they were harsh, surly, exacting. I remember only their shoes, that cold, hostile ring of approaching heels, and then the shoes that entered my field of vision while, head down, I continued to scrub the floor. Poor guys, with those women around!

The work of the scenographer

I have never loved my work, in the end I always had the impression that over half of it has been lost along the way. And I'm not talking about the usual sensation of dissatisfaction which one invariably feels when measuring the distance between intentions and the final result. I'm actually referring to the work of the scenographer, in which very often the variables do not depend on you, are absolutely arbitrary, incoherent, uncontrollable. I'll give you an example: for *La Caduta degli Dei* (The Damned) I spent four months designing the costumes for Vanessa [Redgrave] and when the cameras started rolling we had Tulin [Ingrid]. Back to the drawing board, and we had to work on her character in a matter of hours. It seems to me that I have always worked to a tight schedule, against wasted opportunities, a heap of tormented decisions.

It's also a personal problem, I realise that; I'm condemned by my character to toil alone, I can't avail myself of help, either from assistants or anyone, because I myself do not know what I'm doing, it's all inside, I move by instinct, groping my way along. I don't find peace even at night; if a thought torments me I repeatedly wake up, I switch on the light, I draw, I take notes, I fix the idea on a block of paper that I keep by the bed. It's like torture, it's a Sisyphean labour.

Working with a director like Fellini, he himself prone to changes of mind, to doing and undoing, to going back to ideas already binned, to constantly come up with new ideas, the sum of uncertainties, and therefore of work, was doubled, was multiplied.

That is why I got on well with Visconti. Luchino right from the start knew what he wanted; no changes, no regrets. Whether that decision was right or wrong, there was no argument, it was wrapped in certainty, an armour impossible to dent.

The formative years

At school I was considered a bit of a beast. I didn't like what they made us study so I went my own way. I was "hell bent" on becoming a production designer for the cinema.

I knew nothing about the world of entertainment and I didn't have the money to go to the theatre. Just looking at the magazine covers, hanging from wooden pegs outside the street kiosks, fascinated me; those bewitching females, their faces filling the whole page, the make-up, the eyebrows, their eyes, their porcelain skin, immobile masks of travertine [white stone], as such they were perfect, smooth, polished and remote, unattainable and mysterious icons.

So I continued to design on my own account, I did sketches to show to people. And this is how I got to work with Visconti, via Zeffirelli, to whom I owe everything. I didn't know anyone who could introduce me into the right circles. If it hadn't been for Zeffirelli helping me out, I probably would never have even got started. One day, in "Unità" [a daily newspaper], I saw a photo of *La terra trema* (The Earth Trembles) and it left an impression. I was instinctively drawn to this filmmaker who depicted such a different world, so in contrast with the usual images of the star system portrayed in the illustrative journals. I absolutely had to see that film. I managed to persuade an aunt, my father's sister, who was a little less insensitive than the other members of my family, to go with me to Venice. Just think - then I still didn't dare even travel alone! Zeffirelli, who came from a wealthy middle class background (his father was a textile merchant), first studied architecture but also wanted to be an actor, and attended the drama school in Via Laura. Then he moved to Rome, as he had interpreted a minor role in the film *L'Onorevole Angelina* [by Luigi Zampa], and Visconti had called him for *Delitto e Castigo* for the theatre. The meeting went well, and they soon developed a working relationship. Franco, being exceptionally gifted, then took care of the costumes and sets before becoming assistant director to Visconti. He had managed to procure passes for myself and my aunt at the Venice Biennial so I was able to watch the presentation of the film. An apocalyptic evening: with the couple of the moment, Orson Welles and Lea Padovani, ostentatiously leaving the auditorium halfway through the screening, and the audience protests stirred up by the Christian Democrats. And there was I, in front of those images, completely "knocked-out": all of a sudden a whole new world opened up for me.

When soon after Visconti went to Florence to stage *Troilo e Cressida* (Troilus and Cressida), Franco again intervened so as to show him my portfolio. The Count looked through it with an extremely critical eye, asked me how old I was then, handing me back my sheets, dismissed me with a: "You've got time, you've got time." It was 1948. In the meantime Zeffirelli somehow managed to squeeze me in as fourth assistant to Maria De Matteis, and I remained with her when she designed the costumes for a new film which Visconti wanted to shoot based on a novel by Pratolini, *Cronaca di Poveri Amanti*. It was my job to supply documentation on locations in Florence that would be ideal for the film. But then the project fell through, Visconti was taken by the idea to bring to the screen *La Carrozza del Santissimo Sacramento* by Mérimée

[Prosper], with Anna Magnani as the lead. This would finally make up for the disappointment felt in not having been able to secure her for *Ossessione*; who knows what force Anna would have been able to give to the character played by Calamai! Just think what that film could have become with Magnani!

Also in Mérimée's story Anna Magnani had a great part, that of a prostitute, a streetwalker, who wants to buy for the Bishop a golden carriage in which to transport the Santissimo Sacramento. Mario Chiari was hired for the sets and Maria De Matteis for the costumes. But once again the project sank. And it was Suso [Cecchi d'Amico] who had the inspiration of billing Magnani for a subject by Zavattini, *Bellissima*. There was very little money for which to finance the film so it had to be done on a shoestring, shot entirely in the street, in real locations. The clothes had to look "lived in", without the faintest whiff of the dressmaker about them. I was called the Friday for the following Monday, scheduled for the scene in which the mother takes her young daughter to the photographer's studio. It was a real business, that of an old photographer in Via Quattro Fontane, a street which still gives me goosebumps when I pass by, as for me it was a very emotional experience. With that film I got my lucky break, things started to take off for me.

There was neither the time nor the means with which to sew the garments; I remember stopping people in the street: "Excuse me, madam, could you lend me your dress? We're shooting a film." I searched houses, desperately rummaging through wardrobes. And yet the most important thing was that these choices, apparently conditioned by the lack of economic resources, in fact corresponded exactly with the way I felt. I understood that these characters could not appear like mannequins, they needed clothes which had already been worn, which bore the shape of a body, still preserving its heat, perspiration, characteristics, its secret soul. Items of clothing which an individual in flesh and blood, and not a tailor's dummy, had given them a form! In a used garment remained the life of the person who had worn it and I managed to absorb it, take possession of it and transfer it to the characters. That was the great lesson I learnt from *Bellissima*: I understood that the real significance of my chosen craft lies in not considering a costume simply as an item of clothing, a wrapping, or an exterior description, but as the real skin of the character.

The Count gave me a free hand. For the most part we didn't have any direct communication, between me and him there was always the assistants, the two Francos, Franco Rosi and Franco Zeffirelli.

Who was I to presume! I was just a whipper-snapper, very timid, not good-looking, of no importance. What talent I had, only I then knew, it was all hidden, submerged. Why ever should Visconti bother about me!? That film was the greatest experience of my life.

Production design

From the scenographic point of view I can say that I did everything by myself. When I started out, the golden years of the twenties and thirties were already well over; the real novelties, especially for the theatre, consisted in using famous painters: De Chirico, Sironi, Casorati, Sensani. Sets that met the enthusiastic approval of the intellectuals that rushed to the opera season, the Maggio Musicale, in those years considered the Italian vetrine of the avant-garde, with shows that set the trend.

Then there were the routine scenographers who produced decorations practically devoid of atmosphere, to say nothing of poetry. Gino Sensani and Maria De Matteis were the exception.

I happened to see at the Pergola several shows by Jouvét [Louis]; I remember *Le Furberie di Scapino*, an unforgettable lesson. Christian Bérard [1902-1949] had a hand in the set designs. He was a grand master of his craft, creating the Dior look, and that of Balenciaga. And I began to realise that production design had to be completely re-thought out.

If you're faced with Chekhov you have to strive to find the most authentic sense of that world, and not just its conventional, approximative appearance. There is no need to invent anything, simply delving back to that reality is enough, gathering as much information as possible. Nothing but an ample, thorough, obstinate process of documentation can provide you with the right ideas.

Luchino Visconti

He was vicious at work. Ferocious, medieval, as I said, he governed on the brink of terror. At least up to the wrapping of *Senso* it was like that. But then he began to mellow out and in his later years the atmosphere of his films changed considerably, and for the better. Visconti aged well. But though less tyrannical, he never ceased to be intransigent.

For *La Caduta degli Dei*, one morning, while we were in the car, one of his racing models that he drove like a madman, terrorising me to death, I had tried to ask him, with the veiled intention of dissuading him, if it were really necessary to shoot the incest scene, if that part of the story could not be dealt with in a less explicit way. "Are you out of your mind?" was the only comment he shot at me, in a tone of voice which

crushed any appeal and which withered any reply or objection. His convictions were unassailable, he would never at any cost go back on them. During the shooting of (The Innocent) there was the question of [Laura] Antonelli's dress. The scene refers to one of the most intense, beautifully written passages of D'Annunzio's novel, on a par with Proust. It is the moment in which Tullio's jealousy explodes (this part played by Giancarlo Giannini, who, incidentally, ensured the film's completion when Luchino was taken seriously ill). His character was a tombeur de femmes, who neglected his wife.

One day, almost by chance, he stops to observe her while she is seated in front of the dressing-table mirror, getting herself ready to go out. The simple act of pinning her veil. But the gesture is performed with such a dreamy detachment, with such an absent-minded sweetness that her husband perceives in that langour an ambiguous, dubious light and is suddenly overcome by a wave of furious jealousy. Visconti had established that Antonelli had to wear a vicuna suit, and that the fabric could not be anything but beige, which is the colour his mother always wore. I thought that for the actress a dark grey would have been better, as beige would have made her figure seem larger and would have subtracted from that rather abstract, ambiguous aura of fragility which it had to suggest. Luchino claimed that a grey vicuna did not exist, there was no other colour for that fabric. Except that, in the end, perhaps due to tiredness, he gave in to my persistence and consented: "As you like, make it grey."

He was by then confined to a wheelchair following a stroke, and had less fighting spirit. He would joke about his disablement in a macabre way, to the point at which, when he had to change place, he would use the expression: "Move the corpse."

The day of the shoot arrived. Luchino had insisted that the hat should be small so that the veil would adhere to her face, pinching it, so as to seem - as he explained - an image by Medardo Rosso, almost a mask which deformed the features of Laura's face. [Silvana] Mangano and Burt Lancaster paid an unexpected visit, there was the usual turmoil, he had no further time for which to concentrate on the details, an unusual air of distraction prevailed.

The scene was shot with Antonelli wearing the suit of grey vicuna.

Once home, at around ten-thirty, a courier arrives with a letter from the Count which, unfortunately, I did not have the good sense to keep. Luchino wrote me that I had always served him well, had been an extraordinary collaborator, and that he could not understand why, on this day, I had betrayed him.

He had taken my initiative - which I still consider to be the right decision - as a betrayal. Simply because I had not carried out his instructions without question.



From left: Milena Canonero, Piero Tosi, Gabriella Pescucci.



Fellini characters



Marias Callas in "Medea" directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini.



“Don Carlo” directed by Mauro Bolognini

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