

Conversation with Pier Luigi Pizzi

A cura di Paolo Scotti

Every time a curtain is raised on one of his shows, it is met with an "ooooh!" of wonder - whether real or metaphoric – from the audience. It really is difficult to remain indifferent when watching a production designed by Pier Luigi Pizzi. There is something in his art that is much more than being unique or memorable or extraordinary. It is something magical.

A career spanning fifty years, with over five hundred productions staged, reaching a total of seven hundred-and-fifty if one includes the revivals. In his youth, no formal training, if not that provided by the stage, through hands-on experience, and by his intense passion as an avid theatregoer. And after decades of memorable sets, costumes and artistic direction of theatrical productions that have made history in Italian theatre and opera (from the dazzling *Gioco delle parti* to the Flemish *Malato immaginario*; from the electrifying *I Vespri siciliani* to the legendary *Orlando Furioso*; from the excellent *Pietra di paragone* to the moving *Tancredi*: how could one possibly cite them all?), Pizzi has, in theory, finally come full circle in designing for the theatre, in that he has now also become artistic director of the Sferisterio Opera Festival which, thanks to its matchless ‘imprinting’, has gained renown and prestige on an international level. Indefatigable, prolific, always prepared to explore and rise to the challenge, he is currently working on the usual stack of future projects: the first night of the Fenice with *Meyerbeer’s Crociato in Egitto* on the 13 January 2007; the return to theatre with Goldoni’s *Una delle ultime sere di carnevale*; the restaging of *Pietra di paragone* in Madrid and *Falstaff* with Raimondi, in Bologna; then *Thais* in Venice and, in 2008, Donizetti’s *Maria Stuarda* at La Scala and Monteverdi’s trilogy of *Orfeo*, *Ulisse and Poppea*, again at the Real in Madrid. All this – and here’s the magic – with a constant, absolute, incredibly light touch. Because Pier Luigi Pizzi, though considered one of the world’s greatest exponents of opera and theatre productions, does not indulge in intellectual posturing. He does not imitate himself, nor spurn new horizons or resort to stylistic short-cuts. In a nutshell, he is ingenious, without striking the pose of a genius.

What is the secret behind all this magic? What lies beneath the boundless and in large part captivating work of one of the key creators of twentieth-century theatre? The answer is banal yet selfevident: a love for the theatre... “When I saw my first drama”, he recalls, “I understood immediately that this had to be my world. That I had to do whatever it took to become a part of it. At the age of seventeen, I heard that Giorgio Strehler was looking for mime artists for a *Richard II* at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan. I showed up. Not so much because I was interested in doing mime, but so as to finally be able to tread those boards.”

There are those who are amazed to learn that Pier Luigi Pizzi has never formally studied scenography. And that his technical training has instead come from studying architecture at the Politecnico in Milan.

“And yet it’s true. And it proved an essential form of training. A studied awareness of the organisation of volumes and spaces I owe to architecture, of which scenography is basically an offshoot. But then only the theatre made me understand the right relationship between stage and auditorium; the relationship between those who show and those who watch, only practical experience ‘in the field’ can give you this. The academies have always seemed to me to be of little use: theorizing beyond a certain point serves no purpose. And especially when it comes to theatre, as you need a ‘hands-on’ approach. It also irritates me to hear of the “art of theatre” being talked about in such pompous tones. Theatre is certainly an art form. But let’s not take it too seriously: this art form finds expression through craftsmanship. A very noble form of craftsmanship. Which is more than enough.”

An artist’s training is also about dialoguing with other artists that he or she meets along the way. What have been the most important experiences for you?

Well, the first was with Strehler. I remember turning up during the break in rehearsals to show him my first designs as a student and he said, being very kind and helpful, “this you could do better”, and “here it would work better like this”. I don’t know to what extent his style of that period influenced the development of my own taste, but maybe something of his later essentiality, that of his mature period, can be traced as a facet of my own expressive rigor.

Then there was the second great encounter of your life. Perhaps the most significant...

Yes: that was with Giorgio De Lullo. Twenty years of working together: at the service of his memorable insights into stage directing for the Compagnia dei Giovani, and those highly courageous, intuitive flights in opera productions. A working relationship that was based on understanding and professionalism, absolutely unique.

De Lullo's characteristic style – that rigorous approach, for example, with which he redelivers a certain freshness and bite to Pirandello after decades of woolly and over-elaborate interpretations – to what extent has it influenced your way of designing sets and costumes?

A great deal. It's actually a combination of the clarity, the rational lucidity that Giorgio expected from his actors, and from every aspect of the production, that I developed my sense of rigour, of simplicity combined with expressive intensity. Through his design philosophy I was able to discover the ideal terrain in which to put forward solutions for sets and costumes that were increasingly pared down and logical, in a process of progressive "subtraction" of the superfluous to the point of reaching the essential. Giorgio had a highly developed sense of craftsmanship. With him it was possible to try things out, to experiment and develop ideas. Always in respecting the author, however, and which therefore – given the authors that were chosen – almost always mirrored realism. But a lyrical, magical realism. Given an essential treatment.

From De Lullo's lyrical realism to the wild, visionary style of Luca Ronconi. Another important encounter...

Fundamental. Luca and I met each other just in the period when he was beginning to make a name for himself. And together we developed a working relationship that lasted at least ten years. For me it was an opportunity to further explore my ideas, to give flight to my imagination. With the use of stage machinery, for example, and generally develop a more liberal approach to theatre that was oneiric, more visionary.

And finally, the "encounter" that was also to prove a turning-point in your career, both in the professional and creative sense. Artistic direction. How did that come about?

I was at the height of my career as a stage designer and costume designer; I was working with a number of key directors - Ferrero, Patroni Griffi, Enriquez, Fassini, Squarzina, Faggioni, Sequi, and many others – I could consider myself completely satisfied. Maybe, thinking about it, there was a kind of restlessness in me; but I certainly didn't consider the possibility of directing. It was by sheer chance: in the spring of '77, the director of a Don Giovanni at the Regio in Turin, Mario Missiroli, had to suddenly step down from the job. They asked me to take his place. I felt that maybe the right moment had arrived. I said to myself: "Why not?". It happened to be, among other things, the same title with which I made my debut in set designing for lyric opera, twenty-five years previously. Luckily, everything went well. And from that time on, as you can see, I have never looked back.

A career that spans over half a century and, between new productions and revivals, around seven hundred and fifty shows. Conclusion: what does a stage design now represent for you?

The organisation of a space. Necessary in order to render this space useful and efficient for the purpose of narration. Which should be done in complete liberty: even from the author's notes. I mean that the author will have already expressed these indications in the text; the portrayal of that text, though, rests with the director, who has every right to interpret it according to his own personality. That is why a set design should not necessarily correspond to the author's intentions (it's never a good idea to follow authors' notes too closely, for example: they are often full of snares) while it should always correspond to those of the director.

In designing for the theatre, you have a personal style that is well-known and recognisable. Let's now consider its main characteristics...

"I would start with the search for beauty. And harmony. Yes: this is actually the most important aspect in my design philosophy. I cannot prevent myself from searching for beauty. In everything I do, even at the cost of being criticised for it. Because beauty is often regarded with suspicion: there is the fear that it throws a veil of superficiality over things. I am sometimes accused of being an aesthete. Well, if the term is not intended in the negative sense, or at least in its reductive sense then, yes, I confess. I am an aesthete.

Another characteristic of Pizzi's theatre is elegance...

Another label that has been attached to me. But I can't do anything about that either: don't they say that elegance is an innate quality? Some think that at times I let things get out of hand because, here too, there is a belief that an excess of form and attention to aesthetics drains the production of vigor, of lifeblood. While for me, elegance represents an escape from vulgarity, a remedy against sloppiness, an antidote to triviality.

There is something else that makes your productions incomparable and at the same time unmistakable. The use of colour...

Well... I think I have what is called a "sense" for colour. I like to use it in its more decisive, pronounced tonalities. I like to match colours that, in appearance, have nothing in common with each other. And I like to use colours that are generally overlooked. Violet, for example, which, despite its unwarranted negative reputation I find it, on the contrary, extremely theatrical and very beautiful. In all its variants.

And then there is the main distinguishing feature of Pizzi's theatre: the cultural and figurative references to the seventeenth century...

Yes; I identify myself a lot with the Baroque. What I find so exciting about this period is that it has all the elements of a classical style, but it also dares to use them in a completely free way. And I also like the huge variety of the seventeenth century, which is never without reason: even in a still life one can find a meaning, a story. It is no coincidence that I collect paintings of that period. My favourites? Caravaggio, Velasquez, Rembrandt, Rubens, for their chromatic skill and for the extraordinary richness in design. But also Guercino, Van Dyck with his portraits, Vermeer and his interiors... I could go on and on...

The result of all this are stage productions that are full of stylistic meaningfulness, of unfailing theatrical impact. But can a set design be a spectacle in itself? I mean: can it incite a collective "ooooh!" or applause at curtain-up, despite being generally considered inopportune or vulgar to do so?

In 1960 I staged Goldoni's *Le morbinose*, directed by De Lullo. There were five sets: each set was greeted with a round of applause. What does this mean? That a stage designer should not concentrate on amazing everyone at all costs (something which, among other things, would run the risk of distracting him from his work) but if it hits the mark, so much the better. A sense of wonder is certainly one of the legitimate expectations of a spectator. And the sets that amaze, the sets that excite wonder, are the great protagonists of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theatre, from Torelli to Galli to Bibiena. Now, of course, producing marvels becomes increasingly difficult, as we tend towards developing a theatre that is increasingly conceptual. But the "ooooh!" of amazement is always welcome.

In brief: when you have to stage an opera, what path do you take?

It's a question of sensing in that opera, and therefore of bringing to light, an atmosphere, a climate. When there is one... because at times it is lacking, and so it must be invented. This is the rule that I have always tried to respect: each production must have its own alchemy. An alchemy which the opera itself dictates. One must always search for a specific harmony, which is at the heart of that opera and functions exclusively for that. Without following that which is specious, or systematic.

Speaking of aiming for an effect: what are your thoughts on the current, and fairly common, trend of setting an opera in a different period of history to the original work?

Someone would hold me mainly responsible for that because, for the first night at La Scala, in 1970, I set *Vespri siciliani* in the period that Verdi was alive: the year was 1848, rather than the original Medieval setting. A rather daring transposition that proved controversial, but which appeared totally relevant to the conductor Gavazzeni and the director De Lullo. In fact, it clarified. The idea was to emphasise the typical atmosphere of the Risorgimento in this opera by Verdi: the character of which the author, to avoid censorship, had to cloak in a different disguise. So this was an attempt to clarify, and not to confuse ideas. Over time, however, this method has become a trend, a simple expedient, used to excess and misleading. But every project should carry its own logic. In staging, let's say, *Il crociato in Egitto*, I would think twice about doing it in modern dress. It would be worse than banal: it would be reductive. An opera's topicality resides in the opera itself. It's the director's and the stage designer's task to simply emphasise this for comparison.

Does it often happen that, despite all your efforts and the fact that they may be applauded by the general public, these efforts are not understood by theatre critics?

It happens, it happens: indeed, it does. Sometimes it is my fault, at times the critics are to blame. The fact is that some critics have a problem, it's always the same issue. They forget that opera means a combination of music and images. Accordingly, they should know how to listen to one while watching the other; instead, they are often afflicted by a kind of incapacity to synthesize. And if they listen to the music, it's almost as if their having to simultaneously follow the visual aspects irritates them. Almost as if one thing was independent from the other."

But can you tell when there is a need to change something in one of your productions?

It is something I always do! Every time I re-stage one of my productions, I change something: I improve a certain effect, I substitute a detail. I do everything that I had no time for – or did not think of doing - the first-time round. Firstly, because no-one is infallible. And secondly because theatre is a living thing; it is not a museum piece.

Let's talk a bit about artistic direction. Lyric opera is based on a number of "conventions" that the public tacitly receives and the director traditionally accepts. For example, the "concertato": a group of singers who, to express astonishment or disconcertion, against all logic sing words that are different from the others, while remaining totally immobile. How does a modern producer deal with such absurdities?

There is no one way of doing these things. A "concertato" can represent a moment of pure abstraction; therefore, immobility is the ideal expression. There are others, by contrast (like that of the first finale of *L'Italiana in Algeri*), which are effectively dynamic, and which can be interpreted in a kind of mechanical delirium; of a figurative *moto perpetuo*.

Talking of the human figure: to what extent does the physical aspect and the acting abilities of the singers count?

A great deal. I don't believe that today's singers attend acting lessons in addition to their music lessons. But this would not be a bad idea: opera is – I'll say it again – theatre as well as music. As for the credibility of the character, physical appearance also plays a part in this. One really must pay great attention to this detail when selecting the actors for a new production. And with regards to this, let's go back to talking about critics. Why, when watching, let's say a *Traviata* in which the actress has a good voice but the dimensions of a hippopotamus, do they judge one aspect while completely ignoring the other? Shouldn't the credibility of an actor also encompass their physical appearance and their ability to act?

A title that, in spite of everything, remains a long-held dream. And another, that you would never dream of staging...

I would really like to work on *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, while I don't think I will ever stage Puccini (except for *Turandot*, which I have already produced several times), because just about everything has already been said and done on Puccini, and because veristic theatre generally leaves little to the imagination. But perhaps *Manon Lescaut*... Yes, maybe *Manon Lescaut* I would do.

As for the Sferisterio Opera Festival, you have just presented the programme for the 2007 edition...

Yes, and we are particularly satisfied with it. Also, for the entire forthcoming season, from 26 July to 12 August, the Sferisterio will follow a strand that links all the productions: "Il gioco dei potenti - Drammi, illusioni e sconfitte nella lotta per il potere" ("Power Games - Dramas, illusions and defeats in the struggle for power"). On the bill we have three operas: *Macbeth*, *Norma* and *Maria Stuarda*; two evenings dedicated to ballet - *Gala Performance* with Alessandra Ferri and Roberto Bolle, in collaboration with Civitanova Danza, and *Shakespeariana*, with Carla Fracci and George Janku; Verdi's *Messa da Requiem* for the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Beniamino Gigli, and the recital by Anna Proclemer, *La donna e il potere*. A considerable undertaking for a project that - from what I hear round about - already seems to be generating great expectations.