

# IVAN STEFANUTTI

## *a highly dynamic figure*

by Gianni Gori

EVERY SO OFTEN AN ASSORTMENT OF BLITHE CHARACTERS FLIT ACROSS THE SCREEN OR TREAD THE BOARDS, SUCH AS A PIERROT LUNAIRE OR SOMEONE LIKE JEAN-LOUIS BARRAULT’S MIMO IN LES ENFANTS DU PARADIS: CHARACTERS THAT HAVE DESCENDED FROM THE MOON EITHER SIMPLY TO TAKE A LOOK AROUND OR TO EXERT THEIR OWN ENIGMATIC POWER ON THAT SPECTACULAR METAPHOR SUSPENDED BETWEEN EARTH AND SKY THAT IS THEATRE. THEY ARE THEATRE PEOPLE IN THE FLESH, ARTISTS WHO HABITUALLY BREATHE THE ODOUR AND THE DUST OF THE STAGE, BUT HAVE NOT YET DEPLETED (AND PERHAPS THEY NEVER WILL) THAT SENSE OF WONDER FOR THE “GRANDMAGIC”. THESE MAKERS OF MAGIC, DESPITE THEIR APLOMB - MORE LUNAR THAN BRITISH IN NATURE – HAVE KEPT INTACT THEIR PLEASURE IN BEING A LIVING PART OF THEATRE AS IF IT WERE NOT MERELY THE PLACE WHERE THEY PRACTICE THEIR PROFESSION BUT MORE AN INTRINSIC PART OF THEIR VERY EXISTENCE.

When I first met Ivan Stefanutti in person and saw how he worked, he gave me the impression of being the reincarnation of a character in free-fall from the lighting grid, a sort of young red-haired musketeer, a D’Artagnan’s love child who, with the air of one rather lost in thought (minus the imperious hubris, the intemperance of some of his scenographer colleagues), would move to and fro from the workshop to the costume shop, from the lighting console to the wings, among singers, extras and prop men. While dishing out instructions he arranged the pieces of the polychrome mega puzzle with discretion, in the manner of those figures of noble patrons depicted in Renaissance paintings, who are witness to and bless the event or episode portrayed on canvas. Or like an enigmatic Hitchcock en travesty fleetingly glimpsed onscreen. Now however, looking back on those years, I tend to see him as “Le petit Saint”, Simenon’s little angel, holed up in a Parisian garret to apply “pure colours” on the canvas, with an eye to Cezanne and Gauguin.

It’s not easy to separate Stefanutti’s *modus operandi*, from the initial sketch to the end product.

It’s difficult to separate his costume and stage design experience from that of director, just as it is difficult for me to remain impartial, to assume the appropriate critical detachment needed to attempt to summarise his way of creating places, environments and moods for the stage, whether for his own productions or for those of other directors.

Friendship prevents me from doing so, other than a long-standing collaboration, in particular while at the Teatro Verdi in Trieste, in years that I should say were difficult; not that today the situation has degenerated to such a degree as to make the late twentieth-century seem like a rosy heaven on earth.

Nevertheless, they were times in which, so as not to be reduced to playing and singing merely to keep the bank happy, the lyric theatres were compelled to tighten their belts on the production budget; this compensated only in small part for the fact that these same belts had to be slackened a notch or two as they buckled under pressure due to union strife. Necessity being the mother of invention, opera houses had to concoct the great illusion that is theatre while avoiding the star-system and without resorting to hugely expensive productions.

In short, they had to pass them off as masterpieces of haute cuisine while whipping up the simple basic ingredients of a more humble fare. During that period at the theatre in Trieste, we even involved the master of poor theatre himself (Josef Svoboda) in a *Luisa Miller* and in a *Don Giovanni* practically made of air while the sets largely consisted of a huge tangle of wire netting.

At this point, Ivan enters the scene, as stage designer for a theatre production for which I was director; he was hired partly for his ability to make the most frugal set appear lavish. It’s useless to deny it: quality pays, but if it costs less it’s more gratifying, it pays a dividend, so to speak, at least for the theatre that strives to be virtuous. And if the hand of the scene painter is important (and a great painter is not always a great scenographer), if the mark of the creator of imagery is invaluable, the alchemy of knowing how to put on a show in common artisan alliance with the theatre represents an added value; it adds something fantastic to the appeal that the raised curtain reveals.

With Ivan Stefanutti at the helm, I often saw a timeless symmetry emerge, which involved all the components of the show, chorus singers, artists and actors in minor roles included. As for the scenographer’s input (or for that matter the costume designer or the director or all these professions brought together) it isn’t just the stylistic or architectural touch so characteristic of the scenographer that one immediately recognizes (the scenographer who, to cut corners, endlessly repeats the same set design, just as Vivaldi - as Stravinski asserted - always wrote the same concert), but the degree of creative invention sparked by the challenge of designing for a theatre production.

One often considers “eclecticism” an abstract connotation, while it should be a prerequisite in the work of a theatre designer when exploring design solutions. And the key to opening the door to “make theatre” as Ivan does is something that could appear commonplace if it were not fundamental: his acute sensibility as “illustrator”, precisely in the sense of one who narrates a story through imagery. And this figurative narration can adopt a historical perspective or evoke other dimensions, though without ever being self-serving, complacent or incomprehensible.

Apart from the odd lapse, I’m retrieving from memory those salient moments in Stefanutti’s design experience: a *Manon* by Massenet, though frugal in means, immersed in sensuality à la Fragonard with a hint of *Barry Lyndon*; an *Orpheus and Eurydice* between a maze of rocks and baroque velvets; a *The Damnation of Faust* in pre-raphaelite mood, the vivid pictorial synthesis of nature and allusive architectural splendour in *Eugene Onegin*.

From here, two extremes: a sensational *L’Elisir d’amore* with a nod to Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, full of zoomorphic and phytomorphic efflorescence and disenchanted Smurf-like sprites, preceded by the explosive chromatic fantasia of Bernstein’s *Candide* for Reggio Emilia and then for Genoa. To my mind, that which guides the hand of Ivan Stefanutti, that characterises his design inventiveness, is precisely that dynamic and vibrant sense in his illustrative style, that zest in integrating great pictorial art (at times accenting a single element such as the enormous picture frame embellished with ornate baroque decorative features in the recent *Rigoletto* co-produced by theatres in Novara, Bergamo, Lucca and Sassari) with the modern tradition of great illustrators, even drawing inspiration from the brash synthesis of the comic strip in the design for a minor but artful musical such as *In bocca al lupo!*

From the palette on which Ivan swirls his paintbrush, there darts a hint of a puckish grin - not sparing the more dramatic works - suggesting a veiled irony among the highly motile, hyperboliceffigies and the soft lace drapery of the opera. The recurrent sense of airy lightness is not confined to the operetta and the musical, but runs parallel to that of staging prose theatre. Whether in condensed form adapted for small-scale productions or for those which involve the larger spaces of open-air theatre - such as the Teatro dell’Opera di Roma stagings in Piazza di Siena (*Andrea Chenier* and *La Bohème*) where the sheer size of the arena fails to overwhelm the elegance of fine detail - Stefanutti’s acquisitive curiosity betrays his fondness for the culture of great figurative forms of art: from the Parisian representations of Toulouse-Lautrec to the Italian school and among the posters of Hohenstein and Giuseppe Palanti. And onwards to evoke, as we have seen, the impertinent creatures of the comic strip and those of Jacovitti compressed within all their graphic complexity.

I was talking of the ironic wit that epitomises Stefanutti’s creative progression, at times like a covert signature. In the play of correspondence and echoes of the fantastic in the magical forest of theatre some “inventions” are in this sense particularly significant. It’s no coincidence that a good number of these melodramas were performed in suburban “laboratories” or in coproductions on the provincial circuit. Thus an *Aida* like that of 2001, transported to outer space in a war of alien worlds, on a stage riven by monumental slabs of inscribed marble and steel. The reverberation of a *Space Odyssey* in which the universal nature of Verdi’s music and dramaturgy perfectly co-exist. In an even more modest laboratory and poles apart compared to *Aida*, alas running a single summer season, the expressionistic excursus of a rock musical of fleeting fortune yet of great quality such as *Metropolis* (Turin, Teatro Nuovo, 2003), paying tribute to the expressionism and the monstrous dehumanizing apparatus of Fritz Lang’s film. Yet again

ripples of eclectic irony run through the delightful worldly paradises of light opera in Parisian or Viennese style: the productions of 1998 and 2003 for the Teatro Verdi in Trieste are both memorable. The first, with Lehár's *The Count of Luxembourg* where the incredible intrigue stimulates the imagination and la vie parisienne merges with the art of the stage and the typical figurative verve of Ivan, framed by a magnificent backdrop designed as a stained glass wall decorated with a floral pattern. The latter with an authentic conflagration of his illustrative humour that the scenographer had already duly made red-hot in 1997, by stoking the embers of Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann* for Treviso, where among statuesque Sirens glide nonchalant Magritte like figures. And the enormous pot-bellied barrels in master Luther's tavern which form the background to the song about Kleinzach are re-cast some years later (Fano, 2003) in the Garter Inn to emphasise the bloated belly of *Falstaff*. It is a set design that happily resolves - almost by subtraction of volumes (obviously the need to keep within budget sharpens the wits and inspires creative solutions) - the shifting of the action from interior to exterior: the sheets of fabric strung out like bunting on a sort of breezy and colourful laundry line become in turn a makeshift stage curtain, a screen or a partition for the onstage action. The night scene in the forest of Windsor teems with mischievous azurine fauns like animistic roots, offshoots of Herne's Oak. And here as in elsewhere - when one leafs through Stefanutti's artwork and recognises the recurring and artfully reformulated elements coupled with that associative panache in his combining the sculptural and architectural structures of classicism through creative expression - one cannot but comprehend an aesthetic affinity with Sylvano Bussotti. I'm thinking of the rich musical score and graphic notation of the Florentine composer exercised in a thriving creative season between Bergkristall and Nottetempo: a season that I recall from direct experience and intermittently with Bussotti's directing experiences in repertory theatre, from De Musset's *Lorenzaccio* for Teatro La Fenice to the staging in Florence of *The Girl of the Golden West*, conducted by Gavazzeni.

Ivan Stefanutti's stylistic approach conserves the inventive fluidity of a continuous transition at the service of theatre; up to (but it is an achievement long surpassed by other professional outcomes) a production of *Simon Boccanegra* (Budapest, 2011) that I consider exemplary. The sea, invoked by the protagonist, is a presence that attracts and lures, that invades, which in the end spreads like a pall over the fate of the Doge immersed in the "penumbra of the dark ages". The sea has two forbidding keepers: two totem-like colossi that keep vigil, majestic and imposing. One would say an idea borrowed from Mozart raised in its mute symbolism on the threshold of the drama. One conjures up an image of the two "armed men" from *The Magic Flute* referenced in this more recent staging of Verdi's melodrama. Serendipity, perhaps, but I find the idea suggestive that the title of this opera has popped up right here, in this segment of my convoluted musings and which, for obvious and various reasons, should by right belong firmly to the creative process and the "specialities" of Ivan Stefanutti.



SIMON BOCCANEGRÀ. Musica di Giuseppe Verdi.  
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## MAGIC FORMULAS FOR MODERN BAROQUE BEWITCHMENTS

by Filippo Tadolini

When, in October 2007, the curtain opened in front of me at the Pergolesi Theatre in Jesi on the third act of Puccini's *La bohème*, I had an epiphany: a scenic language, if executed with technical skill and artistic flair, acts upon the beholder as if it were a real enchantment. From the stalls, I physically perceived the icy dampness of that first light of day, in the rigours of the northern winter; I felt the rheumatic pains in my bones and the sharpness in my lungs, the feverish state of the protagonist who, in the grip of anxiety, was crossing a hostile city, cold and numbed by the snow. I was completely captivated. It was during my university studies in architecture, in search of an aesthetic of space, of a style of performance that would deeply resonate with my sensibility. I had already seen and appreciated other works by Ivan Stefanutti: *Cavalleria rusticana* and Gianni Schicchi two years earlier on the same stage, and *Il trovatore* in Rimini the year before; but that evening, the mists of the *Barriera d'Enfer* made me the aware that I had found an expressive universe of reference; this was the kind of theatre that I wanted and hoped for.

My collaboration with Stefanutti, as assistant director and set designer, has now spanned fourteen years. It has been, and continues to be, a long and stimulating journey into his imagination, in dialogue with the realms of figurative art, literature, film, music, technology and the most extraordinary creative achievements in the history of human thought. What most excites me about his way of conceptualising performance is his drive towards the affirmation of a theatrical language that is never limited to the one of reality. Ivan deliberately chooses not to insist on intellectualizing messages, he is not interested in forcing meaning and form to adapt to contemporaneity, instead he awakens the stirrings of a primordial, unbridled, at times childlike fantasy, often leading the audience into the dimension of the fairytale. Idyllic or monstrous, scintillating or dark, carefree or horrific, evasion from the 'here and now' is the primary purpose of his dramatic storytelling.

Typically, the tools he selects for the narration of his dream world are the most fascinating known: craftsmanship and the bounty of tradition. They are not to be understood - mind you - in a purely stylistic sense, but as imaginative, and then realisable, modes of scenic vision. In this regard, I would like to use the adjective 'baroque' boldly: this is obviously not baroque theatre in the philological sense, but a language that excites the senses, moves, enraptures, arouses astonishment, wonder, emotion, horror, makes a spectacle of itself in the noblest sense of the term.

It is a theatre that satisfies through tangible presence: the characters are psychological tension, but also figure, and all the scenic coefficients emanate a particular energy, full of theatricality and dramatisation. Stefanutti dramatises space, he dramatises light, he dramatises costume, he dramatises gesture, he never leaves anything to two-dimensionality, neither physical nor emotional.

Sometimes very little is needed: the bright yellow and green of the sheets hung out to dry by the cheerful Windsor comedians in Verdi's *Falstaff*; a backlight on the pink curtains in the Countess of Almaviva's room in *Le nozze di Figaro*... Other times the construction is more complex: the sumptuous Palazzo Farnese in *Tosca*, the digital scenery of which delicately complements the built scenery, for an effect of elaborate pageantry; the virtuosic, monumental make-up and wigs of the characters in *Aida*, from an interstellar Egypt...