

Luciano Damiani

by Daniele Paolin

Rome. I walk along the stretch of the Tiber embankment that leads to Testaccio, the part of town where he lives and where he has built his “impossible” theatre. I try to bring to mind the gate that leads to his studio, but my memory fails me, though I recognise the ivory-tinted entrance to the “speco teatrale” – the theatre-cavern – and, next to it, on a red wall, a series of doorbells, two of which display a simple inscription: DAMIANI. I climb a couple of short flights of stairs and a door opens: once again I set eyes on that unmistakable figure. White hair, cordial smile, dressed in blue. One of the most fervent minds of Italian theatre and stage design welcomes me in: I have an impulse to embrace him, partly because I am happy and partly because I want to thank him for all that he has said and done throughout his life (and beyond...) for the theatrical world. We seat ourselves in the half-light of his studio, on two sides of a large table (beyond his shoulder I glimpse the “Trattato del Serio” open at the three canonical scenes) and... we get down to talking about theatre. Naturally, we talk about our first encounter: Milan, Teatro alla Scala, 1975. I, a young novice stage designer on a study grant; he, an extremely successful 52-year-old stage designer with the collective experience of the most brilliant series of Italian post-war productions, the most recent of which, directed by Strehler, include: Goldoni’s *Il Campiello*; Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, and the splendid, legendary *The Cherry Orchard* by Cechov, which was to enchant European audiences with its voluminous white veil suspended between the stage and the orchestra pit, full of dried leaves...La Scala is working on its production of *Macbeth*, a staging that, in my opinion, marks an era of heavy investment and memorable stage productions in live musical performance. It has an exceptional cast: the orchestra director is Claudio Abbado; director, Giorgio Strehler; stage design by Luciano Damiani; singers, Piero Cappuccilli, Shirley Verrett, Nicolai Ghiaurov; artistic director is Tito Varisco. What can I say? The staging is absolutely innovative. Away with all the musty, antiquated garbage of the traditional opera staging: just material and movement. The material is oxidized copper, aged, and strident in its glowing, gleaming rays. Large volumes and surfaces are shifted onstage and a great, diaphanous copper-tinted gauze ripples and flutters unceasingly, as foreboding as a glowering sky, almost a malign placenta suspended above the heads of the protagonists: an utterly fascinating spectacle. But the amount of work that was behind that production: hundreds and hundreds of square metres of thin layers of copper stuck to plywood then patinated, aged and tarnished... that copper became history, precious matter, violent and primordial, like the music that it reflected. I still have in my mind’s eye to this day the finale: the *Birnam Wood* that animates and advances (the presage...) is composed of none other than large shields of copper in the form of a tree grasped by the advancing rebels; an idea that is simply magnificent.

From that moment on, opera in general, and that opera in particular, formed part of my DNA and I decided to embark on a career in stage design. Beyond the undeniable creative skills that Damiani demonstrates in the design process, it is his observations and his ideas that map out a new pathway for Italian stage design. He brings a breath of fresh air to the theatre and its universe. He has an intrinsic understanding of the stage designer as something much more than a simple “provider of images” for live performance, as it was considered up to the 1970s, from the purely administrative point of view. With him began the contemporary “stage design” as we know it, that which is still in the laborious process of being understood and taught.

In the theatre prevailed the same old tired “routine” that demanded of the stage designer the task of creating one or more images or concept sketches for theatrical representation. The artistic director and technicians would then set about “translating” those two-dimensional images into a three-dimensional scenic space, using the rules and devices that were typical of the restorative process dictated by traditional perspectives employed first by the Baroque then by the nineteenth-century periods in theatre. But these methods left a risky amount of artistic licence on the part of the technicians that worked on this type of “translation” – the enlargement from the very small to the very large, which inevitably led to a certain imprecision and approximation with respect to the original working design. Of the revolution of languages, of the forms and concepts that had so characterized theatrical research between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not so much as a wisp was evident.

And so begin the series of major battles that will forever mark Luciano’s artistic life, both from the normative and the exquisitely theoretical and technical aspects. He begins to use the theatre machine in all its complexity. He understands that an exhaustive planning process is the basis behind elimination of dangerous misunderstandings in form: he designs everything, where possible, in full scale, 1:1. This method of working proves burdensome but provides him with absolute control over the final result.

But there is a need to overcome the resistance imposed by a world comfortably settled on an ingrained procedure, that of the administrative and bureaucratic underbelly of the theatrical world, so difficult to undermine. Stage designers in particular.

Stage designers in particular no longer feel themselves interpreters, but technicians, often ill prepared for these new requirements. They will rapidly get used to this situation, given that there is also an ever growing inclination to move away from strictly painting and perspective as an expressive, technical and compositional means. Furthermore, Damiani directly inherits that aspiration typical of the twentieth-century avant-garde to draw the audience into the performance and the stage design into the midst of the audience, in an ideal union between stage and stalls: but the world’s most adopted architectural model for theatres, the so-called Italian theatre, does not allow for this. The raised level of the stage, its front, the form of the proscenium and the orchestra pit do not permit this. Wagner had already shaken the foundations of this model, but Damiani wants to push further. He dreams of having the audience among the scenic elements, of the stage lighting bathing them in its glow; he wants to be able to have a “flexible” theatre, able to adapt itself to the entire repertoire of tradition, but also to the avant-garde and beyond, to the point of inventing new, poetic forms of dramaturgy. In other words, a creative instrument.

Few architects understand all this, particularly in Italy. Two such architects, Nordio and Cervi, invite Damiani to re-visit the Nuovo Teatro in Trieste in the light of his theories. He plans the technical structures, without remuneration, just to see his model realized. Nordio is in agreement, but a strange brew of Triestine politics mixed with art, more or less covertly headed by Strehler, the man himself, definitely opposes the project: that theatre will never become a reality.

But Damiani does not give up.

I faithfully reproduce a part of his intervention at the International Seminary on Architecture and Theatre held in Reggio Emilia on 23rd and 24th October 2004: “...The intransigent observation of the form of theatre according to my theory of the eye’s perception is today the point of arrival. As a matter of logic, different consequences will result from this, for example, with regards to the relationship between the visual field and the mobility of the audience, the dramaturgy of lighting and sounds, the distribution of the performance within time and space (auditorium and stage).

It is my privileged target, in the conviction that no scenic magic can remove that context from the substantial fixity that derives from being perceived as a world apart from the concreteness of our feeling, our senses. There is thus a need, in order to draw it nearer to us, to play on not the illusionistic mechanisms that work within the container, but directly on the spaces identified on their axonometric coordinates: surfaces, height and depth.

This means that a similar procedure implies the constant reference to a code of geometric abstraction: beneath there is always an abstract elementary structure, one could cancel everything and retrace the essential lines, the levels, the spaces, the relationships. The term stage design is inappropriate, one should instead speak of the study of spatial coordinates, a means of intervention on the space prior to a reconquest and refounding of the same. The stage has thus become ever more all-absorbing, intent on embracing the audience. But it is not enough to have the audience participate in order to realize the desire to transfer it into the live performance, there is a need to construct theatres dipped in the same ideality of going beyond the Wagnerian poetics of union, combining the auditorium and the stage before the aerial veils, at the Nuovo Teatro in Trieste with the ropes extended into the house, from the hoisting of the stage machinery to the wholly modifiable auditorium, production by production. The fact is that the issue of traditional methods of staging a production, centuries old and still in force, remains an open question. It happened that, due to a series of negative occurrences to do with the Milanese theatrical milieu, I became so retaliatory to the point of deciding to build myself a Theatre, thereby regaining my autonomy and the necessary organisational independence, relying on my physical strength and resistant nerve. I began to construct it with my own hands; I was 58 years old. It is beneath my house that my utopia is destined to be fulfilled, in the Teatro dei Documenti in Rome, an extraordinary Theatre, arranged on different levels where the spectator and the live performance merge in perfect spatial-temporal unity. Teatro dei Documenti, so named because, other than being the container of the documents of Theatre (at times on display) it is also the sum of architectural 'documents' of the Theatre of 'witnessing', of 'participating', and that of 'free choice'." His theorization is perfect.

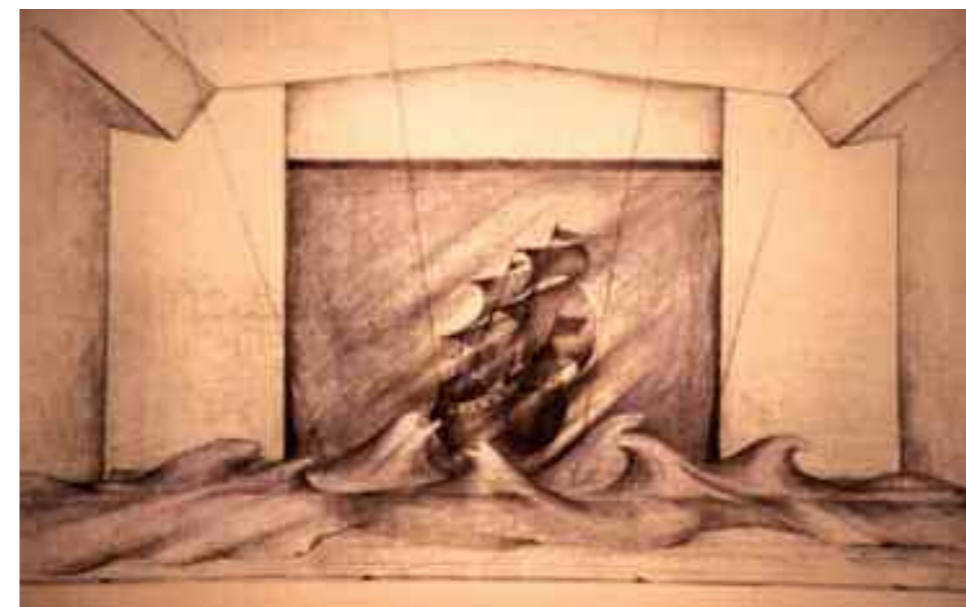
From a series of thoughts and considerations in the fifties and sixties on the vision of the point where thought tends to wander towards poetry, by way of sets composed of "voids" and of "silences", to postulate on "the stage is not a place to dress, but a space to organize", ending by crossing that frontier between stage and audience even at the cost of forcing a hollow and useless set of rules that forbade it, and faced with the indifference of the same "authorized persons", he creates by himself "his" Theatre, transforming old seventeenth-century subterranean storehouses comprised of a series of caverns on different levels, into his theatrical, stage "utopia".



EL NOST MILAN by Carlo Bertolazzi. Direction: Giorgio Strehler. Set design: Luciano Damiani, Costume design: Ebe Colciaghi.



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And so we come to our second meeting: 1986 – Teatro La Fenice, Venice. A revival of *Macbeth* is staged, of which he himself declares: “With Luca Ronconi, I had the opportunity to stage the most “intriguing” production of *Macbeth* at the Deutsche Oper in Berlin. Giuseppe Sinopoli, for the first time, directed the orchestra. It was an enormous success. To commemorate that collaboration it is the Association "Amici del Teatro di Documenti" [Friends of the Teatro di Documenti], founded by myself, Luca Ronconi and Giuseppe Sinopoli.” The Berlin staging of *Macbeth* came from an idea by Ronconi during a very brief meeting in Milan: “A wall divides the ‘real’ world from unreality then... the banquet table pierces through the wall and reaches the witches’ world”, says Luca Ronconi: “Beyond the wall live the witches. It is dangerous to lend an ear to the voices that emanate from the other side of the wall, even more so would be to deliberately choose to cross that threshold.”

It is 1985, and I am in charge of the staging at the Teatro La Fenice, and for this production I go to his studio in Rome, together with the Head of Stage Design at La Fenice, Lauro Crisman. I see for the first time that which is to become the Teatro di Documenti. I remain impressed. Between one conversation and the next, I learn of another brainchild of Damiani's from a previous year (1983): the “flexible” plan.

Yet more from the book entitled “Sipari di autoritratto”: “the theme was interesting (an open-air Orfeo del Poliziano, at the Sforza castle, Milan). Roberto Guiducci, who supervised the event, thought of producing that which Leonardo [da Vinci] had done for the performance. At the time, I merely said that I would think it over and that maybe I would put forward an idea of my own; I wasn't keen on the idea of redoing the production designed by Leonardo, as if it were a model from the Science Museum. I rejected the possibility of a remaking of Leonardo's designs, deciding on a transposition to the modern world of the “spirit” of Leonardo's stage designs. Leonardo had a hill open up like a half-dome, making the souls of the underworld appear from within and having the characters ascend and descend by way of a trapdoor. I searched for another solution, a mechanism that, beginning as a level stage, in flexing would take on the form of an arch and reacquire the horizontal only when needed, thus creating an upper space and a lower space. The same effect that Leonardo had obtained with the opening and closing of the hill.

It was a “fortunate” circumstance because I discovered the element that enabled me to complete the Theatre “Machine” that I wanted for the fantastical underside.” Damiani “challenges” Leonardo and realizes the dream of centuries of stage design: a workable surface that from a flat level flexes to the point of transforming itself into a cavern to then reassume its original horizontal plane whenever the need arose...

But let’s return to Venice: the Macbeth scenery arrives from Berlin.

The cast: director of orchestra, Gabriele Ferro, artistic director, Luca Ronconi, stage design by Luciano Damiani, the singers are Piero Cappuccilli, Olivia Stapp, Nicolaj Ghiaurov.

The material used this time is lead. But Ronconi and Damiani’s idea is very provocative for that time: a “wall” in Berlin...!

(The real wall was to fall only in 1989). A great parallelepiped of lead that moves on a circular revolving stage, pulverizing first the “real” space then that of the unreal. The staging is sombre, grey, weighty; the darkness is broken only by a brief, blindingly luminous ray at the arrival of *King Duncan*, who shortly afterwards is to die. The contrast between all this muffled, greyish gloom and the red of the royal mantles, the sole bright note, is enchanting. The performance is, as always, magnificent and Damiani manages it with the same untarnished love as the first, choosing “visual” solutions appropriate to the space, different from that of Berlin, like *La Fenice*.

So, today is the third time that we meet. The afternoon flies by amidst one memory and another. I visit the now functioning theatre; I take a few shots trying to capture its spirit or the sensibility with which it was created, but the sheer complexity of the solutions found, in all their apparent simplicity, is difficult to translate into an image. The true image is that of him and his astounding ability to plan, his coherence, his convinced determination, his moral and ethical discipline. It is for this reason that the character of the person seated in front of me, despite his eighty-one years, is always exciting: he has the power to motivate the spirit...

In the course of years, during the periods that I teach, I have had occasion to send many students to him in order for them to better know him and his work, his theories, his ideas and he has indiscriminately transmitted to all that same power, that same determination that to this day makes his eyes glisten.

“...NO STAGE MAGIC CAN REMOVE THAT CONTEXT [THE PROSCENIUM] FROM THE SUBSTANTIAL IMMUTABILITY THAT STEMS FROM IT BEING PERCEIVED AS A WORLD THAT IS TOTALLY SEPARATE FROM THE REALITY OF OUR SENSES. IN ORDER TO DRAW IT CLOSER TO US IT WILL THEREFORE BE NECESSARY TO FOCUS NOT ON ITS ILLUSIONISTIC MECHANISMS THAT OPERATE WITHIN THE CONTAINER, BUT DIRECTLY ON THE SPACES DETERMINED BY ITS AXONOMETRIC COORDINATES: SURFACES, HEIGHT AND DEPTH. THIS MEANS THAT A SIMILAR PROCEDURE IMPLIES THE CONSTANT REFERENCE TO A CODE OF GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION: DEEP DOWN THERE IS ALWAYS AN ABSTRACT ELEMENTARY STRUCTURE, ONE COULD CANCEL OUT EVERYTHING AND IDENTIFY THE ESSENTIAL LINES, THE PLANES, THE SPACES, THE RELATIONSHIPS. THE TERM “SCENOGRAPHY” IS INACCURATE, ONE SHOULD INSTEAD TALK OF THE STUDY OF “SPATIAL COORDINATES”, A METHOD OF INTERVENTION ON THE SPACE IN VIEW OF REGAINING IT AND FOUNDING IT ANEW”.

LUCIANO DAMIANI

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architect of the ephemeral,
theatre designer and builder,
challenger of the 'impossible'

IL TEATRO DEI DOCUMENTI







