

Title || Cecchi actor and director: *L'uomo, la bestia e la virtù*.  
Author || Armando Petrini  
Translation from Italian || Edward Tosques  
Published in || «Sciami», 2017 - [www.nuovoteatromadeinitaly.sciami.com](http://www.nuovoteatromadeinitaly.sciami.com)  
Rights || All rights reserved. © Sciami 2016. Visit [term and condition](#) on [sciami.com](http://sciami.com)  
Number of pages || pag 1 di 3  
Language || ENG  
DOI ||

## Cecchi actor and director: *L'uomo, la bestia e la virtù*.

by *Armando Petrini*

*Words could no longer remain written on paper,  
they had to burst into the air, spoken or shouted.*  
Luigi Pirandello

Carlo Cecchi presented *L'uomo, la bestia e la virtù* for the first time in 1976. The variants were countless: at least in the '80/'81, '81/'82, '86/'87 and '87/'88 seasons. In 1991 he also did a fine TV version.

Cecchi's encounter with the grotesque in Pirandello meant realizing one of his most successful stage works, even if it was maybe Cecchi's special approach that made this "tragedy drowned in farce" so totally grotesque. "I used the text – Cecchi said in a 1976 interview – but changed its slant, introducing a total detachment of the public's identification with the hero."<sup>1</sup>

Cecchi is always very careful to avoid any form of identification by spectators in the stage action. When he decides to stage a text that may present some ambiguity of this kind he intervenes by stressing as much as possible the effects of distancing that that text allows. Before *Uomo, la bestia e la virtù*, Cecchi had already had to face the problem when he did *Tamburi nella notte* (1972) and *La cimice* (1975). For the first, Cecchi had had the same doubts as Brecht about the risk that the spectators would identify with the hero, Kragler (whom Brecht thought too "romantic"). *Tamburi nella notte* – Cecchi observes – is a work that, "in addition to being 'the most ambiguous' [among Brecht's dramas], is also one of the most difficult, since it demands a 'distance' (i.e. demonstrated critically in such a way that the public sees but doesn't identify) that – in the text – isn't at all distanced – quite the opposite." And so, Cecchi explains

In staging *Tamburi nella notte* we tried to solve the problem that Brecht had posed critically but hadn't resolved. On the one hand, we tried to add a greater external presence (the Spartacist revolution that grows and is then crushed in a bloodbath), and on the other to make Kragler's drama a 'comedy' – a grotesque comedy, an expressionist nightmare – through a reversal of the characters of the love story, reduced to ridiculous but also rather dreadful puppets<sup>2</sup>.

According to Cecchi, *La cimice* too has dangerous ambiguities. "The story of this petty-bourgeois – Cecchi himself argues – is ludicrous from beginning to end. Some precautions have been taken to avoid confusion. The main one was to discourage any identification by the public with the hero, starting with – today very dangerous – the original ending."<sup>3</sup>

In Cecchi's version Prysipkin's last line is cut ("Dear brothers, have mercy on me! For what must I suffer?! Citizens!") and the spectacle ends with the coldest and most detached scene of the "lunar philistines" who display the "terrestrial philistine,"<sup>4</sup> so altering the overall sense of the Majakovsky ending. He did this to prevent any identification the public might have had with Prysipkin and to highlight the more subtly critical and even pessimistic character of the text.

Likewise *Uomo, la bestia e la virtù*. Though Cecchi turned Pirandello's text into "a successful *Mandragola*" (his words) by stressing its most authentically grotesque components, it is precisely because he realized on stage what according to Roberto De Monticelli constitutes the main defect of that version. He "erased" Pirandello's basic ambiguity between the individual's candor and social hypocrisy<sup>5</sup> and therefore, also, from the spectator's viewpoint, between emotional participation and critical detachment, stressing the latter almost exclusively. In Cecchi's version, probably more incisively than Pirandello's dramatic text, there is no room for empathy with the "man" Paolino. The whole dramatic mechanism is stretched to the limit, and the game becomes violently cruel and devoid of possible escape hatches: "The accent – and the play's meaning lies [...] in the cruel tension that runs through the portrayal of this bourgeois farce," Cecchi wrote in the playbill<sup>6</sup>.

No identification is possible with those characters concealed behind "acidic, sooty masks, [...] lumps of lime and ash, petrified leers."<sup>7</sup> Here's what Renzo Tian wrote during a revival in October 1980:

Bodily removed from the sphere of the 'probable' and 'psychological' and transported into the sphere of the monstrous, namely the grotesque that is yielded from the fusion of farce and tragedy, the text explodes its hidden

<sup>1</sup> L. Coen, *Da vedere*, in "La Repubblica", March 30, 1976.

<sup>2</sup> The quote is from a note of Carlo Cecchi's preserved in photocopy form in the Brecht-*Tamburi nella notte* folder at the Centro studi del Teatro stabile of Turin.

<sup>3</sup> C. Cecchi, *La messinscena della "Cimice"*, in F. Quadri, *L'avanguardia teatrale in Italia*, cit., p.401.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>5</sup> R. De Monticelli, *La via italiana a Pirandello*, in "Corriere della sera", December 10, 1976.

<sup>6</sup> From the cited playbill.

<sup>7</sup> A.M. Ripellino, *Ballando il tomba-tomba*, in "L'Espresso", n.24, June 13, 1976, pp.107-108, now in A.M. Ripellino, "Stiate buffi". *Cronache di teatro, circo e altre arti ("L'Espresso" 1969-77)*, Rome, Bulzoni, 1989, p.523.

Title || Cecchi actor and director: L'uomo, la bestia e la virtù.  
Author || Armando Petrini  
Translation from Italian || Edward Tosques  
Published in || «Sciami», 2017 - www.nuovoteatromadeinitaly.sciami.com  
Rights || All rights reserved. © Sciami 2016. Visit [term and condition](#) on sciami.com  
Number of pages || pag 2 di 3  
Language || ENG  
DOI ||

charges by setting in motion a dark tarantella of cruel masks that tear themselves to shreds between a guffaw and reverence for ethical living<sup>8</sup>.

A frigid grotesque puppet, Cecchi displays here the impossible martyrdom of virtue, the pathetic struggle of three lives (what remains of them) in an oppressive and airless context where every value and certainty appear corrupt and overturned into its opposite. And it also shows us the pain, deep and distressing pain over man's typically modern (late modern) inability to cohere. A pain that Cecchi objectivizes by freezing it and never giving it a tragic outlet<sup>9</sup>, yet deeply etched into the crevices of the gestures and wrinkles of those masks. By foregrounding and amplifying an inference from Pirandello, Cecchi permeates virtue with an aura of holiness, and has the disfigurement of the former coincide with the blasphemy against the latter. And so in Cecchi's work *Signora Perella* shows herself "paradoxically buffoonish when she is decked out as a 'virtuous' lady and like a Madonna when she is shamelessly exposed and travestied."<sup>10</sup> In the 1991 television version, in the middle of the scene where Paolino "paints" Signora Perella's face, she actually poses like Christ on the cross to emphasize in another yet equally effective way how much the grotesque martyrdom of virtue coincides here with the definitive, irreparable loss of sacrality.

And while all the indications, and suggestions described till now are present in the play – the several plays that make up their various versions and revivals – Cecchi's greatness lies in his ability, as actor and director, to prevent these indications from reducing themselves to the function of a simple expressive "sign." Every great artist speaks above all about himself, and only by talking about himself can he talk about someone *else*. Thus Cecchi, when on stage, before he even *talks, talks to himself* (or rather, he talks by talking to himself). He does not present himself as a "servile", "instrumental" sign, as Mukarovsky would say, who portrays his character (in this case Paolino) but as an actor-artificer who utters his actor being – finding in it his most authentic form of expression – through the explicit and highly calibrated balance between his artistic sensibility and the part being played. In Cecchi's *Uomo, la bestia e la virtù* the "content" we've spoken about is not simplistically organized and orchestrated down to the last detail by the director-Cecchi, but emerges as the ineluctable extension of Cecchi's stage-acting experience (and, albeit to a lesser degree, that of his fellow actors). It is precisely how Cecchi formulates his speech that what may be improperly understood as "content" is crystallized. Like every authentic work of art, form and content present themselves to our sight as perfectly coinciding.

The whole stage construct at the same time realizes the grotesqueness we have spoken about and the shaping of a subtle and refined meta-theatrical discourse, also obviously grotesque. Cecchi himself writes that the main characters are here the "puppets and martyrs of their class and of Italian comedy."<sup>11</sup> It is the whole mis-en-scene that stresses their metalinguistic components: the set design, which depicts a theater within the theater, a "raft adrift" wrote Antonio Attisani, in which "the actors cannot move freely, stumble, bump into one another"<sup>12</sup>, «and that also forces them to change and prepare for their next entrances on-stage; the deformed masks, which stress the fiction and strip it of every even subtly illusionistic feature; the mirror-like background wall that reflects and multiplies the on stage action, restoring it "to the actors-as-characters" – Franca Angelini wrote – while they are acting. And while the audience visually perceives a double action, the actor is subjected to the control of his gestures, in a sort of self-reflection"<sup>13</sup>; the pendulum-metronome, which measures and transports to the fiction time the reality time of the fiction; the interiors where the story takes place, which "are none other than understairs prop bins"<sup>14</sup>; the different references that, depending on the repeat performances and the public, are placed on stage or simply encountered by some spectator, such as the "mocking finale, hinging on the possible technical errors of theater production" noted by Gianfranco Rimondi<sup>15</sup> or Signora Perella's retching, which Nicola Garroni took as "a caricatural copy of the inner trembling and languor of her 'lofty' model, the Divine Eleonora (Duse)."<sup>16</sup> But it is above all Cecchi's acting that concentrates and amplifies all these elements, bringing them to their highest and most complete pitch of expression. We are talking here about that "unforgettable wiggling of vainly outstretched, weirdly restless hands"<sup>17</sup>; those deliberately dry, wooden gestures

---

<sup>8</sup> R. Tian, *Stirpe di mostri*, in "Il messaggero", October 11, 1980.

<sup>9</sup> "Here tragedy doesn't exist, or if at times it pop up from one dialogue to another, it's at once cancelled out by a character's grotesque appearance, a guffaw, the emphasis of a phrase" (G. Lombardi, *Dietro le maschere uomo bestia e virtù*, in "Paese sera", October 11, 1980).

<sup>10</sup> F. Quadri, *Granpirandello*, cit., p.11.

<sup>11</sup> From the cited playbill.

<sup>12</sup> A. Attisani, *Attraverso Pirandello*, in "Scena", n.2, March-April 1976, p.11; for a semiological analysis of the stage space S. Jansen, *Lo spazio scenico nello spettacolo drammatico e nel testo drammatico: qualche nota sulle letture di Carlo Cecchi e Edmo Fenoglio di L'uomo, la bestia e la virtù di Pirandello*, in G. Ferroni (a cura di), *La semiotica e il doppio teatrale*, Naples, Liguori, 1981, pp.249-270.

<sup>13</sup> F. Angelini, *Su un teatro "teatrale": L'uomo, la bestia e la virtù by Carlo Cecchi*, in "Rivista di studi pirandelliani", n.1, March 1984, p.111.

<sup>14</sup> G. Davico Bonino, *Tragedia e beffa della borghesia degradata in Pirandello con il grande Carlo Cecchi*, in "La stampa", February 19, 1982.

<sup>15</sup> G. Rimondi, *Pirandello minore inscenato a Guastalla dal Granteatro*, in "L'unità", January 13, 1976.

<sup>16</sup> N. Garroni, *Tanti Pulcinella incarogniti*, in "La repubblica", February 14, 1976.

<sup>17</sup> F. Quadri, *Granpirandello*, cit., p. 11.

Title || Cecchi actor and director: L'uomo, la bestia e la virtù.

Author || Armando Petrini

Translation from Italian || Edward Tosques

Published in || «Sciami», 2017 - [www.nuovoteatromadeinitaly.sciami.com](http://www.nuovoteatromadeinitaly.sciami.com)

Rights || All rights reserved. © Sciami 2016. Visit [term and condition](#) on [sciami.com](http://sciami.com)

Number of pages || pag 3 di 3

Language || ENG

DOI ||

inexorably punctuated by the ticking of the pendulum, simultaneously distinct and repetitive gestures; those **quotes** from Totò, Eduardo De Filippo, Petrolini; those hinted, mutilated, fragmented words uttered in a stupendous monotone, counterpointed by an asynchronous, alternately oscillating movement of the hands and head; that very refined way of being an actor precisely through the sage, balanced, dissonant rendering of an actor's every expressive element, that tension – intimately sacred and not at all “irreverent”<sup>18</sup> – displaying the on-stage pain for the lost sacredness of art. In all this there is an admirable and incredibly effective fusion of the grotesqueness of a “*man*” who is no longer a man, shattered and alienated, corrupted and prostituted like the virtue he can no longer possess, except in parodistically inverted form. And the grotesqueness of Cecchi the actor, who seems unable to cohere as an artist, is sadomasochistically forced to struggle on a stage in the agony of one who, in a blaze before going out (to use the intensely painful words of Genet), expresses only the impossibility of expressing.

---

<sup>18</sup> “Irreverence? Rather re-reverence. Because either the theater has a relationship with sacredness or it doesn't exist” (*Tornando a casa per scoprire il gioco teatrale di Pinter*, interview by G.L. Favetto, in “Gazzetta del popolo”, March 4, 1983).