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## Carlo Cecchi. Biographical note

by Chiara Schepis

Carlo Cecchi was born in Lastra a Signa, near Florence, on January 25, 1939.

Actor, theatre and art director as well as teacher of performance, his life is totally dedicated to theatre: «an instrument of my relation with other people»<sup>1</sup>.

Cultivating his growing attraction for theatre, in the late Fifties Cecchi resolved to leave Florence. So he set off, in 1958, like a backwards migrant, first to Rome, where he attempted the admission to the Accademia d'Arte Drammatica Silvio D'Amico with no success, and soon afterwards to Naples.

Under the shadow of the Vesuvius he started his very original course of formation, or rather self-formation. Cecchi found out the “real” theatre, to which he felt intimately attracted, in Naples, in its streets and alleys, in its still active post-war theatres like the Duemila or the Trianon, in the *performances* of actors like Beniamino Maggio, Trottolino, Angela Luce. In Naples he discovered a different kind of theatre than the Italian theatre he was familiar with, different in style and in acting, the popular theatre of the farce and the ‘sceneggiata’ in Eduardo De Filippo’s style.

The next year young Cecchi attempted again the admission to the Accademia, this time successfully. However, the Neapolitan *shock* was too deep in him and the Academy too institutionalized («a mine of actor-officers with a meditative mood and a declamatory counter-language»<sup>2</sup>, according to his schoolmate Claudio Meldolesi). Cecchi felt that school a rigid institution as to the idea of theatre he was conceiving, not corresponding to the avant-garde impulses that started to spread through the Italian *tournées* of the Living Theatre. The Living Theatre and Eduardo De Filippo were two significant spirits in Cecchi’s theatrical formation: having established contact with these experiences in the years of his formation permanently conditioned the profile of an actor-director in constant balance between tradition and experimentation.

After leaving the Accademia in 1961, commuting from/to Rome and Naples, Cecchi took the first steps in theatre with the Cooperativa Teatro Scelta directed by Gian Maria Volonté, then with the Compagnia Il Porcospino animated by Dacia Maraini, Alberto Moravia, Enzo Siciliano. His first professional trial was *Ricatto a teatro*, taken from Maraini’s first dramatis text for the theatre of 1968. He was accompanied in this adventure by Paolo Graziosi, Angelica Ippolito, Peter Hartmann – director of the play -, with whom he would soon after found a new company: Granteatro.

With the name of Granteatro, Cecchi, in 1969, for the first time undertook to direct the setting of Büchner’s *Woyzeck*, which would be presented as *Prova del Woyzeck di Büchner* at the Infernotti, a theatre in the vaults of Palazzo Carignano, head office of Turin’s Unione Culturale.

It is between this first direction and the birth of Granteatro (1971) that a turning point in Cecchi’s theatre can be detected: at this point, the young actor-director approached De Filippo, and later worked with him for one year in 1969-1970. As actor he was involved in the staging of De Filippo’s *Il monumento* and in the part of Federico in *Sabato, Domenica e Lunedì* (1969), being also the director’s assistant, like for the revival of *Le voci di dentro* (1969). Cecchi would define the relation between the actor-manager and himself as «schizophrenic»<sup>3</sup>, at the same time friendly and made of incompatibility, yet productive and lasting.

He said that Eduardo was the one who suggested to him to act in Neapolitan the part of Felice Sciosciammocca, formerly played by Eduardo Scarpetta. Of that Neapolitan tradition he would adopt even the language, not only as a theatrical language but also as his mother tongue, his everyday’s language. Therefore, by no chance the inaugural show of Granteatro was *Petito’s Le statue movibili* (March 1971, Beat 72 in Rome). And by no chance godparents to one of the most enduring *ensembles* of our theatre were Elsa Morante and Eduardo De Filippo.

Elsa Morante was indeed a very important character, together with Cesare Garboli, in Carlo Cecchi’s artistic events. The Roman writer as Cecchi’s adviser and mentor in his first steps, the Viareggio critic as the translator of most of the texts staged by Cecchi (particularly from Molière and from Shakespeare), as well as collaborator of his directions.

To this intense period of production and setting of a repertoire are to be added, beside the above-mentioned *Statue*, the staging of Majakovskij’s *The Bathhouse* (1971) and *The Bedbug* (1975), Brecht’s *Drums in the night* (1972), *Pepito’s A morte dint’o lietto e Don Felice* (1974) and an interesting new *Woyzeck* (1973), a theatrical decentralization in Turin. Last but not least, the staging of Luigi Pirandello’s *L’uomo, la bestia e la virtù* (1976), a very successful show, re-presented many times for many years.

After these first *mise-en-scènes* there came the encounter with Molière’s dramaturgy, aided by Garboli’s translations, first of which was the staging of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (in Genoa, 1977) and *Dom Juan* (1978). The Seventies were closed with a Machiavelli’s masqued *Mandragola* (1979) and Cecchi’s first Pinter, *The Birthday Party* (February 1980). The

<sup>1</sup> C. Cecchi in O. Guerrieri, *Il mio Pinter di sarcasmo e dissoluzione*, in «La Stampa», Turin 1997.

<sup>2</sup> C. Meldolesi, *Fondamenti del teatro italiano. La generazione dei registi*, Bulzoni, Rome 2008 (I Edizione – Sansoni Editore, Florence 1984).

<sup>3</sup> C. Cecchi in A. Gnoli, *Carlo Cecchi*, in «La Repubblica», February 24, 2013.

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company inaugurated the first season, in October of the same year, at the Teatro Niccolini in Florence, from then their permanent seat, with a revival of *L'uomo, la bestia e la virtù*.

With the achievement of the permanent seat at the Teatro Niccolini of Florence, directed by Cecchi together with Roberto Toni, what can be defined “the time of the mastery” starts: the actor-director, now in his full artistic maturity, became conscious of his role: he was a master of actors. His care was more and more concentrated on the formation of the new generation of actors, for instance through a teamwork with theatre schools and academies, and a (never accomplished) project of supporting the Niccolini’s productions with a school for actors. In reality in the theatre of Carlo Cecchi, «posthumous actor-manager»<sup>4</sup>, the company had the role of the formation.

The prolonged “Niccolini season”, 1980-1995 in Florence, established a sort of *Homecoming* (text by Pinter staged in 1981) for the actor-director who had gone to improve his language in the Gulf of Naples, and coincided with many successful productions – 23 new *pièces*.

The Niccolini closed in 1995 owing to serious financial failures, yet since the first Nineties Cecchi had already started to feel impatient of the rigidity of the institutionalized theatre and production system. In those years, as a strategy of escape, he made frequent incursions in the cinema (see filmography), like in *Morte di un malematico napoletano* (Mario Martone, Italia, 1992). But the actual escape was moving further south, this time to Palermo, where he discovered the ruins of a Nineteenth century theatre, the Teatro Garibaldi in the area of Kalsa, and let him be was «reconquered to theatre»<sup>5</sup>.

In Palermo, in 1996, our actor started an adventure, the *Trilogia shakespeariana a Palermo*, which saw an outstanding company, with well-known performers from Granteatro together with very young actors, engaged for the next three summers in *Amleto al Teatro Garibaldi* (1996), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1997), *Measure for measure* (1998). In September 1999 the complete *Trilogia*, lasting eight hours, was taken on tournée to Rome and to Paris. The *Trilogia shakespeariana a Palermo* was a successful theatre experiment, a fundamental training for countless Cecchi’s actors-pupils: Valerio Binasco, Arturo Cirillo, Iaia Forte, Francesco Sframeli, only to mention some.

The new millennium opened with another move: in 2003 Cecchi was proposed for the artistic direction of the Teatro Stabile delle Marche, which post he still holds today. A period of fortunate productions started with Pirandello’s *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (2003 and re-staged four times after), Molière’s *Tartuffe* (2007), Thomas Bernhard’s diptych *Claus Peymann kauft sich eine Hose und geht mit mir essen* and Eduardo De Filippo’s *Sik-Sik L'artefice magico*, then a new version of Shakespeare’s *Dream* (2010) with the pupils of the last year of the school Silvio D’Amico, and *The twelfth Night* (2014), always with the same cast of those young actors. In 2013 the actor-director crowned his long-dated dream of staging his friend, dramaturg and counselor Elsa Morante’s only theatre text (never shown), *La serata a Colono*, directed by Mario Martone.

Cecchi’s life, as we said above, was and continues to be totally dedicated to theatre, as was his teacher’s, Eduardo, of whom he has kept the greatest teaching, «his total identification with theatre»<sup>6</sup>.

«Actors who are really actors» - says Cecchi – «have no private life. Those who have one, carry a failure on their shoulders»<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> C. Cecchi in R. Di Giammarco, *Io, Cecchi, capocomico postumo*, in «La Repubblica», Roma 11 marzo 2007.

<sup>5</sup> C. Cecchi in M. Nadotti, *Teatro ritrovato*, in «La Repubblica delle donne», Palermo 16 dicembre 1997.

<sup>6</sup> C. Cecchi in S. De Matteis – V. Dini, *Intervista con Carlo Cecchi. La lingua, il corpo, la scena*, in «dove sta Zazà», Napoli febbraio 1993, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> C. Cecchi in R. Di Giammarco, *Comici di sinistra che satira ipocrita*, in «La Repubblica», 19 agosto 1994.