

[Title](#) | La messinscena “acentrica” di Zip-Lap-Lip-Vap-Mam-Crep-Scap-Plip-Trip-Scrap e la Grande Mam alle prese con la società contemporanea: la questione dell’avanguardia divide la critica

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Zip-lap-lip-vap-mam-crep-scap-plip-trip-scrap e la grande mam alle prese con la società contemporanea, 1965

text by Giuliano Scabia

from an idea by Carlo Quartucci

directed by Carlo Quartucci

set and costume designs by Emanuele Luzzati

with Luigi Castejon, Cosimo Cinieri, Leo de Berardinis, Sabina de Guida, Anna D’Offizi, Mirella Falco, Giampiero Forteleoni, Maria Grazia Grassi-ni, Claudio Remondi, Edoardo Torricella

production Studio Theater of the Teatro Stabile of Genoa

premiere XXIV Prose Festival of the Venice Biennale, Teatro del Ridotto, 30 September 1965

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by Daniela Visone

In Prima Porta *Zip* was put to the test for the first time: a theatrical work in progress, a group effort realized by the author, the director, the actors, the set designer, the musician and the technicians, even during the drafting stage of the text. *All’improvviso* and *Zip* saw Giuliano Scabia’s debut as a playwright, despite the fact that he had already done some stage writing in his relationship with exponents of the New Music, in particular Luigi Nono, whom Scabia had met during the play *Intolleranza* in 1960, for which in 1964 he had written *La fabbrica illuminata*. In close contact with Carlo Quartucci and his directing style, [...] Scabia began to address the problem of the relationship between text and stage, between writing and physical space. His research crystallized in his invention of a new “acentric” stage space which radically changed the relationship between stage and audience, by exploiting a perceptual situation of plural perspective, which enabled spectators to get into close proximity to the theatrical event. By changing the idea of space he also changed the idea of the dramatic text, since space was an integral part of dramatic writing. For this, the writing had to contain, in addition to dialogue, a list of everything that could happen on stage – descriptions of light, tone, gestures, movement. The author thus created a complete text, of which no single element took precedence, since there was no longer a distinction between dialogue and stage directions. The period in which this project was realized can be divided into three phases. We can trace the first phase of preparation in January 1965, when Scabia began to take some of Quartucci’s cues on how to structure a text. The second phase took place in February-March of that year, when Scabia and Quartucci, with the support of the Teatro Stabile of Genoa, proposed *Zip* to the Biennale Theatre Festival of Venice. “The Venice Festival agreed to do *Zip*. The Teatro Stabile di Genova also entered the fray, ‘to get the show on the road,’ as Squarzina said. All told, between the Biennale and the Stabile, we had a play budget of 3,400,000 lire. Sets, costumes, actors’ pay, theater rent for rehearsals, unforeseen circumstances. The actors’ and directors’ pay came to 3000 lire per day. We rehearsed in Rome. The *Zip* text was delivered to the Biennale and the Stabile with a modifiability clause. It was a text that had to be adapted to the stage, the individual actors, so it could be subject to substantial changes.”¹ The third stage came when Giuliano Scabia met the actors in Quartucci’s troupe, the moment for the project’s concrete realization, when the text was rehearsed for the first time with the actors – or we might say *on* the actors – and with set designer Emanuele Luzzati. The work took place in Prima Porta, at a makeshift camp built along the bend of the Tiber, where the actors involved in the Beckett Festival had moved to. Here Scabia was able to integrate his original idea and the characters his imagination had given birth to, by working closely with the actors. The text developed gradually: Scabia “acted” patiently on the character-masks, grasping their corporeality and continual reference to contemporary reality (especially politics), to link the dramaturgical writing as much as possible to the stage writing [...]

Most of the critics present at the play’s premiere on September 30, 1965, in Venice, didn’t comprehend the experimental scope of the project and rejected both its ideological underpinnings and the result. The play was divided into two acts and began with the entrance on stage, from a kind of great primordial egg, of the characters listed in the title, completely enveloped in wrapping paper. At first just ten clowns. “Then, little by little, they took on their identities of character-masks grappling with contemporary society: those who control it, or at least those who enjoy its fat profits, those who serve it, or who let themselves be absorbed by it without much resistance, and lastly those who make a feeble, sterile protest, more, it seems, to make peace with their consciences than because they think they can actually change things.”²

The stage space was extended to mid-orchestra with a workable system of catwalks, “as if to emphasize that in contemporary society along with *Zip* and others there are also the spectators.”³ The actors thus completely invaded the hall, moving around constantly, beside, behind and above the audience. The costumes and the stage were “a combination of Dada

¹ G. Scabia, unpublished collection of memoirs in the author’s archive, February-March 1965. G. Scabia, *All’Improvviso e Zip*, Einaudi, Turin 1967.

² E. Capriolo, *Zip Lap Lip Vap Mam Crep Scap Plip Trip Scrap e la grande Mam alle prese con la società contemporanea*, in «Sipario», November 1965, n. 235, p. 10. The “fake” rebels are: the Lip-Lap pair who decide, but wind up surrendering, and the solitary Zip, who says uselessly no.

³ *Ibidem*

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and Futurism, put together with collages and a montage of various objects”⁴ (clusters of white tissue paper on the stage backdrop and side walls, on which metal pipes and illegible posters were attached) by Emanuele Luzzati. Only after the spectators became familiar with the space did the masks begin to use language: in the first part of the play, simple phonemes devoid of logical connections, then the sounds became more and more complex until, in the second part, they took the form of articulate speech. At first, the actors mimed, screamed, jumped, gave life to rarefied clowneries (motions, make-up, stage gestures insistently recalled the world of clowns) that tried to express revolt, rejection and irony, in opposition to the world of violence and conformism, the cruelty of false well-being.”⁵ In the second part of the play, the wealth of mimetic and acoustical inventions gave way to more realistic gestural and linguistic elements. The standard term critics used in assessing the operation was “the new literary avant-garde,” in recognition of the distinctions that made the two phenomena incompatible. Scabia’s text established itself concretely as a starting point for creating a new stage language, and the errors that arose from the play were due mostly to its vagueness and immaturity. Quartucci and Scabia drew up a manifesto entitled *Per un’avanguardia italiana*, in which they traced a brief history of the origin of *Zip* and clarified the relationship between the new and the historical avant-garde. In the Manifesto, the authors defined *Zip* as an experiment in continuity with the historical avant-garde in its concept of a total space, making references to Artaud, Meyerhold and other more recent 20th century experiences, and at the same time as the prototype of a new avant-garde, in step with contemporary reality through the construction of a stage that reproduced the grid of the contemporary city. Quartucci and Scabia went to the heart of the matter, pointing out that, unlike the historical avant-garde, the new avant-garde intended to build a “theater of construction, not destruction.”⁶ The invention of a joint theatrical writing, in which text, space, objects, sounds, words and actors were on an equal plane (a bit like what was happening in the U.S. with groups such as the Living Theater or John Cage and Happenings) was the great merit of *Zip* and the reason why it marked an important date in the history of how the new Italian avant-garde theater was born. [...]

Its uniqueness was demonstrated by a curious though marginal fact that was nevertheless indicative of the state a certain Italian theatrical culture was in. It was impossible to register their text with the SIAE (the Italian Society of Authors and Publishers) as a normal Italian theatrical work, because it didn’t have the traditional characteristics of a “comedy.” This created a paradoxical bureaucratic situation that blatantly revealed the difficulties political and cultural institutions had in dealing with an aesthetic object whose novelty couldn’t be pigeon-holed into any codified model. So for its staging the Finance Ministry applied a tax rate on a par with that for foreign works, not recognizing in the text its distinctive traits of “official” dramatic form.

⁴ G. Nogara, *Zip Lap Lip Vap Mam Crep Scap Plip Trip Scrap e La Grande Mam alle prese con la società contemporanea*, in «Humanitas», Brescia, October 1965.

⁵ R. Tian, *Giovanile tentativo di avanguardia nello spettacolo del Teatro-Studio genovese*, in «Il Messaggero», October 1, 1965.

⁶ C. Quartucci, G. Scabia, *Per un’avanguardia italiana*, in «Sipario», no. 235, November 1965, p. 15.