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Giuliano Scabia - Biographical notes

by Viviana Raciti

Giuliano Scabia is not only a man of the theater. He is a poet, playwright, novelist, actor, director and teacher, though he likes to define himself simply as a writer¹. He was born on July 18, 1935 in Padua, where he received a university degree in Moral Philosophy in 1960. He attended the cultural circle Il Pozzetto, promoted by the then P.C.I. (Italian Communist Party), and worked as a young man on such important newspapers as “Paese Sera,” “l’Unità,” “Corriere della Sera” and “Il Lavoro.” In Venice he taught for a year at the Istituto Magistrale, then moved to Milan, where he began teaching at the school of the Convitto Rinascita. In the latest published volume devoted to his work², Stefano Casi reports how this teaching “continued until 1968, and enabled him to realize several small theater and animation (before the term was invented) projects with his students.”³ He took part in the second Gruppo 63 conference and in 1967 was a signatory of the Manifesto di Ivrea on the New Theater.

In 1965 he published his first collection of poems (1960-64), *Padrone e Servo*, in the contemporary poetry series “Il Sintagma.” Here the poetic structure wove together a musical (even concrete) and visual dimension with social issues denouncing labor exploitation. His *La fabbrica illuminata* was especially important: an opera libretto he wrote with Luigi Nono (with whom he had previously collaborated on several occasions), present within the collection. In 1965, his *Zip Lap Lip Vap Mam Cre Scap Plip Trip Scrap & la grande Mam* was staged at the Venice Biennale, directed by Carlo Quartucci, with stage designs by Luzzati (the text was published two years later by Einaudi⁴), and among the actors Leo de Berardinis, Claudio Remondi and Rino Sudano, a play that presented an “acentric” elaboration of space and roles within the stage realization in which Scabia actively participated, writing part of the text during rehearsals, inserting slide and movie projections. Scabia’s research continued despite the negative response by critics and by the two directors of the Teatro Stabile of Genoa, Luigi Squarzina and Ivo Chiesa, who did not recognize the innovative quality of the play. A few years later Scabia clashed with another important theatrical institution, Paolo Grassi and the Piccolo Teatro in Milan, where in 1968 Scabia staged and directed his *Interventi* as a “performative grafting” onto the play *Visita alla prova de L’isola purpurea di Michail Bulgakov*, directed by Raffaele Maiello.

In 1970 Radiorai broadcast his radio drama *Fuga inseguimento & grande giardino*, which he also directed and starred in. Before his encounters with the theater Scabia had already had several contacts with the musical experimentalism of Luigi Nono and John Cage, and was fascinated by the possibilities of radio, which he returned to on several occasions: in 1971 with *Inizio del suono e del fuoco (parabola radiofonica ciclica)*, a production for magnetic tape, which he wrote and directed, and in 1978 with the Rai Radiotre broadcasts of *Il racconto del teatro (10 tempi)* and *Descrizione orale della passione e morte di Giovanna d’Arco*.

In 1969 he wrote *Scontri Generali*, which represented a clean break with the theater (in this case ATER), followed by the publication of a collection of work scenarios and diaries about his theater research experiences from 1968 to 1971, with the significant title: *Teatro nello spazio degli scontri*. In this period Scabia understood theater as a place for expressing political and social issues and at the same time for manifesting the culture of an era. Theater, as he said, was “a place for collective encounters and confrontations [...] a place for celebrating collective myths, an improvisational space [...] a place for the body’s re-emergence through collective work, a place for exhibiting and analyzing metaphors.”⁵ Especially during the 1970’s it was such powerful statements that defined his experiences with the so-called “theater of participation,” in collaboration with the theatrical places and institutions and otherwise, and that would be one of the fundamental bases for the cycle of his *Teatro vagante*. His first attempt in that direction was a collaboration between his Research Group⁶ and the Teatro Stabile di Torino, called *Decentramento torinese*, six months of work between 1969 and 1970 in four venues in the city, where which he organized a workshop with primary school children in the wake of a project for renewing the entire Italian educational system. This theater experiment with kids was followed by several others in collaboration with different kinds of schools, such as *Quattordici azioni per quattordici giorni* (1971) or *Forse un drago nascerà* (1972), while shortly before that he had done the *Grande Pupazzo* project (only partially realized) with children of the Corvetto district of Milan. With regard to university education it is interesting to note that Scabia, invited by Luigi Squarzina, was among the first teachers called on to teach in the newly formed Dams in Bologna, founded in 1972 by the Greek scholar Benedetto Marzullo, Renzo Tian, Umberto Eco and others. Also in 1972 he wrote the *Commedia armoniosa del cielo e dell’inferno* (awarded the Pirandello Prize) which – Stefano Casi reports – “formally marked the birth of the *Teatro Vagante*, an authentic conceptual category (but also a material and concrete point of reference) that henceforth would typify Scabia’s idea and practice of theater as a poetic-dramatic-theatrical wayfaring through roads, villages, forests and territories.” It is worth noting that the Cycle also included such previous texts as *All’improvviso* (1964), *Zip* (1965), *Interventi per l’Isola Purpurea* (1968), *Scontri Generali* (1969), *Fuga inseguimento e*

¹ G. Scabia interviewed by C. Mencaroni in C. Mencaroni, *Giuliano Scabia poeta vagante a cavallo di un’utopia*, Ph.D. dissertation on the history of theater and spectacle at the Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata, mentor: A. E. Bellingeri, supervisor: D. Orecchia, A. A. 2005/2006, p. 191.

² S. Casi, *600.000 e altre azioni teatrali per Giuliano Scabia*, ETS, Pisa 2012.

³ S. Casi, *Cronologia della vita e delle opere di Giuliano Scabia*, in *600.000 e altre azioni teatrali per Giuliano Scabia*, cit., p. 269.

⁴ Cfr. G. Scabia, *All’improvviso e Zip*, Einaudi, Turin 1967.

⁵ G. Scabia, *Teatro nello spazio degli scontri*, Bulzoni, Rome 1973, p. XVII.

⁶ Trained by him, Loredana Perissinotto and Pier Antonio Barbieri.

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grande giardino (1969), and *Inizio del suono e del fuoco* (1971). Many other texts, even among the most recent, were included in it.

In 1973, together with Franco Basaglia, Scabia set up a laboratory inside the psychiatric hospital of Trieste, a significant experience documented in the book *Marco Cavallo*.⁷ This first workshop, which would be followed in other years, was part of the larger project of transformation of the idea of mental illness symbolized by the advent of the “Legge Basaglia.”

With the help of some university students he brought to life *Il Gorilla quadrumano* (1974, published by Feltrinelli in the same year), a study program of some texts of “theater in the barn” later acted in itinerant form in the hinterland of the Apennines of Reggio Emilia, presented the following year at the Festival Mondial du Théâtre in Nancy. Also in 1974 he organized together with students and others a street event for Gianni Rodari at the invitation of Einaudi, entitled *Arriva il signor Gutenberg gigante alla fiera del libro per ragazzi di Bologna*. The Gorilla events found an ideal continuation in his *Dialoghi di paesi* (still in progress): a series of communications, small group events, exchanges of theater visits, letters, and representations from Tuscany to the High Apennines of Reggio Emilia.

Each year till the end of his university teaching career in 2005⁸, he offered courses and workshops even on little known authors, such as Büchner (late 1970’s), Marlowe, Kleist (first half of the 1980’s), Adam de la Halle, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Goethe, (late 1980’s), Aristophanes, Euripides, Rodrigo Garcia (1990’s and the first decade of the new millennium). However, it is interesting to mention the experiment he carried out in 1977, in the midst of the harsh social climate, during which he built dozens of paper balloons, a phase that marked a change of perception by the city, a “wave of pacification.”⁹

Going back to the late 1970’s, in 1979 Scabia wrote *Il Diavolo e il suo Angelo*, one of his last works to be structured in a clearly theatrical way. “Scabia – Casi claimed – radicalizes his artistic endeavors, on the one hand by writing in an increasingly literary manner, including plays and poetic and narrative works, and on the other in a multiplication of “theatrical” actions and readings that increasingly elude any clear definition and increasingly link themselves to concrete, specific occasions.” Scabia has always passed over the “spectacle” form, even when he himself has given voice to his works in unconventional places and modes, without distinguishing between an inn, a private home or a theater. In contrast, several of his works, (especially *Fantastica visione* of 1973, published 15 years later by Feltrinelli) were presented – some with his cooperation – both in Italy and abroad by other directors, such as Aldo Trionfo, Pier Luigi Pier’Alli, Harald Ludwig, Michele Perriera, Massimo Castri, Alessandro Marinuzzi, Renato Nicolini and Geppy Glejjeses.

During the 1980’s Scabia devoted himself more intensely to his writing, also intensifying his activity as a “theatrical wayfarer,” and writing different texts for the Ciclo del Teatro Vagante, while also rigorously pursuing his university teaching.

In 1990 he published his first novel, *In capo al mondo*, although his most famous one remains *Nane Oca* (1992, Brunacci Prize 1993), which he himself read aloud several times in various natural or urban settings. This first publication was followed, especially towards the end of the first decade of the new millennium, by other episodes focusing on *Nane Oca*. 1995 saw the publication of his poetry collection *Il poeta albero*, which Scabia, invited two years later to the International Poetry Festival in Colombia to represent Italy, read while actually perched in trees. Among his novels, besides the popular *Nane Oca* saga¹⁰, whose second and third volumes they are, also published by Einaudi, *Le foreste sorelle* (2005), *Nane Oca rivelato* (2009), *Lorenzo e Cecilia* also deserves mention (Einaudi, Turin 2005), linked to his first novel, *In capo al mondo*. Among his poems are *Lettere a un lupo* (2001), *Il tremito. Che cos’è la poesia?* (2006) and *Canti del guardare lontano* (Einaudi 2012).

⁷ Cfr. G. Scabia, *Marco Cavallo*, Einaudi, Turin 1976.

⁸ Two years later, in 2007, Scabia received the Dams Prize for his career. Documentation on his entire university career and the development of his personal teaching method can be found in the more than 50 *Quaderni di drammaturgia* raccolti da Casi. Cfr. S. Casi, p. 278.

⁹ Cfr. G. Scabia in M. Belpoliti, *Nel laboratorio di Bologna*, a 2005 interview published at «www.doppiozero.it» on July 18, 2015 inside the *Speciale Scabia*. The interview in summary form was published by M. Belpoliti, *Scabia, il folletto in strada*, in «La Stampa», on November 7, 2015.

¹⁰ In addition to publishing his novel trilogy and poetry collection *Canto notturno di Nane Oca sul platano alto dei Ronchi Palù* in 1997, during 2010 Scabia organized, on the invitation and nudging of various intellectuals, a series of performative events with characters from the saga.