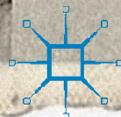




# Educational Theatre for Women in Post-World War II Italy

## A Stage of Their Own

Daniela Cavallaro



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Cover illustration: The all-women theatre company of Tirano (Sondrio) in Claudia Procula, 4 April 1954. Photo courtesy of Ebe Pedretti

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*per mia madre*

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## Theatre Is a Serious Matter

“O gentle Romeo,” whispers a dreamy young Juliet, wearing an oversized dress over her chequered school pinafore and a crown of flowers on her head. “If thou dost love me, pronounce it faithfully. Or if thou think’st I am too young for love, or too quickly won...”<sup>1</sup> “Juliet, I swear to you”, replies her classmate matter-of-factly, reading her lines from a book, wearing the same school uniform and her hair divided in symmetrical plaits. “No! A lower voice. Like a man. [...] A deep, warm voice, you know”, exclaims Juliet, breaking role. “Juliet, I swear to you”, tries the female Romeo again, this time feigning a lower register. The poor attempt at a male voice causes the group of about 15 uniformed girls and teenagers admiring the performance to break into laughter. “Don’t laugh!” cries Juliet earnestly. “Theatre is a serious matter!” The young spectators resume their captive listening of the vows of eternal love exchanged between Romeo and Juliet, until the stern principal, wearing a disapproving expression, appears at the door and scatters them away.

This short scene from Vittorio de Sica’s film *Teresa Venerdì* (1941), set in an all-girls orphanage, humorously portrays the sort of theatrical representations that used to take place in all-female Italian schools, boarding schools, parish halls and orphanages before World War II.<sup>2</sup> Theatre performances were often encouraged in educational environments—which were single gender at the time and would remain so until the mid-1960s—as they gave the performers many educational opportunities: to practise proper diction, as opposed to the more common dialectal pronunciation of their daily lives; to memorise unusual, learned words; to sympathise

with the thoughts, feelings and life choices of different people; to learn about exotic locations and past historical times; to show creativity in arranging costumes; to prove reliability by regularly attending rehearsals; to get along with peers; to respect their elders' decisions; and to develop self-confidence in presenting themselves to others (as happens in de Sica's film to the protagonist Teresa Venerdi, whose acting background allows her to role-play herself into a romantic happy ending). Moreover, the time spent in preparing, rehearsing and then actually performing would be taken away from time that might be spent partaking in other possibly less healthy forms of entertainment, in less secure environments.

In pre-war Italy, educational theatre was considered a healthy form of entertainment and thus preferred to, for example, cinema or dancing, which provided opportunities for promiscuity. The right sort of dramatic work would also provide an appropriate, edifying message that both performers and spectators (schoolmates and sometimes relatives) could easily grasp. For a female cast and a female audience in particular, plays containing characters who gave proof of such virtues as honesty, respect, obedience, patience, loyalty, modesty and faith were considered particularly suitable—which explains why *Teresa Venerdi's* orphanage principal did not approve of her pupils' choice of *Romeo and Juliet* for their impromptu performance.

Inappropriate content was only one of the possible risks of theatre for young women. Another was the presence onstage of male characters. Shakespeare and other classics had to be modified or adapted to the needs of the single-gender performers and spectators, with the male roles either eliminated, switched to female or (if absolutely necessary, as would have been the case for Romeo) performed by a girl in a male costume. However, cross-dressing in all-female theatre could bring unwanted results: either hilarity, if a female Romeo, for example, could not quite fake the necessary deep, warm voice for the role, as in *Teresa Venerdi*; or sexual misconduct, if the breech role happened to be too convincing.<sup>3</sup> For centuries, in fact, the biblical prohibition of cross-dressing<sup>4</sup> transferred to the stage as well because of the fear that cross-dressing might invite homosexuality or signal sexual availability (Garber 1992, 29–31), “that wearing the clothes of the other gender might change the wearer, that a disquieting power—a power at once sexual and political—did somehow inhere in clothes” (Garber 1992, 217).

To avoid the problem of cross-dressing and the possible immoral implications of staging the classics for a young audience while continuing the tradition of theatre as an educational and healthy entertainment,

after World War II and for nearly 20 years many Italian women, as well as several men, created hundreds of plays that both contain a definite educational message and consist of female roles only. These authors, their plays and the magazines in which they appeared are the focus of this book.

### FROM THE POST-WAR YEARS TO THE ECONOMIC MIRACLE

Although some publications lasted until the mid-1960s, the golden era of educational plays for women extended from 1946 to about 1960. This era coincided with major transformations in Italian society, which was slowly recovering from the end of Fascism and the ravages of war, and reaching a period of new economic prosperity. As Molly Tambor put it, this was “not just a period of apolitical desire for a return to normalcy and the reconstruction of devastated families”, but a time of “great conflict, upheaval, and political activism” for Italians—both men and women (2010, 431).

Women had become more independent and mobile during the war: at home, where they took on responsibilities that would normally have fallen to their husbands, fathers, brothers or sons, and after September 1943 outside the home, by participating in the anti-Fascist armed resistance or enlisting in the Auxiliary Services of the army in Mussolini’s Republic of Salò.

After the end of the war, women acquired the right to vote and to be voted in, winning the presence of 21 women among the 543 members of the Assembly that was in charge of writing a constitution for the new Italian state. Making up 52 per cent of the electorate, their vote was highly sought after in the 1946 elections, both for the constituents and for the constitutional referendum to choose between monarchy and republic, as well as two years later in the elections for the first general parliament of the new Italian republic. The two main contestants in the 1948 election were the Christian Democrats and the Popular Front—a coalition that included the Italian Communist Party and the Italian Socialist Party. The election staged a clash between a conservative, Catholic, capitalist Italy envisioned by Christian Democracy and a revolutionary, secular, socialist Italy envisioned by the Popular Front (Ventresca 2003, 439). The Church treated the election as an almost apocalyptic battle between God and Satan, Christ and the Antichrist, civilisation and barbarism, liberty and slavery (Pollard 2003, 108). Women in particular were encouraged to cast their vote to prevent the Communist threat from destroying their families. “The legislative position of women in the new nation”, summarises Lesley

Caldwell, “was one that sought to endorse their rights as citizens while insisting that motherhood was their major contribution to the building of the new collectivity” (2006, 229).

Yet while women in the post-war years resumed their place in the domestic environment, a shift supported by the return of men from the war and the women’s consequent loss of jobs, there was also a desire for change. As Penelope Morris points out, by the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, Italy was already feeling the influence of American consumerism; as yet inaccessible products (such as domestic appliances, cosmetics and cars) featured in films and magazines were becoming objects of desire (2006, 10). During the 1950s, industrial development, especially in the north, and the consequent massive migration of southern agricultural populations to join the industrial workforce, as well as the construction of new, single-family housing, changed Italy from a traditionally rural society to an urban one, giving origin to what was defined as “the economic miracle”. Between 1953 and 1960, industrial production increased 89 per cent (Scrivano 2005, 320) and salaries grew about 4 per cent per year (Cacioppo 1982, 86). With the increase of per capita income, new products became available and more accessible, and mobility increased. The number of motorcycles rose from one million in 1955 to four million in 1960 and the number of cars from 700,000 in 1954 to three million in 1962 (Crainz 2003, 84; 136). As for domestic appliances, in 1958 only 13 per cent of Italian families owned a refrigerator and 3 per cent owned a washing machine. By 1965, that number had risen to 55 per cent and 23 per cent, respectively (Ginsborg 2003, 239). RAI, the Italian broadcasting company, started its programming in 1954 for only 88,000 registered television sets. In just four years, the number of televisions had reached one million (Ginsborg 2003, 240). Leisure activities had also become more frequent, cinema in particular: on average, more than two million people per day went to the movies in 1955 (Crainz 2003, 142). Dance halls and bars with jukeboxes became places where young people could meet and socialise (Ginsborg 2003, 244).

However, this exposure to new products and lifestyles from the USA was a concern for many parties: Communists deplored the Americanisation of Italy and the Catholic Church looked with suspicion on the materialism, changes in social customs and what it saw as a decline in moral standards (Morris 2006, 11–12). Furthermore, mass migration brought about a high number of de facto separations (about 600,000 in the late 1950s), women raising children on their own and issues of illegitimacy

(Caldwell 1995, 154–55), as divorce was not yet legal, so new couples could not remarry. On the other hand, cohabitation of extended families became common, as elderly parents had to move in with their children because of lack of financial self-sufficiency and inadequate social structures (Cacioppo 1982, 84–85).

### RECOVERING THE LOST TRADITION OF EDUCATIONAL THEATRE FOR WOMEN

It is this dramatic change in Italian society, for women in particular, that I saw reflected in the new plays for female casts published in monthly magazines after the end of the war and through the years of the country's reconstruction and the economic miracle.

My first encounter with post-World War II educational theatre for women occurred in 2000, well before Italian library catalogues began to be computerised and accessible online. Having found few primary and secondary resources on women playwrights in Italy before feminist theatre, I decided to go through the most important magazines collected at the Burcardo Library and Theatre Collection in Rome and simply look for plays written by women. I still recall the jolt of surprise when I found a magazine name in the card catalogue that sounded very encouraging: *Scene femminili* (Women's stages). What I found was even more than I expected: the magazine not only published new plays by women in each bimonthly issue, but the plays themselves included only women's roles—instances of which I had seen just occasionally in feminist theatre from the 1970s. Sadly, the Burcardo library owned merely a few issues of *Scene femminili*; however, these convinced me that I should look for the rest, as well as for other similar magazines, if they existed. And in fact, the pages of *Scene femminili* themselves indicated the existence of a “sister” publication, *Teatro delle giovani* (Young women's theatre), that also sounded promising. So began a more than decade-long search that brought to the surface hundreds of educational plays in archives and libraries, as well as from the bookshelves of generous donors.

Some of the plays I read were thought provoking, some of the comedies witty and some of the dramas powerful. On the other hand, some works were so melodramatic, far-fetched or tedious that one wonders if they were ever staged at all. Nevertheless, in one way or another, all the plays I found portrayed a female universe far different from what I was used to seeing in

Italian films, novels and theatre of the post-war years. There were two main reasons for this difference: they did not include men and they were sponsored by Catholic institutions. Thus, I believe that not only the best plays but also the genre of educational theatre for women in the Italian post-war years deserve to be recovered and studied because of their unique characteristics.

### AUTHORS, CHARACTERS, SPECTATORS

As I had hoped, educational theatre for female-only casts did provide me with an unexpected source of theatrical works by women. In fact, the vast majority of authors were women. Seldom professional writers, although in some cases writing for educational theatre served as a preparation for other literary endeavours, they were teachers, secretaries, housewives and nuns who decided to write plays to satisfy the needs of the particular group of girls in their charge.<sup>5</sup> In most cases, because they did not acquire fame through their publications, little information is available about these playwrights. While *Scene femminili* encouraged its authors to introduce themselves informally in the pages of the magazine, *Teatro delle giovani* provided no information whatsoever on the identity of its authors, not even whether (as was often the case) they belonged to a religious order. Thus, part of my research consisted in recovering biographical data on the women authors of all-girls theatre, since it gives evidence of women's interest and skills in writing for the theatre in a country such as Italy that can count very few well-known female dramatists before the 1970s.<sup>6</sup>

A second unique characteristic was that all the roles in the plays I looked at belong to women: this means that women are always the protagonists and not merely occupying the supportive roles of mothers, sisters and love interests of the male characters. As Maggie Gunsberg noted for Franca Rame's monologues of the late 1970s, the fact that women are not competing with men for audience attention, as normally happens in mainstream theatre, brings to the foreground the feminine perspective of the world offered in the play (1997, 203). Thus, as the performers of educational plays for women would in many cases play roles that were similar to their daily life activities—students, workers, sisters, friends, daughters and homemakers—they offer a vivid portrait of the post-war world in which they were growing up. On the other hand, many roles allowed young women to forget for a few hours the difficult reality of the reconstruction years and play what they were not: beggar, queen, detective, spy, martyr, maid, slave, gypsy or saint.

Moreover, although in many cases a love interest is part of or even the driving force behind the plot, the relationship between the two people in love never takes centre stage. Rather, the protagonist's casual encounter offstage with a handsome and honest young man would be at the centre of conversations among a group of friends, in which she lamented her parents' resistance to such a match or to any match at all, and plotted the best way to overcome parental disapproval and win over the man of her dreams. In fact, many plays stage conflicts in which the younger generation represents a desire for renewal, change and modernity, in contrast to their parents' stagnant immobility and attachment to age-old ideas. On some occasions, however, it is the sensible grandmother who remains a depository of wisdom and ethical values that the younger generation seems to have lost.

One of the challenges of creating plays with women's roles only is to find a specific situation in which the absence of men would seem justified. All-girls schools, orphanages and boarding houses were the obvious choices, which would in later years expand to include factories, prisons and even refugee camps. Home settings in dramas might mention fathers, husbands, brothers or fiancés killed during the war; comedies would report men travelling, building a career in a different city, momentarily away at work or simply waiting downstairs for the protagonists to join them.

Whatever the setting, the women onstage—vivacious students, paralysed grandmothers, mischievous little sisters, frivolous mothers, responsible widows, invidious friends, difficult mothers-in-law, underpaid factory workers, aspiring missionaries, stern principals or supportive cousins—had to make choices without the guidance or control of men. They did not have to submit to or question the authority of husbands, fathers or confessors. They were in charge.

The effect of such protagonism would have been felt not only by the young and not-so-young women performing in all-women theatre, but also by their audience, which in many cases was itself female only. Several former performers of educational theatre mentioned that men were either excluded from the audience (Ragazzi 2013; Villa 2013) or preferred to remain outside anyway (Aliverti 2013); others recounted that attending an all-women play was the only form of evening entertainment that their own mothers were allowed (Cucco 2013). Thus, considering that most plays were written by women, performed by women and addressed to women, I would claim that educational theatre in post-war Italy—even though possibly not deliberately—gave women a unique opportunity to