

PLAYS

INTERNATIONAL & EUROPE



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NATALIA ISAEVA ON
ANATOLI VASSILIEV,
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BOOK REVIEWS

Features: a sample



The north London women's theatre company Clean Break is devoted to giving prisoners a voice. Shown here, the performance Sweatbox takes place in a prison van. Read Jeremy Malies' interviews with the company's directors Anna Herrmann and Róisín McBrinn. Photo courtesy of Clean Break.

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Michael Ajzenstadt on Opera as Theatre. A scene from Wagner's dramatic Tannhäuser at Germany's Bayreuther Schauspielhaus in 2019. Stephen Gould as Tannhäuser and Elena Zhidkova as Venus in Tannhäuser at Wagner's Bayreuther Festspiele, 2019. Photo by Enrico Nawrath.

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John Russell Taylor reflects on a lifetime in theatre in Anger ... And After? Gemma Dobson as Jo and Stuart Thompson as Geoffrey in A Taste of Honey in a National Theatre touring production in 2019/2020. Photo by Marc Brenner.

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FRONT COVER:

At the Berlin Schlosspark Theater, actor Dieter Hallervorden sits beside one of the dolls especially designed to occupy the seats kept unoccupied to permit social distancing during the Covid pandemic. Photo: Knut Koops
 Read the review by Hans-Jürgen Bartsch on page 46.

Maggie Rose on the English Theatre Milan

English Theatre Milan was set up in July 2019 by Sal Cabras, Julia Holden and I. We all live and work in Milan which has a lively theatre scene with some thirty busy theatres, from which the Piccolo Teatro stands out as a truly international arts venue. Founded by Giorgio Strehler, Paolo Grassi and Nina Vinchi in 1947, it is Italy's first public theatre. With each season the Piccolo offers theatregoers an opportunity to see its own in-house productions, productions from around Italy, as well as the work of a small number of important companies from different parts of the world, these often headed by leading directors like Lev Dodin, Eimuntas Nekrosius and Robert Wilson. Among the outstanding British companies, over the years my favourites have included, Edward Hall's Propeller and Declan Donnellan's Cheek by Jowl, without forgetting the one-person Shakespeares by Ian McKellen and Fiona Shaw.

It is well known that British theatre since the Second World War has been among the most productive and fertile in Europe, but only a few productions from England reach Milan. Many years ago I remember writer and translator Sal Cabras and I talking about what we considered to be a serious cultural gap in the English language shows available. We discussed the possibility of inviting some small but artistically excellent companies, with a view to bringing to Milan a freshness and a level of experimentation sometimes missing in the shows on hand. Having studied several theatres already programming a season in English in other major European cities, Sal came up with the idea of an English Theatre organization for Milan, the intention being to put on shows in a number of different but existing theatre venues. We wanted to create an English-speaking community of theatregoers who would not only see the shows but also attend platform events and perhaps theatre workshops run by our visiting companies. We knew that such a cultural, non-profit organization would undoubtedly enrich life in the city.

In 2017, Julia Holden was organizing workshops with experienced UK practitioners in some of Milan's international schools. We met and she asked us for advice and help to find theatre buildings in which to stage some plays. A three-way conversation got underway to set up what is today an ongoing venture, the English Theatre Milan Association. Soon afterwards, we decided to produce and direct our own "home-grown" productions with local actors who are either native speakers or bilingual.

Over the two years prior to the formal establishment of English Theatre Milan in July 2019, we invited several shows over from the UK. This informal collaboration was important since it allowed us to become familiar with potential audiences and to start building relationships with some interested Milanese theatres that were able to host our shows. In 2017 writer and actor Justin Butcher performed his solo show *The Devil's Passion* at Il Teatro Filodrammatici di Milano, while in 2018 the producer, director, and actor Guy Masterson brought Gareth Armstrong's *Shylock* to the Filodrammatici theatre and Charles Dickens's *Christmas Carol* to the Teatro Litta. In 2018 Cabras and I produced our first play, his one-person show *Hilde* with British actor Louise Kissane, which I directed. For all these productions, we arranged a Question & Answer session with the company and in some cases a buffet, so audience members could socialize as well as meet company

members.

Audiences responded well to these shows, and we were mostly sold-out. People's enthusiasm and eagerness for more theatre in English convinced us that we should go ahead and set up a more formal association. By then we had a fairly good idea of the audiences who were coming to see our shows. They were a mixed bag of British and American expats, other non-Italians who know and love English, and a good number of Italians. People of all ages have attended our productions. Another interesting statistic is that far more women than men support our activities.

In November 2019, we organised our first event as English Theatre Milan at Milan's Teatro Gerolamo, a gem of a venue locally known as La Piccola Scala. Built in the mid-eighteenth century, the Gerolamo stands just round the corner from the iconic opera house on a small square next to Milan Cathedral. Thanks to the international outlook of the theatre's artistic director Alberica Archinto (see interview below) and its general director, the architect Chitose Asano, we were fortunate to be offered a three-day slot for a showcase. In Milan, there is genuine appreciation of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, so we decided to exploit this popularity by labelling our initiative "Shows from the Edinburgh Fringe".

Given the huge number of shows performed at the Fringe Festival, the selection was not an easy one. We therefore set ourselves a few criteria in light of what we had learnt over the previous two years: given the rather conservative taste of audience members who had attended our productions, we would not select shows that were too experimental. Linguistically speaking, the plays should also not present too much of a challenge for non-native speakers, even though each play is performed with Italian surtitles. The plays should have no more than one or two characters, given our limited budget and the tiny stage at the Gerolamo. Last but not least, the productions had to be top quality. In the end, for our first showcase we decided on two one-person plays.

The first, *Scaramouche Jones - or the Seven White Masks*, was written and performed by Justin Butcher and directed by Guy Masterson. The play wasn't a direct transfer to Milan but had opened at the Fringe in 2009 after which its author-performer has toured worldwide. In the play Butcher in the role of the clown Scaramouche, driven by a courageous spirit, takes his audiences on a journey of crumbling empires through the West Indies, Europe, Africa, and beyond. In Butcher's own words, "Scaramouche is a delicately drawn character, a perfect balance of beauty and tragedy – one we can recognize in ourselves, the ultimate mask of the clown".

English Theatre Milan's second production was the play *My Darling Clemmie* by Hugh Whitmore, performed by Rohan McCullough and directed by Gareth Armstrong. It was at the Fringe in 2019. Two factors impacted on our choice: firstly, Julia Holden and I saw it then and loved it; additionally, at the Fringe it had sold out and had received some five-star reviews. The play celebrates the long and remarkable marriage of Winston and Clementine Churchill, one of the most successful partnerships in modern British history. Clemmie stood by him from their unconventional courtship through the tumultuous years of World



The auditorium and stage of the Teatro Gerolamo. Photo courtesy of the theatre.

War One and Churchill's erratic political progress. The play is theatrical storytelling at its best, since Rohan McCullough in the role of Clemmie keeps audiences mesmerized with her moving, amusing, and frank account of Churchill. She deftly and quickly switches among the many roles she played in her relationship to Winston: mother to their children, staunch protector of his reputation, devoted wife, and at times a fierce critic whenever she deemed the judgment of this wartime politician and leader misguided. I talked to Gareth Armstrong, director of *My Darling Clemmie*, when he visited Milan to see the play at the Teatro Gerolamo and learned that during the last three decades this truly international figure has written and performed his own solo shows and has adapted other people's plays for major festivals and theatres in a multitude of European cities. Gareth and I asked him about the production's visit to Milan, and he told me that "The play is linguistically quite difficult, and would not be an obvious choice for an audience of non-native speakers. However, Rohan's stage presence is magnetic. As she performs *My Darling Clemmie* she manages to engage audience members, even if they don't understand every word. She is after all telling them a story and talking directly to them, so they feel that they are actually in her company".

Gareth also attended a Question & Answer session that English Theatre Milan hosted. "A Tea with Clemmie" was an informal meeting allowing a small group of audience members to meet the company over light refreshments. Gareth reflected that "such meetings are very enjoyable and can also illuminate the subject of a play that isn't that well known. People generally know something about Churchill but very little or nothing about Clementine Hozier. I think the event and the discussion I attended when audience members were able to ask questions to you, Rohan, and myself worked really well. A Q & A of that sort somehow rounds off the experience of having seen the play." And so we were reminded that one of the advantages of running an English language theatre in a foreign country is that a platform can

be dedicated to exposition, and simple discussions of the production on hand are potentially highly valued by local audiences.

We three joint directors of the English Theatre Milan continue to find out more about audience reception in order to design future programmes with our audience in mind. During the Teatro Gerolamo showcase, we distributed a questionnaire asking audience members what they thought about the use of surtitles in Italian. How important were the surtitles for them? The result of that informal survey was quite surprising to us. Sixty percent of the audience answered that they liked the surtitles for reasons such as "Just in case there were things (we) couldn't understand". Among the people who answered the questionnaire, only one in five said they would have gone to see the plays if there had been no surtitles! While we had laboured under the impression that surtitling a play in some way "modified" the performance because the actor is less free to ad lib or improvise, this factor apparently did not worry the vast majority of our spectators.

We at English Theatre Milan intend to continue our work despite the difficulties encountered during the lockdown due to Covid-19. As I am writing this article (August 2020), the virus menace prevents us from planning a detailed programme. Still we are envisaging a second showcase at the Teatro Gerolamo for spring of 2021, while our schools programme – including our own production of John Maddison Morton's farce *Box and Cox* (1847) – is planned to open in November of this year. In the long term, we hope not only to continue inviting productions in English to Milan but also to organise Italian tours for the companies we invite as well as to make agreements with other English theatres in some of the major cities in Europe to exchange shows or to visit them with our own in-house productions.

Contact Margaret Rose at critics@playsinternational.org.uk

Seeking A New Audience in Milan: Alberica Archinto, artistic director of Teatro Gerolamo interviewed by Sal Cabras of the Milan English Theatre

Because of the lockdown in Milan, I interviewed Alberica Archinto in the square outside the Teatro Gerolamo where she works as artistic advisor. Since 2018 Archinto has brought new life to this historic theatre a stone's throw from the Cathedral and at the very heart of the city. A highly respected professional who has held down a raft of different jobs in the performing arts, she is currently on the board of the Accademia dei filodrammatici, the oldest drama academy in Italy. Previously, she sat on the board of the Milanese Arts Council in the area of the performing arts. She has also worked as a programmer at the Rai (Italian State Television) for ten years and was coordinator of one of Milan's other important drama schools, La Civica Scuola di Teatro Paolo Grassi.

Archinto is well-known as the founder and curator of Stanze (Rooms), a site-specific theatre season for which she programmes a series of new plays in people's homes. This means that every week audience members go on the road in search of that week's venue. Rooms gives companies a much sought after opportunity to try out new work, much of which transfers later to regular theatres. Rooms – given the high quality of the plays and the very special intimate setting in private houses – has proved so popular that the plays have also toured to Naples, Rome, Piacenza, and Varese.

Alberica Archinto is fully aware that one has to seek out and nurture new audiences to keep the auditorium full. So, when she was approached two years ago by the Milan English Theatre, she eagerly agreed to welcome productions from us in her theatre building. This is what she told me about keeping Milanese audiences interested in theatre.

Sal Cabras

Why have you agreed to support productions of the Milan English Theatre?

In Milan there is a great variety of shows on offer, and theatregoers are substantially the same group of passionate people. From the very start of my job at the Teatro Gerolamo, I selected high quality productions – plays that opened in Milan, companies and actors who are highly regarded throughout Italy. We also focused especially on new writing. Besides this, we have also programmed clown and marionette shows as well as concerts. Above all, we have done our best to pull in people who don't normally go to the theatre. This is why we considered it a great opportunity when the founders of English Theatre Milan approached us with a proposal for plays in English at the beginning of 2019.

What is it that facilitates your decision to programme plays in English now as compared to the past?

It's worth remembering that as of the EXPO in 2015 a significant change in Milanese society took place. Many young people, and not only the young, came to live and work here. They include Italians and people from elsewhere with a medium-to-excellent education level. Many of them know English well and enjoy a non-traditional life style. These people are certainly appreciative of top quality cultural events. Today, given the situation caused by Covid-19, it is hard to know if Milan will continue as before or if it will change.

Which of these newcomers are the most interested in theatre?

Certainly the young professionals, the high school and university students, and the many teachers of English at high school and university. Don't let's forget there are about ten universities in Milan and the courses taught in English are on the increase.

How do you rate this first trial run of plays in English at the Gerolamo?

The experiment met our expectations, attracting audience members, most of whom were non-Italians, who otherwise would



Alberica Archinto. Courtesy of Archinto.

not find anything similar in Milan. We filled sixty percent of our seats and feel sure that we achieved something important for the community.

What do you envisage in the future?

The crisis triggered by the pandemic has left its mark everywhere. As we know it has particularly damaged live theatre and entertainment, and it prevents me from making a definite forecast for the future. However we are now preparing to live with the restrictions that the pandemic brings with it while at the same time safeguarding live performance. The management of the Gerolamo has decided to change the venue's seating and performance arrangements, at least for the time being. We can do this because the Gerolamo is an Italian-style theatre, and shows can be performed using a part of the stalls while audience members will be seated on the stage and in the remaining stalls. In this way social distancing can be achieved both for the actors and for audience members. Unfortunately, though, audience numbers will be much lower than pre-pandemic.

Questions for Sal Cabras can be sent to TRIEu@gmail.com