

Encounters and Blind Spots: Pirandello, Evreinov, and Brecht

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The years between 1928 and 1930, when Pirandello was living in Berlin, coincided with the translation into Italian of Evreinov's theoretical essays and with the first production of Brecht's *Three Penny Opera*. Nikolaj Evreinov (1879-1953), while younger than Pirandello, shared with him a common philosophical and aesthetic background. Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), who belonged to a different generation, had opposite political views and very different aims for his theatrical practice. However, these three theatre practitioners were all concerned with interrogating the mechanisms of the theatre. They challenged the static view that juxtaposed the stage and the auditorium, defining boundaries between areas for "playing" and "watching," and they proposed instead a dynamic view based on the interrelation of these spaces and their functions. All three practitioners examined the relation between actor and character and character and spectator. Finally, all three were engaged in drawing attention to the essence of the theatre—to what defined theatre as such—but they were also fascinated with the extension of performance into other domains.

Pirandello produced two of Evreinov's plays at the Teatro d'Arte in 1925, but he became acquainted with Evreinov's theatrical theories a few years later, probably in 1929. At this time, Pirandello and Brecht were both living in the same city. Pirandello was exploring the theatrical scene of the Weimar Republic and was busy writing *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* (*Tonight We Improvise*), as well as several screenplays for the cinema. Brecht was at a critical point in his career; he was in the process of becoming well known and he was re-envisioning theatrical practice in relation to pedagogy.

While numerous scholars have explored the connections between Pirandello and Evreinov, fewer have researched the connections between Pirandello and Brecht, and, to my knowledge, the three figures have never been examined in conjunction. In this paper, I will illustrate how the paths of Pirandello, Evreinov, and Brecht crossed, shedding light on the

common concerns of their poetics and their different conceptions of theatricality. I define theatricality as “that which is specifically theatrical, in performance or in the dramatic text” (Pavis 395). It also includes, following Evreinov’s suggestion, the quality that defines all self-conscious performance in front of an audience, or in any social situation in life. By comparing the points of conjunction in the practice and poetics of Evreinov and Pirandello as well as Pirandello and Brecht, with a focus on the time in which the Sicilian author was engaged in writing and arranging the production of *Questa sera si recita a soggetto*, I aim to shed light on Pirandello’s reflections on the theatre, his position on the relation between actors and characters and characters and spectators, as well as his understanding of performance within and outside the theatrical space. My contention is that Pirandello’s interest in Evreinov’s dramas and theories and his lack of response to Brecht’s practice point not only to divergent political views but also to a different understanding of the theatre as participatory experience.

Pirandello and Evreinov: Encounters and Connections

Evreinov was an experimental actor, playwright and director who today is mainly remembered for the extravagant and yet insightful theoretical writing he produced in the vibrant artistic climate of early-20th-century Russia. He challenged the dominant aesthetic of naturalism, represented by the school of Stanislavsky, and pursued the objective of bringing back theatricality to the Western stage, looking for inspiration in ancient forms such as medieval plays, the *commedia dell’arte*, and in Hindu and Chinese pantomime. Throughout his career he explored the relation between actors and audiences and strove to bridge the distance between stage and auditorium. During his time as a director of St Petersburg’s Theatre of Antiquity he investigated and reconstructed the role of audiences in medieval plays. He held official positions such as the director of Moscow Art Theatre, while simultaneously experimenting with parody, *commedia dell’arte* and pantomime at the Crooked Mirror Cabaret. In 1908, he wrote the manifesto *Apologija teatral’nosti* (*Apology of Theatricality*), which remains a reference for scholars exploring the notion of theatricality (see Féral 348). The following year, he developed *monodrama*, a form of spectacle in which

all the elements on stage represent the perception of the main figure, which in turn reflects a projection of the author. The idea behind this form of drama was that, by empathizing with a single figure, spectators would avoid disruption and experience the play as if they were onstage, maximizing their participation in the production. Evreinov later moved on to other projects but continued to experiment with devices to reduce the distance between stage and auditorium.

In Evreinov's theoretical writing, developed in *Teatr kak takovoi* (*The Theatre as Such*, 1912) and in the series *Teatr dja sebja* (*The Theatre for Oneself*, 1915–1917), a selection of which was published in English as *The Theatre in Life* (1927) and in Italian as *Il teatro nella vita* (1929), there is a tendency to alternate between the conception of theatricality as a property specific to the theatre and theatricality as permeating all domains of life, from sexuality to business, from the social to religious spheres and from political affairs to military structures. On one hand, Evreinov defines theatricality as a natural instinct and an innate need. On the other hand, taking a sociological approach that prefigures the theories of scholars such as Erving Goffman, he emphasizes the artificiality of human behavior and the extension of performance in all spheres of life, challenging a sharp distinction between the natural and the theatrical.¹ In the chapter entitled “The Stage Management of Life,” he comes close to the conception of “cultural performance” when he underlines how each country and cultural context has “its own theatrical characteristic, its own wardrobe and scenery, its own mask” (1970, 100). This view resonated with Pirandello's conception of naked masks and is especially in line with his emphasis on the theatricality of Sicilian culture, which Pirandello addressed in early fiction and plays and which still constitutes a central concern in later plays such as *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* (1930).

In the series of essays titled “The Theatre for Oneself,” Evreinov elaborates on theatre as a therapeutic tool for both actors and spectators. Since, in his vision, actors and spectators are bound by empathy, the stage gives to both the opportunity to project their desires and fulfill their instincts for transformation in a framework free from societal restrictions. This view constituted an important shift, because it moved the emphasis from the theatrical production as an aesthetic product to the enjoyment

of the performative process for both audience and participants. In line with this, Evreinov argued that the theatrical impulse preceded aesthetic notions, and called for amateur actors, who, in his opinion, were more likely to act for the sake of it (Evreinov 1970, 166). On the other hand, Evreinov did not exclude the belief that theatre could have a pedagogical or social function; plays such as *Samoe glavnoe* (*The Chief Thing*), written around 1919, and *Teatr vechnoi voiny* (*The Theatre of Eternal War*, 1927), suggest that, since role-playing is embedded in all human behavior, theatre is also the best training tool to make sure that individuals can be successful in life.

Evreinov was initially an enthusiastic supporter of the Russian revolution. His writings stress the role of performance in constructing the political and military order, and in 1920, he directed the famous *Vziatie zimnego dvorca* (*The Storming of the Winter Palace*), a reenactment of the October Revolution that involved an orchestra of 500 and a cast of 8000 individuals, not one of whom was trained as a professional actor (see Smith 2010, 204). This spectacle exemplified the potential of performance to inculcate political and moral lessons for both audiences and participants, although most of the plays written after this date—such as *Korabl' pravednykh* (*The Ship of the Righteous*, 1924)—express disillusionment with the possibility of using theatre as a tool for social change.

Evreinov's work became increasingly well known in Western Europe after he moved to Paris in 1925. Three of his plays were translated into Italian in that year. Luigi Pirandello, who was then beginning his experience as a *capocomico*, selected two of them for the first season of his Teatro d'Arte. Evreinov's references to the commedia dell'arte in *Vesëlaja smert'* (*A Merry Death*, translated into Italian as *La gaia morte* in 1925) provoked mixed reactions. While impressed by Lamberto Picasso's performance, Italian reviewers protested against what they saw as a careless appropriation of an Italian historical genre (see D'Amico and Tinterri 117). *Samoe glavnoe* (*The Main Thing*), mainly gained attention for the perceived similarities to *Sei personaggi in cerca di autore* (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, 1921 and 1925). Evreinov's play had premièred in St Petersburg in 1921, just three months before the *prima assoluta* of Pirandello's play. Just like *Sei personaggi*, it opened with the rehearsal of a theatre company in

a third rate theatre and had a complex meta-theatrical structure that involved several plays within plays. As in Pirandello's play, characters stepped in and out of their parts, moving between their roles as "characters" and "actors." In the 1925 season of the Teatro d'Arte, Pirandello strategically placed Evreinov's play just after the Teatro d'Arte production of *Sei personaggi* and just before the performance of *Enrico IV*, thereby encouraging comparisons between the work of the Russian playwright and his own.² Comparisons between the work of Pirandello and Evreinov continued when, two years later, Dullin staged *Samoe glavnoe* in Paris as *La Comédie du bonheur* (Carnicke and Parson 121; D'Amico and Tinterri 153).

Since then scholars have frequently addressed the similarities between Evreinov's "Trilogy of the Theatre in Life" and Pirandello's trilogy of "The Theatre within the Theatre."³ They have underlined how both authors encourage a critical stance from the spectators through the use of devices to break the illusory frame (see Baikova Poggi 1980; Pearson 1991, 1987); they have also emphasized their similar philosophical and aesthetic visions. Claudio Vicentini argued that Pirandello's experience in staging Evreinov's plays led to important revisions to the script of the *Sei personaggi* in the 1925 production, in which he decided to place stairs between the stage and the auditorium, enabling the actors' movement between the two sites (Vicentini 82).⁴ Other scholars have drawn attention to the similarities between Evreinov's *Krasivyi despot* (*The Beautiful Despot*, 1906) and Pirandello's *Henry IV* (1921), two plays which emphasize conscious role-play in real life (Collins XIII). Olle Hildebrand sees in both *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* and *Trovarsi* (*To Find Oneself*, 1932) "a reassessment of the existential implications of role-playing" that takes place under the influence of Evreinov (128).

In his own theoretical writing, Pirandello often refers to Evreinov's ideas. In 1929, the same year in which Evreinov's treatises on the theatre were summarized and translated into Italian in the volume *Il teatro nella vita* (1929), Pirandello published the essay "Se il film parlante abolirà il teatro" ("Will Talkies Abolish the Theatre?"),⁵ in which, referring to the Russian scholar as a personal friend, he summarizes his philosophy as follows:

Il mio amico Jevreinoff, autore di una commedia che anche gli americani hanno molto applaudito, arriva fino a dire e a

dimostrare in un suo libro che tutto il mondo è teatro e che non solo tutti gli uomini recitano nella parte che essi stessi si sono assegnata nella vita o gli altri hanno loro assegnata, ma che anche tutti gli animali recitano, e anche le piante e, insomma, tutta la natura.

Forse si può non arrivare fino a tanto. Ma che il teatro, prima di essere una forma tradizionale della letteratura, sia un'espressione naturale della vita non è, in alcun modo, da mettere in dubbio. (Pirandello 2006, 1327).

[My friend Jevreinoff, author of a comedy that the Americans have much applauded, even says and demonstrates in his book that the whole world is a stage and that not only all men play the part that they assigned to themselves in life, but that all the animals and even plants play, and, in short, all of nature.

Maybe this is too far-fetched. But that theatre, before being a traditional form of literature, is a natural expression of life is unquestionable.]⁶

Pirandello does not comment on Evreinov's ideas on acting nor on his stance on the theatrical experience; he appears more interested in the circumstances that define human (and non-human) activity as performance in self-conscious role-playing in everyday life. However, at this time he was very engaged in reflecting on the mechanisms of the theatre, as exemplified by *Questa sera di recita a soggetto*, a play that he writes in 1929 for the German stage. In this work, a German director hires a group of actors to improvise a tragic tale drawn from one of Pirandello's "Sicilian" stories. According to an interview released in the same year, Pirandello's aim was to criticize the tendency of German directors who reduced the dramatic text to a bare outline, filling it with elements such as "dance, acrobatics, circus horses, quick scene changes" (see Bassnet and Lorch 158). In a letter to Salvini dated March 30, 1930, Pirandello also underlines his intent to address the balance among the author, the actors and the director (D'Amico, 2007, 247-295). Along with these concerns, this metatheatrical play indicates an increasing interest in acting and acting methods. Throughout the play, the actors move in and out of their roles, emphasizing the contrast between their personalities and their stage personae as they struggle to put up with the instructions of the bossy director.

The Sicilian story that constitutes the play-within-the-play

underlines the theatricality of Sicilian culture, the self-conscious awareness of behaviors in front of audiences—in other words, the dimension that Evreinov refers to as “theatre in life.”⁷ It is also a tale that foregrounds several amateur performances: the protagonist and her sisters perform melodramas at home for their own enjoyment, thereby enacting a sort of “theatre for oneself,” and the female protagonist comforts herself by performing melodramas when, in the fiction, she is confined to her house. In addition, in rejecting the director’s elaborate scenography, opting for symbolic props, and focusing on the theatrical experience, the actors seem to listen to the advice that Evreinov gives in *The Theatre for Oneself*, in which he recommends that the actors not “pay too much attention to the aesthetic side of your theatre, to the details of scenic equipment” to “play in the company of others” (196), and also that they should prepare their mood for the play through “preparative measures” in real life (197).⁸ Like Evreinov, Pirandello stresses the importance of empathy and identification, and he goes as far as making the actors fall into a trance that effaces all distance from their stage personae.

Evreinov considered emotional involvement a form of audience engagement. In nineteenth century melodrama, the audience was not expected to participate, but Evreinov, saw in it an example of “old fashioned” art that, while defying naturalism, succeeds in binding actors and spectators: “Melodramas are no longer *en vogue* [...] but in former days men and women, young and old, all sat with reddened eyes, all dropped tears, all blew their noses, beholding the ‘unreal’ gesture of ‘theatrical’ heroism or hearing a pathetic phrase” he writes in *The Theatre in Life*. (Evreinov 1970, 143-44). In the same passage, he describes an example of acting that he finds “deeply moving” while defying the doctrine of naturalism:

I once overheard in a theatre the criticism of an old lady with an eternally skeptical smile on her lips: “Excuse me, but that isn’t natural,” she observed with the contempt of an expert whom one cannot fool. “Have you ever heard people crying like that in real life?” Meanwhile, after the fall of the curtain the actress lay almost senseless on the stage; her make-up was literally washed away by tears; even the carpenters who entered the stage to replace decorations were deeply moved [...]. (Evreinov 1970, 143)⁹

It is possible to identify a parallel between this scene and the ending of *Questa sera si recita a soggetto*, in which the leading actress collapses after having performed an aria from Verdi's *Trovatore*. In Pirandello's play, the actors' performance after their rebellion is incredibly successful, but the acting style adopted takes a toll on them: after playing the death of the protagonist, the leading actress feels as sick as if she had experienced a real heart attack. As Paolo Puppa and Roberto Tessari note in their forthcoming work, Pirandello goes beyond Stanislavsky in foregrounding a transformation from character into actor that entails the sacrifice of the leading actress. Overall, the play presents a paradox: Pirandello underlines the double nature of the theatrical enunciation, the distance between actors and stage personae, while at the same time conjuring "life" onstage through an acting style based on identification. The ending, in which the actors declare that they cannot continue acting in this manner, seems to question the limitations of this acting method—without, however, proposing an alternative solution.¹⁰

Pirandello and Brecht: The Blind Spot

If Josette Féral reaches back to Evreinov to define theatricality (349), the French scholar and director Jean Pierre Sarrazac underlines how the dramaturgy of Pirandello and Brecht brings about an important change in 20th-century theatre by inviting the audience to reflect on the "specifically theatrical:" "Changement parfaitement identifiable et explicite chez Brecht, qui souhaite que 'le théâtre avoue qu'il est au théâtre', et, déjà, chez Pirandello: le Régisseur de *Ce soir on improvise* n'annonce-t-il pas chaque soir au public qu'on va «essayer de regarder fonctionner à l'état pur ce jeu, cette simulation, ce simulacre, que couramment on appelle le théâtre?»" ["A perfectly identifiable and explicit change in Brecht, who wishes 'the theatre to admit that it is theatre;' and already, in Pirandello, doesn't the director of *Tonight We Improvise* announce to the public that every night it will 'consider how this game, this simulation, this sham commonly known as the theatre functions at the pure stage?'"] (61).

The names of Pirandello and Brecht are frequently cited in association with one another in Italian histories of theatre, often in such a way as to underline the place of the Sicilian author among the great European dramatists and to emphasize his engagement

in the renewal of the theatre (see Ferrante 1968; Szondi 1962). Pirandello and Brecht share the concern for the message of the dramatic text and the retention of its integrity through the *mise en scène*. Until the end of his life, the Sicilian author keeps repeating the position originally formulated in the essay “Illustratori, attori e traduttori” (“Illustrators, Actors and Translators,” 1908), according to which any translation into another artistic medium is seen as inferior to the original. Unlike Pirandello, Brecht is primarily concerned with the relation between the meaning of the text at the time in which it originated and the political significance that it can acquire at the time of production. However, for both of them the dramatic text maintains an important role (see Vigliero 119). The tension among the author, the actors and the directors is addressed throughout Pirandello’s trilogy and in particular in the last play, *Questa sera si recita a soggetto*.

Pirandello and Evreinov shared a common background in German idealism; their conception of theatricality was informed by the writings of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (Corsinovi 20-42, Hildebrand 114). The gap between Pirandello and Brecht was wider. They belonged to different generations and had opposite political stances. Pirandello declared his support for the Fascist party in 1924; Brecht had become interested in Marxism in 1926. Despite these differences, in the second part of the 1920s, both were preoccupied with similar issues: the impact of new technology on artistic productions, the relation between cinema and theatre and the influence of American culture on the European way of life—themes that are underlined in *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* and in the essays that the two artists produced in this period. In addition, both were fascinated by the observation of performance outside the stage, by spectacles such as sports, rituals and dance performances and by the dimension that Evreinov called “the theatre in life” — with conscious human behavior in everyday life. Furthermore, both had experience as theatre directors and were engaged in observing the work of actors as well as in exploring the relation of actors to different audiences in different cultural contexts.

In terms of life events, Brecht’s and Pirandello’s paths crossed more than once. Both were closely associated with Otto Falckenberg, who had staged Brecht’s *Trommeln in der Nacht* (*Drums in the Night*) in 1922 and Pirandello’s *Sei personaggi in*

cerca d'autore in Munich in 1924. In addition, Brecht was working as Max Reinhardt's assistant between 1924 and 1926, years in which the Austrian director staged *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, *Il piacere dell'onestà* and *Vestire gli ignudi* (see Chiarini 321). From 1926, on the wave of the success of *Sei Personaggi*, Pirandello began to be frequently quoted in the German press (see Cometa 1989). Around the same time Brecht, who had already won the Kleist prize with *Trommeln in der Nacht*, achieved visibility through *Mann ist Mann* (*A Man is a Man*), which premiered in Düsseldorf and Darmstadt in 1926. Wolfgang Sahlfeld notes that the comparison between Brecht and Pirandello was used among German critics to either support or invalidate the work of the younger dramatist (55). For instance, in reviewing *Mann ist Mann*, Herbert Jhering, who was a personal friend and supporter of Brecht, highlighted his innovative use of humor. In contrast Alfred Kerr, who was on good terms with Pirandello, cast Brecht in the role of a mediocre imitator and noted that he was using the same contrast between reality and illusion, but with less talent than the Sicilian playwright.

Scholars who have addressed the relation between the two playwrights tend to look for a possible influence of Pirandello on Brecht, rather than the other way around. In order to demonstrate the points of conjunction on their vision they often dwell on *Mann ist Mann* (see Chiarini; Sahlfeld). In fact, like many of Pirandello's works, *Mann ist Mann* foregrounds a fluid notion of identity. Like Vitangelo Moscarda in *Uno, nessuno e centomila* (*One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand*, 1926), Galy Gay, the Irish porter who is led to take on the identity of the soldier Jeraiah Jip, undergoes a symbolic death and experiences the dissolution of the self in nature or in the collective. Like the main figure of *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* (*The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator*, 1925), he is eventually reduced to a human machine. The effacement of individuality in an age of mass production is exemplified by the interlude in which the making and unmaking of Galy Gay is compared to the process of assembling an automobile. However, Brecht's introduction to the 1927 radio production of *Mann ist Mann* underlines the distance between the views of the two dramatists. In fact, whereas for Pirandello, the effacement of individuality always entails a crisis, in the 1927 talk Brecht described the loss of the self and the

transformation into the collective as a “jolly business” (in Willet 1979b).¹¹

From 1928 to 1930, Pirandello and Brecht were both living in Berlin; they frequented very different social circles but their work was often judged by the same critics. Furthermore, Pirandello, like Brecht, had become in this period an affectionate client of cabaret and variety theatres. These were crucial years in the Weimar Republic. The German economy was strongly affected by the 1929 crisis and the nationalist Right took advantage of the climate of political instability to strengthen its position. The crisis affected the theatre industry, and Pirandello, who had arrived in Germany filled with hope of making great profits with theatrical and cinematic productions, had to lower his expectations. One of the consequences of the financial crisis was that artists and theatre practitioners turned their focus to the social and educational function of art. Piscator, at the *Theater am Nollendorfsplatz*, experimented with a politically engaged theatre that incorporated technologies such as film screens and voice recording to call attention to contemporary social issues. In music, movements such as *Gebrauchsmusik* and *Gemeinschaftsmusik* were concerned with reaching out to the general public and involving the community (see Willet 1979a).

Pirandello was not interested in pedagogy. He had always seen his job as a teacher as a burden, and he abandoned it as soon as he could afford to write full time. He was also a fierce opponent of politically engaged art. His opinion on this matter is summarized by his interview in 1931 with Enrico Rocca, in which he asserts: “Condanno l’arte a tendenza politica dei tedeschi, perché la ritengo dannosa sia alla politica che all’arte. Per i fini che la politica si propone un documentario sarà molto più probatorio di una commedia o di un romanzo dove la fantasia ha necessariamente largo gioco” [“I condemn the politically committed art of the Germans because I consider it harmful both to politics and art. For political aims, a documentary will be a lot more convincing than a play or a novel, in which imagination necessarily plays a large role”] (Pirandello 2006b, 1393). This stance did not prevent him from being curious about the work of a politically committed artist such as Piscator. In an interview released in 1928, Pirandello reproached Piscator for imitating the Russians excessively, and warned that “la messa

in scena non deve sopraffare il lavoro che mette in scena” [“the *mise en scène* should not overpower the work that it stages”] (2006c, 1354). However, he acknowledged that “Piscator fa delle cose meravigliose” [“Piscator is doing wonderful things”] and expressed admiration for German stagecraft: “I progressi della tecnica nel campo teatrale sono immensi. Ho visto, specialmente in Germania, miracoli. Palcoscenici che si sollevano per metà o per intero, o che si sprofondano, luci che bagnano tutto in una specie di alone fantasmagorico, irreal, sgorgando dalle fonti più impensate. Prodiggi. Le dico, prodigi...” [“I have seen, especially in Germany, miracles. Stages that rise half way or entirely, or that sink, lights that wet everything in a phantasmagoric, unreal, halo, coming from the most unthinkable sources. Prodigies. I say, prodigies...”] (*ibid.*, 1355). From a letter to Marta Abba dated September 14, 1929, we know that Pirandello attended Piscator’s production of *The Merchant of Berlin*, which together with Brecht, Weill and Hauptmann’s play *Happy End*, turned into one of the most famous theatrical flops of the Weimar Republic and after which Piscator decided to close his theatre (Willet 1997a, X).¹²

Brecht was closely associated with Piscator. He had joined his collective in 1927 and it was from him that he derived the notion of epic theatre. He was also involved in a series of collaborations with composers such as Paul Hindemith and Kurt Weill, geared to revolutionize the theatrical experience both from inside and outside the theatrical establishment. The most famous of these endeavors was Brecht, Weill and Hauptmann’s *Dreigroschenoper* (*Threepenny Opera*), which premiered in Berlin on August 31, 1928, and continued to run at the *Schiffbauerdamm* theatre throughout the whole 1928/29 season. The opera received mixed critical responses. Jhering applauded Brecht’s and Weill’s endeavor to re-envision elitist genres and their commitment to speak to a broad range of audiences. Conservative critics labeled it a “literary desecration.” Harry Kahn, who in 1929 would be in charge of translating *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* into German, called the opera “a Schwabish joke that takes itself excessively seriously” (Hecht, Knopf, Mittenzwei and Müller 1988, 438). Regardless of critical disputes, *The Threepenny Opera* was enthusiastically received by audiences and became an immediate box office hit.

Thus, at the time in which Pirandello was living in Berlin with Marta Abba, *The Threepenny Opera* became extremely

popular in Berlin and in the whole of Germany. Felix Bloch-Erben, who was very close to Pirandello, published the first edition of the libretto in October 1928; Brecht and Weill's songs were continuously broadcast on the radio and in coffee houses.¹³ In a letter to Marta sent during a journey to Paris on March 1, 1930, Pirandello expresses his satisfaction at the flop of the *Filodrammatici* production: "Hai visto che a Milano *La veglia dei lestofanti* di Bragaglia ha fatto fiasco? Ci ho provato un gusto!" ["Did you notice the flop of Bragaglia's *La veglia dei lestofanti* in Milan? I got a kick out of it!"] (Pirandello and Ortolani 328). In the same letter, he comments that Parisian audiences are fed up with the tricks of modern directors and adds that the time is therefore perfect for the *mise en scène* of *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* (Pirandello and Ortolani 328).¹⁴ Two months later, in a letter from Berlin written on May 10, Pirandello explains to Marta that two German directors have shown interest in his new play. He specifies that the first is the director of the *Lessing Theater*, whereas the second "la vuol dare al Bauschiffdammm [sic] Theater" ["would like to stage it at the Bauschiffdammm [sic] Theater"] (378). Nostalgic about the time he and Marta shared in Berlin, he adds: "dove, ti ricordi? Sentimmo insieme 3Groschen Oper" ["where, do you remember? We went together to see the 3Penny Opera"] (*ibid.*).

We do not know what Pirandello thought of the *Dreigroschenoper*; after mentioning the play he shifts to another topic and makes no further comment on it. From the letters to Marta Abba we know that he disapproved of rough language on stage and improperly dressed actresses.¹⁵ Moreover, the play, while intended as a "culinary piece," still contained a political message. It is possible that, like most of the audience, Pirandello ignored the play's political implications, but it remains curious that the work did not catch his attention. Besides his interest in modern technologies Pirandello was also fascinated by the influence of American culture, of which Jazz became a powerful symbol in the 1920s. In addition, *The Threepenny Opera* foregrounded some of the devices that Brecht would later link to his theory of *Verfremdung*, and with which Pirandello was experimenting in his own plays—the action was fragmented through several plays within the play, the actors undertook new roles under the eyes of the audience, and the audience was not only offered the opportunity to judge the action but encouraged to do so by the actors (Knopf 118-19).

Furthermore, in Erich Engel's 1928 production, the technology was visible on stage, with screens displaying the titles of each scene while the actors were grouped according to an aesthetic reminiscent of contemporary development in film (Hecht, Knopf, Mittenzwei and Müller 1988, 424-446).

All these strategies can be compared to the stage directions of *Questa sera si recita a soggetto*, in which Pirandello creates a German director, Dr. Hinkfuss, who could represent Piscator or Brecht, or any director committed to a bare *mise en scène* to provoke an effect of estrangement (Alonge 100).¹⁶ Like Brecht and Weill's opera, *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* showed the influence of Jazz and of cabaret. But while Weill presented musical numbers as a new form of opera designed to break with the conventions of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Pirandello chose to juxtapose Jazz to Verdi's melodrama, foregrounding the contrast between modernity and tradition. Furthermore, in *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* the function of the music was to keep together, rather than to fragment, the action; Verdi's *Trovatore* functioned as a connection between the main scenes of the Sicilian tale.

By 1928, Brecht and Weill had already composed most of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahaganny* (*The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*). The opera premiered in Leipzig on March 9th 1930, when Pirandello was still in Berlin, occupied in arranging the production of *Questa sera si recita a soggetto*. It immediately became the target of Nazi demonstrators raising heated debates in the theatre scene. The notes to *Mahoganny*, which contain a detailed formulation of the epic theatre—the same essay was later re-printed as “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre”—were published in the same year. Meanwhile, the Berlin première of *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* (*Heute abend wird aus dem Stegreif gespielt*, 1930) took place on May 31, 1930 at the *Lessing Theater* under the direction of Gustav Hartung.¹⁷ It is possible that Jhering's enthusiastic reception of Brecht and Weill's endeavors played a role in influencing his review of *Tonight We Improvise*, in which he sharply criticized Hartung's production as well as Pirandello's dramatic text:

Pirandello's plays show the boundary line between seeming and being, between acted and lived reality. And for whom does that have meaning today? As insights they are mediocre. As plays

they are vague. The latest *Tonight We Improvise* is once again about the problem of the theatre, the problem of the actor, what is a play, what is improvisation and what is role-playing, what is the private quality of the actors? This latest play was quite stunningly uninteresting in its own right, even though it might have been good. However, it is uninspiring, devoid of wit, endless, dust boring, dust and more dust. (Bassnett and Lorch 165)

In underlining that “the play may have been good,” Jhering acknowledges that the work had some potential and that the questions the play poses about “the problem of the actor” are not irrelevant. However, in comparison with works such as *The Threepenny Opera*, Pirandello’s ideas appeared to the German critic irrelevant and oldfashioned. Jhering continues by underlining that the actors act “wrongly” – “wrongly in terms of the meaning of the show (if such a thing can be said at all). Wrongly for the stage, wrongly for the acoustics” (Bassnett and Lorch 165).

“To act wrongly” (*nicht gut spielen/ falsch spielen*) was an expression that Brecht, in these years, frequently used to describe the work of the actors, especially in his conversation with Jhering (Brecht 1992a, 392; 1992c, 279). In fact, both Pirandello and Brecht were, in this period, engaged in observing acting methods: Guglielmo Bernardi has recently suggested that, in *questa sera si recita a soggetto*, Pirandello may have envisioned a different acting style for the “actors” and the Sicilian characters, a style that emphasized difference in the German and Italian acting traditions, which saw as highly influenced by the *Commedia dell’arte* (see Bernardi, 2015). Pirandello had initially been as enthusiastic about German actors as he was about German stagecraft: “German actors are the most disciplined and meticulous in the world. They don’t act, they live with the appearances of a minutely observed reality. They lack perhaps, the actor in the Italian sense of the word, the inspired improviser among a crowd of mediocre walk-ons. Here, they are all perfect, from the first to the last” he declared in an interview with Corrado Alvaro released in 1929 (Bassnett and Lorch 158).¹⁸ However, the letters to Marta Abba indicate that his enthusiasm diminished as the time for the première of *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* was approaching. In these letters, Pirandello betrays an increasing frustration with a wealthier and more elaborate theatrical system that, in his view, was nevertheless disorganized and did not always bring out the best in the actors

(Pirandello and Ortolani 495). He complains about the difficulties of finding a leading actress able to sing, and he frequently expresses distress at what he perceived as signs of vulgarity and inaccuracy, such as actresses “not properly built” for the role. Furthermore, he has very sharp words for women acting “local” roles with a foreign accent.¹⁹ In sum, while engaged in staging the contrast between actors and characters, Pirandello continued to be preoccupied with the fact that the actor’s background, or what Jhering called the “private quality of the actors,” may hinder the illusion of the stage persona, consequently affecting the process of identification of both actors and audiences with the character.

In the same period, Brecht was reflecting on similar issues but suggesting different solutions, proposing an acting method that emphasized the distance between actors and characters, characters and spectators. In the essay “Schwierigkeiten des epischen Theaters” [“The Epic Theatre and its Difficulties”] (1927), he defined the Epic Theatre as a new school of play-writing that “appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator’s reason” and underlined that theatre was not about “sharing an experience with the spectator,” but about “coming to grips with things” (23). In “Dialog über Schauspielkunst” [“A Dialogue about Acting”] (1929) he described the method used by most German actors as hypnosis, underlining how the actors tend to “go into a trance and take the audience with them,” and emphasized the need for a method that would allow actors to act “consciously, suggestively, descriptively”, thereby enabling a distance between actors and spectators (280). The instructions to the actors printed in the 1931 edition of *The Threepenny Opera* further stress this position:

As for the communication of this material, the spectator must not be made to adopt the empathetic approach. There must be a process of exchange between spectator and actor, with the latter at bottom addressing himself directly to the spectator despite all strangeness and detachment. The actor then has to tell the spectator more about his character ‘than lies in the part.’ (in Manheim and Willet 1979: 93)

The success of *The Threepenny Opera* enabled Brecht to work on a series of experiments geared to question the theatre as a space for “action” and “observers,” and to re-envision it as a pedagogical endeavor (Brecht 1992, 398-9). These learning

plays (*Lehrstücke*), on which Brecht worked in collaboration with composers such as Hindemith and Weill, were theatrical experimentations focused on a message for the participants, rather than on the final product as an aesthetic output. They were designed to be held in schools and other public spaces and, among other sources, they were influenced by the communal performances held in the Soviet Union. Brecht published several articles and essays on these theatre practices, and continued to engage in these performances until his exile in 1933.

It is not surprising that Brecht, who often commented on the work of other dramatists, did not refer to Pirandello even once in his notebooks and diaries (Vigliero 119). In these years, Brecht was first and foremost engaged in the establishment of a pedagogical theatre and there was little in the work of the Sicilian writer that could contribute to this. It is more puzzling that Pirandello, who in these years was exploring the theatre scene of the Weimar Republic, behaved as if Brecht's work had not even come to his attention. Different political opinions had not prevented Pirandello from expressing criticism and admiration for theatre practitioners such as Meyerhold and Piscator. Given his eagerness to generate profits, he must have been interested in box office hits such as *The Threepenny Opera* and in the film that resulted from the theatrical production. It is a mysterious and perhaps deliberate silence.

Conclusions

Evreinov and Brecht were both dissatisfied with naturalism and with the acting style proposed by Stanislavsky. They searched for an alternative in theatre that emphasized the artificiality of the *mise en scène*, challenged the division between active performers and passive viewers and explored the theatricality of all human behavior. All these features resonated with Pirandello's dramaturgy and with his vision of the theatre. There are, however, important differences that explain why Pirandello was fascinated by Evreinov's ideas but unable to recognize Brecht's work. Evreinov had been excited about the support that his plays enjoyed in post-revolutionary Russia and, like Brecht, he had underlined the power of performance in constructing societal order. However, his theories of monodrama and of a "theatre for oneself" stressed the potential of the stage as

a therapeutic site to indulge in dreams and imagination, and this was the notion that most resonated with Pirandello. Moreover, while Evreinov's emphasis on the theatrical experience challenged the primacy of the aesthetic output, his theatrical vision continued to be firmly grounded in empathy—in a system that aligned character, actors and spectators through identification.

Pirandello dreamed of a theatre independent of political and financial constraints that could count on a close collaboration between playwrights and actors. In one of his last works, the introduction to Silvio D'Amico's *Storia del Teatro Italiano* (1936), he looks back to the *commedia dell'arte* to find a model for this practice. In the same essay, he returns to Evreinov's ideas to describe the origin of the theatre as a natural instinct of representation (2006, 1517), but also adds a paragraph on the moral and critical function of the theatre: "il Teatro propone quasi a vero e proprio giudizio pubblico le azioni umane quali veramente sono [...] libero e umano giudizio che efficacemente richiama le coscienza degli stessi giudici a una vita morale sempre più alta e esigente" ["Theatre brings human actions as they really are to a public scrutiny [...] it is a free and human judgment that efficiently recalls the consciousness of the judges to a higher and more demanding moral life"] (2006, 1519). It is the same comment that he made at the opening speech of the *Convegno Volta* (2006d, 1442), which was dedicated to Mussolini's project for a "theatre for the masses."²⁰ At the end of his life Pirandello felt obliged by the political climate to underline the moral and social function of the theatre, but he did so reluctantly, betraying fascination for mass spectacles such as sports competitions but a suspicious attitude towards the idea of a theatre concerned with matters beyond aesthetics or philosophy.

In the second play of the trilogy of the theatre within the theatre, *Ciascuno a suo modo* (*Each in His Own Way*, 1924), Pirandello foregrounded the role of audiences and turned the auditorium into a place of action. In the one act-play *Sagra del signore della nave* (1925) he had come close to a ritualistic conception of theatre by inviting audience members to imagine themselves as a congregation. In *Questa sera si recita a soggetto*, Pirandello went further and envisioned an active use of all of the theatrical space, including the stage, the foyer, the auditorium, but always through the presence of professional

actors “playing” the audience in these locations. Pirandello’s uneasiness at “real” audience involvement is exemplified by the ending of *I giganti della montagna* (*The Mountain Giants*, 1937), in which the itinerant actors are attacked and killed by the uneducated spectators who are unable to recognize the poetry of the representation.²¹

Like Brecht, Pirandello was, in this period, engaged in observing the work of actors, and it is not far-fetched to suggest that the final scene of *Questa sera si recita a soggetto*, in which the actors declare that they cannot continue “living” their characters, suggests at least a temporary interrogation about an acting method based on empathy and identification.²² However, the different conception of the theatrical experience and of audience participation prevented Pirandello from developing an interest in or even recognizing any of Brecht’s experiments.

In conclusion, there is much that we can learn from the encounter between Pirandello and Evreinov, but there is also something to learn from an encounter that never took place, such as the one between Pirandello and Brecht. The ideological differences between the two men and Brecht’s exile in 1933 certainly played a role in preventing Pirandello from engaging with Brecht’s work. On the other hand, it is also possible that, confronted with a work that reflected several of his thoughts on theatre but that proposed a solution from a radically different angle, Pirandello chose to ignore it. As Ferdinando Taviani notes, confronted with the latest innovations of European dramaturgy, Pirandello did not modernize his theatre, but just like Evreinov, looked “backwards,” searching for the roots of the European theatrical tradition in forms such as the *sacra rappresentazione* or the *commedia dell’arte* (LXVII). Brecht’s plays proposed increased audience participation and, in experiments such as the learning plays, entirely subverted the theatrical structure. Pirandello was instead interested in working within the given system, innovating theatrical structures from within. He dreamed of a theatre that could align the vision of the author and the actor, but he could not imagine theatre as a pedagogical tool and he never questioned the primacy of the aesthetic output. While receptive to Evreinov’s ideas, he did not reflect on the aspects of Brecht’s work that pointed in this direction, and his work remained enveloped in a blind spot.

Notes

¹ "Is nature so 'natural' after all? And do we really know what we are talking about when we use the word 'natural' as the antidote to the word 'theatrical?'" Evreinov writes in the *Theatre in Life* (1970, 21).

² The Teatro d'Arte produced *Sei Personaggi in cerca d'autore* on May 18, 1925, *Ciò che più importa* on May 29, 1925, and *Enrico IV* on June 11, 1925 (D'Amico and Tinterri 1987, 69).

³ Evreinov's trilogy of the theatre in life includes *Samoe glavnoe* (*The Chief Thing*), *korabl' pravednykh* (*The Ship of the Righteous*) and *teatr vechnoi voiny* (*The Theatre of Eternal War*).

⁴ Vicentini acknowledges that Evreinov's influence was only one of the factors inspiring Pirandello in these revisions. The experiments of the futurists, Pitoëff's *mise en scène* of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* in 1923 and the choreography of the Teatro Odelscalchi are also mentioned among the factors that played a role in overcoming the division between stage and auditorium (81). We can add that a similar strategy was already used in *Sagra del signore della nave* (*The Festival of Our Lord of the Ship*, 1925), in which the religious procession walks through the auditorium before climbing onstage.

⁵ Evreinov's ideas are also mentioned in "Discorso al convegno 'Volta' sul teatro drammatico" (1934), and the Introduction to Silvio D'Amico's *Storia del teatro italiano* (1936).

⁶ Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations are my own. A few years later, in the "Discorso al convegno 'Volta' sul teatro drammatico," Pirandello returns to Evreinov's ideas in stating that: "Il teatro non può morire. Forma della vita stessa, tutti ne siamo attori; e aboliti e abbandonati i teatri, il teatro seguiterebbe nella vita" ["The theatre cannot die: it is a form of life, in which we are all actors; and if theatre were abolished, the theatre would continue in life"] (Pirandello 2006d, 1437).

⁷ See Segnini (2015) on the cultural implications of interpreting the "Sicilian Story."

⁸ "If, for instance, the play is dreamy, misty and mystical, a sleepless night, a doped cigar and darkness may be helpful. If the play is kinetic and rich in action, ablution, gymnastic and other such exercises may prove of use" (Evreinov 1970, 197).

⁹ The sentence "it is not natural" is meant to mock Stanislavsky's insistence on naturalism.

¹⁰ In the play that Pirandello writes in 1932, *Trovarsi*, he returns to examine an acting style based on identification.

¹¹ In the following years, Brecht would continue to revise the play. In the 1929 version, he underlines Galy Gay's transformation as negative, and in later versions he gives to the transformation a precise political meaning by bringing it into connection with Hitler's politics (See Hecht, Knopf, Mittenzwei and Detlef Müller 1988a, 409-10).

¹² "Staseraandrò a vedere al teatro di Piscator 'Il mercante di Berlino', [...] mi dicono che la messa in scena è prodigiosa, e ci vado per questo" ["Tonight I am going to Piscator's theatre 'The Merchant of Berlin' [...] they say that the mise en scène is extraordinary, and I am going for this reason"] (letter from September 14, 1929, in Pirandello and Ortolani, 254).

¹³ It was through Felix Bloch Erben that Pirandello signed the contract with the *Lessing Theater* for the Berlin production of *Tonight We Improvise* (see Pirandello and Ortolani 381). Hans Feist, who translated *Questa sera si recita a soggetto*, was a translator from German into Italian for Felix Bloch Erben.

¹⁴ "Anche qua sono arcistufi degli spettacoli americani tipo za-Bum e di giuochi d'artificio dei régisseurs moderni. Baty è stato cacciato a vergogna dal teatro Pigalle. E la stagione parigina di quest'anno è stata disastrosa. Il momento, dunque, è propizio, così per 'La vita che ti diedi' come per 'Questa sera si recita a soggetto'" ["Here too, they are tired of American shows like za-Bum and of the pyrotechnics of modern régisseurs. Baty was chased shamefully from Pigalle theatre. And this year's season in Paris was a disaster. The moment is therefore ripe for 'Vita che ti diedi' as well as for 'Questa sera si recita a soggetto'"] (Pirandello and Ortolani 328).

¹⁵ After watching Käthe Dorsch's interpretation of Hans Müller's "Flamme," Pirandello is outraged: "Tanto la Ilonka [...] quanto poi la Gasti vengono inscena quasi nude, peggio che nude: sconce addirittura. [...] Parlano, addirittura, in un gergaccio da triviale, proprio a codesta risma di gente, che non avrei potuto capire senza conoscere come conosco la commedia" ["Both Iloka [...] and Gasti arrive on stage almost naked, worse than naked: even indecent [...]. They speak even a vulgar jargon, suited to these type of people, that I would not have understood if I had not been so familiar with the play"] (Pirandello and Ortolani 381).

¹⁶ Roberto Alonge also points out that certain features of Hinkfuss reflect traits of Pirandello as a *capocomico* and show his own demands and tyranny over the actors (97-102).

¹⁷ The first *mise en scène* of Pirandello's play had taken place in Königsberg. On Hartung's Production, see House (1995).

¹⁸ It is in his letter that he also criticizes the tendency of German directors to introduce a bare outline "corrupting elements" for the theatre (Bassnet and Lorch 158).

¹⁹ See, among numerous examples, the letter to Marta in which Pirandello describes the German cast for *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* and criticizes the protagonist of "Fiamma" for her Hungarian accent (Pirandello and Ortolani 382).

²⁰ Here Pirandello, without mentioning Evreinov, reflects again on his notion of the theatre in life: "Il teatro non può morire. Forma della vita stessa, ne siamo tutti attori; e aboliti e abbandonati i teatri, il teatro seguirebbe nella vita, insopprimibile" ["the theatre cannot die. It is a shape of life itself, and we are all its actors; if theatres were to be abolished and abandoned, the theatre would continue in life, insuppressible"] (2006, 1437).

²¹ Vicentini brings attention to Rina Franchetti's witness of a performance of the Teatro d'Arte in the Sicilian countryside, in which the actors, playing the *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* confronted a hostile audience of peasants. While Vicentini's theory that *I giganti della montagna* originates in this episode remains a hypothesis, Franchetti's testimony underlines the challenges that Pirandello's theatre faced among the masses. See the interview of Rina Franchetti by Alessandro Tinterri, recorded at *The Museo dell'attore di Genova* on April 27, 1981. The interview is now in Vicentini (93).

²² The play that Pirandello wrote two years later, *Trovarsi*, returns to an idea of theatre based on empathy and identification.

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