

Acting Archives Essays

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THEORY OF ACTING III THE EARLY ITALIAN TREATISES AND THE THEORETICAL ACTING MODEL*

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1. *The Academicians Establish the First Rules of Acting. Giraldi Cintio's Discorsi*

The first sketch of a theory of acting, however, was not to originate from the professional comic actors but in the academy, where in the mid-sixteenth century debate was developing on Aristotle's *Poetics* and attempts to fix the rules of composition for literary works were multiplying. In 1554 there appeared the *Discorso intorno al comporre dei romanzi* and the *Discorso intorno al comporre delle comedie e delle tragedie* by Giambattista Giraldi Cintio, an eminent intellectual and the author of various tragedies, who held a prominent position in Ercole II d'Este's court at Ferrara.¹ Like many of his colleagues Giraldi Cintio too combined the writing of theatrical texts with theoretical thinking, and this had two results. The works composed could be exhibited as concrete examples demonstrating the validity of the rules developed from Aristotle, and these were the most effective tool the author had to justify and defend his literary works from adverse criticism.

From this viewpoint, judging the worth of a comedy or tragedy obviously did not require seeing how effective it was onstage. It was enough to evaluate it on the page to check its perfection in the light of the established rules. Giraldi Cintio himself had staged his tragedy, *Orbecche*, at Ferrara in his own home in 1541. But he was firmly convinced of the absolute artistic autonomy of the theatrical text: the written work should produce all its effects on the reader without need of help from the staging. It should possess, he claimed, 'by its words alone, a hidden capacity that can move the feelings of the reader even without being performed'.²

* Translated by Richard Bates, Università di Roma "La Sapienza". From C. Vicentini, *La teoria della recitazione dall'Antichità al Settecento*, in press (Venezia, Marsilio, February 2012).

¹ Giovambattista Giraldi Cintio, *Discorsi di M. Giovambattista Giraldi Cintio, nobile ferrarese, e segretario dell'illustrissimo et eccellentissimo duca di Ferrara intorno al comporre de i romanzi, delle comedie, e delle tragedie, e di altre maniere di poesie*, In Vinegia, Gabriel Giolito de Ferrari et fratelli, 1554.

² Giovambattista Giraldi Cintio, *Discorso ovvero lettera intorno al comporre delle comedie e delle tragedie*, in *Scritti estetici. De' romanzi delle comedie e delle tragedie*, 2 vols., Milano, G. Daelli e Comp., 1864, II, p. 111. See also *Discorso ovvero lettera intorno al comporre dei romanzi*, in *Scritti estetici*, I, pp. 181-182.

Yet, unlike most of the men of letters, Giraldi Cintio did not think that this meant that a theatrical performance was without interest. It was rather a form of aesthetic experience close to that of the literary enjoyment of the text, but of a different kind. Its effectiveness depended essentially on the correct use of the tools of the stage, which included acting – to the point that, he claimed in a passage that became canonical among scholars of sixteenth-century theatrical theory, if we consider our experience of performances, ‘it is better for a well performed story of inferior quality to appear onstage, than an excellent one with cold and mediocre actors’.³

But what were the rules that made for effective acting? Here Giraldi Cintio had no choice. The foundations of these criteria could be found only in the existing, widespread theoretical apparatus, which meant Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the similar doctrine of Horace’s *Ars poetica*, and the treatises of Cicero and Quintilian. But in the cultural climate of the time the *Poetics* was the basis for the rules for literary composition, while the works of Cicero and Quintilian dealt specifically with oratory.⁴ This had two important consequences. The theory of acting could only be the application in a different field of the same principles that regulated the creation of the literary text, and to discuss the specific tools of the actor – the use of body, gestures and voice – one could only take as one’s model the orator. This created the premises that stage professionals would then exploit towards the end of the century to justify the nobility and cultural quality of their art.

In fact Giraldi Cintio’s rules regulating the conception of characters, in the sense of types representing precise political, generational, social, economic or professional categories, were rigorously Aristotelian. Each type corresponded to a series of features, certain traits of character, and a range of passions and behaviour that belong to it. These data, coherently connected for each figure, seem fixed in a pre-ordained and constant typology that could not be deviated from.

Kings and Queens should be full of majesty [...] shepherds should be rough, shepherd girls simple and artless, youths shrewd and cunning [...] servants generally pusillanimous and fraudulent, maidens bashful and shy, soldiers brave and threatening⁵

An experienced captain should be brave and courageous, and a woman timid and modest [...] If a captain is presented as cowardly and timid, and a woman as brave and fierce, it will be improper, and an example of ill-breeding, because it will be outside the nature of both of them⁶

The features of a character’s personality also determine his way of acting and speaking, to the point of defining the natural connotations of his voice:

let the young speak like the young, the old like the old [...] A low-born young man and one of royal blood will speak differently, and the prudence of an old King will be different from that of a father⁷

³ Ibid. The passage is obviously a new take on Quintilian’s reflection that a fine performance of a mediocre text has an effect on the audience far superior to a badly acted performance of an excellent text (*Institutio oratoria*, XI,3,4-5).

⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵ Giovambattista Giraldi Cintio, *Discorso intorno al comporre dei romanzi*, p. 77.

⁶ Giovambattista Giraldi Cintio, *Discorso intorno al comporre delle comedie e delle tragedie*, p. 91.

⁷ Ibid., p. 95

if [the actor recites] the love scenes with rough, harsh and unpleasing voice, he will not arouse the compassion of the listeners, but will offend their ears⁸

The actor's task is thus to render onstage a typical figure, with the appropriate manners and behaviour, and in this sense his 'gestures, movements, voice and, last of all, action must be suited to the part he is playing'.⁹ He should also, however, be able to act 'in situation', modelling the behaviour and expressive manner of his character in relation to his particular circumstances, the intentions that move him in the various scenes of the play, and the other characters he addresses. All these elements, without obscuring his essential character, determine its various forms of expression.

Because one speaks to a King in one way, and to a gentleman in another. And a King will reply differently to another King than to his vassal, or to another minor prince. And he will speak differently with his soldiers to rouse them to battle, differently to calm a people that has taken up arms. And a captain will speak differently to another captain, and so it will be with other kinds of person, according to blood, honour, dignity, the authority they have, and according to place and time.¹⁰

And here arose, at least in theory, a first difficulty. A stock character has a precise and limited range of passions and expressive forms. When he deviates from them he betrays his exemplary 'nature': a captain cannot be timid, nor a woman brave, and still less fierce. What happens then when the situation is such as to require of the character behaviour and emotional reactions that do not belong to how the rules describe his figure? When, in short, observes Giraldo Cintio, 'accidents' intervene that 'make the fierce become humble, the lewd temperate, the timid bold and the bold timid'?¹¹ Achilles is an example: in the last book of the *Iliad* his terrible, cruel nature seems to change, and become compassionate towards Priam, who has come to ask for Hector's body. In actual fact, however, there is no solution. The only expedient is to let the character remain for a short while in the emotional disposition that is not his, bringing him quickly back to the behaviour that characterizes his nature.¹² The rigidity of the typology that assigns each character a predetermined series of emotional reactions does not allow exceptions.

Yet in the *Discorsi* the problem essentially concerns the poet and must be solved in the writing of the play. It does not concern the actor, who should merely reproduce onstage the distinctive features of the character, depicting each time as clearly as possible the different emotional reactions and behaviour proper to the situations in which he is placed. If he performs this task suitably, his performance seems to have 'grace' and 'decorum', which 'is no more than what suits the places, times and people' and 'the nature of who is acting, and who is speaking'.¹³

⁸ Ibid., p. 117.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Giovambattista Giraldo Cintio, *Discorso intorno al comporre dei romanzi*, p. 75.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 77.

¹² See *ibid.* and Giovambattista Giraldo Cintio, *Discorso intorno al comporre delle comedie e delle tragedie*, p. 92.

¹³ Giovambattista Giraldo Cintio, *Discorso intorno al comporre dei romanzi*, p.74, and *Discorso intorno al comporre delle comedie e delle tragedie*, p. 91. The need to suit the gestures, actions and expressions of the characters to the imaginary situations of the play also require, as Cintio explains elsewhere, that when the actors perform they ignore the audience, behaving as if it were not there (Giovambattista Giraldo Cintio, *Scritti contro la Canace: Giudizio ed Epistola latina*, ed. by C. Roaf, Bologna, Commissione per i testi di lingua, 1982, pp. 112-113).

Decorum in this sense was for Giraldis Cintio the fundamental principle of acting. Violating it meant compromising the effectiveness of the action and courting disaster, as happens, for example, in the performance of tragedies when the actor is unable to assume an elevated tone and a manner suited to the particular nature of the character, tries to make the audience weep and instead ‘provokes laughter where he should be causing tears’.¹⁴ It was the same criterion – respect for decorum – that justified the condemnation of the ‘zanni and other foolish persons’ who sought to provoke mirth acting ‘with lewd and filthy manners, impertinences, indecent acts and words, and with other unseemly behaviour’. These acts and gestures were not only unbecoming in themselves, but above all ‘forced’ and introduced inopportunistly into the story being acted, while all the elements of the performance should be ‘unsought, unsolicited, unaffected’, but produced ‘by the thing itself, with such ability and so delicately as to seem natural’.¹⁵

Finally we need to consider the specific tools of the actor, who represents the character and his behaviour, using voice, gestures and movements – as Giraldis Cintio says, everything that Cicero describes as ‘the eloquence of the body’.¹⁶ Acting in this sense was simply the *actio* of ancient oratory, following the rules in Cicero and Quintilian. Voice and movements had to be articulated with particular attention to ‘measure’, the effects that could be obtained by raising and lowering the tones and varying the rhythms.¹⁷ He mentions the passage in which Cicero recalls how when Gracchus delivered a speech, he used to keep a musician hidden near him who gave him the necessary note with his instrument to regulate the tonality of his voice. In our day, adds Giraldis Cintio, ‘I too have known preachers who had companions in the pulpit, and with the pitch of the notes they showed them how to raise and lower the voice for the pleasure of those who heard them’.¹⁸

What mattered above all, however, was the golden rule of classical oratory. The actor had to depict in himself the passions he wanted to impress on the audience, using ‘decorous movements of the back, the hands and the whole body’: otherwise the expressions he assumed would remain inert, ‘cold’ and ‘ineffective’, and it would be impossible to obtain the essential effect of ‘feigning’ the characters and their actions so effectively, so ‘delicately’, that ‘they seem real’.¹⁹

2. Angelo Ingegneri. Stage Characters as Reality Perfected

While Giraldis Cintio was the first of the men of letters to concern himself with acting, all his thoughts on the subject were limited to a few passages, almost incidental reflections as part of a piece on composing the literary texts of comedies and tragedies. The full perception of theatrical performance as something worthy of careful and detailed study developed in the cultivated circles of the courts and academies only in the following decades. In 1570 Ludovico Castelvetro was the first to criticize a passage of Aristotle’s *Poetics* in his *Poetica di Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta*,

¹⁴ Giovambattista Giraldis Cintio, *Discorso intorno al comporre delle comedie e delle tragedie*, p. 117.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 116 and p. 119.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 57. See also Giovambattista Giraldis Cintio, *Discorso intorno al comporre dei romanzi*, p. 181.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* See Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, IX,4,10-13.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 57. See Cicero, *De oratore*, III,225.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

claiming that theatrical performance was necessary, as only onstage could the written play be fully effective.²⁰

In the literary text, wrote Castelvetro, ‘performance is not an additional factor, but a necessary part of it’, and tragedy cannot be fully effective ‘if we do not see the action’, because the tragic composition ‘was designed to delight and be understood by the judicious and by the ignorant: which it does very easily when it is performed with all its devices’. A mere reading not only is not understood by the ignorant, but cannot even exercise its full effect on the cultivated members of the audience.²¹

The consequence is clear. If performance is the most suitable way of bringing out the full effect of a theatrical piece, then when the poet writes a comedy or tragedy, he should bear in mind the requirements of staging. If he does not, he compromises the result of his work. And so, towards the end of the century, another man of letters, Angelo Ingegneri, in his treatise *Della poesia rappresentativa e del modo di rappresentare le favole sceniche*, published at Ferrara in 1598, could assign a precise duty to those who were exerting themselves to compose theatrical texts:

It would therefore be good that the poet who writes a dramatic work first of all imagined the scene before his eyes, establishing the buildings, the perspectives, the streets and all that is required for the event he intends to imitate; and that he imagined it so well that no character could enter without the author seeing where he comes from, nor make a move or speak a word without the author seeing it or hearing it in his mind.²²

Thus, in the very act of writing the text, the poet must imagine how it would be performed onstage, and ‘see’ and ‘hear’ the actors moving and speaking as they interpret the characters. Ingegneri, moreover, had thought deeply both about literary composition and stage performance. Man of letters and academic, he had directed the performance of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* that had inaugurated the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza in March 1585. The inauguration had been a genuine cultural event, carefully prepared and organized by a group of intellectuals interested in every aspect of the art of theatre. This experience, as well as the intense polemics that had raged for years on the forms and genres of dramatic composition, led to the reflections that Angelo Ingegneri set down in his treatise of 1598.

The title, with its proclaimed intention to discuss both representational poetry and ‘the manner of representing’ stage fables was in itself a novelty and demonstrated the increased interest in thinking about the problems of staging. But the greater importance attributed to the performance did not in itself change the way of theorizing about acting. The conceptual apparatus that Giraldi Cintio had set out almost half a century earlier remained more or less intact and the sources were still the same: Aristotle on the one side, and on the other Cicero and Quintilian.

²⁰ It was the famous passage in which Aristotle claims that the theatrical ‘fable’, quite apart ‘from the effect of seeing it performed onstage, must be constructed in such a way that even those who only hear the facts of the events being narrated receive from the sequence of these facts a shiver of terror and a sense of pity’ (*Poetics*, 1543b).

²¹ Ludovico Castelvetro, *Poetica d’Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta*, ed. by W. Romani, 2 vols, Bari, Laterza, 1978-1979, II, pp. 354-355. See also I, pp. 479-480.

²² Angelo Ingegneri, *Della poesia rappresentativa e del modo di rappresentare le favole sceniche* (Ferrara, Vittorio Baldini Stampatore Camerale, 1598), ed. by M. L. Doglio, Ferrara, Panini, 1989, p. 17.

For Angelo Ingegneri too, the actors must represent typical figures distinguished ‘by sex, age, condition and profession’.²³ They must also use all the physical means available – voice, gestures and movements – carefully following the precepts of oratorical *actio*. Facial expressions became particularly important, and so, as Cicero had already suggested, the use of masks was to be avoided.²⁴ As for the voice, Ingegneri then explains that it should vary in quantity and quality, depending on what is to be expressed, ‘full, simple and joyful’ in prosperity, ‘forthright’ in dispute, ‘terrible, broken and harsh’ in anger, ‘pleasant and subdued in satisfying others’, ‘firm and sweet’ in promising and consoling, ‘pliant and faint’ in commiseration, ‘swollen and splendid’ in the grand passions – all of them suggestions taken wholesale from a passage in Quintilian.²⁵ The description of the gestures is also codified by the simple transcription of some passages of the *Institutio oratoria* that underline the need to suit the gesture to the word, the importance of the gaze, and the importance of eyes and gestures following the same direction, except in cases when the character condemns something or expresses repulsion.²⁶

Lastly, in following these rules the actor must never fall into affectation ‘which is always bad’. And his expressions, gestures and manners must not only be well regulated, natural and ‘credible’, but also able to display the character’s impulses of passion, ‘as the player cannot move the spectator’s soul without them’.²⁷

So far, Angelo Ingegneri was not departing from the previous positions of Giraldo Cintio. The only novelty in his *Discorso* – and a very important one – concerned an aspect of character portrayal, which should be both realistic and idealized. If, he says, the stage presentation closely follows the facts of the real world, the effect on the audience is greater. That is why the sets should reproduce as far as possible authentic, recognizable places: a tragedy set in Rome should ‘show the Campidoglio, the Great Palace, and the main temples and buildings’, a comedy, the Pantheon, the Tiber ‘and something else indicated that identifies the city’ – because ‘the closer things are to the truth’, the greater the audience’s emotion.²⁸

The same principle also applies to acting, which should avoid anything contrary to the most obvious customs of real life. It is unacceptable for a character to remain inert with nothing to say or do, and to stand for an hour in front of the audience ‘without speaking, or listening to the others who speak’.²⁹ In the same way a character who has to recite a soliloquy, and so has to speak for a long time alone onstage, is a nuisance. It is permissible only in very few cases, strictly justified by the circumstances of the story: when, for example, the character must pretend to be mad, or when he is struck ‘by some powerful passion’.³⁰

Yet the theatre should represent things not as they actually are, but as they ought ‘fittingly to be’, explains Ingegneri, which means how nature would have formed them if it had not been in some way ‘impeded’ by the accidental nature of the real world. A prince who has been given the power to ‘dominate others’ should ideally be

²³ Ibid., p. 29.

²⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 28. See also Cicero, *De oratore*, III,221.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 30-31. See Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, XI,2,64.

²⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 31. See also Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, XI,2,67 and 70,75.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 8 and p. 26.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 18.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

an excellent person in every respect and of special virtue, and excellence of soul should be visibly reflected in the features of the body, which would thus appear ‘the most beautiful, the tallest and the best formed of all’.

Now, even though this happens relatively rarely in life, onstage the character of a prince must in any case seem to fit the ideal of a prince, and, to do this, it is best to use all the artifices available. When the actor is too short one can, for example, use particular footwear, or ‘clogs’, to raise his stature. Indeed, it would be better to use clogs to make the height of all the characters proportionate with the dignity of their condition, scaling their stature from the most distinguished figure to the most humble. In this way the theatrical representation would reflect a correct, perfected image of reality, bringing out for each character the features of the ideal type in all their precision.³¹

In this perspective the gestures and manners of the actor – whatever the part he is playing – should appear precisely regulated, filtered and polished in relation to the behaviour of people in daily life. Otherwise it could not render the superior ‘exemplary nature’ of the theatrical figure compared with the simple individuals that populate the human world. And it is the ability to regulate voice and gestures so as to reproduce adequately onstage the ideal perfection of the image represented that generates the decorum that makes the actor’s performance beautiful and pleasing. Decorum, claims Ingegneri, ‘is so powerful, that, when it is there, it renders things wonderfully pleasing, even those that are by nature ugly and disgusting; and where it is lacking, it makes even the most beautiful and honoured things displeasing and unwelcome’.³²

3. Leone de’ Sommi’s *Dialoghi* and Theory Based on Stage Experience

The writings of Giraldi Cintio and Angelo Ingegneri, then, show how acting theory in the late sixteenth century developed around two basic convictions: the need to depict characters as ideal types representing various human categories, and the identification of the actor’s work with the *actio* of classical oratory. We find these convictions again, at least in part, in the first real treatise on acting, written by Leone de’ Sommi, a Mantuan Jew and author of poems, pastoral fables and comedies, a member of the Accademia degli Invaghiti, and above all producer of plays and festivities at the Court of the Gonzaga family, where there was a company organized by the Jewish community. His familiarity with the world of professional theatre is certain: in 1567 he asked the Duke of Mantua to obtain the exclusive rights to provide a space where ‘those who act for payment’ could be seen. In exchange he promised to supply two sacks of wheat each year ‘to the poor of the Misericordia’.

On a date that was also probably in the late 1560s de’ Sommi wrote his *Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche*. The third dialogue was entirely on ‘precepts

³¹ Ibid., pp. 28-29.

³² Ibid., p. 31.

on acting, and costumes, and all that generally pertains to the players'.³³ And while Giraldi Cintio and Angelo Ingegneri were directly influenced by the idea of tragic acting in their reflections, de' Sommi dealt explicitly with the performance of comedy and showed a cautious openness towards the more free-and-easy ways of professional theatre. He thus allowed the possibility of recourse to 'a few lewd remarks' that might immediately involve the audience and 'keep awake those who fell asleep' when 'learned saws' and 'exemplary speeches' were pronounced onstage, and also regarded it as essential for those playing the part of a servant to be able, when necessary, to 'make an elegant leap'.³⁴ But the underlying theoretical outlook did not change.

For de' Sommi too the characters are representative figures who should indicate the qualities natural to their 'age, degree and profession'. Each of these figures has precise traits of character. A servant should be shown as 'mischievous and astute', a maidservant as 'self-assured and cunning', an old man as 'suspicious and avaricious', while it would be unacceptable to apply these qualities to a young gentleman or a well-born student. It was also necessary to show onstage images of the characters not as they might be in real life, but, 'as Aristotle says', as they should be, as perfectly as possible.³⁵ Yet a few exceptions were allowed. It might seem 'delightful' to introduce a doctor who was more interested in money than in his patients' health, or a lawyer who betrays a client, and so on.³⁶

In this way the typology of characters became more flexible than the rigid rules fixed by Giraldi Cintio: the recurrent figures, representative of social, professional or generational categories, and the underlying moral qualities might be combined in different ways, on condition, of course, that both seemed exemplary. The doctor would have to be depicted according to the set, external image of the doctor, with his characteristic physical features, and the way of speaking and moving traditionally attributed to him, just as greed would have to be shown as clearly greed, with the gestures and expressions that the audience had always imagined it as having. On the other hand, at least as regards the physical features of the characters, de' Sommi does not seem to allow exceptions: their appearance must imitate as perfectly as possible 'the status' that they represent, and so the lover must be handsome, the soldier 'brawny', the parasite 'fat', the servant 'quick-witted', and in the same way an old man's voice cannot have a youthful tonality, or a woman's be deep. And when the actor's physical features do not correspond to the typical way the character is represented, one can, at least to a certain extent, use make-up, 'dying a beard, painting a scar, adding pale or yellow cheeks, or creating an appearance of vigour, ruddiness, weakness or darkness'.³⁷

Thus prepared, the actor must then perform onstage, and once again there is the canonical reference to Cicero and his definition of the *actio* of oratory as 'eloquence

³³ Leone de' Sommi, *Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche*, ed. by F. Marotti, Milano, Il Polifilo, 1968, p. 5. All the available information on de' Sommi and his work, and on the dating of the *Dialoghi*, which another theory regards as being written around the 1580s, can be found in the critical apparatus to this edition, edited by F. Marotti (see the three sections of the 'Introduzione', pp. xv-lxxiii and the 'Nota sulla datazione', pp. 77-79).

³⁴ Ibid., p. 35 and p. 41.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 17-18.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 39-40.

of the body'.³⁸ But unlike Giraldi Cintio and Ingegneri, Leone de' Sommi does not simply set down a few precepts from the *De oratore* or the *Institutio oratoria*, but bases himself mainly on his own observations and experience of the stage. As regards the voice, for example, he does not bother to repeat the theory of varying the tonality taken from Giraldi Cintio or the list of the different qualities of voice in Quintilian, later reproduced by Ingegneri. Instead, he is, much more practically, interested in fixing the requisites that an actor's voice must have for his words to be understood by the audience.

The actors should have 'a good pronunciation', and also speak 'firmly' without 'shouting', making their voices 'clearly audible to all the spectators'.³⁹ They should also 'speak very slowly', expressing all the words 'very deliberately'. De' Sommi denies that this might make the acting seem unnatural, and too unlike how people speak in real life. The audience should 'understand the poet's ideas easily, and relish his precepts', and, as they understand everything that is said onstage it will seem that the actor is speaking 'at great speed', however slowly he utters the lines.⁴⁰

The gestures, postures and movements should above all bring out the typical nature of the character and the emotional reactions that are his. In this way we can see a sort of code, which was probably defined by stage use, which de' Sommi seems to sketch in a few lines. Characteristic gestures of the miser, for example, are 'always keeping his hand on his purse', or constantly checking that he has not lost the keys of his coffer; of the simpleton, 'catching flies, searching for fleas, and suchlike'; of the maidservant, 'tossing up her skirts in a vulgar way', or 'biting her thumb in scorn', and so on. At the same time these gestures must also be varied and blended with other forms of expression, so as to render the characters' reactions to the various situations in which they are involved. Thus the actor playing the part of a miser must be able to render his frenzy when he realizes his son has stolen his money, and that of a servant to express grief by 'tearing a handkerchief with his teeth', or tearing his hair when he is in despair.⁴¹ A full list of all the gestures appropriate to each character and the various situations is not possible, however, as much of the stage action is in any case left to the actor's invention: 'those who properly understand their part, and have talent, also find the appropriate movements and gestures'.⁴²

Apart from these gestures, which can be depicted with greater or lesser ability, there are also the most effective and precise expressions of the sentiments, which seem to require the actor's actual emotional involvement. On this, de' Sommi recalls Plato's *Ion*, but does not take up the theory of divine possession. Rather, like Aristotle, he regards the ability to actually share the character's feelings as a gift of nature: 'these things do not lend themselves to teaching, and are impossible to learn, if they do not come naturally'. In short, there is no rule, trick or expedient to fall back on, and only the 'born' actor can succeed. Those who possess this gift can then

³⁸ Ibid., p. 47. At this point de' Sommi also takes up a passage in the *Discorso intorno al comporre dei romanzi*, by Giraldi Cintio (I, p. 181), which he must have known, along with the *Discorso intorno al comporre delle comedie e delle tragedie*.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 39-40.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 41. And so an essential idea emerges for the first time. The 'verisimilitude' of the acting does not derive from its direct relation with real behavior, but lies in the mental image that the actor's action produces in the audience.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 41-42.

⁴² Ibid., p. 46.

produce extraordinary effects, and can even turn pale, for example. De' Sommi cites a series of actors of the time, and in particular Flaminia, a Roman actress who was able to change 'gestures, tones and moods, as the circumstances require', moving to wonder 'anyone who sees her'.⁴³

However, as the canons of behaviour in Castiglione's *Il libro del Cortegiano* required, it was essential for all acting to be always marked by ease, accompanied by elegance or 'grace'. The actor 'ought always to have a lithe body, with free-moving limbs, not stiff and awkward. He must place his feet on the ground appropriately when he speaks, and move them easily when the occasion demands'.⁴⁴ He should also avoid walking while speaking, except in very special cases, when it is absolutely necessary. And he should never turn his back on the audience.⁴⁵

One last rule: the actors should always perform at the edge of the stage, as near to the audience and the centre as possible. In this way their voices will reach the audience more easily, and above all, the 'natural' effect of painted perspective sets will not be ruined:

it is always good to speak at the centre of the stage and at the front of it, both so as to be as close as possible to the audience, and as far as possible from the painted sets in perspective, because the closer the actor is to them the more he ruins their effect⁴⁶

All the rules and prescriptions, the whole complex mechanism of regulations, customs, tricks and inventions that made up acting – from the need to adopt only gestures and movements that strictly adhered to the typical nature of the characters and the situations in which they are involved, to the need to render perfectly their emotional expressions, or the requirement to place the actors on the edge of the stage – aimed at just one, essential, decisive effect: creating the illusion that the action, which is feigned and imitated, rehearsed and repeated, should appear real and true, spontaneous and improvised. The actor's 'gestures and movements' are appropriate in that they managed to make the part played seem 'something true'.⁴⁷ The voice should vary and be articulated so that 'what is spoken' seems 'familiar talk

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 43-44.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 47.

⁴⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 55. The principle by which the actor must not walk while speaking seems to have been widespread and general towards the end of the sixteenth century. It can also be found in a scene from the anonymous English play, *The Return from Parnassus*, acted at Cambridge between 1598 and 1603, where two actors, Burbage and Kemp, give some advice to two young students who intend to take to the stage (the dialogue is reproduced in *Actors on Acting*, ed. by T. Cole and H. Chinoy, New York, Crown Publishers, 1970, p. 84). The principle originates in the model of the oratorical style and was illustrated by Quintilian, who advised the orator to walk only during the pauses of the speech (*Institutio oratoria*, XI,3,126). The other rule, which was universally accepted down to the late nineteenth century, forbidding the actor to turn his back on the audience also originates in the oratorical model (on this see also Angelo Ingegneri, *Della poesia rappresentativa e del modo di rappresentare le favole sceniche*, p. 19). Quintilian reminded his readers that it is usually improper for the orator to show the judges his back when he moves. The rule was one of the precepts for good conduct in society, where it was disrespectful to turn one's back on the person one is talking to, and so, for the actors to do so to the audience during a performance, not only when they are speaking their lines, but also when they are moving on the stage without speaking (*Institutio oratoria*, XI,3,127)

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 55.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 46.

that happens without forethought'.⁴⁸ The ability to render the most immediate emotional expressions with a wonderful change of face, gestures and tones, leads the audience to believe 'they are not seeing something prepared or feigned being represented, but so well as to see something true taking place that has happened unexpectedly'.⁴⁹ So that the actor's final task consists precisely in 'trying his utmost to deceive the spectator into believing that what he sees happening on stage is true'.⁵⁰

4. *The Writings of Pier Maria Cecchini*

Similar thoughts can also be found some time later in the first systematic writings on acting to come from the world of professional actors, written by Pier Maria Cecchini, who was an active member of various groups of *comici* and later a stable member of the company of the Accesi. Particularly keen on justifying the dignity and morality of his profession, in 1601, while on a tournée in France, Cecchini published his *Trattato sopra l'arte comica, cavato dall'opere di San Tomaso, e da altri santi. Aggiuntovi il modo di ben recitare*.⁵¹ The second part of the work was later reprinted with some change and a new title, *Discorso sopra l'arte comica con il modo di ben recitare*, and again reworked and published in his *Frutti delle moderne comedie et avisi a chi le recita*, which appeared in Padua in 1628.⁵²

Most of Cecchini's experience was connected with acting in the *commedia all'improvviso* and on this he provided some clear observations. For example, he advised those playing the comic roles not to intervene too much and beside the point, with extemporaneous jokes and witticisms that might distract attention from the main development of the action, and also regarded gestures as being particularly communicative, able to compensate for any shortcomings in the verbal expression.

But apart from these sporadic indications, Cecchini's thoughts do not imply any fundamental difference between the representation of a written text and the performing of a scenario. Naturally, when he mentions the characters Cecchini refers to the stock characters of the *commedia dell'arte*, and so gives a brief description of the figures of Graziano, the first and second servant, Pantalone, the Capitano and Pulcinella. But his way of conceiving the character is no different from that of Leone de' Sommi, Giraldo Cintio or Angelo Ingegneri: for Cecchini too each figure who appears onstage must be depicted with his permanent, pre-determined features, which involve character, typical forms of expression, and the language or dialect he must speak.

The concrete experience of the stage that Cecchini had acquired in his daily work as a professional emerges in his insistence on the practical, essential requisites that acting must possess. Still more than de' Sommi, Cecchini underlines the need for the actor above all to 'come across', both in the sense of being heard and being

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 48. See also p. 38.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 44.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 38.

⁵¹ Pier Maria Cecchini, *Trattato sopra l'arte comica, cavato dall'opere di San Tomaso, e da altri santi. Aggiuntovi il modo di ben recitare*, Lion, Roussin, 1601.

⁵² Pier Maria Cecchini, *Discorso sopra l'arte comica con il modo di ben recitare*, 1608, held in a late-nineteenth-century manuscript copy at the Biblioteca del Burcardo in Rome; Pier Maria Cecchini, *Frutti delle moderne comedie et avisi a chi le recita*, Padova, Guaresco Guareschi, 1628. The two texts can be found now in F. Marotti and G. Romei (eds.), *La professione del teatro*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1991.

understood. This is what dictates the rules for the use of gestures, which must be coordinated with the words, preceding them, and even be so clear and immediate as to compensate for any inadequacy in the actor's verbal communication with the audience.⁵³

However, to be really effective, the actor's words too must be immediately understood by the audience, which is why his pronunciation should be perfect and the phrases not spoken 'quickly'.⁵⁴ The volume of the voice should also be regulated in relation to the size of the auditorium, so that the whole audience can hear what is being said without effort, and are not deafened by constant shouting:

those speaking should regulate the volume of their voices depending on where they are, in a small place they should not use the full power nature has given them, but should sweeten their voices, restraining them, and give them only enough strength to fill the place where they are acting.⁵⁵

There are some who, though Heaven has given them such a powerful voice that they can easily be heard, perversely and absurdly insist on never speaking loud enough to be heard, even when they are requested to⁵⁶

Once the volume has been regulated, one must then adapt the voice to the various situations involving the character and the different emotional states he experiences.⁵⁷ In any case, the actor can never speak directly to the audience because theatrical convention requires that the only persons present are those onstage. It will also be necessary to coordinate the tempi of the speech with the stage movements. When a character enters, the person speaking should at once fall silent, just as an actor should never come onstage while another actor is speaking.⁵⁸ It is also desirable that two actors never speak at the same time, 'so as not to create confusion, which is irritating to the listeners and not right for the speakers'.⁵⁹

Lastly, voice and gestures should be completely unaffected.⁶⁰ Yet the whole performance should seem graceful and elegant: the forms of expression – the words, but also the gestures and movements – should have a certain elegance superior to that found in the real world, and so the pronunciation should be 'softened', and made 'mild to the listener's ears',⁶¹ and the voice of the speaker appear 'like a loving and well-fashioned equerry who, with polite and civil manner, prepares the entrance for the Majesty of the speech'.⁶²

⁵³ Pier Maria Cecchini, *Trattato sopra l'arte comica*, p. 15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵⁶ Pier Maria Cecchini, *Frutti delle moderne comedie et avisi a chi le recita*, in F. Marotti and G. Romei (eds.), *La professione del teatro*, p. 81.

⁵⁷ See Pier Maria Cecchini, *Trattato sopra l'arte comica*, p. 21.

⁵⁸ See *ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

⁵⁹ Pier Maria Cecchini, *Frutti delle moderne comedie et avisi a chi le recita*, p. 82.

⁶⁰ See Pier Maria Cecchini, *Trattato sopra l'arte comica*, p. 15 and p. 17, and *Frutti delle moderne comedie et avisi a chi le recita*, p. 82.

⁶¹ Pier Maria Cecchini, *Trattato sopra l'arte comica*, p. 16.

⁶² Pier Maria Cecchini, *Frutti delle moderne comedie et avisi a chi le recita*, pp. 81-82.

5. The Theoretical Model of Acting. Flaminio Scala and the Decline of the Early Treatises

Now, in all the writings on acting, from Giraldi Cintio to Cecchini, some of the remarks certainly seem perfectly obvious, like the rule obliging the actors not to speak their lines at the same time onstage, and other rules seem to be set down unsystematically, if not casually. In actual fact, however, all these works and the reflections they express led to a precise methodological model for describing the actor's art that was to dominate the debate down to the nineteenth century, and that still persists more or less latently to this day.

According to this model, theatrical acting is determined in every detail by three sets of different requirements. The actor onstage must respond to all these requirements, finding a point of balance between them, and so manage to produce the overall and basic effect of acting, which consists in inducing the audience to perceive and experience as real the figures and events represented, even though they know quite well they are simulated.

The first requirement is 'theatrical' and concerns the concrete conditions of any staged play, which establish how the actor must perform. He acts in a defined space, facing an audience that must see and hear him, understanding everything he does. This determines the rules concerning the volume of the voice, the need to speak slowly, the arrangement of the actors on the stage area to make it easier for the audience to see and hear them, the coordination of the tempi of entrances and exits and the speaking of the lines so that they are not superimposed, creating confusion. These aspects of acting precede any other later choices and must in any case be maintained, whatever character the actor must interpret, and whatever action he must perform.

The second requirement is 'aesthetic', and concerns the need for the people and events represented by the actors to reflect people and events in real life, but made 'more beautiful', corrected and perfected. To this end the gestures, expressions and movements must not only be 'exemplary' – able to show absolutely clearly the ideal aspect of each character and his way of behaving – but also possess elegance and grace. Hence the suggestions for making the actor's voice, gestures and movements beautiful and pleasing, and hence too de' Sommi's remarks on how the actor should position his feet, the ban on speaking while walking, and the need to enunciate, as Cecchini desired, so that it is 'mild' to the audience's ears.

The last requirement is 'dramaturgic', and concerns the actor's essential task: delineating the characters as typical figures, representative of general categories, displaying as clearly, convincingly and effectively as possible the persistence of their basic (physical and psychological) traits, and at the same time acting in the situation, expressing the variety of their emotional reactions in the various circumstances in which they find themselves.

Finding and maintaining a point of balance between these requirements was far from easy. One need only consider de' Sommi's rule that the actor must always speak slowly to make himself understood by all, in the name of a typically theatrical requirement, and imagine a moment in which the character, for the dramatic requirements of the situation, must express himself frantically, brokenly, or gabbling the words; or the need to maintain elegance of gesture in performing hopelessly comic and grotesque parts; or the difficulty of preserving the rigidly established

constant features of the stock character as well as his various reactions in the extreme variety of situations he meets, which sometimes seem to require the display of feelings and attitudes extraneous to the pre-fixed characteristics of his ‘nature’.

Finding the point of balance determines the final – and essential – effect of acting: ensuring that all the images and actions represented, which are feigned and carefully developed, are so well depicted, as both Giraldi Cintio and de’ Sommi write, as to seem ‘true’. And for that to happen it is obviously indispensable to avoid any form of affectation and to act naturally, so as to simulate the appearance of perfect spontaneity. Only then will what is ‘prepared and feigned’ seem authentic and to have ‘happened unexpectedly’.

The contents of a methodological model of this kind can obviously vary. In practice, it was a question of identifying precisely the ways in which the actor can respond to the three different types of requirement, find a balance between them, and give an effect of ‘reality’ to the character and his actions, and here we can recognize two attitudes in the line passing from Giraldi Cintio down to Cecchini. While Giraldi Cintio and Ingegneri sought the rules of acting in Cicero’s and Quintilian’s thoughts on *actio* and transferred their precepts wholesale to their own theories of acting, de’ Sommi and Cecchini tended to make more use of their practical experience of the stage, taking from it a limited number of rules, still extremely schematic and simple, which they prescribed to the actors.

This tendency to theorize starting from the experience of the stage seems explicit in the *Prologo* to the comedy *Il finto marito* (1618) by Flaminio Scala, a representative figure of the professional theatre of the time, an actor-manager in the company of the Confidenti between 1614 and 1621.⁶³ The *Prologo* contrasts the opinions of a ‘foreigner’, who thinks it indispensable to stage comedies written by literary men who know how to apply the rules established by the ancients, and the objections of an actor, a spokesman for Scala, who not only sees the literary quality of the texts to be staged as relatively unimportant, but also excludes the possibility of finding rules for writing and performing them in the ancients.

The essential element in any play, when it is staged, claims Scala, is not the literary text, but the actor’s gestures, movements and performance. However learned, profound and elaborate the verbal expression may be, in itself it cannot produce important effects, because onstage ‘every gesture timed properly and with the right emotional force will have greater effect than all Aristotle’s philosophy’. Movements and actions are much more effective than mere words: ‘anyone with a mind, and even the animals, will take more notice and move when faced with someone who raises a stick than someone who raises his voice’.⁶⁴ Lovers, he continues, are moved much more ‘by a little tear, by a glance or a kiss’, than by the words ‘of a great moral philosopher, who with well-crafted phrases, perfect concepts and great eloquence’ exhorts them to virtue, ‘persuading them to leave sensuality aside’.⁶⁵

In addition, as regards the performance of comedies, ‘actions are closer to actions than narrations are’, and comedies consist essentially ‘in actions’. Thus, anyone

⁶³ Flaminio Scala, *Il finto marito*, In Venetia, Andrea Baba, 1619 (but 1618).

⁶⁴ Flaminio Scala, *Prologo della comedia del Finto Marito*, in *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative*, ed. by F. Marotti, 2 vols., Milano, Il Polifilo, 1976, I, pp. cxiii-cxiv.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. cxiv.

wanting to perform a comedy, and so 'imitate actions', must rely more on the actor's activity onstage than on the words of the text.⁶⁶

It obviously remains to be seen if something useful for good acting can be found in the treatises of the ancients. The foreigner claims that precepts should be taken 'from the good authors who wrote the poetics'. If we need to introduce 'the expression of happiness or grief, fear or daring' in what is said, then it is 'the orator and the philosopher' who will teach us how it should be done. But Flaminio Scala counters all this with a radical argument: all rules and suggestions derive from experience alone.

Who can know better the precepts of the art than the comic actors themselves who every day put them into practice by exercising them? [...] Experience makes art, as many acts repeated make the rule, and if we draw our precepts from experience, then from these actions we discover the true rule⁶⁷

At this point the road that leads to a theory of acting dictated by experience and stage practice seems to lie wide open. But in this respect Flaminio Scala's position bore no fruit. Stage practice remained to all intents and purposes merely practice, and the tendency to describe and discuss ways of acting based on the concrete experience of actors produced only the simple suggestions provided first by de' Sommi and then by Cecchini.

There are two essential reasons for this lack of development. On the one hand, there were no indispensable cultural references for translating the comic actors' wealth of stage experience into a clear and systematic theory of acting, making it clearly impossible to go beyond reflections on the volume of the voice, how the actors were placed on the stage, and the need to vary the behaviour of the characters in the various situations, trusting above all, as de' Sommi suggested, to the actor's personal inventiveness. On the other, as we have seen, the justification of the actor's dignity against the condemnation of the Church and contempt of men of letters, and his aspiration to the status of intellectual, led him, whenever he described his activity, to take as his model the images of the orator and the author of texts that were written and, preferably, printed.⁶⁸ It thus seemed absolutely inadvisable to extend their reflections to the areas specific to acting, where it could no longer coincide with oratory, thus underlining its specific diversity from the celebrated and recognized expressive forms. That is why when Flaminio Scala justified stage practice as the only source of rules for the actor, he avoided setting down those rules. In exchange, in 1611 he had an extensive collection of scenarios published in Venice in an elegantly bound volume, with a title that gave the writings a respectably literary aura.⁶⁹ As a result, the need to appropriate the figure of the intellectual in the ways allowed by the culture of the period blocked any attempt to develop a theory of acting based on the specific requirements and characteristics of the actor's work.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. cxiii.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. cxi.

⁶⁸ See C. Vicentini, 'Theory of Acting II. From the Church Fathers to the Sixteenth Century', *Acting Archives Essays*, AAR Supplement 2, April 2011.

⁶⁹ Flaminio Scala, *Il Teatro della Favole rappresentative, ovvero La Riconoscenza Comica, Boscareccia e Tragica. Divisa in cinquanta giornate*, In Venetia, Gio. Battista Pulciani, 1611.