

1 THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED IN EUROPE

Introduction

In the pages which follow, and later in the book, I give a brief account of some of the experiments I carried out in the late 1970s in a number of European countries. All these experiments were done in precarious conditions, with little time: two weeks in Portugal, a week in Paris, two in Stockholm and five days in Godrano, a small Sicilian village near Palermo.

In all of these places I was able only to explain the mechanics of the different techniques, without ever being in a position to carry out an in-depth analysis. Everywhere I tried to follow the same basic scheme.

First came two days' work integrating the group, with exercises and games, and discussions on the political and economic situation in Latin America, and on the nature of the popular theatre which exists in some of our countries. These two preliminary days were necessary because the groups with which I was working were heterogeneous: in Paris, the actors came from several troupes (Aquarium, La Grande Cuillère, Carmagnole, La Tempête); in Stockholm, they were actors and spectators at the Scandinavian Skeppsholm Festival (Swedes, Norwegians, Danes, immigrants); in Portugal, people from all backgrounds; and only in Godrano actors who were all from the same group, i.e. the inhabitants of the village.

Even if they had all been homogeneous groups, I believe that this introduction would still have been necessary: actors must always work on their bodies to get to know them better and to make them more expressive. The first two days' exercises are those I describe in Chapter 2 of this book. When, afterwards, we worked with the public, we would begin by asking them to do the same exercises, in order not only to warm them up and help them shed their inhibitions, but also to establish a form of theatrical communion with them.

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During the following two days, exercises and games would be linked together and we would prepare Invisible and Forum Theatre⁷ scenes.

On the fifth day came the showing of the Invisible Theatre scenes and on the sixth day the Forum Theatre presentation.

Contact with the audience in the Forum Theatre sessions was always established following the same format: physical warm-up and disinhibition of the spect-actors by means of games and exercises, then Image Theatre work, and finally the Forum Theatre piece itself. The themes to be treated were always suggested by the group or by the spect-actors; I myself never imposed, or even proposed, anything by way of subject matter – if the intention is to create a theatre which liberates, then it is vital to let those concerned put forward their own themes. And, as the preparation time was short, we never managed to write whole plays, just short scenarios.

The Godrano experience: my first Forum Theatre in Europe or the ultimate spect-actor/protagonist!

Godrano is a little village in Sicily, 40 km from Palermo. There are many things Godrano lacks: hotel, hospital, supermarket, cinema, theatre – there isn't even a petrol station or a newsagent's. If you want a newspaper you have to go and buy it at Villa Frati, which is a ten-minute drive away.

Among the few facilities which Godrano does have are a bar, a church, a public telephone, two butchers, two grocers, oh yes, and a *posta carabinieri* (police station).

Godrano lies in a valley called Busambra, overlooked by a mountain of the same name. Right in the middle of the mountain, there is a fissure, a precipice, into which the local mafia – which holds sway over the whole region – used to throw the bodies of the numerous workers and peasant leaders with whom they had disagreements.

There have been many mafias. The first mafia, that of Salvatore Giuliano, was a pre-revolutionary form of popular organisation. It was the people armed, the people in revolt, and yet a people without ideology, without a strategy for taking power. So it was defeated. Then the anti-people mafias emerged: the fish mafia (on the coast) would buy an 11-kilo box of sardines for 1,000 lire and sell the contents in the market at 600 lire a kilo. And anyone who got in the way

⁷ For a brief explanation of the mechanics of Forum Theatre, see pp. 241–5 or translator's introduction, p. xxiv–v.

was given a warning: his house was burned down. If there was a second offence, the definitive solution was applied: the fisherman would be thrown down the Busambra precipice. There were also mafias in the civil construction industry, vegetable mafias and animal fodder mafias.

Because Godrano is essentially a pastoral *paese*, the community numbers amongst its inhabitants slightly less than 1,000 people and slightly more than 8,000 cows. Why so many cows? Why eight cows for each human being? Because the European Common Market⁸ obliged Italy to buy its meat abroad. And the meat one eats in Palermo (all of 40 km away) arrives by plane, when it could just as easily come from Godrano on foot. Foreign cows feed the population of Palermo, and the cows of Godrano live a long life, till they grow senile and die sclerotic. And these aren't even sacred cows, so they have no religious duties: all their time is free to contemplate the fields, no worries, no hurry.

Godrano used to have a population of over 2,000 people, but half had to emigrate. They went to Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Argentina and Brazil; they went wherever they had family, friends, or hope. But not one of these emigrants ever stopped thinking of their little beloved *paese*.

Which is why house-building still goes on in Godrano: there are fewer and fewer people and more and more houses – but one day the emigrants will return . . . so they think.

Such was Godrano in 1977. A peaceful village. A profoundly unhappy village. Silent even in summer.

Feminism in Godrano

Everyone in Godrano was unhappy, and among the unhappiest were the women – and, among the women, the girls. Everyone was oppressed, but most oppressed were the women who were married or soon to be married. In the afternoons I used to walk around the village's few streets, and in front of almost every house I would see a woman sitting sewing. She would be preparing her trousseau or her daughter's. In these parts, the trousseau is called the *corredo* and the *corredo* is an Italian national institution. But in Sicily this institution is even more awful and alienating than it is in the rest of the Italian nation.

For example, I was told that it used to be perfectly normal – and even today is quite common – for the bridegroom's family, before the marriage, to meet the

⁸ The forerunner of the European Union.

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bride's family for what is known as 'the valuation'. When father, mother, uncles and aunts, sisters and brothers, and, sometimes, friends of the family, are gathered for the occasion, the bride's family start displaying the contents of the *corredo*.

'This cloth cost 20,000 lire.'

'That's impossible, it's worth far less. I've seen the same stuff in Paoletti's but much better quality and half the price.'

'Well, that's what it cost —.'

So the argument goes till a rough figure can be agreed, then on to the next items, and in this fashion, in front of the assembled company, they parade the bridal nightgown, handkerchiefs, sheets, towels, carpets, even lampshades.

When general agreement has been reached, the whole lot is duly set down on a list, with two copies made, one for each family. From then on, for however many weeks till the marriage is due, the components of the *corredo* remain on display: viewing is open to all friends and family.

The groom is not required to present a *corredo*. Which means, translated into simple arithmetic: 1 bride + 1 trousseau = 1 bridegroom.

There's equality for you.

Another 'detail' — the bride absolutely must be a virgin. Until recently (some say even to this day), in many places in Sicily it was the custom, the morning after the nuptial night, for the man to hang out the bloodstained sheet so that everyone could see that the bride had been a virgin; no one asked if the groom was a virgin or not.

Now, almost everywhere, local customs are moving forward, but they are still terribly anti-women. For example, at four in the morning the whole family bursts into the newlyweds' bedroom to bring them . . . breakfast. And while they're at it they take the opportunity to catch up on the latest news; so, did it all go all right? Did they acquit themselves well?

The police again

Two Palermo newspapers published interviews with me. Immediately, the head of the *carabinieri* at Palermo telephoned the 'brigadier' at Godrano to ask why he had not detected the presence of a 'foreigner'. The *carabinieri* then showed great vigilance in tracking our every movement. And when they became aware that we were planning to do a show in the main square, they decided to ban it. There were lots of comings and goings, one step forward, two steps backward, many discussions. Finally they decided to allow the show if an authorisation came

from Palermo – which would entail at least three days' worth of bureaucratic transactions. And there was a further difficulty: the show we were doing had no script on which we could be judged.

The chief of the *carabinieri* came to see us mounted on his mule and accompanied by his entire squad (of two), on their bicycles. He repeated his objections: 'When all is said and done, this man is a foreigner; and let's face it, foreigners can cause social unrest. Who knows what sort of ideas they have over there – and who's to say this foreigner won't harm the citizens of Godrano by showing them these ideas?'

My hosts gave a detailed explanation of the theory of the Theatre of the Oppressed and the policemen listened attentively. It was explained to them that I was not in the least interested in the importation of foreign ideas; all I brought with me was a new way of doing theatre. As for ideas, it was the inhabitants of Godrano who would be supplying them, not me.

'You mean to say that it will be the local people themselves who will be expressing themselves through this Forum Theatre? You mean these people are going to say what they think, say whatever they like, *they're* going to "practise the actions they think necessary to liberate themselves"?'

'Yes.'

'The people themselves?' shouted the brigadier who wanted to be heard on the other side of the Bussambra Valley.

'Exactly.'

I have to acknowledge that at this point the policeman had a rare moment of lucidity:

'Then it's even more subversive than I thought and much more dangerous. People should have ears but no mouth! It's absolutely out of the question. Good day, gentlemen' – and off he went again on his mule.

The only solution was to talk to the *Sindaco* (the leader of the council and the mayor rolled into one). I was not keen to ask him, because one of our plays dealt explicitly with the economic hardship the *Sindaco* had caused, by not allowing the peasants to organise their own cooperative to trade their meat elsewhere. But my friends insisted that we should not give up prematurely – we should at least talk to this mayor. So we went to meet the man. In the name of culture and freedom of speech, the *Sindaco* decided to take full responsibility and we got back to work. He added that instead of going to Palermo at the weekend, as was his wont, he would stay to watch the play. I ventured that the play was not so important – he would do better to go and take a break in Palermo – but he insisted on attending

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the performance, proud as Punch that his village could now boast an *avant-garde* theatre, surpassing Villa Frati in terms of Art with a capital A – so he said.

The oppressed and the oppressors

Come the Saturday, we were all in the square. The whole town had got to know about the show: many took part, others were happy just watching, still others watched from a distance, from their window or their doorstep.

It was a wonderful experiment for a number of reasons. Apart from anything else, this was the first time in my experience that Forum Theatre was being done with an audience composed of oppressed and oppressors at one and the same time. In Latin America and in Europe, I had done lots of Forum Theatre,⁷ but always with the oppressed. At Godrano the adversaries were face to face.

The family

First we did a few exercises and games, not only to warm up actors and audience but to create an atmosphere of joy, a sort of 'artistic communion'. Then we started the first scene, which was based on a real event and featured real people from the village, using their real names.

First action

Giuseppina, a young woman of 20, wants to go out after supper. She asks her mother's permission. The latter answers that it is up to the father. Giuseppina says that one of her brothers will accompany her. The two women prepare supper.

Second action

The father arrives in a foul mood with everything and everyone – the increase in the cost of living, his wife who isn't bringing his children up right, the children who are all good-for-nothings, the cooperative they were trying to set up and which was making no progress. Enter the sons. Towards Giuseppina each practises a different species of oppression. The first, the violent one, is of the opinion that a woman's place is in the home, and that the stupider and more ignorant she is, the better she is placed to carry out her feminine tasks, whether at the dinner table or in bed. The second, who is younger, does his best to tell on all his sister's misdemeanours, however small: she looked at next-door's son, etc. As for

the third, he plays the nice guy: he will accompany his sister as long as she behaves as he thinks fit. Giuseppina asks if she can go out that evening, but it so happens they are all busy: one is going to play football, another is going to play cards and the third has to do his homework.

Third action

The father forbids his daughter from going for a walk. The three brothers go and do what they want, because they're men, even if two of them are younger than her. Giuseppina gets back to the washing-up, because she is a woman.

The forum

Immediately after the presentation of the play, the 'model' which was to be the starting point of the forum, there were some very masculine reactions in the audience. Two husbands ordered their wives to get up and go home. The two women refused and stayed to the end. They didn't dare come on stage, but they were brave enough to stay, against their husbands' wishes.

Other men started to say that this was not a serious problem and that we should be discussing more serious matters, such as the price of bricks and mortar. The women protested, saying that as far as they were concerned, this was a very serious matter.

Then the forum began, around the supper table, right in the middle of the stage. Three young women decided to replace Giuseppina and tried to break the oppression. But the oppressors were well coached and on every occasion the women eventually found themselves back at the washing-up. They managed to say just about everything they wanted to say, but in the end they were still beaten. Then a fourth young woman came along, to show what was for her the only solution: force. Going against the paternal will, she went out for her walk after he had gone to sleep; and the audience accepted this as a solution. The *Sindaco*, who had no daughter of his own, was enchanted with this new form of theatre, this outburst of creativity.

Then the second part of the forum started – the spectators were now encouraged to take the place of other characters as well, to show actors and audience new forms of oppression – in the *naïveté* (in the best sense of the word) of their acting, unaware of the power theatre had to lay bare their true feelings and ideologies in their acting, the oppressors-interveners would show their real ideology, feelings and desires. Immediately a corpulent man appeared and played out his solution: he ordered his children out of his house and in the end threw his wife out too, saying: 'Yes, you too, go and find your boyfriend!'

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His words revealed the reactionary thinking which lay at the root of his behaviour: if the girl had committed 'a sin', it was because the mother was a *putana* (whore). The women vigorously challenged this.

At the end of the 'forum' of this scene, one of the young women spect-actors commented:

'We have dared to say things here, in the main square, in front of everybody, which we sometimes don't dare say at home. But for our parents the opposite has been true: things they say over and over at home, they haven't had the guts to say once here, in front of other people.'

This transplanting of the dining room to the middle of the street had other effects as well. There was another important moment when a young man took the place of the protagonist. We were then able to make the following observation: when a young woman took Giuseppina's place, she immediately excited a feeling of identification, which was experienced by all the other young women present. By contrast, with the young man's performance, there was no identification. The young women watched him, but didn't identify themselves with him.

What are the practical consequences of this non-identification? The male actor (even if he was a spectator at the beginning) was still, as far as the women were concerned, a male actor; the woman spect-actor on the other hand was one of them, a woman on stage, standing there *in the name* of other women. The male actor, played in Giuseppina's *place*, but not *in her name*.

It clearly follows that when an *actor* carries out an act of liberation in a normal play where intervention by the audience is not allowed, he or she does it in *place* of the spectator, which event is thus, for the audience, a catharsis. But when a *spect-actor* occupies the stage and carries out the same act there, he or she does it in the name of all the other spectators, because they know that, if they don't agree, they themselves can invade the stage and show their opinion – and the event is thus for them not a *catharsis* but a *dynamisation*.

It is not enough for a theatre to avoid catharsis – what is needed is theatre which produces dynamisation. We should depart from the theatre galvanised with our desire and our decision to bring about change on that which is unfair and oppressive.

In the end, even if the men weren't as happy as they might be, the women, well, the women were overjoyed. The next day, when we asked Giuseppina's mother how she liked the show, she answered:

'I thought it was sensational. And all my friends admired my daughter's performance. They told me that it's just the same in their homes. The problems are the same. And one of my friends said that we should look for the solutions together.'

The cooperative: the character assumes his own role and seeks to refute the actor

The second show we prepared contained an extraordinary element – an actor was playing the part of a character who was present in the audience: the *Sindaco*!

This came about in the following way: at Godrano, the shepherds had wanted to form a cooperative so that together they could find an answer to the problem of the lack of markets for their flocks. They accused the *Sindaco* of not helping them, even of actively impeding the cooperative in the pursuit of its goal. They prepared and performed the scene themselves. I only made suggestions about the form of their play, not its content.

First action

Three members of the cooperative argue about the role of the *Sindaco*, and decide to broach the subject with him in order to demand certain measures which they deem essential. Everyone agrees.

Second action

Enter the *Sindaco* in the company of a presiding judge. The former explains that he has chosen this person as a companion on account of his great knowledge of the subject. The three partners protest, declaring that any judge presiding in this case should be an inhabitant of Godrano, someone better acquainted with the problems, rather than an outsider who knows nothing of them. The *Sindaco* maintains his position and ends up imposing his will.

Third action

The presiding judge reveals his plan, proposing that the base of the cooperative should be located somewhere other than the *paese*, where conditions are not ideal. Once again the partners protest, but they are beaten by the cunning arguments fielded by the *Sindaco* and the judge.

Fourth action

The *Sindaco* insists on getting the signatures of the three partners on a document he needs for his official procedures. At first the partners refuse, but they end up giving in.

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By the time the forum element of the show started, tension was high. The 'accused' was there, in the audience, and while the actor-*Sindaco* was speaking, the audience could watch the *Sindaco-Sindaco's* face. The latter smiled and tried to treat the whole thing as a joke; but the spect-actors were deadly serious. The *Sindaco* asked me who this character was, and I answered that he was no-one in particular, a symbolic *Sindaco* rather than a real *Sindaco*. He did not believe me: 'Symbolic . . . I see . . .' . And nor did I. When anyone shouted 'Stop!', the actor would be replaced and the next spect-actor would give his version of the facts and of the behaviour of the authorities present. With tears in his eyes, one of the spect-actors cried out that if the cooperative had been in existence, and had been as effective as it had the potential to be, he wouldn't be in the position he currently found himself in, i.e. being forced to emigrate to Germany. Another launched a tirade exposing the benefits the *Sindaco* gained from the non-functioning of the cooperative. Another proposed – still from within the frame of the theatrical action – that the *Sindaco* be excluded from the cooperative. And the *Sindaco* was right there, listening to everything, drily swallowing all the accusations and preparing his response.

Then came the inevitable moment. The *Sindaco* himself very nervously shouted 'Stop!' and took the place of the actor playing his part. This happened in Sicily, birthplace of Pirandello⁹ – but the motivation for this collision of character and reality, this dissolving of theatrical boundaries, was here very different from that which animated the author of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. There was nothing metaphysical about it; it was as concrete as can be. The motivation here was political; the *polis*¹⁰ was there in the square to discuss the acts of its government, to challenge its government, to attack it.

We experienced a bewildering event; the *Sindaco* entered into the theatrical game, but immediately tried to transform it into a game he knew better, the parliamentary game.

'Good, now let's talk seriously. Up to now you have been doing theatre, you've been playing around with serious issues. Now we are going to talk seriously.'

What did the *Sindaco* want? He simply wanted to play his game. In local politics, it was up to him to call on whomever he wanted to speak when he wanted; he

⁹ Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936), modernist Sicilian playwright best known for his so-called 'theatre in theatre' plays, in which the characters break out of the frame of the drama.

¹⁰ *Polis*, the ancient Greek city-state.

led the process, and interrupted or modified it as he wished, and no one dared oppose him. He had been esconced in this position for the past seventeen years.

However, in the game of Forum, theatrical democracy came into play; here any spect-actor could shout 'Stop!' and shut him up. The peasants understood this and one of them said:

'No, we are not going to talk seriously, we are going to talk theatre!'

In this game, all the players were equal. And the *Sindaco* did not enjoy this democracy. Because whenever he started to say something which wasn't true, immediately he would hear a shout of 'Stop!' and someone would take the stage to contradict him, revealing opposing evidence and fielding the counter-argument.

Anyone could do it – this was theatrical democracy. Anyone. A far-from-stupid adolescent girl was one of the most vociferous; she protested the most, she was the most forthright in her condemnation of the *Sindaco*, right there in the middle of the main square, in front of everybody. She talked so much and so often that she provoked the following exchange:

'Madam, remove your daughter and ask her to shut up and stop accusing the *Sindaco*, because if she says one word more, she will never find a husband in Godrano!'

The mother answered:

'So what? She can just as easily get married in Palermo! I will pay the bus fare'

The *Sindaco* continued to try his utmost to have this theatrical game replaced by his favoured local politics game, but at every juncture he would hear the same cry: 'Stop!' Finally he blew his top and screamed:

'It's my cooperative, if you want to run it, set up another one.'

Clearly this was impossible.

The show had begun at nine in the evening and at two in the morning there were still lots of people on the square deep in discussion. The Forum Theatre turned into the forum, pure and simple. At great length. Right through till the following day. Even reaching other *paesi* at Villa Frati and Mizzoiuzzo, because the villagers from there who had come to see the show wanted to take the idea of Forum Theatre back with them, so that the problems of the people would be discussed there too. In the square, in the 'forum'.

In Forum Theatre at no time should an idea be imposed. Forum Theatre does not preach, it is not dogmatic, it does not seek to manipulate people. At best, it liberates the spect-actors. At best, it stimulates them. At best, it transforms them into actors. Actor – he or she who acts.