

UCLA

Carte Italiane

Title

Review of Gianluca Rizzo. Poetry on Stage: The Theatre of the Italian Neo-Avant-Garde. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0n28b3hz>

Journal

Carte Italiane, 13(1)

ISSN

0737-9412

Author

Kim, Hiju

Publication Date

2021

DOI

10.5070/C913054161

Copyright Information

Copyright 2021 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Review of Gianluca Rizzo. *Poetry on Stage: The Theatre of the Italian Neo-Avant-Garde*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020.

Hiju Kim

Among the many innovative achievements of the Neoavanguardia and the Gruppo 63, the Nuovo Teatro stands out as a platform that allowed poets to carry their words onto the theatrical stage where art met the public, both literally and figuratively. The Nuovo Teatro was a socially driven artistic practice that breathed life into poetry by bringing the elements of body, voice, and gestures into the textual form. In his expansive and thought-provoking volume *Poetry on Stage: The Theatre of the Italian Neo-Avant-Garde*, Gianluca Rizzo articulates the visceral and intellectual synergy between poetry and theatre and elucidates the collaborative efforts that flourished among playwrights, directors, actors, and audiences. He stresses the poets' insistence upon the improvisational freedom of the actors and highlights their sociopolitical objectives devoted to communal meaning-making. By reexamining the birth of Nuovo Teatro, Rizzo challenges the perceived divisions between poetry and theatre overall and critically bridges the purported gaps between the two artistic media.

In the first chapter, Rizzo outlines the reasons why certain poets took to theatre as a means of sociopolitical expression by exploring the philosophical contentions that rose out of the Neoavanguardia. The author tackles questions that pertain to the functionality of literature with respect to the public, the "permeability between poetry and drama" (20), and how theatre as a medium promotes inclusivity for audiences through tactile and auditory modes of exchange that result in meaning-driven communal gatherings. As Rizzo shows, neo-avant-garde poetry on stage was a means to unbind the written word from an enclosed realm of literature dedicated to elite circles. He presents the authors' reckoning of theatre as a spatial medium in which poetry could flourish and lauds the tenacious strides of each artist that supported the "stage as a laboratory for linguistic experimentation" (57). In doing so, Rizzo brings to light the distinctive literary practices of the neo-avant-garde and illuminates how poets nurtured a mission to deconstruct the institutional hierarchy within the art world. While outlining the debates surrounding the movement from the genesis of the Gruppo 63, this chapter analyzes the works of Elio Pagliarani by contextualizing and comparing them with those of Alfredo Giuliani, Edoardo Sanguineti, Nanni Balestrini, and Antonio Porta.

Chapter 2 focuses on the four pioneers of the Nuovo Teatro, Carmelo Bene, Mario Ricci, Carlo Quartucci, and Giuliano Scabia. Rizzo outlines their artistic developments from the inception of their theatrical practice, the theoretical foundations of their manifesto, "For a Conference on New Theatre," and how their reformist approach to theatre and poetry was received by their contemporaries. As he carefully retraces their humble beginnings from *cantine romane*, Rizzo underscores how the authors subsequently allowed the actors' voices on stage or in other public settings to resonate louder than their writings alone. As the chapter contextualizes all of this in the social problems of the decade, Rizzo highlights the relationship of the Nuovo Teatro to absurdist theatre, the influences of Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud, and the modes in which the artists incorporated unconventional props and sculptures on stage to deliver anti-mimetic representations of everyday life. According to Rizzo, such gestures disrupted the consumer capitalist culture of the quotidian world projected in mass media and introduced a critical approach to art viewership with a counter-hegemonic social stance. In particular, Rizzo analyzes the work

Zip, an experimental play directed by Quartucci and written by Scabia that promoted an egalitarian approach to theatre with the actors, the scenographer, author, and all other participants in the show contributing equally to the creation of the performance as process art.

Chapter 3 expounds upon the theoretical dimensions of the Nuovo Teatro through the works of Porta and Scabia, while Chapter 4 takes Pagliarani's theatre as a case study. Rizzo meticulously examines the ideological underpinnings of the neo-avant-garde movement by dissecting Pagliarani's writing process and theatrical experiments. In particular, he illustrates how these experiments sought to show the primordial relationship between poetry and theatre as an amalgamated form of linguistic and artistic expression. The author emphasizes the performative value in reciting and representing poetic verses from the traditions of antiquity and recalls how oral and corporeal dimensions of literature evoke theatre's natural incorporations of spoken language. With a diminished reliance on pre-written scripts, the actors were active agents who worked primarily with the directors to manifest their artistic freedom through spontaneous and uninhibited forms of physical expression. The materials in these chapters thus explicate the importance of *corpo-voce* (body-voice) on stage. In tracing the praxis of the artists who wished to summon the origins of *poiesis* as a commemorative act of creation, Rizzo carefully demonstrates how theatre was an ideal backdrop for neo-avant-garde artists to amplify poetry through elements such as tone, intonation, and rhythm in performance.

Chapter 5, the final chapter of the book, propounds the many epistemological overlaps and intertextual references that generated international collaborations. As he juxtaposes the theatrical works with philosophical debates of the period, Rizzo takes the one-act play *Pelle d'Asino*, a rewriting of Charles Perrault's classic tale by Giuliani and Pagliarani, to illustrate how sociopolitical themes involving labor strikes and marginalized peasants became modified fables on stage. Other examples also include the rewritings of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* by Giuliani and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* by Pagliarani and Giorgio Celli, which were both outcomes of international collaborations that showcased the neo-avant-garde movement as a conscious retreat away from bourgeois materialistic culture. After this last chapter, Rizzo concludes the volume with four interviews with contemporary figures (Valentina Valentini, Pippo Di Marca, Nanni Balestrini, and Giuliano Scabia), giving the reader a broader range of scholarly and artistic perspectives. Rizzo thus enlightens his reader with firsthand accounts of how the theatrical works reached a variety of students, professional writers, and actors with considerable room for them to collaborate and intervene in the movement.

From the outset, Rizzo convincingly delineates why the poets had to extend their creative avenues to theatrical spaces through tight-knit theoretical foundations. Based on the artists' testimonies, the author demonstrates how the collaborations organically came into fruition through their shared belief in poetry's intrinsically symbiotic relationship with the theatre. In Rizzo's view, the medium of theatre was itself a space for the poets to dialogically deliver their messages through a compound of visual and linguistic elements embodied by the actors. Rizzo also helpfully clarifies how individual artists rearticulated particular lessons from prior movements such as futurism and Dada for the reformist purposes of the Nuovo Teatro.

This rich volume is not merely a celebration of innovative craftsmanship in experimental theatre, but a critical reassessment of neo-avant-garde theatre that reveals the poets' unrelenting dedication to effecting social and political change. Rizzo covers a wide breadth of under-investigated materials in ways that should interest scholars from an array of disciplines. Despite the scant audiovisual evidence of the works performed on stage, Rizzo has conducted a robust examination into the theoretical and historical ramifications surrounding the movement through

extensive archival research. The volume thus accentuates the neo-avant-garde writers' unwavering determination to communicate with the public through performances and attests to the tangibility of theatrical productions as a legitimate mode of poetic engagement.