

## **A Theatre of/for Europe: Giorgio Strehler and the Dream of a United Continent**

Margherita Laera

It is my firm belief that until a possible European unification places cultural events, art and cultural heritage at the top of the agenda for its construction, it will be destined to fail, even though it may succeed in constituting itself in some other form. (Strehler 1993,1)

To be writing about the dream of a united Europe today – particularly of the Europe that Giorgio Strehler had hoped would become united in the name of socialism, humanism and a common cultural heritage – is an ironic and somewhat uncomfortable task. From the current historical perspective in the mid-2010s, when the refugee crisis has unleashed the most un-human and anti-communitarian side of the European Union (EU), when disaffection with the transnational political machine has become endemic in every corner of the Old Continent and when a neoliberal agenda seems to have irrevocably prevailed in Brussels and Strasbourg, all hope of the outcome imagined by the Italian theatre director for the European project seems lost. Nonetheless, a reassessment of Strehler's thinking and legacy appears remarkably timely and necessary. On 23 June 2016, the British people voted to leave the European Union, in what was largely seen as a protest vote against immigration and the EU's policy on free movement of people and labour. It was a vote that, as studies have found, highlighted deep-rooted social divisions in British society and pushed the majority of marginalized, low-income voters – traditionally Labour's main constituents – to be persuaded by the Leave Campaign's divisive rhetoric and its nostalgia for the country's 'lost sovereignty' (Goodwin and Heath 2016). The voting breakdown also demonstrated a marked division between younger voters who wanted to remain, and older ones who chose to leave (Ibid.). In the weeks and months immediately after

the vote, a sharp rise in xenophobic and hate crimes was reported to Scotland Yard. In other parts of Europe such as France, Greece and the Netherlands, far-right, anti-establishment, and anti-EU forces are on the rise.

What can we learn about our current situation from Strehler's vision for the future of Europe? And what do Strehler's words mean to us today, as the European project seems to be on the verge of collapse? How can we judge his legacy and ethics from our current perspective without falling into historical anachronism? This chapter examines the work of Giorgio Strehler as a director, artistic director, ideologue and politician from his theatrical beginnings in the 1940s to his death in 1997, fifty years after he founded the Piccolo Teatro in Milan. The study will focus not so much on Strehler's stage aesthetics, which are the subject of the previous chapter in this collection, written by Bent Holm, and much celebratory scholarship in Italian, but on his ideas and political engagement through programming, organizing, writing, parliamentary activities and cultural leadership.<sup>1</sup> I will investigate the historical and social context in which Strehler operated, assessing his conception of theatre as political battleground and nourishment for the (European) soul, and his efforts to put into practice his utopian dream of a unified Europe based not simply on free markets and consumerism, but on a rich cultural heritage and the values of 'poetry' and 'beauty'. Strehler's project for a 'humanist' Europe characterized by transnational 'fraternity' – and theatre's role in co-constructing it – will be dissected here in all its problematic yet still remarkably relevant purport. This chapter also offers a critique of Strehler's legacy: I ask what remains of Strehler's dreams in a European context hit by the most profound crisis since the Second World War, and where Strehler's own pioneering efforts to manufacture what I will call a 'theatre of/for Europe' through dialogue and cultural exchange have ended up, in some cases, feeding the market-oriented machine of the European festival circuit as a new transnational establishment. Is it fair to argue that his project for furthering transnational cooperation has been co-opted by a neoliberal logic? If so, what can be done to reclaim its focus on community and fraternity?

The chapter is divided into two main sections: in the first part, I provide a brief summary, periodization and contextualization of Strehler's work, mainly in Italy and France, concerning his ideas around theatre in Europe. In the second part, I examine some of Strehler's writings and speeches from the 1940s to the 1990s concerning theatre and Europe, positioning his thoughts within a constellation of philosophical discourses. I then investigate what is left of his teachings and ideas today: in particular, I reflect the role that the practice of international co-productions has today in relation to cultural integration in Europe.

### **A Battle On Multiple Fronts: Strehler's European Work**

Giorgio Strehler's work began as a vocation to 'Europeanize' Italian theatre, mainly by promoting the figure of the theatre director and the model of a state-sponsored, resident art theatre, both derived from European, particularly French and German models. It evolved into a mission to 'transnationalize' theatres in Europe through his leadership of the Paris Odéon - Théâtre de l'Europe and the Union des Théâtres de l'Europe<sup>2</sup>. A faith in the European dream of togetherness despite differences characterizes his long and productive career, and almost every choice he made in the various roles he covered, from theatre programmer to director, from translator to writer, politician, organizer, magazine editor and campaigner can be seen to contribute to building that dream through theatre. Strehler's conception of theatre as the most 'human' and collaborative of art forms makes it in his view the optimal catalyst and paradigm for European integration and cooperation (Strehler 1979b). What emerges from assessing Strehler's multiple activities is a battle on multiple fronts to create not only a theatre *of* Europe – that is, a theatre that would display a European identity and explore a European heritage – but above all a theatre *for* Europe: a theatre that would actively build much needed relations, cooperation and mutual understanding among European peoples. A theatre that would strive for, and begin to shape, European cultural integration.<sup>3</sup>

Strehler was born in 1921 in the culturally diverse town of Trieste into a distinctively multilingual and multicultural family.<sup>4</sup> Four languages were spoken at home: Italian, German, Montenegrin and French. Writing about how this multicultural family set-up impacted on his understanding of European politics, Strehler remarked, as he stood for the Socialist Party at the first European Elections in 1979:

I really do not know [...] how much I can call my own personal culture Italian, Mediterranean, how much Middle-European, French, Slavonic, I do not even know, sometimes, how to distinguish the borders of these human and cultural lines that are intertwined in me.

Of course, I belong to a ‘naturally’ European family, I was born at the crossroads of Europe, in Trieste, where Slavonic, Austro-German and Italian cultures blended and contrasted with one another in search of a new dimension and shared identity. (Strehler 1979b)<sup>5</sup>

Strehler’s family was also devoted to performance: his mother Alberta Lovrič was an accomplished violinist, his father Bruno Strehler was an impresario and venue manager, and his maternal grandfather Olimpio Lovrič was a horn player, a conductor and choirmaster. When the young Giorgio moved to Milan with his mother in 1928, both Bruno and Olimpio had died, but Alberta continued her musical career.

In 1938, Strehler enrolled in the Accademia dei Filodrammatici, a Milanese drama school, where he graduated two years later with full honours. There, Strehler met Paolo Grassi, a junior teacher, who later became one of his closest collaborators. Strehler’s early career began on stage in 1940, playing minor roles in unsophisticated Italian comedies as a member of touring companies. In this period, Strehler came into direct contact with the distinctively national tradition of the star actor (*mattatore*), who was also, often, serving the role of the company manager, artistic director and producer (*capocomico*). He became

disillusioned with its unrefined aesthetics. In an interview with theatre critic Ugo Ronfani, Strehler depicted Italian theatre of the time in derogatory terms:

I found myself living through the end of the glorious Italian tradition of making theatre (*teatro all'italiana*). It was quite a dishonourable end: what remained of that tradition had evolved either into 'sitting room comedy' (*commedia da salotto*) – which had more in common with French *boulevard* than with Pirandello – or into the theatre of the [Fascist] regime. (Strehler and Ronfani 1986, 76)

While during the first half of the twentieth century the figure of the theatre director had already become established in central Europe – most notably through the work of André Antoine, Max Reinhardt, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Jacques Copeau, and Erwin Piscator – these new developments had not yet reached Italy, where star performers were still the dominant figures. This led to few rehearsals, less attention to the visual aspect of the performance, and textual improvisation and approximation. Ronfani argues that, 'in Italy at the time, the ineffective theatre policies of Giolitti [the long-serving liberal Prime Minister of the pre-Fascist era] and Fascism, the average ideology of official culture and the authority of traditional actors made the relationship between our national scene and European theatre an anomaly' (Strehler and Ronfani 1986, 75). In Milan, where Strehler was living, one of the few experimental theatre groups that was open to directorial practices was Palcoscenico, a company directed by Paolo Grassi, which Strehler joined as a performer in 1941 in the run-up to the opening at the city's Teatro dell'Arte of *L'ultima stazione* (*The Last Station*), a play by anti-Fascist intellectual and writer Beniamino Joppolo. Speaking about this experience, Strehler declared in an interview:

Italian theatre was historically and humanly backward by at least fifty years. There were dreadful gaps. Those gaps were the spaces we occupied, with the intention, of course, of changing the world. Because, at the age of twenty, one wants to change the world. (Strehler and Ronfani 1986, 75–76)

The Italian scene was, for Strehler, both a source of disappointment and an incentive to leave a mark in history. Strehler began to direct in 1943, demonstrating a keen interest in contemporary playwriting by choosing texts by Italian writers Luigi Pirandello, Dino Buzzati, Ennio Flaiano and Joppolo. In the same year, Strehler refused to serve in the military for the Salò Republic (Mussolini's second attempt at forming a 'Social' Republic, following his retreat to Northern Italy in 1943 during World War Two) and instead joined the Resistance. Condemned to death for his dissident activities, Strehler escaped to Switzerland, where he met other anti-Fascist intellectuals, both Italian and French, and founded the Compagnie des Masques, a theatre company through which he explored texts by, among others, T.S. Eliot, Albert Camus and Thornton Wilder. During his Swiss exile, Strehler developed the consciousness that his interest for theatre could not be pursued other than as a reformer, and that only the position of director could offer him this privilege (Mambrini 2013, 280–87).

In order to appreciate the impact of Strehler's work on the Italian theatre system, it will be useful to situate further his practice within theatre conventions in 1940s Italy. During the Fascist Era, from 1922 to 1945, the repertoires of touring companies in Italy had been forced to become inward-looking and provincial, focusing mainly on national writers, some of whom were active supporters of Mussolini – for example Guido Cantini Teodosio Copalozza, Aldo De Benedetti, Gherardo Gherardi, Sergio Pugliese, and Vincenzo Tieri – with a penchant for light entertainment, bourgeois family values or propagandist themes about war, patriotism and colonialism (see Pedullà 1994, 211–24, and Bottoni 1999, 173–96). Before the Fascist period, French authors had dominated Italian stages, but after 1922, importing foreign dramaturgy was actively discouraged by censorship, though classics such as Alexandre Dumas and Molière were of course present. During the 1930s, the Fascist government began forcefully to regulate the theatre industry, not least by trying to influence artistic output and to promote large-scale open-air performances for the masses (*teatro di massa*) (see Pedullà 1994, 200–11). The scarce funding distributed by the regime was channelled towards loyalists (*ibid.*, 38).

Ever since the Futurists had proposed their theatrical manifestos in the 1910s, promoting a kind of fragmented, anti-intellectual and anti-realist entertainment, their enthusiasm had not been followed through with sustained stage innovation, and the avant-garde theatre scene in Italy had stalled. A healthy commercial scene focused mainly on the genres of comedy and drama in Italian, dialect theatre in regional languages, and opera; the latter generated by far the highest income. Until the early 1930s, stage arts relied entirely on private enterprise, touring companies and star performers whose declamatory delivery and textual semi-improvisation challenged the role of the playwright and excluded that of the director. Calls for modernization were frequent and loud, and the intellectual debate in specialized publications was lively (Pedullà 1994, 47–84), but a combination of factors such as the rootedness of the old system, the scarcity of state funding, the economic precariousness in the 1920s and the growing competition from cinema meant that the Italian ‘anomaly’ dragged on until after the end of the Second World War.

Despite the inauspicious background, some innovators were active during the Fascist period. Anton Giulio Bragaglia, a visual artist influenced by the Futurists, had founded the company Teatro Sperimentale degli Indipendenti (1922–36). Partly funded by the regime after the new state support system was inaugurated in the 1930s, Bragaglia introduced avant-garde authors like Maurice Maeterlinck, August Strindberg, Eugene O’Neill, Frank Wedekind and even Bertolt Brecht to Italian audiences, directing productions himself and theorizing the role of the *regista*, the theatre director. (Alberti 1978). Simultaneously, Pirandello’s experiments, especially with his company Teatro d’Arte in Rome (1924–28), saw the role of the *capocomico* timidly mutate into that of a *de facto* director (Sogliuzzo 1982). Pirandello devised bold spatial and staging choices to match his meta-theatrical plays – for example *Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore* (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*) (1921) – though he never actively theorized the shift to director’s theatre, concentrating his campaigning instead on the need to establish quality art theatre repertoires in Italian stage venues, and to offer stable, decent standards of

living for performers. The most influential reformer of all was theatre scholar and pedagogue Silvio D'Amico, a close collaborator of the Ministry for Public Education – which at the time had jurisdiction over theatre – despite not being a Fascist himself. In 1936, D'Amico left his office as government adviser to take up the position of Head of the Regia Scuola di recitazione in Rome (Royal Drama Academy), later to be named after him. In this role, D'Amico set out to shape the next generation of performers, who would be attuned to the sort of acting work undertaken under the guidance of a theatre director.

During the 1930s, the Fascist regime opted for a more sustained involvement in the theatrical sector: first, in 1930, the *Corporazione dello spettacolo*, an organization that was partly a union and partly a government-run regulatory body, was created; in 1931, a tight system of censorship was introduced; then in 1935, the *Ispettorato generale del teatro* was established with the task of regulating repertoires and issuing funding, falling short of creating fully state-run venues (Pedullà 1994, 123–90). This inaugurated an age of state intervention in the theatre industry, with considerable impact on the system that had thus far been left in the hands of private initiative. This paved the way for more intervention by the State after the fall of the regime. When Italy was liberated from Fascism in 1945 and the War ended, the political and ideological climate shifted completely. A Republic from 1946, Italy was on its knees but optimism was on the rise as the ensuing 'economic miracle' saw a period of remarkably strong economic growth.

It is important to situate Strehler in this context, so that his successful efforts to implement European experimentation in Italy can be seen to emerge out of an expedient social and political milieu, rather than appear as a single-handed feat springing out of a desert, which is what much celebratory scholarship around Strehler suggests. In his essay *Il tramonto del grande attore (The twilight of the star-actor)* (1929), D'Amico diagnosed that the reason why the Italian theatre scene had been lagging behind its European neighbours was that Italy lacked its own 'Antoine, Stanislavsky, Reinhardt or Copeau, a man capable of reforming our staging



technique according to the needs of our time and country, like the abovementioned have done for their own. [...] If that maestro does not appear, our theatre is doomed' (D'Amico 1985, 29). Strehler may have been that 'maestro' so intensely longed for by D'Amico, but what is sure is that Strehler operated in a social, economic and political context that was ripe for change. While the pioneering aspect of Strehler's activities and the influence of his work on Italian theatre is undeniable, further consideration of the historical context suggests that, building on the work of innovators like Pirandello, Bragaglia and D'Amico, Strehler filled a leadership vacuum in the post-war economic boom period. He was the right man in the right place at the right time.

In 1945, Strehler returned to a bombed-out Milan and, working closely with Grassi, launched into a period of intense cultural and artistic activity. He wrote as a theatre critic, campaigned for the re-election of Socialist mayor Antonio Greppi, organized theatre-themed meetings to discuss new ideas and read new international plays, and directed several successful productions based on a bold selection of newly translated texts by O'Neill, Émile Zola, Armand Salacrou, Maxwell Anderson, Maxim Gorky, Paul Claudel and Elsa Shelley. Strehler talked about these years as a long and hard fight against the old system of the star actor and against those commentators and performers who thought directors were useless and even damaging for the theatre (Mambrini 2013, 287–314; Strehler and Casiraghi 2000, 61–71).

In 1946, Grassi and Strehler began to dream of a state-funded resident theatre in Milan, an 'art theatre for all' that would perform a kind of 'public service' benefiting the entire citizenship, not just an intellectual élite, taking Jean Vilar's Théâtre National Populaire in France as a model (see Introduction). In 1947, a positive response from the municipality allowed the birth of the first state-funded theatre in Italy, the Piccolo Teatro, in an old and derelict 400-seat cinema venue in Via Rovello, near the Duomo. The new manifesto for the Piccolo wished to offer a programme of high quality productions at reduced prices, rejecting both light entertainment and elitist experimentalism, construing theatre as a place where the community comes together to know itself and to accept or reject the behaviours it sees on stage

(the original manifesto is reprinted in Mazzocchi and Bentoglio 1997, 34). Grassi and Strehler were named joint artistic directors, and the board of governors included local politicians from across the political spectrum. This management structure meant that elected public officials with little experience or knowledge of theatre would be able to influence decision-making at the Piccolo, something which Strehler found particularly detrimental to his artistic practice and freedom, especially in later decades.

The new venue opened with Gorky's *На дне* (*Lower Depths*), which Strehler translated, adapted and directed himself. Later in the season, the Piccolo presented productions of plays by Salacrou, Calderón de la Barca, Pirandello, Carlo Goldoni and Alexander Ostrovsky, all staged with a semi-permanent ensemble directed by Strehler. This was certainly a revolutionary concept for a country like Italy, and the Piccolo must be credited for leading the transformation of the entire national theatre system towards a more 'European' kind of practice (one characterized by a directorial aesthetics and funded by the state), which also incidentally significantly improved performers' working conditions. The Piccolo's overtly social and democratic mission, its exclusive dedication to directorial theatre and to building a stable ensemble, and its outward-looking programming choices were ground-breaking for Italy in the 1940s and 1950s. No such large-scale, consistent project had been attempted before in the country, and it was soon emulated, between 1950 and 1965, by other state-funded resident theatres in other major cities, such as Genoa, Turin, Trieste, Rome, and Palermo.

Strehler's directorial style, known as 'symbolic realism', was based on the supremacy of the text and understood the director not as an artist in his own right, but as an interpreter of the play.<sup>6</sup> Sustained by close readings of the script and prolonged ensemble work, Strehler's theatre was a 'poor theatre', in that it was based largely on in-depth work with actors and a simple set. Strehler's signature style combined the teachings of Copeau and Louis Juvet on rigorous actor training, a bare stage and 'authenticity' of delivery (that is, more naturalistic, less mannered and declamatory), with Bertolt Brecht's emphasis on the political, ethical and social role of theatre.

As Strehler elaborated in an essay entitled 'I miei maestri' ('My teachers'), he considered these three practitioners as crucial in his personal and artistic development. From Copeau, Strehler wrote, he learned to understand the theatre as a kind of 'religion' prompting 'absolute devotion', despite not being a believer in God (Strehler and Kessler 1974, 134). From Jouvet's work, he came to understand theatre as a profession to be practised day in day out in order to get better and better at it, while the actor should become a transient servant of eternal 'poetry', that is, dramatic literature (Ibid.). From Brecht, Strehler absorbed a conception of theatre as a 'human' art, an art that is never disjoined from its historical, political and social context and that should never be practised for its own sake, but instead to 'help [spectators] to make the world a better place' (Ibid., 135). Strehler's faith in theatre's ability to mobilize spectators and achieve concrete political objectives – such as European unification – can be understood as the most significant aspect of Brecht's legacy on the Milanese director.

In the twenty theatre seasons that followed, Grassi and Strehler programmed a balanced selection of both 'classic' and contemporary texts by national, European and American writers who were often previously untranslated into Italian, such as Albert Camus, Ferdinand Bruckner, Jean-Paul Sartre, Brecht, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Anton Chekhov and Federico García Lorca. The Piccolo's 1947 manifesto was clear about the need to internationalize the repertoire:

There is no need to claim a nationalist character for this theatre [...] Even if we are going to resort to words first spoken elsewhere to other peoples, we will realize the universally human traits that are revealed in them, while finding ourselves in the condition and situation of being Italian. We will not renounce the universal richness of men's words: we will only translate it for ourselves and communicate it among us. For this reason we will ask the translator to be an interpreter, almost a second author, poet added upon poet.' (Strehler et al., reprinted in Mazzocchi and Bentoglio 1997, 34)

Strehler's open and on-going interest in translated plays was not only the result of what he perceived as a lack of high-quality contemporary Italian playwriting, but it formed part of his internationalization plan, rooted in ideas of 'universality'. Between 1948 and 1968, creative fervour and enthusiasm meant that an average of ten plays were mounted each year at the Piccolo. The output was matched by a steady audience attendance, so much so that expansion plans were beginning to take form (though the funding for two new venues only materialized much later). National, European and intercontinental tours of the Piccolo ensemble already began the year after it was founded. By 1967, more than 4,300 performances of Strehler productions had been seen in 142 Italian venues and 116 foreign cities (Bentoglio 2002, 33).

While Strehler had first imagined that the Piccolo's relationship with its audiences would be open, dialogic and fresh, over the years it became far more institutionalized. Despite the theatre setting out to found a truly democratic art theatre for all, and practising a policy of subsidized theatre tickets, its audiences were mainly made up of the Milanese bourgeoisie who could afford a sustained engagement with the venue. Gradually, Strehler began to perceive the institutional dimension of the Piccolo and political interference as a weight on his artistic choices, which forced him to produce too many shows without allowing time for research and failure. Strehler's relationship with Grassi – who also pushed for a higher number of shows than Strehler would have wanted – began to deteriorate. Meanwhile, the political climate of the late 1960s saw a renewed hostility towards the role of the director, who was accused by anti-bourgeois ideologues of being the tyrant of the stage and colluding with the upper classes by furthering a hierarchical power structure (Bentoglio 2002, 36–37). In 1968, Strehler therefore handed in his resignation following a small student protest outside the Piccolo which accused him of authoritarianism and elitism. Strehler did not quit because of this demonstration, as has often been claimed (Palazzi in Testoni 2009, 111–21; Strehler and Kessler 1974, 51), but because he did not want his aesthetic choices to continue to be subjected to the will of Grassi and the board. Following his resignation, he founded the collective Teatro e Azione, supposedly

bringing politically engaged theatre to factories and theatres around the country, but actually performing mostly in conventional theatre venues. This experience drew to a close four years later when Grassi left the Piccolo to head Milan's opera house, La Scala. Strehler was then asked to return as sole director, which he did with a renewed sense of resolve and European impulse, implementing a plan to allow more experimentation, and to train new generations of theatre-makers. Shortly after his appointment, he set out the new strategy as follows:

I thought of something more than a theatre that puts on shows night after night. I thought – with that element of dream and utopia that concretely underpins everyday action – of a *Theatre City* in the heart of Milan. And I thought of it for Milan but also for Europe: that Europe that is having so much trouble being born, but of which we detect the signs, and which in the fields of art and culture is a truer and more operative reality than in the field of politics. [...] In these coming years [...] a great *Theatre City* will begin its activities, a City that wants to be the heart of a *Theatre of Europe* in the heart of Milan.

It will be a manifold organism, articulated over two theatres. The first is the Teatro Fossati, rebuilt within its perimeters, its volumes, its spirit, and dedicated to research; therefore, if you understand what I mean, we will be allowed to 'error'. Inside it – as I have said before – there will be a national and European drama school for actors, which will not of course solve all the problems for new generations, but will be a point of reference and development for 'modern' actors and actresses. [...]

Alongside this place – which I call a 'carte blanche' for theatrical research and the school – another theatre is being built [...]. I think of it as a great European theatre, where different texts belonging to different ages and countries would be staged, where European directors could find an organized, human, protected space

that would be devoted to realizing theatrical events under the guiding lights of invention and poetry. (Strehler and Ronfani 1986, 303–4; original emphasis)

In the late 1970s and 1980s, as the European unification project gathered pace, Strehler's European work intensified with new commitments at the European Parliament in Strasbourg and at the Odéon theatre in Paris, and with his new productions in France, Germany and Austria.

As the task of 'Europeanizing' Italian theatre practice could be seen to have been accomplished by the late 1970s, Strehler therefore moved to a different objective: that of 'transnationalizing' European theatre. He stood for the Socialist Party in the European Parliamentary elections in 1979, but was only elected in 1982 and served for just over a year until the end of the first legislature. During his election campaign, Strehler declared that, 'In a possible future Europe, where little, too little, if anything, has been so far discussed about culture, my candidacy wants to represent [...] the idea of a community of culture over that of economy, rooted in shared ideas, brains, common cultural operations' (Strehler and Casiraghi 2007, 89). His speeches in Strasbourg argued for a union based on a shared European cultural heritage. Strehler fought to give a voice to the arts sector in the new political project at a time when European institutions did not have a legal mandate for cultural affairs. His proposed plans for the arts in Europe, such as funding for transnational cooperation in cultural activities, were visionary for his time and were implemented in later years, after the Maastricht Agreement was signed in 1992 (Theiler 2005: 71–73).

His vision for European collaboration in the theatre sector became more concrete in 1983, when France's Socialist Culture Secretary Jack Lang – who had met and worked with Strehler at the European Parliament – named him artistic director of the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe in Paris, a position that Strehler held for six years. The Théâtre de l'Europe, which shared the building with the Théâtre National de l'Odéon, was so baptised in order to sanction

its mission to become the first truly European theatre – not just a hosting venue for ready-made productions from the Continent, but a factory for theatrical creativity that was actively to promote ‘collaboration among European theatre directors, actors, writers and other theatre-makers, with a view to creating new works and to enlivening Europe’s dramatic heritage’ (Strehler 1988, 84). For the Odéon’s first season, Strehler proposed a selection of European classics in a variety of languages: Shakespeare’s *Tempest* in Italian, co-produced by the Odéon and the Piccolo and directed by the *maestro* himself; Ramón del Valle Inclán’s *Luces de Bohemia* (*Lights of Bohemia*) in Spanish, co-produced by the Odéon and Madrid’s Centro Dramático Nacional, directed by the Catalan Lluís Pasqual; Corneille’s *L’Illusion Comique* (renamed *L’Illusion*), produced by the Odéon and directed by Strehler in French; and Heinrich von Kleist’s *Hermannsschlacht* (*Herman’s Battle*) in German, produced by the Schauspielhaus Bochum and directed by Claus Peymann. In the programme notes introducing the 1983/84 season, Strehler hailed the new theatre as ‘a step towards human knowledge [*connaissance des hommes*]’ and characterized European identity as ‘multiple, complex, contradictory [...] but recognizable as a red thread that weaves our history’ (Strehler 1983). He explained that the Odéon’s mission would develop into several strands of activities:

[...] production of works that constitute European cultural heritage, coproduction of theatrical events with European organizations and institutions, performances in different languages (played by actors and directed by directors of international merit), research of links between different cultures and different theatre experiences, presentation *in* Europe of works produced by the Théâtre de l’Europe and creation of the ‘company of the Théâtre de l’Europe’ (Strehler 1983, Strehler’s emphasis)

The following seasons at the Odéon continued on the same track, with a blend of visiting productions and new commissions: in 1984, Strindberg’s *Oväder* (*The Storm*) visited

from the Piccolo in Milan; Dostoevsky's *Бесы* (*The Possessed*), directed by the Russian Yuri Lyubimov in English, was co-produced by the Odéon, London's Almeida and the Piccolo; and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, directed by Ingmar Bergman in Swedish, toured to Paris from Stockholm's Dramatiska Teatern. Under Strehler's directorship, the Odéon hosted visiting productions from Munich, London, Catania in Sicily, Milan, Moscow, Budapest, Madrid, Berlin and Lisbon in the respective languages. Plays presented in the Odéon's small venue comprised French translations of texts by Nâzim Hikmet (from Turkish), Lars Norén (Swedish), Alfred Döblin (German), Edvard Radzinski (Russian), and Krzysztof Zanussi and Edward Zebrowski (Polish). Notable international co-productions were Brecht's *Die Drei Groschen-Oper* (*Threepenny Opera*), directed in French by Strehler with an international cast from France, Italy, Germany and Austria (with the Châtelet Theatre in Paris), and Pirandello's *Come tu mi vuoi* (*As You Desire Me*) in Italian (with the Piccolo and Madrid's Centro Dramático Nacional), again directed by Strehler with actors from Italy, France, Spain, Germany and the UK. Strehler described his work with international actors as 'at the same time human, symbolic and political [...] Not a point of arrival, but of departure' (Strehler and Ronfani 1986, 307–8). Working with international casts was a key aspect of Strehler's brand of a theatre *for* Europe, symbolically embodying the ideal of solidarity and cooperation among Europeans.

When considering Strehler's programming choices for the Parisian venue, it is important to mention that, in the 1980s, mechanisms of international collaboration and co-production were well established in the film industry but were not so frequent in the theatre sector (Cambiaghi 1997, 102), despite having emerged as a practice in the 1960s (Maanen and Wilmer 1998, 31–32). Thirty years later, co-productions have become the norm and are part of the sector's survival strategy against a lack of funding and competition from other art forms. As S. E. Wilmer has argued in his study of western European national theatres, venues 'have become more transnational in their approaches in the late twentieth and early twenty-first



centuries' (Wilmer 2009, 30), and international networks of European theatres have favoured co-productions from this period onwards. Back in 1984, when the practice of co-productions was still infrequent, Strehler remarked that, '[...] with our work we try to create a true circuit of European theatre arts which will have to grow and confirm itself in the future if the powers, the will and the means are up to the task [...]' (Strehler 1984). This is what happened when funding for international cultural collaborations within Europe was established a decade later. It could therefore be argued that the model of international co-productions proposed by Strehler at the Odéon provided a paradigm for what was later to become European cultural policy through its various programmes, such as Kaleidoscope 2000 (1995), Culture 2000 (1999) and more recently Creative Europe (2014). They promote 'bottom-up' cooperation for cultural events organized by partners in at least three member states. Strehler also envisioned what was later to become one of the pillars of European cultural funding, that of support for literary translation from and into European languages, listing it as one of the top priorities for a European cultural policy:

I believe that one of the most fertile endeavours that could be undertaken under the banner of a communitarian cultural organism would be that of stimulating editions of works by authors from different nations in different languages on the basis of a complex programme that would take into account the gaps, the lacunae, of reciprocal differences. It is about planning a corpus of performable dramatic works, accurately translated into European languages, and presenting them to those responsible for different European theatres so that they might become part of their repertoires (Strehler 1993, 4)

In the 1980s, Strehler was acutely aware that what he was doing at a cultural level was in many ways pioneering. In the programme note for the 1984/85 Odéon season, Strehler acknowledged that many Europeans were not 'ready' for what he was doing, but that it was

still his duty to ‘further the feeling of fraternity and unity’ and help define the future of Europe through theatre:

The Europe of politics still needs to be built. The Europe of culture, which is already a reality in its own right [...], demands new efforts and methods, for which many people are not yet ready, in order to blossom with the force of beauty and poetry. But this is precisely our duty... the duty of those of us who ‘make theatre’, who witness the miracle of an art performed by human beings who are different, speak different languages, but who are tied by the same feeling of fraternity and unity in a world still too divided and solitary.

To our audience, we ask nothing more than what it has already given us: presence, love, curiosity and perseverance in its will to be the protagonist of a fascinating adventure that is about to trace the profile of our continent’s future.  
(Strehler 1984, 3)

What is striking in this passage is Strehler’s vision of theatre as the driving force for social and political change. Here, he communicates his belief that theatre is not simply commenting on the status quo, but that it is doing ‘social work’ and influencing the political future of an entire continent. From 1987, when Jack Lang and Strehler created the Union des Théâtres de l’Europe (UTE) and Strehler became its first director, the *maestro*’s vision for the transnationalization of the theatre system in Europe entered a new and more effective phase.<sup>7</sup> The UTE, which is still an active organization today, was established to promote a network of producing theatre venues characterized by strong local traditions and international aspirations. The three founding members – the Odéon, the Piccolo and Madrid’s Centro Dramático – were joined by twelve other members by 1995, including the Maly Teatr in St Petersburg, the Berliner Ensemble, the Royal Shakespeare Company and London’s Royal National Theatre.<sup>8</sup> The primary aims of this new organism were to promote ‘an Art Theatre that would oppose any commercialization of the

theatrical event, seen as an instrument of both poetry and fraternity among peoples' and to devise a common policy that would encourage 'regular exchanges of European authors, actors, set designers and directors, overcoming any language barriers and concretely sharing different experiences and methodologies' through 'productions and co-productions' (Strehler 1988, 85). An annual festival hosted by one of the partners and a quarterly magazine called *Théâtre en Europe* (*Theatre in Europe*), initially edited by Strehler in French and Italian, were further initiatives conceived to strengthen the ties and opportunities for dialogue between the different institutions and their audiences. When Strehler died suddenly in 1997, having been at the helm of the UTE for ten years and at the Piccolo for fifty years, he left behind a remarkable legacy in both Italian and European theatre and culture.

### **For a 'Common Humanity': Strehler's European Ideology and Legacy**

Strehler's career shows how his vision of theatre as an agent of social and political change developed into what we might see as his distinctive cultural strategy for European unification and integration. But what conceptions of identity, aesthetics and politics underpinned his European ideology? In assessing Strehler's legacy, one might rightfully ask whether his art, and particularly his transnational 'theatre of/for Europe', was more revolutionary or else more reactionary in nature. Did it serve the powers that be or did it struggle against them? At the beginning of his career, Strehler's efforts to break Fascism's narrow-minded nationalism and bring Italy's theatre practices up to speed with European developments appeared groundbreaking and truly progressive. But later on, from the 1970s onwards, Strehler struggled to update his rhetoric, aesthetics and cultural references, remaining stuck in an essentialist modernism, so to speak, which may provoke ambivalent feelings today. In this section, through a series of close readings, I shall assess more specifically what Strehler understood 'Europe' to be – a subject that previous scholarship on the *maestro*, most of which is celebratory in scope, has so far omitted.<sup>9</sup>

In the following key passage, taken from an article first published in 1979, Strehler places what he terms a ‘humanist ideal’ (*ideale umanistico*) at the core of ‘European identity’:

[...] the idea of ‘Europe’ is for me an idea of Man before the creation of a system of government and of a more or less pacific association of interests: [...] this idea of the European man is born out of common heritage, of great shared themes that tie us together even beyond what is conscious and most definitely beyond our differences in language and customs.

There is a humanist ideal that is tenaciously rooted in the heart of all of Europe, there is a theme that unites the different cultures of Europe in the name of those that made men modern, and this ‘figured bass’ [*basso continuo*] is at the same time national and European. Perhaps more European than national, such is the number of reciprocal exchanges, that it seems to me that we cannot exist within the circle of our own specific cultures without one another.

Along the course of a history of ‘European homicides’ we have not only exchanged blood but also ideas, thoughts and art, words and images, in other words life and culture. We have made each other what we are today (Strehler 1979b)

Here, Strehler argues that all Europeans have common roots and that, culturally speaking, they belong to the same extended family – so much so that, using a musical metaphor, he likens European cultures to orchestra instruments that play a ‘basso continuo’, that is, a bass line providing the harmonic structure for a piece of music. In other words, European cultures are like different instruments that play to the same musical score. It is crucial to our investigation to begin to untangle what Strehler actually referred to by such nebulous phrases as an ‘idea of Man’, a ‘common heritage’ and ‘humanist ideal’ in his attempt to define European identity.

In philosophical terms, Strehler seems to posit here an ‘essence’ of ‘European man’, and to equate that ‘essence’ with a ‘humanist ideal’. However, ‘humanism’ is an ambiguous philosophical term that is difficult to define. John C. Luik has argued that humanism’s

successive incarnations and definitions in history mean that it can now be thought of as a series of concentric circles, with the early-modern notion of *studia humanitatis* – an educational programme that includes Greek and Latin ‘classics’ – at its heart, and Enlightenment humanism as the second circle (Luik 1998). Enlightenment humanism, in its most basic shape, makes ontological, ethical, educational, epistemological and political claims all centring on the core belief that human reason is the essence of ‘man’ – more precisely, an emancipatory essence – positing history as a progressive course towards realizing human reason’s full potential. According to Luik, at the basis of humanism is a ‘commitment to the perspective, interests and centrality of human persons’, but ‘to be helpful, a definition of humanism must be as much alive to what it excludes as to what it includes’ (Ibid.). In this sense, it may be useful to define Strehler’s brand of humanism by considering how 1970s philosophers who called themselves ‘anti-humanists’ defined humanism itself. Louis Althusser, who was the first to coin the term ‘anti-humanism’, saw Marx’s philosophy as progressively breaking away from humanism (the belief that history was tantamount to ‘the unfolding of human essence’) and Hegel’s essentialism to anti-humanism, i.e. the view that ‘history [is] a process without a subject’ (Callinicos 1998). Later, the term ‘anti-humanism’ was appropriated by post-structuralists such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze. Specifically, these thinkers attacked Enlightenment-derived humanism for its belief in the ‘subject as a unified and sovereign entity’ (Ibid.), and rejected the very notion of ‘essence’ as relative and historically, socially and culturally determined.

My assumption is that Strehler subscribed to the modernist current of thinking that was later to be rejected by post-structuralists and post-modernists like Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Hélène Cixous and Judith Butler. In analysing his speeches, what seems evident is that the lineage of Strehler’s beliefs with regard to ‘Europeanness’ can be traced back to Enlightenment humanism, and to Hegelian and Husserlian reinterpretations of it. Both Hegel (1819) and Edmund Husserl (1965) discussed the ‘essence’ of the European ‘man’ as deriving from ancient

Greek philosophy and went so far as to make claims about the superiority of Europeans over non-Europeans. While Strehler never made similar remarks, an element of essentialism undeniably permeates his thinking on Europe, and his vision of European unification as progress points to a sense of historical teleology. While he rejects essentialism at national level, it is reinstated at transnational level, unwittingly excluding ‘non-Europeans’ in its attempt to be more ‘inclusive’ and ‘open’. Strehler understood ‘Europeanness’ as an autonomous entity and one absolutely distinct from, say, ‘Asianness’ or ‘Africanness’. In Strehler’s idea of European identity, there is little, if any, acknowledgement of the histories of colonialism, diasporas, migration and the porosity of European cultural borders in what was, by the late 1970s, becoming a multicultural continent with a shared past and inextricable cultural, economic and political ties with the rest of the world. Strehler’s theatrical investigations and programming, albeit progressive and pioneering, focused on a kind of European culture and repertoire that, from a contemporary perspective, appears insular and autocratic – an accusation that Strehler himself had levelled at the Fascist-approved repertoire in 1930s Italy.

A European ‘common heritage’, then, includes precisely the kind of texts Strehler staged over the course of his career – a mix of canonical and contemporary plays by European authors, including Russian writers, who were among Strehler’s favourites, and some (white) North-Americans such as Wilder and O’Neill. By ‘common heritage’, then, Strehler refers to ‘classics’ that notoriously exclude women and ‘foreign’ authors, and forms of writing that rejected the traditional understanding of character and plot. By the 1960s, and particularly after Strehler returned to the Piccolo from his four-year break in the 1970s, the cultural climate had changed significantly. Challenges to the western literary canon had become more widespread through the development of feminist, Marxist, post-structuralist and post-colonial literary critique (a group later dubbed ‘the School of Resentment’ by Harold Bloom in his 1994 book *The Western Canon*), and a growing number of theatre-makers realized the importance of acknowledging, legitimizing and engaging with non-western cultures, notably Peter Brook and

Ariane Mnouchkine.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the ‘idea of Man’ postulated in Strehler’s speeches and in the plays staged in his theatres continued generally to be that of a western, white, male, straight and middle-class human being. While we must credit Strehler with being an innovator, the ‘revolutionary’ purport of his work does not lie in pushing the boundaries of western thinking about subjectivity and identity – in fact, in this regard, Strehler’s work can arguably be seen as fairly conservative.<sup>11</sup>

Creativity’s role is, for Strehler, to unite ‘our divided continent’ by means of its ability to articulate Europe’s distinctive and unified identity:

That which united, that which will truly unite Europe will be above all love, understanding, the ability not to reassemble the fragments of an exploded culture, but to highlight more clearly and more courageously a culture that despite it all managed not to explode into pieces and to determine the distinctive character of our divided continent: this ability is that of creativity. [...]

Having said this, I want to say that if I think about a basic European culture, a culture that is everyday, real, sometimes hidden and sometimes evident, I think that there is a European culture that everyone dreams of (every intellectual, every worker and every man [*sic*] of good will), but that at the same time is almost denied and sometimes furiously prohibited by institutions. At best, culture is ignored. (Strehler 1979b)

Strehler’s faith in culture’s power to generate social consensus, and his belief that culture’s mission was precisely that of manufacturing agreement among what was already an essentially like-minded set of people, appears today as one of the most problematic aspects of his thinking. Inspired by Gramsci, Strehler imagined a European culture not for the few, but for ‘everyone’, affordable and relevant to all – and yet we have seen how that ‘everyone’ was fairly restrictive and based on a normative understanding of subjectivity and an essentialist

vision of identity. Strehler's outspoken desire for his work, and culture in general, to speak to 'everyone' also appears problematic because it suggests an understanding of democracy as the space of consensus rather than disagreement and contestation. Despite its self-declared openness and progressive objectives, Strehler's project identified the artist's task as that of enabling harmony, rather than celebrating difference, or problematizing 'common sense'. As a universalizing, harmonizing apparatus, culture and the arts – and theatre as a consequence – are tasked with 'catalogu[ing] all that exists and interpret[ing] it through the light of Tomorrow', as Strehler has it:

I dream as a man of culture and a man of theatre (this simple and complex art that more than any other is made with others for others) of a Europe where culture and theatre would not be a privilege for the few but where authentically interdisciplinary cultural centres would be born, where propulsive cultural pivots would be able to catalogue all that exists [*l'Esistente*], but also able to interpret it through the light of Tomorrow. I dream – to give a few examples – of a Beaubourg that is not frigid, of a Biennale that is not disintegrating, and of a Kassel that is not autocratic. I think of a living European culture, a modern one that is affordable to all, and meets everyone's needs, in its most authentic Gramscian acceptance (Strehler 1979b)

Strehler's vision of culture as a unifying, universalizing device that produces 'happiness for all' can appear a deeply flawed attempt to normalize, standardize and exclude difference.

But as the world around the *maestro* changed, he did not shift his beliefs to suit it. It is symptomatic that in 1968 student protesters chose to march to the Piccolo to point their finger against Strehler, singling him out as a symbol of authoritarianism and oppression, and his theatre as the bulwark of the bourgeoisie:



The protest taught me a terrible lesson: one morning I found myself standing on the Right, perceived as retrograde by many, while the night before I thought I was on the Left and at the avant-garde. And I did not understand how such a transformation could have happened in twenty-four hours. And why. (Strehler and Kessler 1974, 51f.)

Finding himself thus on the ‘wrong’ side of history, his subsequent work to bring theatre to the factories with the collective Teatro e Azione almost appears as an act of apology and atonement. But as Renato Palazzi has argued, Strehler’s four years away from the Piccolo never really marked a shift in his approach to theatre; his faith in the model of a state-funded public resident theatre and his less-than-collaborative creative processes remained largely unshaken – and as a result he fell back into his old habits (Palazzi 2009, 118–20).

And yet, we dismiss his insistence on the need to use theatre politically to further kinship and solidarity among different cultures at our own peril. It is important to remember that the dream of European unity, that Strehler so passionately subscribed to, was the brainchild of a generation that had just resurfaced from the trauma of war and that had seen their lives wrecked by fascism, racism and unspeakable violence (see Introduction). Despite Strehler’s relative ethnocentrism and blindness *vis-à-vis* Europe’s debt towards its former colonies and the rest of the world, his investment in a unified Europe as an instrument to further understanding among different peoples represents a crucial development in the history of the continent, and it would be a mistake simply to dismiss it. While the notion of ‘universality’ has received thorough scrutiny and much-needed criticism in the past forty years, especially by post-structuralist and post-modern thinkers, the value of an ideal such as kinship among the peoples of Europe must return to the top of our agendas. As the European political climate has shifted again towards intolerance and hatred in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, which unleashed nationalist,

intolerant and xenophobic forces on the European political stage, might today be the moment to reassess our mistrust towards notions such as ‘humanity’ and ‘universality’?

Strehler was drawn to exploring European ‘humanity’ through the lens of theatre-making. For instance, a reflection on the theme of ‘illusion’ or ‘stagecraft’ as metaphors for the human condition can be found in his celebrated productions of *The Tempest* (1948; 1978; 1983), in which the director identifies himself with the magician Prospero; in Pirandello’s *I giganti della montagna* (*The mountain giants*) (1947; 1966; 1993), where the downfall of the actor troupe is a reflection on the condition of the artist in modern times; in Corneille’s *L’Illusion* (1983), where the protagonist, the magician Alcandre, allows Strehler to explore the illusory nature of theatre and life; and in *Elvira, o la passione teatrale* (*Elvira, or the theatrical passion*) (1985; 1996), based on the writings of Louis Jouvet, a production which investigates the labour and backstage workings of performance-making and training as a metaphor of earthly existence. Strehler was more frequently attracted to plays that explored a psychological approach to character-building and human subjectivity, and only marginally drawn to his contemporary anti-realist, ‘anti-humanist’ and ‘Absurdist’ theatre, such as the work of Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet, by whom he only staged *Happy Days* (in 1982) and *Le Balcon* (*The Balcony*) (in 1976) respectively.<sup>12</sup> And yet the *maestro* believed in the absolute value and power of ‘poetry’ – by which Strehler meant dramatic literature – whatever its focus, to further solidarity among different people and to heighten spectators’ perception of themselves through sharing the live and collaborative experience of making or watching theatre.

In Strehler’s writings and speeches, there is a clear yet under-theorized link between what audiences and theatre-makers do in the theatre and what they are then imagined to do and become in everyday life as a result of watching theatre. An almost Schillerian belief that a direct link between the experience of ‘beauty’ through ‘poetry’ in the theatre trickles down to other aspects of sociality outside the regime of art underpins all of Strehler’s political campaigning and European engagement.<sup>13</sup> According to Strehler, an act of ‘harmonization’

between the performance and its audience is key to creating a ‘collective fact’ and turning spectators into a ‘counter-chorus’, that is, a collective entity that ‘recognizes itself through theatre’ (Strehler and Kessler 1974, 37). If the theatre does not respond to the profound everyday concerns of ordinary people, then the power Strehler accorded to theatre – its ability effectively to shape more humane and intellectually open (European) citizens – will be less productive. Theatre, in Strehler’s view, plays a crucial part in fostering a sense of community and shared humanity among people precisely because it is an essentially collaborative art ‘that more than any other is made with others for others’ (Strehler 1979b). A theatre director’s mission is, therefore, that of turning silent spectators into a ‘participating chorus’ that gets to be ‘one’ with the performance, and in so doing ‘transforming a simple numerical multiple into a collectivity’ (Strehler and Kessler 1974, 39).

In this sense, Strehler put his theatre at the service of European cultural and political unification on the basis of our common heritage despite differences. His support for the dream of a united continent was wholehearted, despite his dissatisfaction with what he saw as a disappointing beginning, dominated exclusively by discussions about markets, currencies and economic policy. He saw European unification as an unstoppable historical process and his own role in it as a kind of catalyst against conservative nationalist forces which were, in his view, rowing against history’s flow. He considered it a duty of every person of culture to work for a (leftist) project for Europe that would prevail over capitalism and consumerism. Strehler’s theatre, from the 1970s onwards, existed to make the project of a culturally united Europe possible – whether or not this coincided with the actual political machinery – by persuading theatre-going Europeans to subscribe to it. His insistence on the need to transnationalize European theatre must be read in this context as his attempt to ‘change the world’, demanding that the values of a pan-European project be adopted by every venue, artist, critic and theatre-goer. In the following passage, part of a speech delivered to an audience of theatre critics, he puts forward the image of the city-hopping theatre critic/ideal

theatre spectator, whose job would be to communicate theatre being produced in every corner of Europe to his/her fellow national citizen:

[...] we need others to understand that theatre locked up in a single town or state is also finished. That the once-cherished concept of stability needs to be defended, but only *vis-à-vis* Europe, if not the world.

Many times I have asked myself what made me, at a not so young age, what made me, tired theatre-maker that I am, tie certain knots with the world, found Theatres of Europe, travel here and there – me, the world's worst traveller?

It was reality, history if you wish, that made me do it; it was the feeling of a reality in the making. And so for you there no longer is, there can no longer be the famous front row seat [...]. But there can only be a jet, an aeroplane, a train. Mobility, that is. Today mobility is your front row seat. [...] We need to tell others that we need to exchange our experiences more, attend more shows that deserve to be seen at least in the four corners of Europe (Strehler 1985, 10–11)

For Strehler, clearly Europe has become the limit. Cultural integration – which does not equate with standardization or the obliteration of local cultures, but with a celebration of their similarity within difference – should be pursued as the only possible basis for political and economic integration. In his parliamentary work as an MEP for the Socialist Party (1982–83) and, later, as an Italian Senator for the Independent Left party (1987–92), he never tired of lamenting how politics seemed to ignore culture, when in fact culture was the key to achieving the political goal of uniting the continent.

If we really wanted to integrate Europe, the entire, still nationally organized European theatre system needed to reflect the paradigm shift to a transnational model, to what I have called a 'theatre of/for Europe': from funding to producing, from translation to criticism, from casting to touring, from programming to theatre-going practices and beyond.

Returning to the question I asked at the beginning of this section, we might wonder whether Strehler's theatre served the powers that be or strived for a revolutionary future. While Strehler had always distanced himself from the aesthetics of Italian anti-bourgeois, avant-garde theatre of the 1960s and 70s, which he deemed too remote from everyday life, and unable to connect with non-specialist audiences, he did construe his own theatre as 'revolutionary'. In 1967, as the Italian experimental scene – including Dario Fo, Leo de Berardinis and Carmelo Bene – met at a landmark conference in Ivrea, near Turin, and signed a manifesto entitled 'For a New Theatre', Strehler was the most noteworthy absentee, and for many he embodied the opposite of what 'New Theatre' stood for – a collaborative, proletarian, revolutionary practice that would bring about the fall of bourgeois society. From the height of his position of power as the artistic director of a state-sponsored theatre, who shared board meetings with elected local politicians, Strehler was not welcome in Ivrea, and certainly could not afford such subversive positions and class struggle rhetoric. Instead, Strehler always fought against what he perceived as the failures of the 'system' from within it, choosing dialogue and action over the antagonism and utopia of his less compromising colleagues in the 'experimental', anti-bourgeois camp. Writing in the 1990s, Strehler defended the 'revolutionary' significance of his theatre by placing it in direct opposition to the 'industrial scientific-technological system' (of capitalism), which in his view had led to a collective 'inability to access the notion of sublime':

Caught between the messages of mass media, the isolation and disintegration of human beings, and the industrial scientific-technological system in which only the product is destined to become 'real', audiences look for oblivion, they seek to forget, not recognize themselves. Hypnosis is their everyday gesture. Now theatre, in its most truthful acceptance, is precisely the opposite of this. Theatre is a physical and psychic conflict-happening, and as such it demands our complete and active participation, which is therefore creative. It follows that theatre today is not in crisis or in decline [...] but that it is ever more an instrument of truth and

opposition, a ‘revolutionary’ instrument in the sense that aesthetic and collective education through theatre seeks to recompose harmony and unity in the individual, who is pushed almost to dissolution and irresponsibility. (Strehler 1993, 2)

In this Adornian reading of the culture and media industry, Strehler put forward his educational vision of theatre as a place for unlearning what the ‘system’ wishes us to learn, its commodity fetishism and alienation from our true selves.<sup>14</sup> Theatre’s role, then, is that of reconnecting the fragmented twentieth-century individual to his/her humanity. With his engagement in Strasbourg and more generally with his cultural leadership, Strehler delivered a very simple message to the European Parliament: the European super-state must attend to the wellbeing of its citizens by sponsoring, organising and intervening in the cultural sector, thus counteracting the alienating effect of our ‘dehumanizing society’. Caring for people’s ‘happiness’ was, for Strehler, a ‘fundamental political gesture’:

Therefore a man [*sic*] of art, a normal thinking man, is entitled to intervene in this context, has the categorical duty to be there to struggle. To struggle because in a dehumanized and dehumanizing society like ours, discourses like these risk being understood as jest, an intellectual’s jest. But I think that we need to tell *politics* that to think of man’s happiness is a *fundamental political gesture*, that inventing places and modes to make people be together so that they can get to know and understand one another is a *fundamental* political gesture.

I believe, for instance, that it is beautiful to be European, that it is right to feel proud of being a people not only of one country, but of a continent. (Strehler 1979a, original emphasis)

Strehler’s words here – as progressive as they may have been in the late 1970s – are easily subsumed by the cynical logic of ‘happiness management’ and the instrumentalization of culture by the powers that be. While Strehler fought for state and European sponsoring of

culture in a world where such notion was not common practice, from our perspective in the twenty-first century, one can see how state or transnational cultural funding may become a means to manufacture social consensus, effectively neutralizing art's potential as a critical, subversive, non-aligned practice. From this perspective, Strehler's 'revolutionary' project could be seen to have been hijacked by the logic of capitalism.

Strehler's engagement in shaping European cultural policy permeated his very conception of the role of the director. His loud cries for more cultural funding at a transnational level were partially met by the establishment of European cultural funding programmes in the 1990s, however the general trend at national level in many European countries from the 1980s onwards was precisely the opposite. Cuts to cultural budgets became the new neoliberal common sense. Reflecting on the state of disarray in which Europe finds itself today, Strehler's words once again offer food for thought. Strehler wrote:

It is my firm belief that until a possible European unification places cultural events, art and cultural heritage at the top of the agenda for its construction, it will be destined to fail, even though it may succeed in constituting itself in some form (Strehler 1993: 1).

From the perspective of 2016, when this article is being written and European unification – political, cultural, economic, monetary and otherwise – appears an improbable feat, Strehler's vision resonates most strongly and prompts further reflection. Given the widespread and steady rise of anti-EU sentiments across European countries, we must ask: has European cultural policy failed for not securing a substantial enough budget and not being able to fill the gaps left by national governments, or is it the case that funding a continent's way to cultural integration through the arts is a flawed undertaking altogether? Scholars of cultural and European studies have highlighted how early European cultural policy and surrounding debates – polarized between those who favoured an approach promoting a pan-European culture and those who championed a regionalist agenda – were 'inadequate to the complexity of what Europe had actually become', blind as they were towards the impact of migration from other

continents (Meinhof and Triandafyllidou 2006, 3f.). Strehler clearly stood in the pan-European camp: highlighting the ‘great shared themes’ and the ‘humanist ideal’, which he argued underpinned all European heritage, were among his priorities, but for him that never meant suppressing regional differences. Despite being a critic of many early decisions taken in Brussels and Strasbourg, Strehler never stopped considering his own ‘Europeanness’ as an imperative for supporting the cultural, political and economic unification project. But it is important that we are able to distinguish between ‘feeling European’ and subscribing to the European Union and its policies in their current shape.

Perhaps the lesson to be learnt from the current failures and shortcomings in European cultural policy, inasmuch as they partially reflect Strehler’s thinking that funding culture transnationally would bring about a closer union, is that theatre’s ability to offer critical paradigms for imagining subjective and social identity must never be confused with more ‘ambitious’ and problematic missions such as that of manufacturing political agreement and social consensus in a continent divided by competing national narratives, different histories and a rich multiplicity of attitudes towards being in the world. Perhaps that is asking too much of the theatre – or too little. Perhaps that is the wrong way of conceiving the political potential of theatre altogether. Theatre’s political work is unpredictable because it depends on the spectators’ ‘unscriptable’ response to an unforeseeable and unique performance event. As performance scholar Joe Kelleher has argued, theatre can be thought of as a faulty ‘signalling machine’ that is

prone sometimes to breakdown and irrelevance and miscommunication, not necessarily *doing* politics in any obvious way but bringing to the attention of us, its participants – actors and spectators all – the fact that some ‘thing’, some familiar stranger, is making an appearance here tonight and has a claim to make upon us.  
(Kelleher 2009, 15)



It may indeed be that the real political potential of theatre lies in that level of uncertainty, indeterminacy and unpredictability embedded in the live encounter of spectators and performers. The efficacy of any given piece of theatre's political message cannot be relied upon to lead the masses but it will act as an 'irritant' that gets 'under the skin' of audiences, if they are receptive to the ethical call before them (ibid., 23).

The most prominent aspect of Strehler's legacy is, however, the undeniably greater level of interconnectedness of the European theatre circuit since the 1980s through the practice of co-productions and exchange between venues and international festivals. Since the UTE was founded and the European Union started funding cultural activities in the 1990s, the number of inter-European partnerships has grown exponentially, now comprising collaborations such as the New European Theatre Action (NETA), the Prospero Network, Mito21, and the International Young Makers in Action, to name but a few.<sup>15</sup> In an interview with Thomas Ostermeier on theatre, Europe and exchange between cultures carried out in 2007, the German director pointed to European networks of co-productions between theatres as a model for the future of the Schaubühne theatre in Berlin, mentioning Strehler and Lang as the first proponents of such a model (Woodall 2010, 373). Ostermeier's nod to Strehler's work in establishing closer networks among European theatres and theatre-makers is significant as it suggests how the *maestro's* vision has influenced contemporary theatre-makers around Europe, beyond Italy and France. It would be misleading to suggest that Strehler was responsible for these developments that coincide with much larger factors such as the establishment of the single market and the rise of the neoliberal economic paradigm, but he was certainly a catalyst in establishing the practice of co-producing theatre in Europe in order to ease internal distribution and tours.<sup>16</sup>

Greater collaboration between theatre institutions, such as venues and festivals, has in turn contributed to the creation of pan-European theatre 'products' and a certain international aesthetics that dominate the continental theatre circuit, with a number of 'usual suspects' –

currently artists such as Jan Fabre, Romeo Castellucci, Rimini Protokoll, Angélica Liddell and many others – travelling internally within Europe to perform at virtually all major venues and festivals, and intercontinentally as European export products. The relative ease with which some co-productions need to travel and ‘translate’ to culturally diverse audiences has in turn had an impact on the aesthetics and stage languages that some artists adopt in their ‘ready-to-tour’ creations, for instance introducing constraints such as limiting the number of performers or the kind of set that can be created, and limiting the use of text, which relies on of sur-titling. According to the French critic Jean-Pierre Han, theatre festivals have become like risk-averse ‘supermarkets’ that push a form of “supranational” official art’ based on an aesthetic that is ‘accessible, conventional and identifiable’. This, according to Han, is currently a particularly established and recognizable brand which is positioned between the ‘chic’ and the ‘shocking’, and effectively erases cultural differences in favour of homogeneity and conformity to current market taste (Han 2011, 85). While not every European festival can be accused of contributing to the ‘normalization of taste’, and not every European theatre artist has been affected by this phenomenon equally, paradoxically, some of the mechanisms that Strehler adopted to establish European theatre circuits in order to further the values of ‘poetry’ and ‘humanism’, ended up feeding the process of marketization that has enveloped all aspects of public and private life with the neoliberal turn. In other words, one could argue that Strehler’s project for a ‘humane’ Europe driven by socialist ideals of solidarity and cooperation through shared cultural heritage has been in some cases appropriated and co-opted by a neoliberal agenda. An urgent question, then, is how (and whether) theatre-makers and programmers may be able to disentangle the ideals of cooperation across national borders from neoliberal market forces.

## **Bibliography**

Alberti, Alberto Cesare. 1978. *Poetica teatrale e bibliografia di Anton Giulio Bragaglia*.

Rome: Bulzoni.

- Bentoglio, Alberto. 2002. *Invito al teatro di Giorgio Strehler*. Milan: Mursia.
- Bottoni, Luciano. 1999. *Storia del teatro italiano: 1900-1945*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Callinicos, Alex. 1998. "Althusser, Louis Pierre (1918–90)." *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London; New York: Taylor & Francis.
- <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/biographical/althusser-louis-pierre-1918-90/v-1>.
- Cambiaghi, Mariagabriella. 1997. "L'avventura del teatro dell'Europa." In *Giorgio Strehler e il suo teatro*, edited by Federica Mazzocchi and Alberto Bentoglio, 101–117. Rome: Bulzoni.
- D'Amico, Silvio. 1985. *Tramonto del grande attore*. Florence: La casa Uscher.
- Goodwin, Matthew J, and Oliver Heath. 2016. "The 2016 Referendum, Brexit and the Left Behind: An Aggregate-Level Analysis of the Result." *Political Quarterly*, no. forthcoming. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/brexit-vote-explained-poverty-low-skills-and-lack-opportunities>.
- Gregori, Maria Grazia. 1988. "Il Teatro d'Europa dall'utopia al progetto." *Teatro in Europa* 3: 94–100.
- Han, Jean-Pierre. 2011. "An Unlikely Scene: French Theatre in the New Liberal Economy." In *Contemporary French Theatre and Performance*, edited by Clare Finburgh and Carl Lavery, 80–89. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hegel, Friedrich. 1819. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.
- <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hp/hpgreek.htm>.
- Hirst, David L. 1993. *Giorgio Strehler*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1965. "The Vienna Lecture." In *Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man*. New York: Harper Torchbooks.
- Kelleher, Joe. 2009. *Theatre and Politics*. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Luik, John C. 1998. "Humanism." Edited by John Crane. *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London; New York: Taylor & Francis.
- <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/humanism/v-1>.
- Maanen, Hans van, and S. E. Wilmer. 1998. *Theatre Worlds in Motion: Structures, Politics and Developments in the Countries of Western Europe*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Mambrini, Clarissa Egle. 2013. *Il giovane Strehler: Da Novara al Piccolo Teatro di Milano*. Milan: Lampi di stampa.
- Mazzocchi, Federica, and Alberto Bentoglio. 1997. *Giorgio Strehler e il suo teatro*. Rome: Bulzoni.
- Meinhof, Ulrike Hanna, and Anna Triandafyllidou, eds. 2006. *Transcultural Europe: Cultural Policy in a Changing Europe*. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Palazzi, Renato. 2009. "Le Dimissioni di Strehler dal Piccolo nel 1968 e la contestazione della regia e della politica degli stabili pubblici." In *Giorgio Strehler: Atti del convegno di studi su Giorgio Strehler e il teatro pubblico*, edited by Elio Testoni. Catanzaro: Rubettino.
- Pedullà, Gianfranco. 1994. *Il teatro italiano nel tempo del fascismo*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Porto, Salvatore. 1987. *Strehler e il teatro dell'Europa*. Catania: Edidrama.
- Sogliuzzo, A. Richard. 1982. *Luigi Pirandello, Director: The Playwright in the Theatre*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press.
- Strehler, Giorgio. 1979a. "Per un'Europa umana." *Libertà*, June 6. Piccolo Teatro Archive.
- . 1979b. "Ci siamo scambiati omicidi ma anche molta cultura." *La Stampa*, June 8. Piccolo Teatro Archive.
- . 1983. "Théâtre de l'Europe, Season 1983-84 Programme Note."
- . 1984. "Théâtre de l'Europe, Season 1984-85 Programme Note."
- . 1985. "Nel teatro si può perdere l'anima." Piccolo Teatro Archive.

- . 1988. *Il Piccolo teatro d'arte: quarant'anni di lavoro teatrale, 1947-1987*. Milan: Electa.
- . 1993. "Il teatro nella prospettiva di un'Europa unita." *Piccolo Teatro Archive*.
- Strehler, Giorgio, and Stella Casiraghi. 2000. *Lettere sul teatro*. Milan: Archinto.
- . 2007. *Nessuno è incolpevole: scritti politici e civili*. Milan: Melampo.
- Strehler, Giorgio, and Sinah Kessler. 1974. *Per un teatro umano: pensieri scritti, parlati e attuati*. Milan: Feltrinelli.
- Strehler, Giorgio, and Ugo Ronfani. 1986. *Io, Strehler: una vita per il teatro: conversazioni con Ugo Ronfani*. Milan: Rusconi.
- Testoni, Elio. 2009. *Giorgio Strehler: atti del Convegno di studi su Giorgio Strehler e il teatro pubblico*. Catanzaro: Rubbettino.
- Theiler, Tobias. 2005. *Political Symbolism and European Integration*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Wilmer, S. E. 2009. "National Theatres and the Construction of Identity in Smaller European Countries." In *Global Changes - Local Stages: How Theatre Functions in Smaller European Countries*, edited by Hans van Maanen, Andreas Kotte, and Anneli Saro, 23–40. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Woodall, James. 2010. "Thomas Ostermeier: On Europe, Theatre, Communication and Exchange." In *Contemporary European Theatre Directors*, edited by Maria M. Delgado and Dan Rebellato, 363–376. London; New York: Routledge.

---

<sup>1</sup> Some of the most important studies on Strehler are Mazzocchi and Bentoglio (1997), Bentoglio (2002), and Testoni (2009). Many other publications are more celebratory in nature, such as Porto (1987); Mambrini (2013); and Renzo Tian and Alessandro Martinez,

---

eds, *Giorgio Strehler o la Passione Teatrale: l'opera di un maestro raccontata al Premio Europa per il Teatro* (Milan: Ubulibri, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> The Odéon – Théâtre de l'Europe (formerly Théâtre de l'Odéon) is one of Paris' most prominent national theatres, located in the heart of the Latin Quarter on the river Seine's Left Bank. Its building was first completed in 1782, and it was then known as the Théâtre du Faubourg Saint-Germain. The Union des Théâtres de l'Europe is a network of producing theatres located in Europe and the Mediterranean regions who cooperate to exchange expertise and performances.

<sup>3</sup> For Strehler, the notion of Europe – and the dream of a united Europe – did not coincide with the political borders of the then European Economic Community. His relationship with Eastern Europe and the Eastern Bloc is evident in his family roots, and in his engagement with Brecht and his fondness for writers from Russia and the former USSR, such as Maxim Gorky. Reflecting Strehler's thinking, in this chapter the term Europe refers to an imaginary place characterized by a shared cultural heritage, rather than a fixed geographical entity.

<sup>4</sup> A good source for Strehler's biography is Bentoglio (2002).

<sup>5</sup> All translations from Italian and French sources are mine.

<sup>6</sup> David L. Hirst calls Strehler's style 'lyrical realism' in his monograph (Hirst 1993, 25).

<sup>7</sup> The UTE only started operating in full in 1990. A similar organization, the Informal European Theatre Meeting, had been established before the UTE in 1981 ([www.ietm.org](http://www.ietm.org)) and is still active today, with members from around the world. In 1988, the European Theatre Convention was founded (<http://www.etc-cte.org>), which is also still active today.

<sup>8</sup> The members of the UTE have changed throughout the years and now comprise eighteen theatres in Italy, Germany, France, Romania, Greece, Portugal, Israel, Serbia, Czech Republic, Russia and Bulgaria, see <http://www.union-theatres-europe.eu/>.

- 
- <sup>9</sup> Books such as Porto (1987), and articles such as Cambiaghi (1997), Bentoglio in Testoni (2009) and Gregori (1988) are largely descriptive and celebratory.
- <sup>10</sup> Despite their problematic ‘appropriation’ of non-western culture, criticized by scholars such as Rustom Bharucha, intercultural theatre practitioners of the 1960s and 70s such as Brook and Mnouchkine did manage to draw spectators’ attention to African and Asian theatre traditions and their rich histories. Strehler’s interest in Brecht, whose Chinese influences have been amply explored in recent scholarship, never led him to explore theatre traditions beyond those of a narrowly defined Europe.
- <sup>11</sup> See, for instance, the work of Jean-Marie Serreau, who in the 1950s and 1960s staged Genet as well as a range of Francophone Afro-Caribbean authors including Kateb Yacine and Aimé Césaire, and who also incorporated black actors into his ensembles.
- <sup>12</sup> Strehler’s preferred acting style freely borrowed from both Stanislavskian identification and Brechtian distanciation techniques, never really opting for a fully ‘epic’ actorial delivery despite naming Brecht among his three main ‘masters’. Strehler’s Enlightenment-derived brand of humanism and approach to actorial work prevented him from experimenting with texts featuring less-than-rounded characters, such as the silhouettes, voices and figures that can be found in the work of Maurice Maeterlinck, Peter Handke or Heiner Müller.
- <sup>13</sup> See Schiller, *Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man* [1794], available online at <http://public-library.uk/ebooks/55/76.pdf> [accessed 29 August 2017].
- <sup>14</sup> See Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectics of the Enlightenment*, especially the chapter entitled ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment at Mass Deception’, and Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* [1972].
- <sup>15</sup> See their webpages. Prospero Network: [www.prospero-theatre.eu/](http://www.prospero-theatre.eu/). IYMA: <http://iyma.eu>. Mitos21: [www.mitos21.com](http://www.mitos21.com). NETA: [www.netaart.tv](http://www.netaart.tv).

---

<sup>16</sup> While historic international festivals such as those in Edinburgh and Avignon – both founded in 1947, the same year as the Piccolo in Milan and well before the Théâtre de l'Europe in Paris – led the way in promoting artistic and theatrical exchange with other countries and continents after the Second World War – their mission statements were not openly involved in the European project.