

Synonymous with Cinema: An Investigation into Ingmar Bergman's Critical Reception in Italy

Francesco Bono

Dipartimento di Filosofia, Scienze Sociali, Umane e della Formazione, Università degli Studi di Perugia, Perugia, Italy

Abstract

The present essay intends to investigate the critical fortune of the Swedish world-famous theater and film director Ingmar Bergman in Italy. In particular, attention will be devoted to the reception of Bergman's theatrical productions that were shown on Italian stages between the early 1970s, when some of Bergman's theater productions were first seen in Italy, and the early 1990s, when Bergman's production of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was one of his last theatrical productions to be shown in Italy. On the whole, only minor consideration has been accorded by Italian scholars in their studies on Bergman to his work in the theater. This is well illustrated by the various books on Bergman that have appeared in Italy over the years, which scarcely deal with his theatrical work. One reason for this may lay, as shall be shown in this essay, in the lateness and scarcity with which Bergman's productions reached Italy. By drawing on a selection of reviews of Bergman's theater productions published in major Italian newspapers from the 1970s to the 1990s, the following investigation intends to give an account of the Italian reception of Bergman's work in the theater, from the specific qualities acknowledged to the Swedish director to the formulas, as will be seen, increasingly characterizing the critics' judgments on him over the years, with the aim to shed light on the critical understanding of Bergman's oeuvre in Italy.

Keywords: Ingmar Bergman, theater, cinema, Italian reception

Introduction

In investigating the critical fortune of the Swedish world-famous theater and film director Ingmar Bergman in Italy, this essay intends to focus particularly on the reception of Bergman's theatrical productions that were shown on Italian stages between the early 1970s, when some of Bergman's theater productions were first seen in Italy, and the early 1990s, when Bergman's production of Ibsen's celebrated play *A Doll's House* was one of the last theatrical productions by the Swedish master

to be shown in Italy. Linking to previous studies by the author on this topic (Bono, 1998), the essay aims to shed light on the critical understanding of Bergman's oeuvre in Italy.

As one leading Italian theater critic, Renzo Tian (1972), has remarked, "In Italy, the name of Ingmar Bergman is synonymous with cinema. Not many know that Bergman is first and foremost a man of the theater". In fact, only little consideration has been accorded by Italian scholars in their studies on Bergman to his work in the theater. A proof of this can be found in the various books on Bergman that have been published in Italy over the years, which scarcely deal with his work in the theater. As examples may be cited the monographic publications devoted to the Swedish master by Tino Ranieri (1979) and Sergio Trasatti (1991), to mention but two among the several books on Bergman's oeuvre that have appeared in Italy. In this regard, one significant exception are the volumes on Bergman edited by Francesco Bono (1992) and, more recently, by Luciano De Giusti (2005), which also take into consideration Bergman's work as a theater director.

One reason for the slight attention that has generally been paid by Italian scholars to Bergman's work in the theater may lay in the lateness and scarcity with which Bergman's productions reached Italy. From the mid-1950s, Bergman's name was well known in Italy as film director and films such as *The Seventh Seal* and *Wild Strawberries* were met with appraisal by Italian critics. On the contrary, it was not until the beginning of the 1970s that one of Bergman's theater productions was shown in Italy for the first time. It was a production of Strindberg's *A Dream Play*, that was presented in 1970 at the Theater Biennale in Venice. This was followed in 1972 by a production of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, which could be seen in Florence as part of an annual theater festival called Rassegna dei Teatri Stabili. A year later, the Florence festival hosted a Bergman production of Strindberg's *The Ghost Sonata*. Then a decade of silence ensued and Bergman as a theater director remained absent from Italy until the 1980s, which marked the arrival in Italy once again of a number of plays directed by Bergman, including Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, in a production by Munich's Residenztheater, Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, and Eugene O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey into Night*.

Bergman's presence in Italian theaters was, therefore, occasional and sporadic and in the eyes of Italian critics, Bergman was first and foremost a man of the cinema who, in addition, worked in the theater. Of note in this regard may also be the lateness with which Lise-Lone Marker's and Frederick J. Marker's (1982) comprehensive investigation on Bergman's theatrical productions *Ingmar Bergman: A Life in the Theatre* was translated into Italian. The book was first published in 1982; a revised and enlarged edition followed at the beginning of the 1990s, a translation of which appeared in Italy in 1996. The fact that Bergman's theater productions reached Italy only sporadically needs to be taken into consideration if one is to understand the

nature as well as the limitations of the critical discourse that developed in Italy around Bergman's work in the theater.

Paging through one of the most important Italian theatrical journals, *Sipario*, from the 1970s to the 1990s, one finds no essay specifically devoted to Bergman's work in the theater. The journal limited itself to reviewing the plays directed by Bergman that reached Italy. The same remark applies to Italian newspapers. In investigating the critical reception of Bergman's theatrical work in Italy, we find ourselves faced primarily, if not exclusively, with reviews that rarely go beyond the specific play that prompted them, their interest consisting not so much in the quality of their reflections on Bergman's work, but rather in their documentation of the ways in which Bergman's oeuvre was understood in Italy, from the specific qualities that were acknowledged to the Swedish film and theater director to the formulas increasingly characterizing the critical discourse around him over the years.

This is the kind of investigation that shall be proposed in the following. For this purpose, the material will be organized around two main nuclei of Bergman's theater productions. The examination will begin with a discussion of the critical reception given in Italy in the early 1970s to Bergman's productions of Ibsen's play *The Wild Duck* and Strindberg's *A Dream Play* and *The Ghost Sonata*. The aim is to grasp what it was about Bergman's productions that particularly impressed Italian critics, what peculiarities were accorded to them and, in particular, where Bergman's stamp was identified. The critical opinions on Bergman's work expressed at that time will then be compared with those to be found in the reviews of some of Bergman's later theater productions, including Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey into Night* and Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. From this comparison emerges the image, the general idea that Italian critics cultivate about Bergman's work as a theater and film director.

2. First Encounters with Bergman's Work in the Theater

When Bergman first arrived in Italy with *A Dream Play*, two qualities in particular impressed critics about his production of Strindberg's play: first, the creative freedom with which Bergman intervened on the original text, amending it in several respects; second, the essentiality of the staging. Italian critics unanimously stressed the many changes which Bergman had operated on Strindberg's text: "He has cut over fifty percent, has shuffled the order of many parts and has eliminated the main character, the daughter" (Tian, 1970). At the same time the rigor of the direction was a cause of surprise and appraisal. Thus Raul Radice (1970) found the "simplicity and bareness" of the sets "astonishing", while Alberto Blandi (1970), reviewing Bergman's production of *A Dream Play* in *La Stampa*, emphasized the "purity" and "beauty" of the staging: the production was "immediate and inevitable", the result of a "simple and essential" direction. "This", concluded the Italian critic Renzo Tian (1970), "is Bergman's achievement: of having rendered clear, concrete and simple the fascination of a work that per se tends to coldness and obscurity".

Two years later Bergman returned to Italy with Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*. Critics greeted the production with enthusiasm, lavishing their praise. The same can be noted for Bergman's production of *The Ghost Sonata* in 1973. Italian critics hailed it as a work of a "genius" (Blandi 1973), judging it "exemplary" (Tian, 1973). It is worth observing that, in reviewing Bergman's staging of *The Wild Duck*, critics' praise closely echoed that of *A Dream Play*, which in turn seems almost to anticipate the reactions to Bergman's production of *The Ghost Sonata*: so similar are the judgments that they appear nearly interchangeable. In the case of *The Wild Duck*, Bergman's direction was admired for its "lightness of touch" (Timarco 1972); it never appeared "ostentatious", as one critic remarked (Radice, 1972). And another critic wrote: "[Bergman] renounces every kind of effect, in order to leave the stage to the drama, to the word, to the actor" (Tian, 1972). The critics' comments are much the same as those prompted a year later by Bergman's staging of *The Ghost Sonata*, which was praised in *La Stampa* for its "simplicity and lightness" (Blandi, 1973), while Renzo Tian (1973), nearly repeating what he had written about *A Dream Play*, observed in *Il Messaggero* that Bergman's talent consisted in "[this] ability to render simple and communicable what is complex and arcane".

These are just a few examples, that could be easily multiplied. It should suffice, though, to show how the critical discourse that developed in Italy around Bergman's work in the theater mainly drew on a stock of ideas and judgments, which would soon come to form, or so it seems, a sort of canon on which to base reflections on Bergman's work. In doing so, critics seem not to adequately consider the multiplicity of Bergman's theatrical productions, belying their complexity and ignoring their evolution, passing over their differences.

A proof of this can be found in the reviews of Bergman's theatrical productions of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Discussing Bergman's staging of *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, the emphasis was again placed by Italian critics on the qualities of "sobriety" (Raboni, 1989), "simplicity" (Quadri, 1989), "rigor", "clarity" and "purity" (Lucchesini, 1989). Similar judgments recur in the reviews of *A Doll's House*, with Renzo Tian (1990) praising the "simplicity" of Bergman's staging, while another Italian critic, Masolino D'Amico (1990), describes it as "extremely simple", eulogizing Bergman as "a master of simplicity". Reviewing *A Long Day's Journey into Night* in *La Nazione*, Paolo Lucchesi (1990) observes that "Bergman concedes nothing to stage machinery and eye-catching sets". And G.A. Gibotto (1990) echoes him in the pages of *Il Gazzettino*, pointing out how Bergman, in his production of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, "does not aim at the 'marvelous', as has now become the custom of too many of his colleagues, and refuses 'easy' solutions of enchantment". One has the impression, in short, that the judgments expressed by Italian critics drew on a corpus of remarks that were often superimposed a priori on Bergman's productions, with his work in the theater coming to be interpreted on the basis of a critical canon.

Besides the rigor and simplicity that, in the eyes of Italian critics, were strong points of Bergman's theatrical work, other key qualities that constituted Bergman's directorial style were his capability of working with actors and his rejection of naturalism. In discussing Bergman's staging of *The Wild Duck*, Alfino Timarco (1972) pointed out in *Il Tempo* that "one of Bergman's merits is that of shaping and preparing the actors, in such a way that they do not fail", a judgment echoed by another Italian critic ten years later, when Bergman's production of *Miss Julie* was seen in Milan: "The direction consists especially in meticulous work with the actors, in a study of their every movement, their every nuance" (De Monticelli, 1982). At the same time Italian critics praised Bergman for his rejection of the naturalism that, in their opinion, often lumbered the staging of Ibsen's plays, for instance. They detect in Bergman's anti-naturalism a mark of his style. Thus Bergman's direction of *A Long Day's Journey into Night* was admired for "[its] strenuous, intelligent and icy cancellation of realism" (Fiore, 1989). The same quality had also characterized, in the eyes of Italian critics, Bergman's production of *The Wild Duck* in the early 1970s. Here, as one critic remarked, "to complete the rejection of any kind of naturalistic solution, Bergman has suggested the attic [...] in a totally invisible way" (Tian, 1972). And the same sort of praise is repeated for Bergman's production of *A Doll's House*, where Ibsen's "glaring naturalism has been completely eliminated or, at any rate, drastically reduced" (Fiore, 1990).

To fully understand the appreciation shown by Italian critics for the anti-naturalism characterizing Bergman's staging of Ibsen's plays, for the way the Swedish director stripped them of any superfluity, as well as their insistence on this point in their reviews, one has to consider the innovative nature of Bergman's productions if compared with the ways in which Ibsen's plays had traditionally been staged in Italy. After the interest, controversy and success that greeted Ibsen's plays when they were first staged in Italy at the end of the 19th century, thanks not least to actors like Ermete Zacconi, a leading exponent of naturalism in Italian theater of that time, and Eleonora Duse, Ibsen appeared in Italy in the 1970s, as has been remarked, "placed in a irremediably remote perspective", his plays seeming "almost archeological" (Chiarini, 1973).

3. Taken up as a Classic

In the 1980s, by which time Bergman was internationally acclaimed as a master of theater and cinema, the essentiality, restraint and anti-naturalism of Bergman's productions, his way of working with actors and on the texts, i.e. the qualities identified from the beginning as distinctive traits of his work in the theater, became, for Italian critics, the teaching that the Swedish master imparted. His theater productions came to be frequently praised as a "lesson in theater" (Tian, 1989), with Bergman becoming "the master of Stockholm", as he was presented in the pages of *Il Giorno*, "who had come to give us a great lesson in theater" (Ronfani, 1990), a lesson which Italian critics held up, inviting Italian theater to follow Bergman's example.

Thus Guido Davico Bonino (1982) exclaimed, in his praise of Bergman's production of *Miss Julie*: "Ah, if only it could be seen by the theater companies and drama groups in our country who have reduced the unfortunate Strindberg to pretexts for their own experiments". In the same way, Bergman's "rejection of the sumptuous padding of useless pharaonic stage-sets", in his staging of *A Doll's House*, represented for *La Nazione* a "theatrical" as well as "ethical" lesson, which "ought to set an example to a large part of our theater" (Lucchesi, 1990).

In the 1980s, Italian critics conferred on Bergman the status of a classic, taking him up into the Olympus of the masters of theater. They pointed at the restraint, rigor and clarity characterizing Bergman's productions, as opposed to what was perceived as the excesses of the theater avant-garde of the 1970s, as proof of his classical status. And, in company with the classics, they judged Bergman "impeccable", indeed, "even too perfect" (Raboni, 1989), coming eventually to assume that they already knew all about his way of making theater. "It leaves no room for any surprise", remarks Giovanni Raboni (1989) in *Corriere della Sera*, in his review of Bergman's staging of *A Long Day's Journey into Night*: "It was impossible not to predict what it would be like and not to foresee its tones and cadences". In this persuasion of knowing almost all there is to know about the Swedish master, one may detect a tendency marking the approach of Italian critics to Bergman's work in the 1980s, i.e. their simplification of it, their reduction of it to a certain number of concepts and constants, while overlooking the complexity, richness and profound diversity that marked Bergman's theatrical productions over the years.

The limitations in their approach towards Bergman's work in the theater clearly manifested themselves when Italian critics were confronted with Bergman's production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which premiered outside Sweden in Florence on January 10, 1987. In their response to it, the ideas that Italian critics had generally cultivated of Bergman's work revealed their partiality and insufficiency, forcing the classicism that was mostly ascribed to him to be revised. "A different Hamlet": thus *Il Gazzettino* summarized the critical impression given by Bergman's version of the famous Shakespeare drama (Brunelli, 1987). The remark appears to be doubly true. On the one hand, it reveals how different was Bergman's way of staging the Shakespearian play from the ones to be usually seen in Italian theaters at that time. On the other hand, we may detect in the remark a hint of the surprise, even of the embarrassment of Italian critics in response to the originality and innovativeness of Bergman's production.

Since the 1970s Italian critics had unanimously praised Bergman's work in the theater and the question arises as to the reasons for their perplexity with regard to *Hamlet*. A reason may perhaps be sought for in the fact that Bergman's production of *Hamlet* did not much correspond to the image that Italian critics generally had of him. Though realizing that they were confronted with what was evidently intended as an "experiment", as Bergman's version of *Hamlet* was described (Vannucci, 1987), Italian

critics seem to have difficulty in finding the appropriate key to decipher it. One critic judged the production to be “discontinuous”, deploring “haste” in Bergman’s direction of the play, “which smacked at times of academe, at times of improvisation” (Tian, 1987). Similarly, Ugo Volli (1987), one of the most authoritative voices among Italian theater critics, considered Bergman’s production of *Hamlet* “heterogeneous, [...] at times disappointing”, lacking “an easily decipherable interpretative line”. In the opinion of the Italian critic, Bergman’s staging appeared “perhaps enriched by too many elements”, making his version of Shakespeare’s play in the eyes of Ugo Volli “a strange *Hamlet*”.

Considering, on the whole, what Italian critics wrote about Bergman’s theatrical productions over the years, there is one feature that stands out and that perhaps lies at the origin of the critical simplification to which they were often subjected as well as of the perplexities Italian critics seemingly felt in trying to come to terms with Bergman’s production of *Hamlet*. They seem to mostly lack a deeper knowledge of his work in the theater and not being familiar with it, they have difficulty in placing it in a wider context that may illuminate it. As has already been noted, Bergman’s theater productions, on their reaching Italy, were generally discussed as events in themselves, with critics seldom developing comparisons between one production and another. In the main, they appear to limit themselves to standard remarks, with generalized references, for instance, to Scandinavian theater’s tradition and, in particular, Ibsen and Strindberg.

Reviewing Bergman’s production of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, Paolo Lucchesi (1990) remarked in *La Nazione* that “Bergman’s Nora [...] mixes the blood of Ibsen with that of Strindberg”. Similarly, for the theater critic of *Il Mattino* Enrico Fiore (1987), in staging *Hamlet*, Bergman interpreted the Shakespearian character of the prince of Denmark “through the lens of Strindberg”. And the same remark can be found in Renzo Tian’s and Ugo Ronfani’s reviews. While Renzo Tian (1987) writes: “The first connotation of his *Hamlet* is precisely that of a Strindbergian figure”, Ugo Ronfani (1987) observed that “Bergman explicitly goes back to Strindberg”. In discussing Bergman’s staging of *A Long Day’s Journey into Night*, Strindberg and Ibsen are again the references suggested by Franco Quadri (1989), one of Italy’s leading theater critics of that time: Ibsen for “[the] ghosts of the past that return”, Strindberg for “the egoism that leads to solitude”. Yet, in referring to Ibsen’s or Strindberg’s influence on Bergman’s work, critics hardly went into detail. The references to both masters of Scandinavian theater remain at the level of hints, becoming part of the stock of remarks with which Bergman’s work in the theater seems to have prevalently been judged and commented on.

4. Viewing Bergman’s Theater through his Films

One exception was Bergman’s cinema: if there is one source to which Italian critics abundantly recur in order to comment on, explain and contextualize Bergman’s theater productions, this was his work as a film director. In his films, Italian critics

mostly identify the references for, and the mainsprings of, his work in the theater. Thus Bergman's production of Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, presented in Milan in 1982, recalled to Ugo Volli (1982) a number of his films, from *Wild Strawberries* to *Winter Light*, from *Persona* to *Scenes from a Marriage*. The Italian critic also detected an influence of the Italian master of theater and cinema Luchino Visconti in Bergman's staging of Strindberg's play, in "[the] naturalistic kitchen, like that of Clara Calamai in *Obsession*", which had been Visconti's debut film in the early 1940s. Also Roberto De Monticelli (1982) placed the emphasis on the analogies between Bergman's production of *Miss Julie* and *Scenes from a Marriage* and a resemblance to this was equally perceived in the case of Bergman's staging of *A Doll's House* (Ronfani, 1990).

Again, these references eventually became a sort of cliché. Regarding Bergman's production of *A Doll's House*, another Italian critic detects a precursor of it in Bergman's film *Wild Strawberries*: "Basically, this production [...] is one we have already seen at the cinema", comments Enrico Fiore (1990), "i.e. when we encountered *Wild Strawberries*". Similarly, Bergman's *Hamlet* was, according to *Il Giorno*, "a long delirium that revives the nightmares and visions of some of Bergman's films like *The Seventh Seal*, *The Devil's Eye* and *Hour of the Wolf*" (Ronfani, 1987). To explain Bergman's theater productions, Italian critics had wide recourse to his films, and when Bergman intervened on the original texts, changing the order of the scenes, for instance, as he did with *A Dream Play* or *Hamlet*, "he was acting no differently", according to Alberto Blandi (1973), "than when he edits the sequences of one of his films". Likewise, in Bergman's production of *Miss Julie*, the scenes were constructed, in the view of Ugo Volli (1982), "almost like cinematic frames, either close-ups or long shots". A similar comment was expressed by Roberto De Monticelli (1982): "If isolated, the attitudes and compositions of the two protagonists [...] recall typical sequences of Bergman's cinema". The scenes of *Hamlet*, too, appeared to Italian critics "almost like film sequences" (Lucchesi, 1987), with Ugo Volli (1987) comparing Shakespeare's character of Fortinbras together with his followers to "soldiers from *Star Wars*". The same reference is also proposed by Enrico Fiore (1987), who, in discussing the finale of Bergman's production of *Hamlet*, speaks of a "choreography from *Star Wars*".

The examples could be easily multiplied. Bergman's production of *Hamlet*, as a whole, gives the impression to Ugo Ronfani (1987) of being "paced in cinematic terms", and in Bergman's staging of *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, another Italian critic saw an echo of one of Bergman's last films, *Fanny and Alexander* (Fiore 1989), while Franco Quadri (1989) describes Bergman's staging of the O'Neill play as "a film against a black background, consisting of foreground shots that succeed each other inexorably". In his review of Bergman's production of *A Doll's House*, Franco Quadri (1990), again, describes the setting as an "essential and emblematic prison, the same that gave its title to Bergman's first film". The reference, of course, is to the film *Prison*, directed by Bergman in 1948. With regard to this, though, it must be noted that *Prison* was not

actually Bergman's first film. He debuts as a film director in 1946 with *Crisis*. Rather, *Prison* was one of Bergman's earliest films to be seen in Italy.

Forgetting, as it would seem, that Bergman comes from the theater, and it was the theater that actually lay at the roots of his cinema, Italian critics came to reverse the relation in Bergman's oeuvre between film and theater, so much so that one critic, reviewing Bergman's production of *The Wild Duck*, has the impression "that it is the cinematic activity that completes his gifts as a theater director, and not the converse, as has been repeatedly affirmed" (Timarco, 1972). And others went so far as to apparently correct Bergman, as does Ugo Ronfani (1982), when writing, with regard to Bergman's staging of Strindberg's *Miss Julie*: "For me, said the director of *Wild Strawberries*, cinema is first of all theater. Now, on seeing *Miss Julie*", observes the Italian critic, "I feel the urge to reverse the sentence: For me theater is first of all cinema". This should not surprise if one recalls the fact that, as noted at the beginning of this survey on Bergman's reception in Italy, critics got to know the Swedish theater and film director first for his work in the cinema. Recognition of his work in the theater followed later, profoundly affecting, as the present essay has intended to show, the ways in which Bergman's work was critically received in Italy.

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