Identity, Otherness and Empire in Shakespeare’s Rome

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ASHGATE
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Chapter 12
Shakespeare’s Rome in Rome’s Wooden ‘O’

Nancy Isenberg

During the summer of 2003, an idea for a raised wooden stage that might host outdoor performances in Rome’s Villa Borghese park – as part of the celebration of the villa’s centennial as a public garden – quite by accident and with no particular pre-defined cultural platform, materialized in a full scale replica of London’s neo-Globe theatre.¹ (See Figures 12.1 and 12.2.)

Figure 12.1  Globe Theatre, Rome, exterior.

¹ The Silvano Toti Globe Theatre was a gift to the city of Rome on the part of an enlightened modern-day ‘triumvirate’: Walter Veltroni, Rome’s progressive and creative mayor; the Toti brothers, heirs to an important construction firm wanting to commemorate their father and his generous patronage and support of the arts; and Gigi Proietti, a well-respected and influential man of the theatre.
Almost overnight, Rome found itself confronted with a provocative faux monument adding a new dimension to the relationship between Shakespeare's stage and the political theatre that was ancient Rome.

During its first year in existence, following an inaugural *Romeo and Juliet*, Rome's Globe offered little promise of becoming anything other than an architectural and political *capriccio*; it remained without an artistic director, apparently without a cultural agenda. But the following summer it hosted a Shakespearean project entitled *Nel grande teatro del mondo. Appunti dalle tragedie romane di William Shakespeare* ('In the Great Theatre of the World. Notes from William Shakespeare's Roman Tragedies') which took its shape from three of the Roman plays. Rome's imitation Shakespearean Globe, hosting this project, is the subject of this chapter. It will examine the exchange of cultural goods involving the reshaping of Roman history for an Elizabethan public and its re-importation and performative reframing centuries later on a Shakespearean stage in the heart of contemporary Rome.

The Elizabethan Globe, as Jack D'Amico reminds us in ‘Shakespeare's Rome: Politics and Theater', had its wooden pillars painted to look as if they were made of marble, an attempt, as D'Amico sees it, 'to recreate [Roman] theatres'. Those ancient arenas were closely associated with political life through a shared lexis denoting both a man of the theatre and a politician.² They were further linked

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by the shared dependence on the arts of oratory and rhetoric of both types of ‘performers’. Theatre and politics acquired monumental contiguity when Pompey constructed a theatre with portico for public meetings – a place of political theatrics and theatrical politics that would become the legendary marker of Caesar’s downfall.

Shakespeare turned Rome’s theatrically pregnant history into his own political theatre, bringing the entire expanse of the Roman Empire, urbis and orbis, inside his wooden ‘O’: one ‘globe’, so it were, within another, suggesting an oddly maternal generative process which confuses matrix with new issue. Roman history thus Shakespeareanized in time found its way back into official ‘Roman’ politics when in the days of Mussolini’s rise to power, _Julius Caesar_ was introduced by the Ministry of Education into the middle school curriculum as a fixed text. From the early 1920s to the mid 1930s, Shakespeare’s play thus served as propaganda for the Duce’s modern refashioning of Romanness and for his own self aggrandizement, the glory of Caesarism. The repurposing of _Julius Caesar_ as a Fascist promotional tool was confined primarily to the printed text (circulating in five different translations) and to a large extent to the coercing of adolescent minds. There is virtually no stage history for the play in the Fascist era, with the exception of a production in 1935 directed by Nando Tamberlani and performed in Rome’s Basilica di Maxentius, the very archaeological site chosen by Mussolini upon whose walls to affix a series of maps charting the expansion of the ancient Roman Empire and his own. In 1936, Mussolini invaded Ethiopia as part of his move to reclaim the Empire of his ancestors. This was the last European colonizing invasion and it culminated in a shameful defeat for the Italians. As Raymond Betts explains, ‘It had the historic effect of announcing that the older form of imperialism was no longer defensible, whatever rhetorical statements about “civilizing missions” might be conjured up.’ As the analogy between Mussolini and Caesar began to reshape itself around themes of tyranny and tyrannicide, _Julius Caesar_ disappeared from the school curriculum.

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3 Ibid.: ‘Quintillian and Horace mined drama for the oratorical techniques needed by a public speaker.’
7 The unified National Library catalogue records the existence of school editions of _Julius Caesar_ dating from 1921 to 1934.
In the post-war years, Shakespeare and his opus became a fixed part of modern Italian culture, prominently visible in education, the publishing industry, academic scholarship, and theatre. Given the cultural weight of Shakespeare throughout Europe, this is not surprising. There is, however, a special case to be made for Shakespeare’s importance in Italy, considering the degree to which Italy, ancient and modern, informed the Bard’s works and the culture of his times. And so, there is a reciprocal long-standing tradition that also links Shakespeare to Italian culture. It started in the eighteenth century when the first complete translations of the Bard’s works began to appear. It is a tradition that extends from the opera stage of Giuseppe Verdi, Vincenzo Bellini, Gioacchino Rossini to the contemporary dramatic stage (and in some cases, silver screen) of directors like Giorgio Strehler, Luchino Visconti, Luigi Squarzina, Luca Ronconi, Carmelo Bene, Franco Zeffirelli. Nobel prize-winning poets – Salvatore Quasimodo and Eugenio Montale – have wanted to merge their own voice with the Bards by translating his works. And there are many other talented translators of Shakespeare in Italy, so many in fact that virtually every major publishing house has its own Shakespeare series. As for these translators and for the outstanding Shakespeare scholarship in Italy, it must suffice here to refer to two recent surveys, Agostino Lombardo’s ‘Shakespeare in Italy’ (1997) and Michele Marrapodi’s and Giorgio Melchiori’s introductory remarks to their Italian Studies in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries (1999).

Shakespeare took his place in the cultural context of modern Italy, flanking the powerfully influential classical tradition. The fact that Walter Pagliaro, director of the Rome Globe Shakespeare project under study here, claims in his distinguished curriculum extensive experience in classical theatre and in classical theatre spaces is, therefore, not beside the point. Nor is the fact that his Nel grande teatro del mondo germinated from a one night performance in the archaeological site of the Trajan Market during Rome’s first experimental ‘White Night’ the previous September. For thus re-rooted in Roman soil and stone, Shakespeare’s Rome came

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8 See, for example, Jonathan Hart, ‘Shakespeare’s Italy and England: The Translation of Culture and Empire,’ in Shakespeare Yearbook 10 (Shakespeare and Italy), eds. Holger Klein and Michele Marrapodi (Lewiston: Mellen, 1999, pp. 460–80), which provides an exhaustive survey.

to be refigured in a way which combined ancient and modern traditions and in so doing made it much more akin to Rome than to Shakespeare.

Pagliaro did not choose to work with the set of the so-called ‘Plutarchan’ plays, but selected two and discarded the third. By flanking *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* with *Titus Andronicus* and not with *Coriolanus*, Pagliaro’s project, first of all, gave *Titus Andronicus* comparable stature as a Roman play despite its traditional, lesser identity as an early experiment in revenge tragedy. But more significantly, by placing this play after *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, and by excluding *Coriolanus*, set in the early years of the republic, Pagliaro created an alignment which sets us thinking about developments in the history of the Roman Empire rather than about those in Shakespeare’s career or on the political stage of Elizabethan England. For the trajectory of his project clearly maps its rise and fall, with *Julius Caesar* heralding the transition from republic, *Antony and Cleopatra* exploring the tensions between the centre and the periphery of the nascent Empire and *Titus Andronicus* bringing the tensions of difference now matured into devastating conflicts, back into the centre.

The project took on the structure of a triptych, each segment constituting its own evening-long event, each bringing centre-stage a particular theme, reflected in its title: *Il mantello squarciat* (*‘The Lacerated Cloak’*) derived from *Julius Caesar*, *La marionetta egiziana* (*‘The Egyptian Puppet’*) from *Antony and Cleopatra* and *La recita della folla* (*‘The Performance of Madness’*) from *Titus Andronicus*.

*Il mantello squarciat* – episode one – begins immediately following Caesar’s assassination and ends, after Antony’s funeral oration, with the plebeians promising to bring about the ‘domestic fury and fierce civil strife’ (3.1. 263) previously invoked by Antony. It revolves around concepts of Roman identity that are defined here in terms of ‘Liberty’ and ‘Freedom!’ – the very words uttered by Cinna that opened the Roman Globe performance. Brutus, in his appeal to the Roman populous, places ‘being a Roman’ antithetically to ‘being a bondsman’ (*‘Who is here so base, that would be a bondman, speak; for him have I offended. Who is here so rude, that would not be a Roman? If any, speak; for him have I offended...’* [3.2. 25–7]). The discourses of the conspirators among themselves and exchanged with Mark Antony and then those of Brutus and Mark Antony delivered in the Forum all address the question, ‘What does it mean to be a Roman?’ from the perspective of tradition, custom, and heritage. Brutus knows that, in defence of the ‘sacrificial’ nature of Caesar’s murder, the conspirators must guarantee that he have ‘true rites and lawful ceremonies’ (3.1. 241); Antony, ostentatiously brandishing

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10 Pagliaro intuitively aligns himself here with Terence Spencer who in ‘Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Romans,’ *Shakespeare Survey* 10 (1957): p. 32, argued that ‘*Titus Andronicus* is a more typical Roman play, a more characteristic piece of Roman history, than the three great plays of Shakespeare which are generally grouped under that name.’

11 Each segment was performed for three consecutive nights.

Caesar’s will before the crowd he aims to inflame, speaks of legacies and heirs. Identity in this Rome is fashioned from within and from the past.\textsuperscript{13}

La marionetta egiziana shifts the historical, political, and geographic landscape of the question of Roman identity, as it gives prominence to the substance of Empire. Expansionism and the conquering of new territories and its peoples, perforce, challenge self-identity in the face of cultural otherness. Focusing principally on Cleopatra’s plight, this episode explores the question of Roman identity in new terms, as it is articulated reflexively in her fate: can a Roman maintain his identity abroad? In the reversed role of other in the indigenous context of a conquered territory? Can Roman imperial power impose itself on a conquered people and at the same time avoid contamination by the culture of other? Mark Antony, who is already dead when this episode begins on the Rome Globe stage, had approached these issues with his sword in its sheath, not in his hand, that is, with an open mind and heart, and had been utterly seduced into Egyptian otherness. Cleopatra, who had borne sons both to Caesar and to Mark Antony, represents in ever so many ways a ‘feminine’ answer to the questions just raised: for the half Roman issue of her womb represents a perfectly egalitarian sharing of genetic patrimony, a fair and just mediation of difference, an impeccably balanced instance of multicultural blending.

The Egyptian queen, whose threatened otherness in the last act of Shakespeare’s drama and in the episode in the triptych is clearly also a question of gender, must in the end defend herself – as queen and as a woman – from the conqueror who wants to violate her cultural, political, and gender identity. Coppélia Kahn reads the blood of Caesar’s wounds, the slits in his mutilated corpse, as feminine, linking these gendered signifiers with his physical weaknesses (his deafness, his epilepsy, his natatorial inadequacy), and consequently with his ultimate failure to achieve true – male engendered – Romanness. She further recognizes in Portia’s self-inflicted wound a need, in order to be heard, to ‘speak’ the masculine language of Romanness.\textsuperscript{14} In comparison, Cleopatra’s mortal wound accords her suicide all the stature and nobility of a Roman death, while at the same time its bloodlessness and the maternal connotations of the nature of it preserve the femaleness of her action.

The final episode of the Roman Globe triptych, La recita della follia, takes the discourse of empire, and within it those of identity and otherness to the negative extreme and reframes the question of self versus other in even more challenging terms. The performance of madness had a different dramatic structure from the other two episodes in that, rather than isolating an extended segment of Shakespeare’s play, it conflated the series of events leading up to and deriving from Titus’s madness into a rapid and linear sequence of scenes. Titus Andronicus’s


others (from the Roman point of view) – the barbarian Goths – are a far cry from Antony and Cleopatra’s civilized Egyptians, with whom the Romans share deeply embedded cultural roots. And in the Titus episode at the Roman Globe, Romanness, battered by centuries of empire, that is, by centuries of contamination by other cultures, is very conspicuously suffering a severe identity crisis, much more severe than the one registered in Caesar’s Rome. And as we know, the less sure you are about who you are, the greater will be your fear of and thus your hostility towards otherness. Who is responsible for the utter falling apart of dialogue, of cross-cultural exchange? Tamora’s revenge stems from maternal grief (she sheds ‘a mother’s tears in passion for her son’ [1.1. 105–6]) when Titus takes her first born as a sacrificial offering to the gods. Aaron’s evil, we are tempted to believe, from our post-Freudian, twenty-first-century stance, derives from the abuses he himself has received. Ultimately, it is Titus’s own futile nostalgia for a Romanness that is no more, his hyper-conservatism exalted by an identity crisis in the face of a crumbling Empire seeping with diversity – figured in that savage pagan rite – which is the source of the madness Tamora and Aaron drive him to.

All three episodes at the Roman Globe take as their starting point a mortal, ritually performed wound. Caesar’s assassination was mimed – like an Elizabethan dumb-show – on a dimly lit stage. All the audience saw were the conspirators in a closed circle. The dominant signifier of the event was the music which rose in an anguishing crescendo. Only as the lights slowly brightened and the conspirators regrouped around the stage did Caesar’s corpse become visible. In The Egyptian Puppet, Antony and his wound were figured onstage metonymically by his bloodyed sword being taken by his friend, Dercetas, to Caesar (‘Thy death and fortunes bid thy followers fly. / This sword but shown to Caesar, with this tidings, / Shall enter me with him.’ [4.14. 110–12]). The Titus episode opens with the verbal determining of the ritual murder of Tamora’s son, Alarbus, whose limbs are to be hewed, his entrails fed to the sacrificing fire. These wounds, then, inflicted by the hands of conspiring assassins (in Julius Caesar), self-inflicted with pitiful ineptitude (in Antony and Cleopatra), or performed in the name of custom (in Titus) – figured through gesture, stage prop or words – are the given for each episode, that the actors must bear in their performance and the audience in their minds. And they continued to haunt the stage in the blood red drapes that completed some of the costumes in each of the episodes, complementing the folds of a military cloak or senatorial toga, serving as head cover for a slave or loin cloth for a fig-bearing clown. Those wounds are thus ever present to remind us of the failures of human judgment and the errors of human action that explain the tragedies befalling the heroes and heroines onstage. And they beckon us back into our own world where


16 I am grateful to Walter Pagliaro, Gianni Carluccio who designed the sets, costumes and lighting, and Rita Bucchi, who also worked on costumes for their generous help in reconstructing the memory of the performances, which were not recorded.
similar fanaticisms, fundamentalisms, and threats to personal identity and liberty, within and without our own extended, globalizing culture, are the cause of far more horrific mutilations and lacerations.

In a press release for the occasion, Walter Pagliaro explained the inspiration for his project. In his view, Shakespeare’s staging of ancient Rome and its civilization, his appropriation of the Latin past into his own Elizabethan present, were a means for the Bard to express ‘the impossibility of grasping reality and the inconsistency of the human being’. In Shakespeare’s world, ‘everything about the individual had become ambiguous’. For this reason, as Pagliaro explains, his triptych revolves around three moments of ‘astonishing ambiguity’ which can ‘call our attention to the reasons that moved Shakespeare to give a theatrical figuration to the world that had by then become problematic and incoherent’.

Pagliaro saw in Shakespeare’s appropriation of Roman history a ‘confirmation of his bitter, pessimistic and cruel philosophy of history’. By extension, considering Pagliaro’s project as a whole, and within the context of our own problematic and incoherent times, we cannot but say the same for his own vision of the world we live in today. And yet, while this project invites reflections on the clashes between the othernesses that so tragically define our world in its current state, at the same time it makes a very strong statement about the way it leads us to these reflections.

Let me explain: all three episodes are overtly or covertly calling attention to theatre. The Julius Caesar episode presents us with a powerful piece of theatrics and incorporates Cassius’s famous exaltation of the theatricality of that moment (‘How many ages hence shall this our lofty scene be acted over, / in states unborn, and accents yet unknown’ [3.1. 111–13]). The ensuing episode is the enactment of a great actress’s performance (I mean, figuratively, Cleopatra’s acting to outwit Octavius, and her highly theatrical preparation for her death, although this statement is, literally speaking, equally true, with the acclaimed Italian actress Maddalena Crippa in the role of Cleopatra). And of course, in this episode, we hear the Egyptian queen recite her famous lines about ‘some squeaking Cleopatra boying [her] greatness / I’the posture of a whore’ (5.2. 218–19). The title of the Titus episode, The Performance of Folly, speaks for itself.

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17 All translations from press conferences and press release are mine.
18 See in this context, Claudia Corti’s argument, in ‘Shakespeare’s Uncultured Caesar on the Elizabethan Stage,’ in Italian Studies in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries, p. 122, linking Shakespeare’s portrayal of ancient Rome with that of other Elizabethan playwrights for whom Roman settings ‘were used to connote intrigue, falsehood, hypocrisy, imbroglio, crime, oppression, and so on. Caesar and Caesarianism thus became in Shakespeare symbols of the moral and political degradation induced by a certain type of culture, or, rather, uncultured.’
19 Maddalena Crippa’s curriculum includes virtually every great female role of the Western stage from classical times to the present. Her professional achievements reflect the influence of her intimacy with Peter Stein, her husband.
Viewed from this metatheatrical perspective, the absence of a *Coriolanus* episode silently turns the triptych into a quadriptych because that very absence becomes the representation of Coriolanus's inability to 'perform' in Rome. As Jack D'Amico points out, 'Coriolanus feels violated on the political stage ... [He] can use disguise and oratorical skill, but can only do so outside of Rome. As he approaches the city, his ability to perform and his authority as a military leader both desert him.'  

The role of acting was further marked throughout the triptych by Pagliaro's decision to bring backstage business into the foreground: during the prelude to each performance, that is, during the quarter of an hour or so in which the audience arrived and took its place in the theatre, the core group of young actors who performed in all three episodes were busily putting on their makeup, adjusting their costumes and rehearsing their lines – in the pit, in full public view.

Other directorial decisions, about the scenographic use of the stage, invested the theatrical space with its own protagonism, for it was left almost entirely naked, with very little to distract attention from itself: a few thick, vertical ropes and metal pulleys in the piece from *Julius Caesar* (see Figure 12.3); bare branches and taut, criss-crossed vertical ropes in the one from *Titus* (see Figure 12.4).

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21 D'Amico, p. 71, substantiates his argument with these lines from the text: 'Like a dull actor now, / I have forgot my part and I am out / Even to a full disgrace' (5.3. 40–43).
One way of seeing the ropes in *The Lacerated Cloak* is as signifiers of the coercive powers of rhetoric. And when the ropes appear again in *The Performance of Madness* they can represent Titus's world looking back on Caesar's, but as they are here criss-crossed – and therefore render circulation on the stage extremely difficult – they can figure as the obstructive and dangerously impeding nature of that past. And the dead branches can be viewed as scenically figuring (in Tamora's words) the 'barren detested vale ... [where] never shines the sun, [where] nothing breeds ...' (3.3. 93–6) and all that that landscape stands for metaphorically in our interpretation of the play.

Figure 12.4  Set design for *The Performance of Madness* by Gianni Carluccio.

In the *Cleopatra* episode, wide, cream-coloured gauze panels hung from the stage gallery to floor, illuminated from behind. The effect was that of a veiled transparency which softened and feminized, but did not hide the stage structure (see Figure 12.5). However, in the scene where Cleopatra dons her royal robes in preparation for her death, the lighting shifted.22 As her figure grew in majesty with the additions to her costume of cape, crown, and jewels, the effect was magnified

22 Verb tenses in describing a performance pose a problem: the scene, which exists independently of the performance, in a sense abstractly, seems to beg the present tense; the lighting on the other hand, specific to a particular performance, seems to beg the past tense.
by the gauze panels, now lit from the front so they became opaque. The same colour as Cleopatra's costume, they seemed to amplify her stature, while at the same time annihilating the theatrical space of the performance, thus decontextualizing it and consequently reminding us of Cleopatra's transcendence through her death to the realms of legend and myth in the collective imagination.

Figure 12.5  Set design for *The Egyptian Puppet* by Gianni Carluccio.

Each segment of the triptych, whether focusing on the tensions between self and other, local and foreign, or male and female, contributes to a larger discourse of empire, expressed by the triptych as a whole. As we have seen, Pagliaro's project, in the order in which he presented the segments, and in particular with the end focus on *Titus Andronicus*, channels our attention towards the Roman Empire's ruinous decline and fall and not towards its glorious rise and the spreading of Roman civilization and culture through the world. This accent on negative discourses of empire combines with directorial decisions regarding costumes to bring history and the present into a dialogical shared presence on his stage. Street gear formed the basis for most costumes: sweat pants, sneakers, tee-shirts. Garb of our times such as trench coats, sunglasses, women's tights (used as a face-mask, burglar-fashion, on a white actor as a gesture towards race in his portrayal of Aaron) combined

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with ecclesiastical robes for Octavius evoking other times of Roman political importance and period costumes like Lavinia’s tunic and Cleopatra’s regal attire. Defective acoustics in the theatre made hidden microphones necessary. Their amplification of Shakespearean dialogue, along with electronic keyboard sound effects were a constant reminder of the techno-age in which the performance was taking place, and by contrast also of the performed histories in act of Elizabethan England and ancient Rome. As the triptych provokes us into reflections on the destiny of imperial powers, past, present, and future, it reminds us that as it was in ancient Rome and in Elizabethan England, even today the stage can be a valid and important arena for political debate.

At the same time, within the context of imperial destinies put forth by Pagliaro’s project, the physical structure itself that contained the triptych can be seen as offering further perspectives on the theme. For a Shakespearean theatre in the heart of Rome punctuates and synthesizes a cultural exchange between dominating political centres and subordinate peripheries which began in the days of ancient Rome when England figured on the imperial map as one of its remotest colonies. It invites us to remember the common founding myths involving princes fleeing Troy in flames that link Rome and England. The myth of the Trojan Brutus arriving on the shores of Britannia dates back to the Middle Ages, when it served, in an early example of translatio imperii, to affirm the nobility of the Norman-Angevin dynasty, but was still very much alive in the minds of the Elizabethans and served the political and cultural agendas at the very core of the English Renaissance. British expansionism began in Shakespeare’s time, but the generations of men and women who participated in its earliest endeavours would not live to witness the inversion of political roles that would make England for a time the most powerful modern imperial force and Italy a mere provincial outpost (albeit with a revered past) of modern Europe. Shakespeare, as Maria Del Satio points out in the Introduction to this volume, not only envisaged this reversal in Cymbeline but in the last lines conjured up deities, birds, and soothsayers to sanction it.

Rome’s incorporation of a Globe Theatre into its city centre, can be read as repurposing this shifting history of globalizing cultures, converting it into a model of positive synergy. The Eternal City’s curiously alien wooden ‘O’ has a future, we can hope, as more than a themed anachronistic landmark or a ‘globalized’ commercial commodity: its stage in welcoming different performance histories, traditions, and styles can provide a space where (borrowing two verbs from a statement of Schechner’s) they can collide and interfere with each other in a positive

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way. And so, as the contemporary Rome’s Globe evokes memories of imperial Rome’s orbis as its self-fashioned image of universal hegemony, it also nudges us in the direction of politically correct approaches to modern day globalization in which diversity makes for a richer whole.

Postscript

On 7 June 2005, actor-director Gigi Proietti was named artistic director of the Rome Globe Theatre. During the press conference where his appointment was announced, Proietti presented a rich calendar of performances including Shakespeare, Sheridan, and Marivaux during the summer season, but also musical events and events for children to take place during the rest of the year. His intention is for the theatre to be a place where young acting companies especially can experiment with their ideas, where – on the bare wooden stage – ‘words and gestures can create by themselves the enchantment of the story’. The press release for the occasion stressed the importance of Rome’s Globe ‘in the process of internationalisation of the city’, defining it as a symbol of Rome’s ‘cultural vitality and richness and hence its universality’. Issued a year after Pagliaro’s triptych was performed and a month after this chapter was written, the press release fully supports what this chapter identifies as the political role Pagliaro cast for the Eternal City’s wooden ‘O’.

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