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**LORENZO AT 'THE THEATRE':
MEETING ACTORS AND AUDIENCE**

NICK CERAMELLA

In his essay 'The Theatre', first published in the *English Review* in September 1913 and then revised for inclusion in his first travel book *Twilight in Italy* (1916), D. H. Lawrence brings to life the atmosphere inside and outside the theatre in Gargnano, evoking a vivid picture of the social structure of this small northern Italian town. At the dawning of the age of cinema, Lawrence shows an unprecedented ability to use words as a film director uses a camera to describe people and places, zooming in and out of the theatre to link two seemingly separate realities. Yet he considered this new form of mass entertainment to be mechanised and lacking the vitality of theatre, delivering instead "the nervous excitement of speed, grimace, agitation, and speed, as of flying atoms, chaos" (*TI* 133). Although Lawrence admits the "triumph" of the "cinematograph" (500 cinemas opened in Italy alone between 1905 and 1907), he mocks the early silent movies for being "deaf and dumb" (*TI* 133).¹ Yet the triumph of the cinema proceeded nonetheless, as recorded in Lawrence's novel *The Lost Girl* (1920), in which "Houghton's Pleasure Palace", another combined theatre and cinema, is less successful than nearby picture-houses that exclusively show films. Mr May, rather like Lawrence himself, "can't believe they want nothing but pictures. I can't believe they want everybody in the flat,' ... He himself was not interested in the film. His interest was still the human interest in living performers and their living feats" (*LG* 115). Later in the novel, May discusses the demise of live performance with the leader of the Natcha-Kee-Tawara troupe, who sadly concedes that her profession will soon be replaced by film:

"The pictures are driving us away. Perhaps we shall last for ten years more. And after that, we are finished ... Why is it? I don't know. I don't know. The pictures are cheap, and they are easy, and they cost the audience nothing, no feeling of the heart, no appreciation of the spirit, cost them nothing of these. And so they like them, and they don't like us, because they must *feel* the things we do, from the heart, and appreciate them from the spirit. There!" (LG 148–9, Lawrence's emphasis)

Lawrence's views on the cinema help to contextualise his lifelong passion for the theatre. Although he tried to launch a dramatic career, as John Worthen observes, "The main problem for Lawrence as a young playwright was what to do with his plays once they were written" (*Plays* xxx). By 1912, when he first went to Italy, Lawrence had already written four plays – *A Collier's Friday Night*, *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd*, *The Merry-go-Round* and *The Married Man* – and, despite a lack of success in getting these works performed, he turned again to drama during his stay at Gargnano (from September 1912 to April 1913), a particularly fruitful period for his writing. A letter to Edward Garnett (2 January 1913) demonstrates renewed enthusiasm and confidence that his works would be staged: "I enjoy so much writing my plays – they come so quick and exciting from my pen ... I *do* think this play [*The Daughter-in-Law*] might have a chance on the stage" (IL 501, Lawrence's emphasis). However, *The Daughter-in-Law* was only briefly rediscovered in 1933, "unnecessarily tarted up for her two brief outings in 1936", as Keith Sagar comments, and then "vanished for nearly thirty years" (*Plays* cxvi), with its first full performance in 1967.² *The Fight for Barbara* – the other play written at Villa Igea and which opens in "The kitchen of an Italian villa" (*Plays* 239) – also had its stage première in 1967.

Lawrence's enjoyment of "writing ... plays" (IL 501) was rekindled by the unexpected opportunity to attend some performances at the theatre in Gargnano, as he wrote to Arthur McLeod on 17 January 1913:

We've got a theatre here, and last night I went to see *Amletto* [sic.]. Do you recognise our old friend? Now he was, really the most amazing creature you can imagine: rather short, rather stout, with not much neck, and about forty years old: a bit after the Caruso type of Italian: the Croton type. I almost fell out of my box trying to suppress my laughter. ... I saw *Ghosts* and gulped it down – it was rather good. I have seen a D'Annunzio play, and rather enjoyed it – fearful melodrama. But they are only peasants, the players, and they play farces ... (1L 505)

This letter provides a synopsis of what Lawrence developed into the first version of 'The Theatre' later that year and then substantially revised and expanded in 1916, as the catastrophe of the First World War increasingly convinced him that European society had gone astray and deepened his awareness of the changes that Italian society was undergoing. A sense of national identity had been building in Italy as a result of the Nationalist Movement, whose leaders aimed to make Italy a modern world power and to rebuild something similar to the Roman Empire. From the 1890s onwards, radical improvements were introduced in northern Italy: industrialisation (shipbuilding, car factories and steel works), railways (crossing the Alps and linking with the south of Italy), modern road infrastructure and mechanised agriculture. Nevertheless, there was unprecedented mass emigration to the Americas, as Lawrence reports in a letter to May Holbrook (February 1914):

Here almost every man has spent his time in America – seven years in Buenos Ayres [sic.], or in the United States. They will not stay any longer in Italy to be peasants without money ... And the men can't settle any more. They seem to have a nostalgia of restlessness. Italy is a country on the change, and suffering it acutely. Fifty years ago, almost every man was a peasant. In one generation it has all changed. (2L 148–9)

Then, in May 1915, Italy, which had been neutral at the start of the First World War, declared war on Austria-Hungary.

These events, as well as close contact with everyday Italian life in Gargnano, excited Lawrence's interest in national character, particularly the differences between northern and southern European nations, which he draws out in 'The Theatre' through his comparison between the Norwegian and Italian playwrights – Henrik Ibsen and Gabriele D'Annunzio. Like most northern European visitors, Lawrence initially entertained somewhat romantic notions about Italy and Italians, but the deeper insight gained through proximity with the people of Gargnano, and the performances at the local theatre, facilitated a deeper understanding. Indeed, Lawrence links those dramatic representations with the reality outside the theatre, and his growing conviction about the opposition between mind and body is conceived, particularly following the *Hamlet* performance, as a division between northern and southern European modes of being.

In the 1916 version of 'The Theatre', which is the main focus of this essay, Lawrence leads us around the little theatre and we see everything through his eyes. He thus creates the effect of a multiple "show": the interpretation of the plays on the stage, accompanied by a psychological insight into the actors as opposed to the characters they play and, most importantly, a presentation of the spectators and their responses to the plays as distinct social groups. He depicts the theatre as a multi-storey stage where so much goes on at the same time, connecting all of these realities which only seem to be separate. The theatre emerges as an important social centre for the whole community. Each group of people represents a microcosm, from the "bersaglieri" to the "family of three" making "a little separate world down there in the theatre" (*TI* 150). People from all walks of life have the opportunity to gather and socialise, while also developing a taste for the theatre and knowing there is always something for everyone to appreciate and learn. And, although the Italian villagers may have difficulty in following plays

like *Hamlet*, even the children watch in a dignified and attentive way.

Both versions of 'The Theatre' begin: "During carnival a company is playing in the theatre" (*TI* 133). In fact, it was Christmas Eve 1912 when Signor De Paoli, the owner of Villa Igea, offered the Lawrences the key to his box, number 8, in the "small" theatre, the former church of Santa Maria Maddalena.³ Characteristically, Lawrence tries to engage his reader with the spirit of this "cast-off" church – "how cleverly it had been constructed for the dramatic presentation of religious ceremonies" – and tells us that he "was really impressed" by this small provincial theatre, which had the same features as any important theatre in a major town: "There are two tiers of little boxes in the theatre, some forty in all, with fringe and red velvet, and lined with dark red paper, quite like real boxes in a real theatre. And the padrone's is one of the best. It just holds three people" (*TI* 133). Unfortunately, the interior has since been refurbished and all that now remains is part of a white and pale-blue wall and a few columns, which are not usually on view to the public.⁴ However, figure 5 shows images from the box panels that decorated the theatre in Lawrence's time. These lovely, hand-painted panels tell us much about the artistry of the painter as well as the social status of the theatre. As Umberto Perini records, in the late 1850s the theatre was skilfully painted and attracted companies from other regions.⁵

The list of box-holders in figure 7, dating from 1918, indicates that theatre-going in those days was open to everyone and the theatre was a social venue as well as a place for entertainment. The list includes rich people, such as the Feltrinellis or Count Bettoni's family, who were surely among the major financial and intellectual supporters of the theatre. Lawrence was lucky that a member of that social circle, his landlord De Paoli (figure 6), gave him the key to his box, so that that he and Frieda could have "*un peu de divertiment* [sic.]" ["have a good time"]. They paid their "threepence entrance fee", walked upstairs, entered into their "little cabin" and enjoyed "looking down on all the world" (*TI* 133).



Figure 5: Original panels from the boxes in Gargnano theatre. Photographs courtesy of Umberto Perini, private collection.



Figure 6: Pietro De Paoli and Silvia De Paoli. Photographs courtesy of Comitato for Gargnano Storica.

Proprietari di palchi nel Teatro Sociale di Gargnano		Teatro Sociale di Gargnano	
No.	Nome	No.	Nome
1	1 ^a fila	1	1 ^a fila
1	Beltrami Luigi Giuseppe	1	Parisi Arnaldo
2	Versiani del teatro	2	Versiani del teatro
3	Perolari Vittorio	3	Parisi Angelo
4	Volenti Maria	4	Parisi Luigi
5	Beltrami Sergio	5	Beltrami Co. Vincenzo
6	Perini Maurizio Margherita	6	Volenti Maria
7	Perari Norma	7	Mazzanti Vittorio
8	De Paoli Silvia	8	Beltrami Donatino
9	Giamini Giovanni	9	Parisi Giancarlo
10	Perini S. Francesco	10	Parisi Nicola
11	Perini Giacomo	11	Del Vecchio Stella
12	Perolari Roberto e Al.	12	Cambani Gen. Luis
13	" Giulietta	13	Parisi Arn.
14	Perini Silvia	14	Calabrese Laura
15	Parisi Maria	15	Parisi Angelo
16	Beltrami Sergio	16	Parisi Angelo
17	Versiani del teatro	17	Parisi Riccardo
18	Parisi Arnaldo	18	Versiani del teatro
		19	Parisi Maria e Verano

Figure 7: List of boxholders in Gargnano Theatre dated 6 September 1918. From the archive in Gargnano Town Hall, photograph courtesy of Umberto Perini. Silvia De Paoli is listed as the boxholder of box no. 8 in the first tier.

Most of the villagers were at the theatre, taking their annual opportunity to socialise in that special place, which was open only from Christmas until Carnival at the beginning of February. The first person Lawrence notices among the audience is the barber, the "flashy little Luigi", "bowing profusely in a box opposite" (*TI* 153, 133). Everyone does this "all round" the tiers: the chemist, the "padrona" [landlady] of the local Hôtel-Pension Cervo, Maria Samuelli, a good friend of the Lawrences, and the village magistrate, who, for some reason, Lawrence utterly disliked. This is a snapshot of the so-called worthies and the well-to-do, characteristic of any town in Italy, surely until the 1960s. And so one may wonder how Luigi the barber came to be sitting up in the tiers. Probably he is Bortoletti Luigi, listed in Figure 7 as having hired a box in the second row, cheaper yet not affordable by everybody and close to the box-holders who were his selected clientele. A line is thus drawn between Luigi on high and another barber, "the Siciliano", sitting on the benches below together with the mass of ordinary villagers whom he served (*TI* 151). Lawrence casts a glance downwards and observes that below all are seated "by church instinct": the women on the left, with "perhaps an odd man at the end of a row, beside his wife" (*TI* 134). On the right hand side, the benches are occupied by peasants, fishermen and just a few girls, almost as if they meant to counterbalance the men's presence on the other side. And "sprawling in the benches, are several groups of bersaglieri" (*TI* 134), who recall those that Frieda admired at a local military parade from her window-sill in an often-quoted letter to Garnett (19 November 1912): "The men so loose and soldiers with *such* hats, a foam [Lawrence interjects: 'Good God!'] of cockfeathers on them I long for one, a hat not a soldier" (*IL* 476, Frieda's emphasis).

Near those "bersaglieri" Lawrence notices another bunch of young people, standing at the back "dark and isolated", covered in their hats and cloaks: they are the "more reckless spirits of the village", ready to "shout and wave to each other when anything occurs" (*TI* 134). Lawrence remarks that they are clean and so are

their clothes, although – as they shave only once a week on Sunday morning, which would be the next day – they are unshaven. But they are proud and dignified as: “Loose and abandoned, they lounge and talk, or they watch with wistful absorption the play that is going on” (*TI* 134). Such behaviour at the theatre is confirmed by the 1913 Baedeker’s *Guide to Northern Italy*, which notes that: “The theatre is the usual evening-resort of the Italians, who seldom observe strict silence during the performance” (*TI* 282).⁶ Lawrence’s essay, however, justifies such conduct as follows:

They are strangely isolated in their own atmosphere, and as if revealed. It is as if their vulnerable being was exposed and they have not the wit to cover it. There is a pathos of physical sensibility and mental inadequacy. Their mind is not sufficiently alert to run with their quick, warm senses. (*TI* 134)

In other words, Lawrence asserts that the senses prevail over reason in these men, whose responses are purely instinctive. They are part of a diverse range of people who attended the theatre for a variety of reasons. Some were there to assert their social status, like de Paoli, or to show off their cultural superiority, like the “maestra” (the schoolteacher who gave Lawrence private lessons in Italian). Or, as was the case with the indistinct crowd below, there was less interest in the plays than in a sense of belonging to the community, or perhaps the chance to meet with people of the opposite sex. And yet, as Lawrence points out, there was a deep division between men and women, symbolised, as suggested above, by the fact that they sat apart on two distinct sides of the theatre.⁷ This situation presents an opportunity for Lawrence to deal with one of his favourite topics, the “sex-war” or “sex duel” (*TI* 135) as he describes it in this essay. And so he moves his focus outside the theatre to observe the segregation that can be seen in the streets of Gargnano, especially on Sundays:

The men keep together, as if to support each other; the women also are together, in a hard, strong herd. It is as if the power, the hardness, the triumph, even in this Italian village, were with the women in their relentless, vindictive unity ... There is no comradeship between men and women, none whatsoever, but rather a condition of battle, reserve, hostility. (TI 134–5)

Lawrence observed a similar division a few years later in Palermo, when Frieda insisted they go to a typical Sicilian puppet show, as recorded in the last few pages of *Sea and Sardinia* (1921). During the performance – “The story was the inevitable Paladins of France” – Lawrence notices there are “no women—no girls” (SS 188). He asks why, and the “fat, jolly man” sitting next to him explains: “Ah, the theatre is so small ... Besides this is nothing for women. Not that there is anything improper, he hastens to add. Not at all. But what should women and girls be doing at the marionette show? It was an affair for males” (SS 188). To which Lawrence comments: “I agreed with him really, and was thankful we hadn’t a lot of smirking twitching girls and lasses in the audience. This male audience was so tense and pure in its attention” (SS 188).

This Sicilian audience is even more segregated than that described in the Gargnano theatre, where although men and women were sitting in rows apart, there were also some “loose women” (TI 152). In Sicily, male and female worlds were traditionally separated by a divide that persisted until the 1960s. And it is interesting to note that Lawrence now felt comfortable with such a division. *Sea and Sardinia* is a travel book from a later period in Lawrence’s life (1920–1), which indicates how his thinking about theatre and masculinity has moved on. A case in point is the intriguing figure of Orlando, “hero of heroes”, who has “the look of a man who does not think, but whose heart is all the time red hot with burning, generous blood-passion” (SS 191). Orlando symbolises Lawrence’s ideal type of man, who exists only as one of the marionettes, with “wonderful faces ... so splendidly glittering and male” (SS 191),

and so the writer concludes that: "There is something extremely suggestive in them. How much better they fit the old legend-tales than living people would do. Nay, if we are going to have human beings on the stage, they should be masked and disguised" (*SS* 189).⁸

Lawrence is also impressed by the way the marionettes speak: "it was the voice that gained hold of the blood. It is a strong, rather husky, male voice that acts direct on the blood, not on the mind" (*SS* 189). Similarly, in Gargnano, he is unconcerned by what de Paoli denigrates as the "vulgar accent" of the peasant actors (*TI* 136) – "It is all the same to me" (*TI* 136) – and instead he is fascinated by the effect of D'Annunzio's words on the audience:

It was the language which did it. It was the Italian passion for rhetoric, for the speech which appeals to the senses and makes no demand of the mind. When an Englishman listens to a speech he wants at least to imagine that he understands thoroughly and impersonally what is meant. But an Italian only cares about the emotion. It is the movement, the physical effect of the language upon the blood which gives him supreme satisfaction. His mind is scarcely engaged at all. He is like a child, hearing and feeling without understanding. It is the sensuous gratification he asks for. Which is why D'Annunzio is a god in Italy. He can control the current of the blood with his words, and although much of what he says is bosh, yet the hearer is satisfied, fulfilled. (*TI* 139)

Lawrence is intrigued by the acting of this amateurish touring group of "peasants", although, as he writes to May Holbrook (31 January 1913), it is "not like Teddy Rayners" (*IL* 508), the travelling family troupe that dominated the Midlands circuit in his Eastwood days. But nor, more importantly, is the staging of *Hamlet* like that he has "just lately seen in Munich, perfectly produced and detestable": "It was such a change from the hard, ethical, slightly mechanised characters in the German play, which was as perfect an

interpretation as I can imagine, to their pathetic notion of the Italian peasants, that I had to wait to adjust myself" (TI 136). After all, Lawrence comments that it could not be otherwise because the actors are themselves individually just as in real life. For this reason they cannot correspond to the stereotype of the northern European.

However, the first play on the bill was "*I* [sic. *Gli*] *Spettri*" – which, only "after a few minutes" (TI 136), Lawrence realised was Ibsen's *Ghosts*. Looking closely at each of the actors, he underlines how unsuited they are to play the roles created by Ibsen, whose plays were modelled on a northern European socio-cultural background: "The mother was a pleasant, comfortable woman harassed by something, she did not quite know what. The pastor was a ginger-haired caricature imitated from the northern stage, quite a lay figure ... The servant was just a slim, forward hussy, much too flagrant" (TI 136). And the leader of the company is the son of a peasant landowner, a qualified chemist, who preferred acting to the pursuit of his profession. Lawrence remarks that the actor shares nothing with Oswald, the decadent and depressive son in *Ghosts*. The problem is that he, like the other actors, is far too Italian to pretend to be Scandinavian. This healthy and "hot-blooded" man in his late thirties is described as self-divided in his passionate desire for his half-sister, Regina, whom he wanted and rejected at the same time:

And he was strangely disturbing. Dark, ruddy, and powerful, he could not be the blighted son of *Ghosts*, the hectic, unsound, northern issue of a diseased father. His flashy, Italian passion for his half-sister was real enough to make one uncomfortable: something he wanted and would have in spite of his own soul, something which fundamentally he did not want.

It was this contradiction within the man that made the play so interesting. (TI 136–7)

The tension provokes a completely unexpected response:

It was so different from Ibsen, and so much more moving. Ibsen is exciting, nervously sensational. But this was really moving, a real crying in the night. One loved the Italian nation, and wanted to help it with all one's soul. But when one sees the perfect Ibsen how one hates the Norwegian and Swedish nations! They are detestable. (*TI* 137)

Although Lawrence gave copies of Ibsen's plays to both Jessie Chambers and Louie Burrows, he clearly had mixed feelings about Ibsen and about Scandinavian drama. He wrote to Edward Garnett: "I hate Strindberg – he seems unnatural, forced, a bit indecent – like Ibsen, a bit skin-erupty" (*IL* 465). His antipathy towards Ibsen erupts in 'The Theatre', where his work is described as "detestable", virtually "mechanised" in its overall perfection (*TI* 136). In the first version of the essay, Lawrence writes that the haunting aspect of "bruised deadness" in Ibsen's text is lost in the translation, while the characters are "frightened, obstinate, foolish, passionate, and dead ... Ibsen is the mind, recognising that itself is of no avail against the flesh" (*TI* 71). The Italian translation and interpretation is full-blooded and virtually spiritless as opposed to the mindful Scandinavian version and so, as Lawrence observes, the audience is enthralled not by the intellectual and spiritual aspects of the play, but by the natural ability of the actors to catch and convey the emotional dimension of the characters to the audience, even to the children:

The peasants below sat and listened intently, like children who hear and do not understand, yet who are spellbound. The children themselves sit spellbound on the benches till the play is over. They do not fidget or lose interest. They watch with wide, absorbed eyes at the mystery, held in thrall by the sound of emotion. (*TI* 138)

And yet, although Lawrence feels that "It was awfully well acted, and gave me the creeps" (*IL* 496), his essay asserts that "the

villagers do not really care for Ibsen" (TI 138). He knew they were disappointed because the play was not really what they expected: "some good, crude melodrama" or "a veritable blood-pudding of *passion!*" (3L 53), which is how he later describes Giovanni Verga's *Cavalleria Rusticana*. One may wonder, then, why the company staged such a gloomy and morally challenging play as *Ghosts*, so far removed from the Italian sensitivity, despite its dramatic force. Perhaps the company found the topic "true" to ordinary everyday life, which made the play appealing also to the lower classes, and, indeed, for such reasons, Ibsen was popular all over Europe.⁹

The most popular play, however, had been saved for the feast of Epiphany, when the whole of Gargnano is excited by the announcement of D'Annunzio's *La fiaccola sotto il moggio* [*The Light Under the Bushel*, 1905], described by its author as "perfect tragedy" and by Lawrence as a "foolish romantic play ... But it is all a very nice and romantic piece" (TI 138). This play, more akin perhaps to Teddy Rayner's "blood tub" plays featuring local murderers and the like to the delight of audiences in the English Midlands, was beloved by Italian audiences and was greeted with approval in Gargnano, as proved by the barber's enthusiasm: "Ah, bellissimo, bellissimo! ... Better than *I* [sic. *Gli Spettri!*]" (TI 138). Since the barber had seemed "cold and depressed" after seeing *Ghosts*, Lawrence concludes that the two plays illustrate a divergence of national characteristics, between Italian passion and Scandinavian detachment.

As the theatrical season continued, Lawrence was urged by the "maestra" to go and see *Amleto*, which after a while he realises is Italian for "*Hamlet!*" (TI 142). Realising that the lead actor Giuseppe Persevali counted on his presence at the theatre – "His Evening of Honour would be a bitter occasion to him if the English were not there to see his performance" – Lawrence dashed out in the rain and arrived at the theatre towards the end of the first act, knowing that the actor "would take it badly that it rained on his Evening of Honour" (TI 142). Like Hamlet himself, Persevali

“counted himself a man who had fate against him. ‘Sono un disgraziato, io’” [What a wretch I am] (*TI* 142).¹⁰ This signals a development from Lawrence’s impressions in the first version of the essay (1913), in which he is struck by the incongruity of Persevalli’s performance:

He made me hate Hamlet ... When a decent Italian, Enrico Persevalli, put himself through the creepings and twistings of the unwholesome Dane, I revolted. I saw the natural man of hot heart, crawling to an anaemic tune, and it made me sick. Now I know Amleto, the Italian, would have stuck the King who had murdered his father, told the Queen, his mother, to clear out, and would have swept the steps. (*TI* 76)

Initially, then, Lawrence’s revulsion is against Hamlet: “When a living creature begins to question whether man ought to live, or ought not to live, he is like a rotten fungus, giving off light of phosphorescence. And the whole of Hamlet seemed to me like this gleam of decay” (*TI* 76). But in the expanded essay of 1916, although Lawrence elaborates on his “aversion from Hamlet: a creeping, an unclean thing he seems, on the stage” (*TI* 143), he no longer feels a sense of difference between Shakespeare’s character and the Italian actor. Persevalli is no longer seen as “An ordinary, instinctive man” for whom, in Hamlet’s place, “It would have been sufficient blood-vengeance if he had killed his uncle” (*TI* 144). Now Lawrence perceives that Persevalli “*is* Hamlet, and evidently he has great satisfaction in the part. He is the modern Italian, suspicious, isolated, self-nauseated, labouring in a sense of physical corruption” (*TI* 144, Lawrence’s emphasis). As Harry T. Moore has observed, this nuance in Lawrence’s thinking about “the modern Italian” has often been misunderstood within the context of “his emphasis on the physical and the intuitional”: Persevalli *is* “the modern Italian” who perfectly embodies “the convulsed reaction of the mind from the flesh” (*TI* 144).¹¹ Although “stout and vulgar” and therefore lacking the “physique du role”, Persevalli “was the

caricature of Hamlet's melancholy self-absorption" (TI 142). Above all, "He has neither being nor not-being" and so "Enrico Persevali was detestable with his 'Essere o non essere'" [To be or not to be] (TI 148).

The shift in Lawrence's thinking turns on Hamlet's famous speech. The day after he saw the performance in Gargnano, he wrote to Ernest Collings:

My great religion is a belief in the blood, the flesh, as being wiser than the intellect. We can go wrong in our minds. But what blood feels and believes and says, is always true ... And instead of chasing the mystery in the fugitive, half lighted things outside us, we ought to look at ourselves, and say, 'My God, I am myself!' That is why I like to live in Italy ... 'To be or not to be' – it is the question with us now, by Jove. And nearly every Englishman says 'Not to be.' (IL 503–4)

But the subsequent "neutralisation and nothingness" of the war has persuaded Lawrence that "To be or not to be ... is no longer our question ... It is a question of knowing how *to be*, and how *not to be*, for we must fulfil both" (TI 148). Persevali, then, is "neither one nor the other. He has neither being nor not-being. He is as equivocal as the monks" (TI 149). He lacks the "principle of Self" (or "the blood") embodied by the old spinner in Lawrence's essay 'The Spinner and the Monks', and like the monks, as Paul Eggert notes, he "can affirm neither the blood (or Self) nor the spirit" so that he represents "the historical crossroads of the two principles" (TI 1vii). However, like North and South, these seemingly opposing principles of mind and body need to be reunited. The absence of such a reunion results in "only a maudlin compromise" (TI 149) and the cultural ironies of an Italian *Hamlet* can sometimes even be comical: "the grave-digger in Italian was a mere buffoon" (TI 150), "The Queen, burly little peasant woman, was ill-at-ease in her pink satin" and, likewise, the King's "body was real enough, but it had nothing at all to do with his clothes" (TI 143). Only the Ghost

(despite being spoilt for Lawrence as a child by a heckler at “the twopenny travelling theatre”), meets with his approval: “The ghost of this Hamlet was very simple ... He seemed the most real thing in the play. Yet he was strangely real, a voice out of the dark” (*TI* 149).

Lawrence was, thus, ironically amused by the stagings of *Hamlet* and *Ghosts*, whose existentially-minded characters are turned into caricatures of themselves: “All the actors alike were out of their element” (*TI* 143) and, like their audience, they were more at ease with “typically” Italian plays of passion, which they “loved”, such as those by D’Annunzio. In their rush to leave the theatre at the end of the play, most of the audience misses “Enrico’s final feat”, an accidentally slapstick moment in which Persevali “fell backwards, smack down three steps of the throne platform, on to the stage. But planks and braced muscle will bounce, and Signor Amleto bounced quite high again” (*TI* 150). Of course, Lawrence did not miss this undignified exit as he remained in the privileged “observatory” of his box, observing until everyone had walked out. Only one of the two spectacles he was watching had finished, while that offstage was still continuing. He spotted a little family among all those people.

Just one man was with his wife and child, and he was of the same race as my old woman at San Tommaso. He was fair, thin, and clear, abstract, of the mountains. He seemed to have gathered his wife and child into another finer atmosphere, like the air of the mountains, and to guard them in it. This is the real Joseph, father of the child. He is not an Italian, dark-blooded. He is fair, keen as steel, with the blood of the mountaineer in him. He is like my old spinning woman at San Tommaso. It is curious how, with his wife and child he makes a little separate world down there in the theatre, like a hawk’s nest, high and arid under the gleaming sky. (*TI* 150)

Lawrence perhaps intended a comparison with Hamlet's disunited family, which lacked the protection of a father figure. By contrast, the father in the audience draws his small family together under his protection, set apart from the world and watchful as a hawk. Lawrence associates him with the "old spinning woman", whom he met on his way up to the Church of San Tommaso that he calls the church of the Eagle as it is "perched over the village" (TI 103). Symbolically, she holds the fate of mankind in her hands, for as long as she spins life goes on and so individuals seem inconsequential to her. She ignores Lawrence as if he "were not in existence" (TI 105), almost as if she belonged to another dimension. Lawrence, who is almost afraid of her, "turned and ran away, taking the steps two at a time, to get away from her" (TI 109). Like the old spinner, the father in the theatre is "fierce with love" and he protects his family from any intrusion, so that Lawrence concludes that "he was of the same race as my old woman at San Tommaso" (TI 150). In a sense that is how ends meet in *Twilight in Italy*, and similarly, Lawrence finishes his essay 'The Theatre' where he had started, with a final glance at the villagers who attended, while also alluding to the monks from his earlier essay: "And beyond all these there are the Franciscan friars, in their brown robes, so why, so silent, so obliterated" (TI 152).

Finally, then, Lawrence gives a finishing touch to his picture of the various layers of Gargnano society:

At the theatre, now the play is over, the peasants in their black hats and cloaks crowd the hall ... Upstairs, the quality has paid its visits and shaken hands: the Syndaco and the well-to-do, half-Austrian owners of the woodyard, the Bertolini, have ostentatiously shown their mutual friendship; our padrone, Signor di Paoli, has visited his relatives the Graziani in the box next the stage, and has spent two intervals standing down below, pathetic, thin contadini of the old school, like worn stones, have looked up at us as if we are the angels in heaven, with a

reverential, devotional eye, they themselves far away below, standing in the bay at the back, below all. (*TI* 153)

And although: "It was the end of *Amleto*, and I was glad. But I loved the theatre, loved to look down on the peasants, who were so absorbed" (*TI* 150). For Lawrence, it is the audience that brings the theatre to life, as he reiterates again on leaving the puppet show in *Sea and Sardinia*: "Truly I love them all in the theatre: the generous, hot southern blood, so subtle and spontaneous, that asks for blood contact, not for mental communion or spirit sympathy. I was sorry to leave them" (*SS* 192). Such experiences reinforced Lawrence's belief that the theatre was not only for the intellectuals, but also provided an active experience for the audience. Theatre thus provides an opportunity to speak directly to an audience that is not generally available through the medium of "literature", as he explains to Alfred Knopf in 1925:

Myself, I am a bit tired of plays that are only literature. If a man is writing 'literature,' why choose the form of a play? And if he's writing a play, he surely intends it for the theatre. Anyhow I wrote this play for the theatre, and I want the theatre people to see it first ... Playgoing isn't the same as reading. Reading in itself is highbrow. But give the 'populace' in the theatre something with a bit of sincere good-feeling in it, and they'll respond. If you do it properly. (*SL* 274)

At the end of the short season in Gargnano, Lawrence expressed his disappointment that "The theatre has gone, much to my sorrow" (*IL* 516). Indeed, he would write only three more plays during the remainder of his life: *Touch and Go* (1918), *David* (1925) and *Noah's Flood* (fragment, 1927). But Lawrence's love for the theatre was so profound that he continued to find dramatic outlets in his novels. So, as suggested by Nora Foster Stovel:

Perhaps destiny intended Lawrence to be a novelist rather than a playwright, for fiction was indeed his true forte, but his early apprenticeship to the theatre contributed to his skill as a novelist by developing the dramatic qualities that distinguished his finest fiction. By writing for the stage, Lawrence acquired a command of dramatic technique – the use of sets, dialogue and action – that vitalised his subsequent novel.¹²

As regards theatre, Lawrence was ahead of his time: his first three plays set in colliery kitchens anticipated the “kitchen-sink” drama of the 1960s like John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1957), which acknowledged a debt to Lawrence in terms of domestic realism as well as class conflict.¹³ But in his essay, ‘The Theatre’, Lawrence demonstrates that he also understood the complicated social dynamics whereby a play, its players and its spectators are intimately connected in competing layers of reality.

¹ “The cheapness of this form of entertainment has created what is really a new type of audience. Over half of the visitors to the picture theatres occupy seats to the value of threepence or less”: National Council of Public Morals, Cinema Commission of Enquiry, 1907 (qtd. *LG* 373).

² Keith Sagar remarks that “*The Daughter-in-Law* was the Cinderella of Lawrence’s works, locked in her [Frieda’s] attic for twenty years, unnecessarily tarted up for her two brief outings in 1936, then neglected for another thirty years. Now, at last, she has come out into her own”: Keith Sagar, ‘The Strange History of *The Daughter-in-Law*’, *D. H. Lawrence Review*, vol. 11 (1978), 175–85, 183.

³ We can draw comparisons here with Lawrence’s experiences of mummers performing in Eastwood at Christmas time, when guysers, men and boys, mummers of the old Christmas plays, called in at people’s houses in disguise. A good example occurs in the ‘Wedding at the Marsh’ chapter of *The Rainbow*: “The wake departed, and the guysers came. There was loud applause, and shouting and excitement as the old mystery play of St George, in which every man present had acted as a boy” (*R* 130).

⁴ I was exceptionally allowed to have a backstage tour when I visited to organise the 2012 D. H. Lawrence Symposium in Gargnano. We know that in the 18th–19th centuries even small towns in Italy had their own little theatre. Gargnano had its Teatro Sociale in 1806, which later was mainly used as a cinema and eventually, in 2006, after a long period of neglect, was reopened as a renovated theatre named Sala Castellani (Figure 8), a comfortable and well equipped multifunctional auditorium with good acoustics, seating 200 people, for all sorts of cultural events, including the International D. H. Lawrence Symposium: ‘Lake Garda: Gateway to Lawrence’s Voyage to the Sun’ (2012). As part of the symposium, the theatre hosted the world premiere of *Where there is no Autumn* and the European premiere of *The Waters are Shaking the Moon*, both based on poems by Lawrence, set to music by William Neil and performed by John Worthen (reader), Bethan Jones (clarinet), William Neil (piano/digital acoustics), Charlotte Stoppelenberg (alto). We had the privilege of carrying on the tradition of using this deconsecrated church as a place for cultural events, as well as the opportunity to celebrate Lawrence’s presence there one hundred years earlier. For further details see *Lake Garda: Gateway to D. H. Lawrence’s Voyage to the Sun*, ed. Nick Ceramella (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).



Figure 8: Sala Castellani, 1970. Photograph courtesy of Umberto Perini.

⁵ Umberto Perini, *Gargnano nella storia e nell'arte* (Bornato: Sardini Editrice, 1974), 153–5.

⁶ Karl Baedeker, *Northern Italy* (Leipzig, 1913), xxvii–xxviii.

⁷ There is an amusing passage in *Tickets Please* (1919) where Lawrence describes a couple flirting at a cinema, again marking a strong contrast between theatre and cinema: "And then, hearing the noise of the cinema, announcing another performance, they climbed the boards and went in. Of course, during these performances, pitch darkness falls from time to time, when the machine goes wrong. Then there is a wild whooping, and a loud smacking of simulated kisses. In these moments John Thomas drew Annie towards him" (*EME* 38).

⁸ Lawrence's appreciation of the use of masks (recalling Greek drama) signals a development in his mythical interests during the 1920s, in his explorations of a creed of continuous recreation, of the ideal man living in harmony with the universe and constituting a special state of being, based on a philosophy of "becoming".

⁹ Ibsen became an exile in 1864 and lived in Rome, Dresden and Munich for twenty-five years, before he returned to Norway aged 63.

¹⁰ Paul Eggert in his notes to *Twilight in Italy* points out the similarity with Hamlet's "O, what a rogue and pleasant slave am I", *Hamlet* Act 2 sc. ii l. 584 (*TI* 285, note to 142:24).

¹¹ Harry T. Moore, *The Priest of Love* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 223.

¹² Nora Foster Stovel, 'Passion and Possession: D. H. Lawrence's *Daughter-in-Law* and John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*', *Etudes Lawrenciennes*, No. 11 (1995), 129–153, 132.

¹³ *Ibid.* Also, for a book-length study of the innovatory aspects and influence of Lawrence's plays, see James Moran, *The Theatre of D. H. Lawrence: Dramatic Modernist and Theatrical Innovator* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), which is reviewed in this number of the *JDHLS*.