

The Italian Independent Scene

A Systematic Chaos

It is necessary to imagine the Italian independent performing arts scene not as an archipelago but as a closely related component that sometimes perfectly matches and sometimes clashes with the whole cultural system. The only way to represent this system is to refer to the concept of modern physics of complexity, that is, a multi-component dynamic structure made up of different subsets that interact with each other, following the rules of chaos and probability. With this specific point of view in mind, we certainly cannot speak of a coherent and stratified system but of a chaotic jumble of events and paradoxical production processes.

The first thing to mention when talking about the Italian independent performing arts sector is the production output in the performing arts: 132,000 shows in 2019¹. These shows have been made possible by major investments from public institutions. Still, the average Italian is not a big consumer in comparison to other European countries, attending just one performance per year. This results in higher output than demand. The second thing is the cultural richness: The Italian cultural landscape is scattered with large and small theatres, even in the farthest suburbs or provinces. A unique cultural wealth in Europe that goes unappreciated, however, because many of the theatres are currently closed or largely underutilized.

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The complexity of Italian theatre also applies to its system of funding, which has been developed on different levels in relation to the institutions that provide resources: municipalities, provinces, regions and the state. Institutions hardly communicate with each other, which thus results in the multiplication of projects and overlapping of funding. This, on the one hand, determines the need for applicants to equip themselves with regard to an abnormal bureaucratic apparatus, and, on the other hand, it contributes to accentuate the difference between virtuous regions and less efficient ones. But it also makes it possible to create almost uncontrolled areas where innovative ferments can develop freely and spread throughout the country. Suffice it to say that in Italy there is no national law regulating theatrical activity, despite the fact that there are several laws currently under discussion.

Funding bodies

Until 2014, the distribution of state contributions was guaranteed by a commission that chose subjects arbitrarily on a purely qualitative basis. Since 2014, the fund for entertainment (FUS) and a quantitative and qualitative evaluation mechanism have been instituted. The economic endowment of the FUS totalled 345,966,856.00 Euros in 2019, a considerable amount - but not enough to meet Italian needs. It has certainly been an important act that has made the system more stable and transparent, but it has also highlighted some critical issues: the lack of difference in functions between the recipients (those who work in production often also work in hospitality and distribution), the very little generational turnover, an unhealthy mixture between private and public enterprise, a territorial imbalance of the provision of resources (not only between the north and south of Italy but also between cities and rural areas). In face of a gradual contraction of public funding, we must also note the growing importance of private foundations that in some regions, particularly in the north of the country, provide more resources than the public funding bodies in those regions.

In Italy, artists are generally unable to sustain themselves and rely on institutional resources for at least 40% of their annual budget. They often manage to access municipal, regional and European funding but hardly any state funding, even compared to independent companies in other European countries. There is no doubt that independent artists are able to diversify their resources in such a way as to be more resilient and flexible than public institutions,

probably also thanks to their ability to meet the needs of the territories in which they operate. As a result, independent companies have fulfilled the very important function of feeding the cultural and social fabric in Italy and have even become cultural governing outposts in the absence of state representation. Independent artists have had the courage to experiment with artist-audience relationships and to modify the production and staging system in order to respond to the challenges of our times. Thus, it is not surprising that the major theatrical institutions have drawn heavily from this basin, inspired both by the artists and the most innovative artistic methods. Unfortunately, this rejuvenation process takes far too long. This is the case, for example, when it comes to artistic residences (there are almost 66 all over Italy): what started out as a courageous work of rejuvenation more than 15 years ago has only been recognized by the Ministry 5 years ago³.

Types of theatre

It is equally complex to outline an aesthetic trend in Italian artistic productions, because the independent scene is very fragmented and is small compared to the European scene: We move seamlessly from stage drama to the extreme „re-working“ of classical texts, to a theatre of objects, physical theatre and documentary theatre. Independent artists first response to the decline of the Italian directorial theatre were productions of monologues, followed by experiments in collective choral dramaturgy and productions of multimedia works, which strive to bridge the separation between audience and actors. Unique to the Italian theatre landscape is the „social theatre of art“ (theatre in prisons, theatre with mentally fragile people, with the handicapped, etc.). Born from the idea to provide a social service as well as cultural one, it has since been transformed into a true artistic act, giving rise to mixed companies.

A few outstanding companies and artists that should be mentioned are Roberto Latini and Licia Lanera (who have a unique way of writing for the stage), Deflorian/Tagliarini, Babilonia teatri, Teatro sotterraneo (as an example of strong authorship and elaborate dramaturgy), teatrino giullare, Marta Cuscutà, Anagor (who, in different forms, have been able to make a synthesis between visual and theatrical arts), as well as a host of creators with a dance background, such as Alessandro Sciarroni, Silvia Gribaudo and Collettivo Cinetico. Italian playwrights like Mimmo Borelli, Davide Carnevali and Fausto Paravidino are certainly less well known abroad, although they have produced some outstanding works,

because they find very few opportunities to be supported. One of the few opportunities for playwrights are OUTIS (the only Italian festival dedicated to new dramaturgy) and special project funding by Network drammaturgia Nuova. For most independent creators, Kilowatt Festival remains the place of reference as well as the Inbox Prize, which has developed an innovative way to link production processes with programming.

Side effects of the pandemic

But how many independent professional companies are there in Italy? We always thought there were many, many more than those that the FUS listed (about 150). We had to wait for the pandemic in order to have a more precise

picture because, even though we missed the opportunity to carry out a complete mapping, thanks to the special calls for proposals from the Ministry, it was confirmed that there could be around 2000 independent companies. Of course, we would have never wished for such a devastating pandemic – which cut ticket revenue by 78 percent in 2020 and hit independent artists especially hard since they were less protected by the state, both in terms of direct support and welfare state⁴ – in order to obtain this data. In fact, despite extraordinary resources, the Italian Ministry of Culture has financed mostly organizations which are already funded by the FUS as well as, paradoxically, commercial organisms – pushing independent artists and organizations, such as festivals and residencies, even more to the margins. Perhaps

Ladies Body Show © Paolo Sacchi









in response to this unfair treatment, it's possible to notice a positive side effect: the reawakening of the entire sector's collective consciousness, illustrated by an intense growth of all networks and umbrella associations who have partnered with alacrity. As a result, we have recently managed to approve the first step of a welfare reform in favour of atypical workers in the performing arts sector, even if this comes many years later than in almost all other European countries.

This pandemic has increasingly highlighted the weaknesses of the complex Italian system and everyone's hope is that it will be possible to respond with structural reforms, such as the one just mentioned, also in view of the PNRR - even though upon first reading the Italian PNRR, it seems that independent artists should not sleep peacefully⁵.

Davide D'Antonio

works at the intersection of education, advocacy and project management. He has been working as artistic director for 12 years at IDRA theatre and as project manager for different festivals, seasons and independent companies in the field of contemporary creation. He sits on the board of CRESCO, EAIPA, IETM.

I giganti della montagna

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¹ SIAE „annuario dello spettacolo 2019“

² EUROSTAT 2016

³ For further information about the Italian residency programme, please visit the official website <https://www.residenzeartistiche.it/>

⁴ Siae „Annuario dello spettacolo 2020“

⁵ For more details, go see:

https://www.linkedin.com/posts/davide-d-antonio-8706454b_change-economics-culture-activity-6795734420574879744-4rQZ