



The Maestro Franco Zeffirelli

*“When they discovered him, **Franco Zeffirelli** was only a set and costume designer. In his early theatre projects, his sceneries and sketches were pictorial. “Parlons peinture”, as André Lohte’s famous title goes, could have been the definition of the historic and theoretical matrix of his creations. Fame came swiftly. The origins of his figurative style can be traced back to two factors: Tuscan “pictorial quality” – the history of Tuscany’s plastic values, design and colour – and the architecture courses he took in Florence. Colour and composition, both at the service of his profession and passion for theatre, and a visual landscape tied to representation and, taken from the opportunities encountered during his youth, oriented especially towards musical theatre, as well as architectural painting and drawing associated with the obligations, objectives, and impulses of musical theatre. I remember his early Rossini productions, “opportunities” to get a taste of the 1700s: there was always vivacity, a colouristic inspiration, a way to arrange the interior sets and landscapes that adhered to the inspiration and shades of painting, tackling the theatrical situations and comic characters. With a seasoned technique, the young Zeffirelli knew how to adapt and harmonize the art of “show” proportions and dimensions; he knew how to adapt them to the proportions and dimensions of opera. In his ability to manage the space, he needed the “perspective” that he learned from the Tuscan greats.”*

Gianandrea Gavazzeni

To trace his life and cultural development, which defined his boundless artistic horizons and worldwide fame, one must begin with Florence, where Franco Zeffirelli was born on February 12, 1923.

The premature death of his mother, Alaide Garosi Cipriani, and the delayed acknowledgement of his son’s paternity on the part of his father, the English wool merchant Ottorino Corsi, left a permanent mark on his childhood and adolescence. He was entrusted to his Auntie Lide and was taught Shakespearean theatre and the art of the great masters of the past by an English teacher, both of whom offered the young Zeffirelli the foundations for a cultured and liberal education, which he developed during his years at the Liceo Artistico, the Convent of San Marco, under the protective wing of Giorgio La Pira, the Accademia di Belle Arti and the Department of Architecture.

*Piazza San Firenze, 5 – 50122 Firenze
Tel. +39 055/281038 – e-mail: fondazionefrancozeffirelli@gmail.com
Pec: fondazionefrancozeffirelli@legalmail.it
C.F.: 94249340483 - P.IVA: 06587670487*



During the war he participated in the partisan effort before joining the Allies as an interpreter, but he focused on furthering his career as soon as he returned home, collaborating with Radio Firenze and gaining experience as an actor at the university theatre in via Laura, directed by Flavia Farina Cini. During those years, alongside his most frequent future collaborators – Anna Anni, Alfredo Bianchini, Danilo Donati and Piero Tosi – he rubbed shoulders with the leading artists of the day, including the set and costume designers Gino Sensani, Mario Chiari and Maria De Matteis.

In the post-war period, Zeffirelli turned his attention to prose and music, working with Alessandro Brissoni's theatre company "Il Carro dell'Orsa minore". As a set and costume designer for minor operas at Siena's Accademia Chigiana, during his courses in "stage art" – held by the soprano and director Ines Alfani Tellini – Zeffirelli inserted himself as a "perfect insect, that flies with coloured wings" "with his dramatic, playful sketches" (Luciano Alberti). His encounter with Luchino Visconti marked a pivotal point in his fruitful career, who brought him to Rome, where he became a director's assistant (*La terra trema*, 1948; *Senso*, 1954) as well as an esteemed set designer for his figurative and architectural skills that he honed with masterpieces of the Florentine Renaissance: at the Teatro Eliseo in Rome with *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare – alongside Salvador Dalí (1948) – *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams (1949) and *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov (1952), preceded by the legendary Shakespearian staging of *Troilus and Cressida* at the 12th Maggio Musicale Fiorentino (1949).

Zeffirelli would return to Florence's Boboli Gardens in 1960 with a production of *Euridice* by Jacopo Peri (1960), a hallmark of the birth of Italian melodrama, brought back into fashion after the humanist group *Camerata Fiorentina*, a pioneer of "recitar cantando", or "recite while singing".

Starting in the 1950s, Zeffirelli worked first as a painter, set and costume designer, then as a director. He oversaw the staging of 18th- and 19th-century operas in theatres in Milan, Genoa, Naples and Palermo, where the unity of his work did not go unnoticed: at the Teatro alla Scala with *Italiana in Algeri* (1953), *Cinderella* (1954) and *Il Turco in Italia* by Gioacchino Rossini (1955), directed by Gianandrea Gavazzeni and starring Maria Callas, with whom he made his overseas debut in the innovative production of *La Traviata* (Dallas, Civic Opera House, 1958).

With Callas, his favourite muse, he staged memorable editions of *Tosca* and *Norma* (London, Royal Opera House; Paris, Opéra de Paris). He honoured the opera singer in the 2002 film *Callas Forever*.



From that moment on, Franco Zeffirelli's artistic career – played out on the world's main stages – rose until he became the most acclaimed Italian director on the international art scene, with an illustrious theatre career. His merits in revitalizing the Shakespearean classics at the Old Vic in London (Romeo and Juliet, 1960; Hamlet, 1964; Much Ado About Nothing, 1965) are indisputable, as is his taking on modern 20th-century theatre, staying loyal to the text while adding creative originality, stripping shows bare with the simplest of sets. In the days when no one would have imagined it, Zeffirelli brought these modern dramas to theatres throughout Europe, from Edward Albee to Arthur Miller, Luigi Pirandello to Eduardo De Filippo.

“Lending a visual landscape to a theatrical and musical text with a personal critical eye and dynamic imagination and without betraying the historic sense of the opera and its composer are the axioms of the Zeffirelli ‘creativity’ that transformed his performances of *Le bohème*, *Aida* and *La traviata* at La Scala and at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York (1963, 1981; 1964 and 1989) into events and milestones in the history of theatre, later adapting the La Scala and New York versions of *Turandot* for the Verona Arena (2010) and the inauguration of the Royal Opera House in Muscat (2012).

“My productions are not immobile over time: they have evolved and changed because my ideas have improved and I have discovered new ways to honour the composers.” Authors such as Puccini and Verdi, the director's most beloved opera composers and whose works he has interpreted since the 1960s in numerous editions of *Tosca*, *Falstaff*, *Otello* and *Il Trovatore*, as well as Bizet's acclaimed *Carmen* in Vienna (Staatsoper, 1978), New York (Metropolitan Opera House, 1996) and Verona (Arena, 1995) – “An everlasting temptation that you can never satisfy and of which you never grow tired” – and the oft-staged double bill *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci* in London (Royal Opera House, 1959), New York (Metropolitan Opera House, 1970), Athens (Teatro Herodion, 2005) and Florence (Teatro Comunale, 2009), in which Zeffirelli successfully sated his desire to make realistic settings: “These are the advantages of *verismo*, which you can bring to life with everyday parameters.”

An opera that has always seemed to elude Zeffirelli's talents is *Don Giovanni* by Mozart. After eight productions and experimenting with multiple solutions of staging grandeur, Zeffirelli stated: “One cannot give a definitive critical interpretation to *Don Giovanni*. When one mystery is solved, a thousand more come to light. [...] It is an opera that grows and changes with you. Sometimes a singer or a conductor is enough to suggest a different interpretation, to make viewers understand new connections of Mozart's elusive genius.”

Piazza San Firenze, 5 – 50122 Firenze
Tel. +39 055/281038 – e-mail: fondazionefrancozeffirelli@gmail.com
Pec: fondazionefrancozeffirelli@legalmail.it
C.F.: 94249340483 - P.IVA: 06587670487



The elite circle of singers and conductors that Zeffirelli has known brims with extraordinary artists – from Callas to Sutherland, to Giulietta Simionato, Mirella Freni, Graziella Sciutti, Grace Bumbry, Leyla Gencer, Giuseppe Di Stefano, Gianni Raimondi, Franco Corelli, Plácido Domingo, José Carreras, Luciano Pavarotti, Herbert von Karajan, Leonard Bernstein a Kleiber, many of whom he developed the best rapports and friendships with, as seen in the photos that show them together on stage or “behind the scenes”.

Zeffirelli shared his fame and international success with these stars. Their names – too long a list to cite in its entirety – can be found among the list of his productions, glimmering like gems. Queen Elizabeth II bestowed upon Zeffirelli an honorary knighthood as a Knight of the Order of the British Empire for his work with Shakespearian dramas as well as for his silver screen remakes for which he became world-famous: *The Taming of the Shrew* with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor (1967); *Romeo and Juliet* with the young Leonard Whiting and Olivia Hussey (1968) – halfway between cinema and theatre, showing how one can always rework a classic – and *Hamlet* with Mel Gibson and Glenn Close (1990): all enormously successful films in terms of critics and the general public. Other achievements include *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (1972); the epic television film *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), which attracted half a million viewers; the operatic films *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci* with Plácido Domingo, Elena Obraztsova and Teresa Stratas (1982); *La Traviata*, starring the Domingo–Stratas duo (1983); *Otello*, starring Domingo alongside Katia Ricciarelli as Desdemona (1986); and the high-grossing Hollywood films *The Champ* – “A film that shone a light on many dark parts of my childhood” – and *Endless Love* (1981) with Brooke Shields and the as-then-unknown Tom Cruise, both films that earned Zeffirelli disparaging reviews from critics.

Young Toscanini (1988), *Sparrow* (1993) and *Jane Eyre* are further proof of the director’s ability to depict on film the most impalpable aspects of the human soul, an awareness that shines through in the tributes he dedicates to his beloved city: *Florence: Days of Destruction*, his documentary with live footage of the 1996 flood, and *Tea with Mussolini* (1999), starring the well-known actresses Joan Plowright, Judi Dench, Maggie Smith and Cher, and depicting the years of his childhood and adolescence: “To be raised and surrounded by the memory of the greatest conquests of civilization and art of Florence is the best gift I’ve received in life.”

In Florence, the Florence that runs through his veins, Zeffirelli inaugurates his much-awaited Foundation and International Centre for the Performing Arts.

Piazza San Firenze, 5 – 50122 Firenze
Tel. +39 055/281038 – e-mail: fondazionefrancozeffirelli@gmail.com
Pec: fondazionefrancozeffirelli@legalmail.it
C.F.: 94249340483 - P.IVA: 06587670487