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Ideas and Practices of the Art Residency. A Long History and a Bright Future



Careggi Villa in Florence is deemed to be one of the first artist residencies, dating back to the 15th Century

Overview

Dialogues shares an essay written by **Roberta Ferraresi**, PhD Candidate in Theater Studies at the **University of Bologna (Italy)**. The essay was presented during her keynote speech in occasion of the conference **TOOLS: New Tools to Develop Art Residencies**, which took place in Milan, October 2018. The essay describes the evolution of the art residency model from Renaissance Europe until the beginning of the 20th Century. A special focus is put on theater residencies.

I would like to begin my speech with a brief succession of images to draw a sort of historical landscape around the culture of residencies. I will start from a very distant past, in order to understand the roots of art residencies.

“Proto-residentiality” Between the Classical and Renaissance Age



The image that inaugurates this series represents what is commonly considered one of the first residencies of modern history: Villa Careggi, where the Medicis, lords of Florence and great patrons of the art, culture and knowledge, encouraged the activation of practices and methods that could be called *proto-residencies*: in this place, five or six centuries ago, Cosimo de' Medici gave life to the Napoleonic Academy, donating to people like Marsilio Ficino, Poliziano, Pico della Mirandola homes and workplaces to encourage meetings, collaborations, new research paths or more simply moments of withdrawal and relaxation from the ferment of everyday life in Florence, without which we might not have had – or in any case, not in those terms – the translation of the works of Plato or the Iliad.

Experiences of this kind have much older roots, which date back to ancient Rome and Gaius Caelius Cicerone's Mecenat. It is no coincidence that his name has remained in the current Italian language, and continues to play an important role in the discourse that we are about to play. He had the merit of establishing, at the time of Augustus, the practice of retreating to the *loci ameni* far from the capital, where the artists and intellectuals could dedicate themselves to the so-called practice of *otium* – which, as Seneca points out for example, did not express any negative value and had nothing to do with the current sense of inertia and apathy. The opposite term instead, the *negotium*, referred to all the obligatory activities linked to subsistence.

workspace between Molière's crew and Italian comedians since the mid-17th Century.

This image – and many like this – therefore depicts what can perhaps be considered the first theater residency program in history, which arose at a time when the theater was radically changing from being an amateur experience dedicated to the amusement of the élite – as it was in part until the Renaissance age – to a real profession, with the idea – absolutely innovative at the time – that being an actor was an actual profession which had to be paid for and that the public itself had to pay a ticket. This step unfolds precisely within the phenomenon known as the *Commedia dell'Arte* and takes its form with the creation of the first private companies in the sector and with the institution of the practice of touring, outlining the first moves of a system that in various forms, declinations and measures persists until today.

The residencies, which at first glance seem to represent exactly its opposite, have a lot to do with it, yesterday as well as today. For example, there is a period of the year – the season of Lent – in which comedian companies cannot work, and it is precisely at that moment that groups develop new works, update the repertoire, acquire new actors and skills, that is, they place research work or at least production in a space and a time separated from the tour system.

Hellerau and Other Historical Vanguarders



The third image of the series makes us move once again much forward in time. The place captured in the photograph is one of the most famous places in the theatrical revolution, triggered in the framework of the avant-garde movements at the dawn of the 20th Century. It is Hellerau – literally, “lawn of light” – a town in the suburbs of Dresden. The complex portrayed here was built in the 1910's in order to house the school founded by Émile Jacques-Dalcroze, the inventor of rhythmic gymnastics –

or, better, eurythmy - and the work of what is considered a founding father and of the greatest “prophets” of modern theater, Adolphe Appia. Here, all year round, students from different backgrounds lived together and studied, following courses marked by the goal of finding balance and harmony, while the Festspiele, organized annually since 1912, quickly became one of the reference points and meeting points of avant-garde artists.

I chose to show Hellrau because it is perhaps the most evocative and inclusive example, but the early 20th Century, in the West, is populated almost everywhere by cases that could be considered in some ways very close to this one – from the “Studies” of Stanislavsky and Mejerchol’d experimented in revolutionary Russia, aimed to the institution of alternative workshops to the traditional ways of creation in the field of entertainment, to the radical choice of Jacques Copeau, who, after the success of his Vieux Colombier in Paris, decided to move with his company to a small town in Burgundy, where he tried to make theater in a different way for a new audience, a non-public, i.e. the inhabitants of the place, mostly farmers not accustomed to attending and enjoying the places of entertainment . This is just to trace an alpha and omega, not only in a geographical sense in the continental territory, but also from a conceptual point of view – from the need to find moments for research within the everyday life to scenic work, to the urgency of identifying spaces, publics, and completely different ways to make culture, art, and theater.

The search for another meaning, value and role for theater in society is the real subtext around which it is possible to bring together many of the various and multiple revolutionary experiences of the early 20th Century, at a time when, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, a process of rapid technological innovation provoked an unprecedented anthropological mutation, which also had enormous riperussions in the field of artistic production. In this context – where, for example, photography outclasses traditional painting in the goal of representing reality, and so it is for cinema, which is in this sense much more effective than theater – traditional arts are not destined to succumb, but rather to interrogate deeply about their status, to change. It is in fact the time when visual artists undertake the long road that leads from Impressionism to the birth of Abstractionism and then to the long story of Conceptualism, and when theater begins to radically revise its methods compared to the traditional naturalistic approach. It should also be stressed that this is a transformation that takes place mainly within these “proto-residencies” scattered throughout Europe.

Ronconi’s Biennale in 1975. An “Escape from Theater”

The last snapshot of the possible genealogy of the art residencies that we are outlining comes from the 1975 Theater Biennale, directed by Luca Ronconi and significantly entitled International Theater Workshop. This is a review that goes beyond the idea of a festival, within which the director invites to Venice some of the greatest artists of the time – from Jerzy Grotowski to the Living Theater and Odin, from Ariane Mnouchkine to Meredith Monk –, but not to present shows, or not only; rather to testify to an expansion of

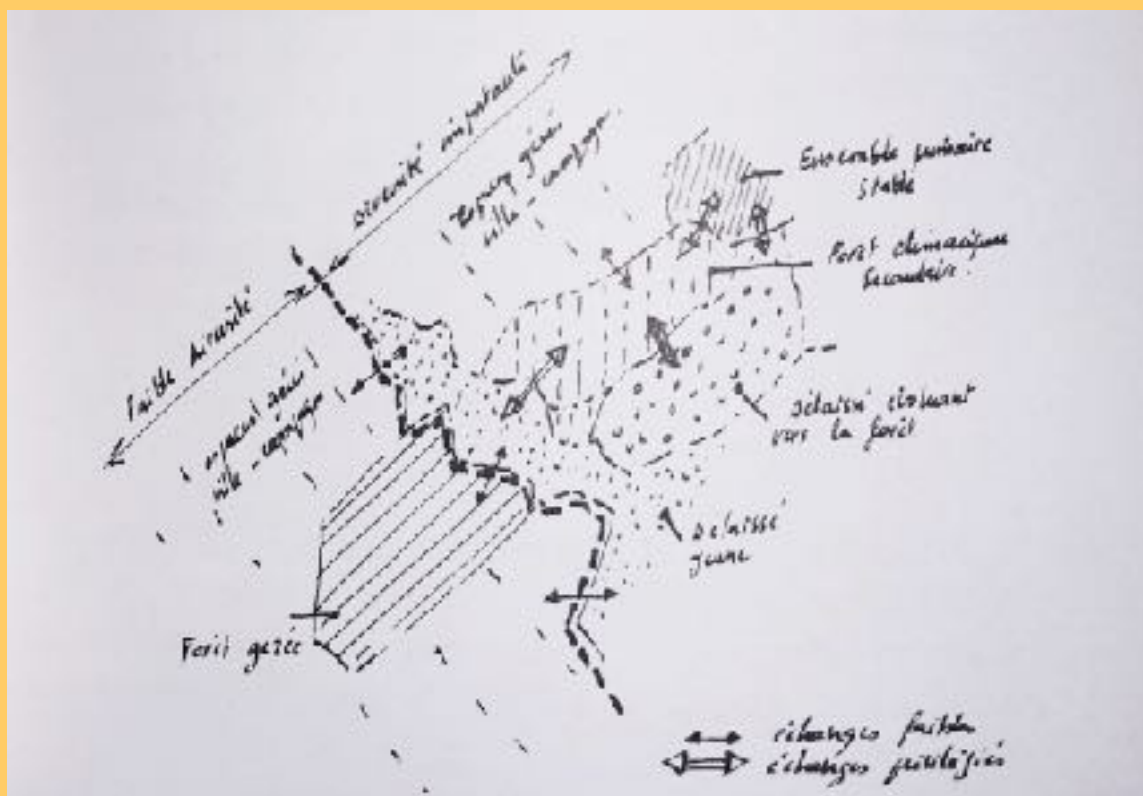


an experience of profound social-anthropological value, well beyond the mere enjoyment of the scenic product, with seminars, meetings, performances in unconventional spaces and a participatory character. The image presented above depicts in fact a moment of Giuliano Scabia's project with the inhabitants of the suburbs of Mira.

The 1975 Biennale is a very significant art residency that lasts several months, as it enables artists to spend an unusual time in the same place. It forces them to get in touch both with each other and with local communities, while it allows them to experiment with alternative methods of creation and fruition. This image is set against a very particular background in the history of 20th Century theater: it is a time when, coinciding with the movements of political protests, the major artists on the research scene are facing – as researcher Marco De Marinis says – a “crisis of the theater form, between processes of dilation and dissolution of the traditional spectacular experience” – and for many of the protagonists of the international avant-garde, in fact, “a path to escape [...] is triggered towards an afterlife, a beyond the theater that for some will no longer have anything to do with the theater itself [...] and for others it will instead be a theater so transformed in its modalities and functions that it will no longer be possible to recognize it as such.” Since the 1970s, these radical proposals, which flourished in parallel with the protests, have led to an unprecedented spread of theatrical practices, especially in Italy, with hundreds and hundreds of groups of young non-professionals – initially called *grassroots groups* – which gather mainly in provincial, decentralized and marginal areas to make up and invent another theater, that is, trying to review the sense of the theater as a possibility of useful experiences and usable for much wider purposes, first of all for human and social growth. It is no coincidence that this occurs once again in relation to a technical and anthropological change.

In this context, the proposal of “decentralization” is born, a phenomenon that is usually referred to as one of the major antecedents of contemporary theater residencies.

Gilles Clément's Third Landscape. Theater Residencies Today



Let's conclude this very brief and certainly partial history through images, thanks to which we have traced a genealogy – among the many possible – of art residencies, and let's begin to approach the analysis of the present, with respect to which I will share another representative image of the phenomenon: the *third landscape* analyzed and described by Gilles Clément.

If the series of cases presented here has the advantage of demonstrating how much the idea and the practice of residency should not be considered a new and not even recent phenomenon within our culture, each of the examples identified contributes in its own way to bring to light one or more historical characteristics of the residency model.

Let's try to summarize in sequence the aspects in question, as they emerge from the genealogy exposed so far. Following the various examples, the residency should:

- be constituted as space and time other than everyday life;
- be dedicated to artists' retreats, giving them opportunities for research and reflection;
- invest in the dimension of encounter with the other and with otherness – that is, with the inhabitants of the territory in which it is located, with the clients and their projects, sometimes also with other resident artists, and more widely, in the comparison between different hopes, disciplines, languages and focus on aspects related to the exchange of experience, teaching and training;
- materialize as a moment of shared life and work;
- open up to the experimentation of ways of living, working, creating differently, and even propose new paths of research and roles of art in society.

I am interested in stressing that the above is not and cannot be a faithful portrait of the residency model. It is more the image of the "residency we have in mind", according to the words by Fabrizio Cruciani. It can be a useful definition – as the scholar has shown with regard to Italian theater - to know, more than the object itself, the imaginary that has been created around. It is not so much about what that thing is, but what it represents in our culture; a model that speaks much more of the observer than of the phenomenon observed.

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