

The Frail Enchantment of the World

1956 - Enzo Sellerio has a solo exhibition at Irene Brin and Gaspero del Corso's Galleria dell'Obelisco, one of the liveliest places of the art and culture scene in Rome.

Sellerio was then 32: his photographs featured regularly in Mario Pannunzio's *Il Mondo*, a much respected and read weekly of that era; and a decisively important *reportage* on Partinico, titled «Borgo di Dio» and documenting Danilo Dolci (the «Gandhi of Sicily»)s social and political commitment, had been published in 1955 by *Cinema Nuovo*, a fortnightly magazine with eminent film critic Guido Aristarco at the helm; all this contributed strongly towards a new iconography of Sicily, setting the standard for years to come.

Meeting artists, writers and poets at the Roman exhibition and later on must have spurred Sellerio to focus on the art of the photographic portrait. Of course among his previous Sicilian photographs there are portraits too (some of them of extraordinary strength); and yet in that work the scrutinizing of a face is strongly intertwined with social documentary or with that knack of narration-triggering (anything can tell a story: it all depends on the gaze of the observer) which is arguably the distinctive trait of Sellerio's world. Remarkably, neither the photographer's gaze nor the story which is hinted at ever feel invasive or judgmental – and indeed you always notice a sense of participation in the subject's predicament, if slightly tempered by a degree of irony. When it comes to the portrait proper, though, the rules of the game change: firstly because the person being portrayed is aware of this, and is waiting for the moment of the shot; secondly because the photographer in turn waits for a gap to open up in that seesawing pattern, allowing the onlooker – ourselves as well as the photographer – to have a guess at what after all is asked of a photograph: a glimmer, albeit temporary, of truth. When the subject portrayed is an actor, a singer, a musician, or indeed anyone accustomed to using his or her face and body as an instrument of expression, things get even more complicated. A veritable game of mirrors takes then place, once again setting a conjectural tale in motion: nonetheless, in the relationship with the scene and its performers, which is the subject of this exhibition (fourteen photos were hitherto unpublished), the centre of attraction becomes the range of possibilities inherent in the portrait, rather than fictionality as per se. Look at Tino Buazzelli in the dressing room of the Teatro Bellini: his hand is gripping a makeup pencil, his already bisted eyes are looking at themselves in the mirror; but what we can see is just the reflection of the light bulb, and therefore the gaze wanders – and we wander following it – from the camera lens to the actor's face to what we must assume to be his interiority: something that unavoidably makes ourselves join the fry. A skilful and rigorous construction of oblique geometry, that photo questions symmetry to an extent not often seen within Sellerio's *oeuvre*. In Lydia Alfonsi's portrait, by contrast, the mirror gives us back her entire face and her hand controlling her hairstyle with a graceful gesture: no strong tension here between the mirror-double and the profile of the actress in the foreground, composed in a closed and elegant line like the Renaissance bust of a modern-day Eleonor of Aragon.

Elsewhere different attitudes prevail: Accursio Di Leo's sly complicity on the stage of the Teatro Massimo; Vittorio Gassman's shifty reluctance in the dressing room of the Teatro Biondo; Virgil Thomson's imperturbable fixity as he sits at the piano framed by a frame of unbalanced lines; Alida Valli's pensive solitude as she peers into the auditorium from backstage, handkerchief raised to her mouth. On the set of Luchino Visconti's *The Leopard* some sort of meta-literary playfulness possibly inspired the shot in which Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi (real-life model for the character of Tancredi in the *Leopard* novel) chats with a smiling Burt Lancaster dressed as the Prince of Lampedusa: a dialogue short-circuiting reality, filmic fiction and literature. At times, however, the tone is straightforwardly ironic and amused: see the gesture with which – in 1962 Paris – Patachou (born Henriette Ragon) adjusts the neckline of her dress, which is as black as the background, so that her face and arms seem to be cut out of a single surface devoid of volume; see the halo of stone rays behind Alberto Sordi's head, with an effect that the great film actor enhances by raising his eyes to the sky (this is on the 1962 set for Alberto Lattuada's *Mafioso* at Villa Palagonia); see the light-hearted, let's-have-fun attitude of Bruno Caruso, Thomas Schippers and Giancarlo Menotti sitting in three bathtubs during the renovation of the Grand Hotel Villa Igia in 1957; and again the diagonal intersection of gazes and arms of the piano duo Arthur Gold & Robert Fizdale – the latter's left hand in motion as if in a Francis Bacon painting – caught in action at the Teatro Biondo in 1968. By contrast, Igor Stravinsky, portrayed at the Teatro Biondo on 21 November 1963, looks up from the score (he's wearing two pairs of glasses) revealing a severe and distant profile, reminiscent of an idol from the dark ages. Here Sellerio was close to the stage and the orchestra, a positioning that turned out to be all the more fruitful when he got to attend the rehearsals of Aurel Milloss's ballets, as the great choreographer of Hungarian origin was for two seasons – 1958 and 1959 – directing the corps de ballet at the Teatro Massimo, bringing the legacy of the Russian art of dance to a Palermo for once *felicissima* again. Sellerio portrayed Milloss a few times: here he's at work in the theatre's tailor's workshop, his holdered cigarette between his entwined fingers, while he chooses – his beautiful oriental eyes half-closed – the colours for the show's costumes. Writing in 2000 on the occasion of a *Milloss al Massimo* exhibition, Sellerio owned up to his predilection for ballet, specifying only *en passant* how this preference is in keeping with contemporary dance. Although sceptical of the Neo-Avantgarde, Sellerio did go in for the sense of intellectual play and irony which is part and parcel of 20th century Modernism: something he readily finds in Milloss's ballets, as his photographs (some of which hitherto unpublished) clearly show, tracing the investigation of movement back to the very sources of European modernity (Degas, Picasso, Matisse). The iteration of gestures, the breaking of symmetry, the interlocking and fluidity of bodies, the seemingly sudden irruption of chance, the digression of time into the unexpected: such procedures share a code with Sellerio's own language as a photographer; and there is a feeling of suspension – what happened before? what is about to happen now? – that we share with Lisa Manet, portrayed before entering the stage, her three-quarter-lit face in the half-light, and with the dancer sitting alone in the centre of the stage, probably in a break during rehearsals, while in front of her the shadows of other dancers move as in a circle. Besides (as video recordings of such shows were extremely rare at the time), ballet was the most ephemeral of the arts – and in the transient beauty of this filigree of space and time, Enzo Sellerio perhaps recognised the frail enchantment of the world, an enchantment central to his own artistic research.

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