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Calvino's Hidden Passion Revealed

Review of: Enrica Maria Ferrara, *Calvino e il teatro: Storia di una passione rimossa*, Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Wien, Peter Lang, 2011, 176 p., ISBN: 978-3-0343-0176-3 br, € 46,90.

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Calvino e il teatro: Storia di una passione rimossa, a work by Enrica Maria Ferrara, post-doctoral research fellow Trinity College, Dublin, has been published in 2011 by Peter Lang in the Italian Modernities series. Ferrara's work calls attention to a previously largely overlooked aspect of the oeuvre of Italo Calvino (1923-1985).

While Calvino explored dramatic writing in the early years of his career, as he progressed he routed his creative efforts toward fiction and essays. However, in this book, Ferrara convincingly demonstrates that while for creative, political and commercial reasons the author might have sidelined his own efforts at dramatic writing, he nonetheless carried with him to the end of his days *una passione rimossa*: a repressed passion for the theater.

Ferrara presents her case via a well researched argument that couples an analysis of Calvino's general opus of narrative and essays with an exploration of his (early) theatric works, journalistic theatric reviews, and epistolary exchanges. The work considers, among other texts, Calvino's early dramatic works (1941-1943), which were in Ferrara's opinion interrupted by the author's post-war Communist affiliations, and continues its analysis by surveying theatrical reviews of 1946-1950, as well as those of Russian theatric productions, published in *L'Unità* in 1952. From there, the work explores theatric elements and themes in Calvino's narrative and essays of 1952-4, and sees as a turning point the author's passionate affair with the actress Elsa de' Giorgi. Begun in 1955 and evidenced by de' Giorgi's 1992 book *Ho visto partire il tuo treno*, and 156 letters by Calvino addressed to de' Giorgi conserved (though not necessarily available for consultation despite privacy policy rendering them public domain) in Pavia, the romance and its epistolary artefacts demonstrate Calvino's profound connection to the theater, enhanced dramatically by his connection to his muse de' Giorgi. Ferrara's work goes on to consider works such as Calvino's libretto *La Panchina* staged in Bergamo in 1956, and theatric works of the late 1950s, up to the libretto for *Un re in ascolto*. On this last piece, which was performed both in 1985, the year of Calvino's death, and posthumously at Teatro della Scala in Milan in 1986, Calvino arduously collaborated with composer Luciano Berio, with whom he had collaborated on the libretto for the two-act 1981 *La vera*

storia. Calvino, at the very end of his life, all but disowned his contribution to *Un re in ascolto* as Berio largely ignored Calvino's textual contributions.

Un re in ascolto, based upon Calvino's story idea but destined to be only half-born, remains buried in dark archives and was never quite staged as the author wished; much like the de' Giorgi's affair, the piece never fully evolved beyond the page to the bright stage of real life. These examples seem to mirror Calvino's artistic heart. What makes Ferrara's work significant – beyond its rigorous yet elegant style, fresh comparative textual analysis of theatric elements in Calvino's narratives, and the thoroughness of its research of known, and previously overlooked, primary and secondary media source material – is the core of its message. This work does not assume the representation the author drew of himself, which has since been mimicked and honored by critics, to be the whole story. In considering what the author himself denied and repressed, and by taking the time and space to extract Calvino's buried passion from his corpus, we are privy to the view of a dimension that Calvino himself would have preferred to leave obscured in theater wings.

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