

Luigi Lunari

## Three on the Seesaw (1990)

Written in 1990, first produced in Milan, Italy, the same year.

**Translated** in twenty-two languages.

**Produced** in Italy, France, Germany, Sweden, Finland, Portugal, Spain, Russia, Turkey, Canada, Czech Republic, Estonia, Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland, Mexico, USA, Spain, Bulgaria and Greece.

**Published** in English:

1) "Plays International", n.9, September 1994, with the title "Three on the Seesaw", (English text by Maggie Rose);

2) International Reader Theatre, Winnipeg Canada (for North America only), in 1997, with the title "Three on the Seesaw" (English text by Maggie Rose);

## The Plot

Three men – a small factory owner, a captain and a professor – find themselves in the same place for three different reasons: the factory owner is there to meet a lady friend, the captain to purchase war equipment, the professor to pick up the galley proofs of his latest book. But what exactly is the place? A discreet, comfortable hotel, a business location, or a publishing house? At first, one suspects that two of the three have got the address wrong, but that isn't the case. The address turns out to be right for all three of them.

This strange situation grows more mysterious, also because an alarm control, simulating a pollution emergency, prevents any of them from leaving. During the night that the men are forced to spend together, they come to suspect that the room could actually be a waiting room for the life beyond, and that they are already dead and awaiting final Judgement. The three characters react differently to this prospect, according to their respective ways of thinking and personal psychology: the factory owner is frightened and anxious, the captain doesn't find anything mysterious in the situation and remains absolutely indifferent, the professor uses all his philosophical logic to explain everything as natural and explicable facts. The play is a very humorous dialogue between the three, centred on the important themes of life and death, destiny, predestination and free will, the existence of God and atheism... which at the same time are treated as stuff for small town gossip. Suddenly, a cleaning woman enters the room. She says so many ambivalent things that their doubts grow stronger: is she really a cleaner, or might she be the Angel of Judgement? In the end, she leaves, without unravelling the mystery, and a loud siren indicates

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that the pollution control is over. The three get ready to leave... but the final moment is a last and amazing "coup de théâtre".

## The Press

An absurd and unrestrained Vaudeville, evocative of Kafka and Ionesco, a very enjoyable and skilful play where Lunari casts the fears, the expectations and the absurdities of mankind, threatened by ecological disasters, unable to coexist and terrified of death.

*(La Stampa, Torino, 1991)*

It's Sartre's play in a sparkling and funny version. The audience bends in uneasy laughter at the cracks, the faces and the jokes of the three heroes... a little jewel sparkling with humour which the actors offer us with a handful of refined wit and funniness.

*(Le Canard enchaîné, Paris, 1994)*

"Fausse adresse" (Three on the Seesaw) by Luigi Lunari: the discovery of a masterpiece: a show which unleashes laughter, where the audience does not miss a beat and a play which will mark a red-letter day in this 1994 festival.

*(La Marseillaise, Avignon, 1994)*

This elegant masterpiece, already translated in eleven foreign languages, is this year a success all over Europe. It has the quality to become a modern classic. A drawing room comedy, so full of humour as deep in though...

*(Die Welt, Hamburg, 1996)*

All the humour of the twentieth century European theatre steps out from this comedy: a sort of "commedia dell'arte" re-written by Samuel Beckett, a sort of tractatus philosophical existentialistic written by Dario Fo. It is the revelation in Portugal of Luigi Lunari, playwright of a very outstanding kind ... It proves to be a dazzling squabble about the absurd of life and death, the presence-absence of God, about determinism and indeterminism, always with that disarming lightness which Italo Calvino could show as an example of the literature(or the theatre) for the next millennium.

*(Diario de Noticias, Lisbon, 1996)*

There is a lot to laugh but also a lot to think.

*(Il Corriere del Ticino, Lugano, 1996)*

The Verdict: A Comedy with a Brain. – You will laugh at "Three on the Seesaw." You will scratch your head. You won't know what to believe, and then you will laugh again. When it's over, Italian writer Luigi Lunari's seriously provocative comedy will leave you entertained, and puz-

zled. And that's probably just how Art Within, a company dedicated to doing work with a spiritual edge, would like it.

*(Atlanta Journal Constitution, July 28, 2000)*

"Three on the Seesaw", to my modest opinion, is in this very moment the best show of the present season. In this way I try to mask the enthusiasm – so dangerous for a critical balance – that springs out from my heart. It is a long time since I have experienced in a theatre such a pure and unconditioned pleasure. For a long time we have been missing in Moscow emotions. For a long time we haven't attended a show who could deserve these warm advises: go in, look at that, don't get out!

*(Russki Kurier, (Mosca 2003)*

## About a few staging problems

*(From a letter to the Estonian director Tiit Palu, who was going to direct the play)*

Windows and door: ... Everything concerned with the production is up to you. I may say that there is no need to follow the indications (such as the opening of the first door in the so-called "fourth wall"; the coming out of the fourth man (or woman) from a trap-door); directors may absolutely disattend it, and do what they like. The only thing I may say is that I would prefer the door of the first man coming in should be the central one, or in a way the most distinguished. (In fact, in my opinion, the "Commendatore" or Mister A, is the central character, the balance of the whole piece: even if the three are very equivalent, and even if the Captain is the more captivating role.)

The reference to the characters of "commedia dell'arte", is absolutely external to the play. The director, the actors and the audience do not need to know anything about it. So, you can forget it. It does not help at all. (But as a matter of fact I can explain – for your information and your better understanding – what the idea is: the "commedia dell'arte", as you certainly know, is a creation of middle age Italy. It is also called "commedia delle maschere" (or play of masks) since its main characters were actually wearing real leather masks. But these "main characters" are only four: the Merchant, the Doctor, the Captain, and the Peasant; and they represented the four leading forces or powers of the middle-age life and world: the power of money and industry (the Merchant), the power of knowledge (the Doctor: it was not safe to say The Priest), the power of the army or weapons (the Captain), the power of labour (the Peasant, or Servant). These types or forces were sufficient to describe the reality of a very simple society and not complicated as it is today: the same forces are to be found in societies of a traditional structure, like the four castes in India, in ancient China and Japan. The same four types are symbolized today in the four "suits" of card games; where in fact the Diamonds, the Hearts, the Spades and the Clubs are stylized versions respectively of Money, Knowledge, Army and Peasantry. Now: the four characters of my play "are" in fact a small Industrialist or Businessman, a Professor, a

Captain and a Poor Chap. But all this is – as you may see – completely external to the play, and has to remain in the back stage. If somebody in the audience thinks "Well: look at it: these four people correspond to the four masks of "commedia dell'arte"! How clever from the author!", that may be good for him. But this is absolutely an optional!

The fourth character was originally thought as a man. (Also the four masks are all men: since the world they draw in the Europe of Middle Age is a world totally man-minded) It was rendered as a woman (and so it is in the Italian first printed version) for theatrical reasons: because it "seemed" more convenient to have a woman in the cast. But in the booklet, as an appendix, there is also the very few changes required by the "man" version. I do not know which solution to prefer: the woman is – in a way – the poorest of the poor, the underworld of the underworld; the man is more logical. Perhaps the woman is more effective, and most producers and directors did choose this solution. (Anyway, the text is always to be treated freely. In a Belgian production of the play, the fourth man was a very young person, with long reddish hair, looking rather like Jesus Christ. In this case I suggested that all his speeches referring to "his son" should be changed into the first person. Not "My son has been treated so and so...", but "I have been treated so an so..." Also when they ask him\her "Was your son a carpenter?", the question was changed into "Where you a carpenter?" And the answer was not "His father was a carpenter" but "My mother's second husband was a carpenter". Etc. Etc. Little things that also the actors can work out as they like.)

Do let me add one or two considerations. First of all, I like to stress a danger on the staging of my play, concerning this fourth character, man or woman that it could be. I think that in nearly all the productions I have seen, the rendering of this character was not right. (Of course, you may say that if all directors got this character wrong, the fault must be mine: I absolutely agree!) But in any case my opinion is this: the cleaning man (or woman) should not be a real and brute cleaning man. He / she must have something mysterious, something uncommon. Otherwise it will come out absolutely incredible that the Director (or Commendatore) can mistake her/him for God or something. **In a nutshell: it is not necessary that the audience think she could be God, but it is necessary that the audience find it credible that the Director may fear it.** I hope this is clear. She has to move or speak in some slightly peculiar way; to give her sentences something superior or mysterious: not to throw away what she says, but also not to be too oracular. In another nutshell, two dangers are to be avoided: that she could appear as a simple and straight Cleaning Man / Woman, and that he\she could appear by sure a God or Goddess.

Second consideration. The fridge is always a problem. Most directors do show to the audience what there is inside it. That means that when Mr A opens it the first time, the audience see the fridge full of beers. When – a second later – the Captain opens it, it appears crowded with orange juice. This is a very funny effect, and the audience laughs a lot, the same as when he "sees" the hot chocolate and everything else. But this is clearly absurd, and does not match with the theory expressed by the Professor in

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the second scene, when he "explains" the fact with the quotation from Schopenhauer: everybody sees what he want to see: the world as will and representation. The theory does work only "if " the audience has not seen the inside of the fridge, and may think it full of everything, and where everybody sees only what he is looking for. You have to choose: the logic (i.e. the inside of the fridge unseen from the audience) or the comic effect, with the fridge openly seen by everybody, and miraculously changing its content every time someone opens it. I reasonably should prefer the first solution; but in this case the actors must express – with mimicry or else – their wonder and their uneasiness in front of this fact. But. as usual, the final decision is up to you.

*Luigi Lunari*

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