

TEATRO ALLA SCALA



ENG

Grazie a
V Luchino
Visconti

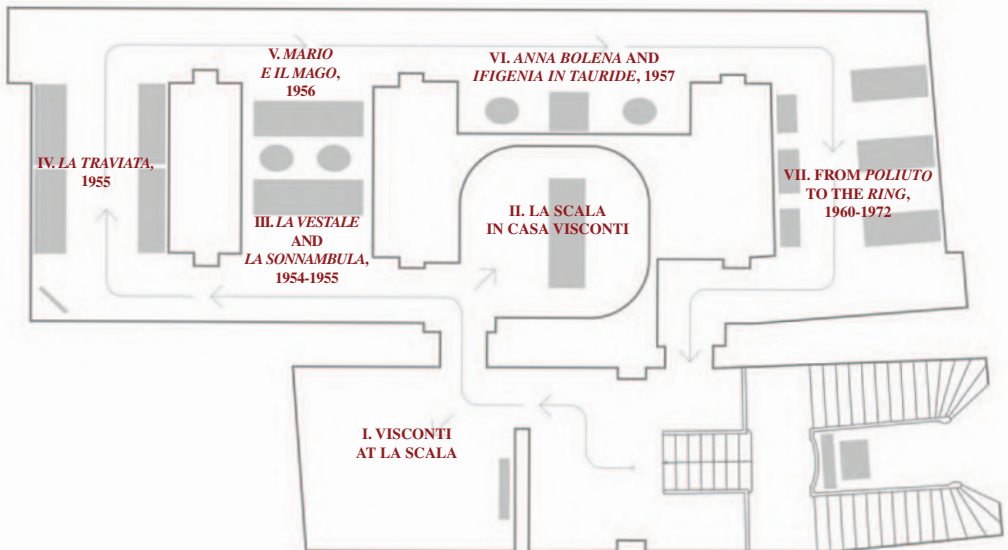
INTRODUCTION

Luchino Visconti di Modrone (Milan, 2 November 1906 – Rome, 17 March 1976) was one of the great intellectual figures of the 20th century in Italy and beyond.

Born into an aristocratic family that shaped the history of Milan, he devoted himself with an all-consuming passion to music, literature, horsemanship, art, theatre, and cinema. He is best known today for his films, from *Osessione* to *Senso*, from *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* to *Il gattopardo*, from *Morte a Venezia* to *Ludwig*.

Visconti threw himself into these pursuits with an uncompromising sense of duty, inseparable from the profound civic conscience he developed in Paris in the 1930s. It was there, during the era of the Front Populaire, that he worked alongside filmmaker Jean Renoir (son of the Impressionist painter Pierre-Auguste), whom he met through the dressmaker Coco Chanel. These experiences led him to stand with the poor and the oppressed, contribute to the Resistance, fight against censorship, and embrace the Communist cause.

Visconti's entire life, including his professional legacy, was shaped by his ties to La Scala. His opera productions, many of them featuring the legendary Maria Callas, have gone down in history – most notably his 1955 *La traviata*. Visually striking and deeply respectful of the music yet so innovative that they sparked controversy and divided opinion, Visconti's productions awakened an interest in opera among audiences who had not traditionally regarded it a cultural pursuit.



Fifty years after his death, La Scala wishes to honor him with this tribute to his extraordinary work.

This is not the first time La Scala has celebrated Milan's pre-eminent director. In 1978, as part of its Bicentenary season, it hosted *Visconti: il teatro*, an exhibition that had debuted at the Teatro Comunale in Reggio Emilia the prior year, with more than nine hundred items offering a portrait of the director's intellectual and artistic life. On that occasion, the writer Giovanni Testori publicly made peace with the memory of his friend, with whom he had broken off relations in 1972. Testori – author of a memorable biographical portrait of Visconti as well as the plays *L'Arielda* and *La Monaca di Monza* (both staged by the director), and a key inspiration behind the film *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* – asserted the need for “a work of critical record that would preserve certain cultural milestones in something more lasting than the fond memories of ‘those who were there.’”

Since 1977, exhibitions dedicated to Visconti have become almost a genre in their own right. Featuring sketches, costume designs, costumes, photographs, archival documents and more, they have often been curated by members of his own entourage, particularly Caterina d'Amico (daughter of the great screenwriter Suso Cecchi d'Amico, who worked with Visconti from the mid-1940s onward). Some have traced his entire career, like the landmark 1981 retrospective at Milan's Castello Sforzesco, with contributions from luminaries like Giorgio Strehler, Luca Ronconi, Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Renato Guttuso, and Martin Scorsese alongside loans from numerous institutions. Others focused on specific areas of his work, from his collaborations with the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino festival to his deep affinity for Giuseppe Verdi.

This time, the spotlight is squarely on Visconti's relationship with La Scala, to which his family had been connected for generations. For Luchino it was a lifelong bond, from watching performances as a child in his family's box (first tier, fourth box on the left, just off the stage) through to the final phase of his career, when he was asked to direct Wagner's *Ring* for the centenary of its first performance at Bayreuth in 1876. By contract, on posters for the *Ring* production, Visconti's name was to be printed in the same size and typeface as that of the conductor. Unfortunately, illness would prevent him from seeing the project through.

The items on display come almost entirely from La Scala's archives, where ongoing exploration continues to yield new insights. Set designer Margherita Palli has once again turned the Biblioteca Livia Simoni into an arsenal of stage illusions, this time resembling a deliberately ideological, Brechtian *féerie*.

I. VISCONTI AT LA SCALA

La Scala was home to eight Visconti productions, the work of an artist who believed that opera was “a distillation of what life is.” It was here, on 7 December 1954 – when Antonio Ghiringhelli was superintendent, Luigi Oldani secretary general, and Nicola Benois director of stage production – that Visconti’s career as an opera director officially began, after several false starts in Milan and elsewhere. He would soon make his mark on theatres in Italy and abroad, from London’s Covent Garden to the Vienna Staatsoper.

At La Scala, the number of productions that were proposed to or by Visconti, or tossed around as possibilities, is far greater than those that actually came to fruition. Notably, in the fall of 1953, Toscanini – a friend of the family’s – asked him to direct Verdi’s *Falstaff* to inaugurate the Piccola Scala in 1955, but the honor went to Cimarosa’s *Il matrimonio segreto*, conducted by Nino Sanzogno and directed by Strehler. Before Visconti’s official debut with *La vestale* in 1954, there had already been talk of his directing Ildebrando Pizzetti’s *Debora e Jaele* and *Cagliostro* (1952); Rossini’s *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1952); Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea* (1952); Mozart’s *Il ratto dal serraglio* (1952); Verdi’s *Don Carlo* (1952, conducted by Guido Cantelli) and *Rigoletto* (1953); Bellini’s *Norma* (1954); and Verdi’s *Un Ballo in Maschera* (1954).

Among the unproduced or reassigned projects proposed over the course of Visconti’s collaboration with La Scala, the following are also worth noting: Mascagni’s *Cavalleria rusticana* (1955); Puccini’s *La fanciulla del West* (1955); Verdi’s *Luisa Miller* (1956) and *Aida* (1956); Giordano’s *Fedora* (1956); Puccini’s *Manon Lescaut* (1956); Zandonai’s *Francesca da Rimini* (1956); Bellini’s *Il pirata* (1958); Verdi’s *Nabucco* (1958); Mozart’s *Così fan tutte* (1958, in collaboration with the Salzburg Festival and conducted by Herbert von Karajan); Berlioz’s *Les Troyens* (1958); Shostakovich’s *Lady Macbeth del distretto di Mcensk* (1959, abandoned because of “failure to reach an agreement with the composer”) and Verdi’s *Otello* (1959, with Mario Del Monaco, Tito Gobbi, and Renata Tebaldi – surprisingly, given his loyalty to Maria Callas), these latter two in spite of signed contracts; Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro* (1966, conducted by Carlo Maria Giulini); Verdi’s *Otello* once again (1969); and finally Wagner’s *Ring* (1972, under the baton of Wolfgang Sawallisch). Visconti did not pull his punches. “The powers that be at La Scala are as unpredictable as the weather. One fine day they take someone who has served them well, give him a kick in the ass, and that’s that.” On the other hand, it was Visconti himself, who spent years pursuing projects he never finished – most notably a film version of Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* – who

once remarked, “Our finest things are the ones we were unable to make.”

In Visconti’s films, the most accessible way to explore his genius, La Scala is mentioned only once: in *Il lavoro* (1962), an episode of *Boccaccio ‘70* inspired by a short story by Guy de Maupassant and transposed to the world of the contemporary Milanese aristocracy (though with a distant and deliberately cultivated echo of Carlo Porta). The protagonist, Pupe (Romy Schneider), is a Swiss heiress married to a young Lombard count, Ottavio (Tomas Milian). On discovering that her husband frequents prostitutes, she wants to go to La Scala “because she has an appointment with Wally,” that is, Wally Toscanini, Arturo’s daughter and the wife of Emanuele Castelbarco, who had run the Amici della Scala since 1950. Wally has promised to find her a job, so she can finally change her life and stop being a lady of leisure.

“Such work done on water,” Visconti would say of his labors for the theatre: a sentiment that may explain much of his desire later in life to focus on cinema, where he could leave a less fleeting trace of his work. A familiar refrain in critical writing is that of Visconti’s work for the theatre, and for opera in particular, little remains beyond the memories of the few remaining audience members who are still alive – aside from reviews, photographs, sketches, costume designs, set plans, a few rare costumes, an even rarer piece of stage property, and sound recordings of certain memorable performances (including plays). A more careful search reveals a few fragments of audiovisual footage, though unfortunately, none of them from La Scala. Through blurred images, we can glimpse something of his productions of *La traviata* in Spoleto (1963), *Il trovatore* and *La traviata* at Covent Garden (1964; 1967), and *Le nozze di Figaro* at the Teatro dell’Opera di Roma (1964). There is also footage of rehearsals for the definitive *Manon* in Spoleto (1973).

II. LA SCALA IN CASA VISCONTI

In his sixties, living in Rome – for much of his life he had kept his distance from the world of his upbringing – Visconti began to take an ever-closer look at himself and his own life story. He was outwardly nostalgic for “that smell of Milan that no one will ever give back to me, the gardens along the Naviglio, the carriages, the scents wafting from the shops, the swallows that in the evening would fly around our house on Via Cerva, the bells of San Carlo, the ladies emerging from Caffè Canetta... My mother would take us for walks along the bastions and I can still smell the sweat of the horses. At dinner time, the light from the chandelier in the dining room would dim, and my father would say: ‘They’ve lit up La Scala.’ Yes, these are the things I miss most.”

His bond with La Scala was seen as unbreakable: “I was born, and an hour later the curtain was rising on a performance at La Scala”; “the evening I was born, *La traviata* was being performed at La Scala” (though this was not in fact true). It was “a meeting of the stars, an unmistakable a calling.” Three years before his death, in 1973, Visconti said that “the curtain at La Scala, trembling before the beginning of a performance,” had throughout his life represented “the anticipation of every pleasure.” At home, “nothing could happen – not even childbirth – without first taking a look at La Scala’s ‘tamburino’,” its daily program.

It was his family, and in particular his paternal grandfather, Duke Guido Visconti di Modrone, who had saved the theatre from closure after a dire financial crisis in 1897 by establishing the Società anonima per l’esercizio del Teatro alla Scala. Guido was its first president, with Arrigo Boito as vice president, and the position then passed to his eldest son, Uberto, Luchino’s uncle, who remained at the helm until 1917. Uberto was also among the principal founders of the Museo Teatrale alla Scala, inaugurated on 8 March 1913, and served as its first president; it was he who donated Abbondio Sangiorgio’s bust of Maria Malibran. Another of Luchino’s uncles, Guido Carlo, remained on the theatre’s board of directors even after 1921, when La Scala became an autonomous institution.

In the building where Luchino grew up, at 44 Via Cerva (today 8 Via Cino del Duca), there was a small theatre where his parents put on performances with their friends. Musicians came and went, among them Puccini, and, before Luchino was born, even Verdi (by then a very old man) had been among the family’s acquaintances. Luchino’s adored mother, the immensely wealthy Carla Erba, was the daughter of Luigi Erba and Anna Brivio; Anna’s sister Giuditta married Giulio Ricordi, Italy’s most important music publisher. Luchino’s father, Giuseppe, a multi-faceted man of culture and principle, was clearly a major influence on his son’s tastes, from his love of *tableaux vivants* to his discovery of Proust. It was Giuseppe who held Box No. 4, first order, left sector, at La Scala, starting in 1906.

Here are a few more snippets of what the artist in his sixties recalled: “My first strict schedules were set by Toscanini at La Scala. And Toscanini was also the first, some sixty years ago, to have the lights in the auditorium switched off during a performance. Until then, La Scala too had preserved the old Italian habit of treating the theatre as a great drawing room. My mother always told me that shortly after her wedding, she made her first public appearance at La Scala. Naturally, the auditorium was filled with all the most prominent, fashionable, and most distracted members of Milan society when it came to what was happening on stage. People were curious to see my

mother, and it was normal that throughout the performance there would be a constant stream of people paying courtesy calls at the Visconti box. So, my father, who went to the theatre to watch the opera, decided to lock the box door during the show. My mother spent two hours on tenterhooks, not wanting to appear rude, her eyes constantly drawn to the door handle, which kept being pressed down in vain. I'm telling this story to explain how at La Scala – the most formidable theatre in Italy – some sixty years ago, people would still stroll about and chat in the boxes throughout the entire performance.”

And then: “At La Scala our family was completely at home, and our box was the perfect place to ignite our young imaginations, already so inclined toward theatrical play. It was Box No. 4, very close to the proscenium and right above the orchestra pit, with the musicians practically within reach and the clang of the brass hitting our eardrums. Yet my first encounter with La Scala was not opera, but rather a ballet called *Pietro Micca*. The title [Pietro Micca was an Italian hero famous for an explosive military sacrifice] explains everything: all I remember of that ballet is the luminous, snaking trail of the fuse, and the acrid smell of gunpowder spreading until it filled our box.” (Luigi Manzotti’s ballet had been revived during the 1908–09 and 1909–10 seasons; Visconti, born in 1906, must have been thinking of this second revival at the latest.)

Again, speaking of Box No. 4, Visconti recalled: “I would sit there, squirming with excitement over what would happen when the curtain went up. Cinema, I must say, cannot provide that pleasure. I don’t like going back to see a film I’ve already seen. *Il trovatore*, on the other hand, I have seen and heard countless times. And the same goes for novels.” During a performance of *Il trovatore* conducted by Toscanini, the young Visconti dreamed of being Manrico and, sword drawn, flying from the box down onto the stage.

III. LA VESTALE AND LA SONNAMBULA, 1954-1955

When *La vestale* made its triumphant debut at La Scala on 7 December 1954 – with Toscanini, who had attended the rehearsals, watching from a proscenium box – Visconti was 48 and already a highly celebrated director of theatre and film. His latest film, *Senso*, based on a story by Camillo Boito (brother of the librettist Arrigo Boito), opens inside Venice’s Teatro La Fenice during a performance of *Il trovatore*. The idea had come to Visconti as he watched Maria Callas sing *Il trovatore* at La Scala in February 1953.

Both Battista Meneghini, Callas’s husband and impresario, and the musician Franco Mannino, Visconti’s brother-in-law, share the credit for persuading La Scala to engage Visconti for the opening opera of the 1954–55 season – an

offer he did not officially receive until September or October, leaving him very little time to prepare. All he could say was, “If I were to make my debut at La Scala, I would want to start with Maria,” and similarly, “Going to La Scala without Maria doesn’t interest me much.”

Gaspare Spontini’s *La vestale*, to a libretto by Étienne de Jouy, starred Callas as Giulia, the Vestal Virgin of the title, and the dashing Franco Corelli, selected by Visconti himself, as Licinius. It was conducted by Antonino Votto (although as late as mid-August it was still assigned to Victor de Sabata) and performed in Italian, in Giovanni Emanuele Schmidt’s 1811 version; the original three-act opera in French – dedicated to the Empress Joséphine Beauharnais, Napoleon’s wife – was composed in Paris in 1807. The 1950s saw a revival of interest in Spontini, alongside the rediscovery of Luigi Cherubini. The Maggio Musicale Fiorentino festival, under the direction of Francesco Siciliani, played an important part in this renewed appreciation. Keen to launch Visconti as an opera director, Siciliani had already approached him unsuccessfully in early 1954 with a proposal to direct a different Spontini work at the Teatro Comunale, *Agnese di Hohenstaufen*, dating from much later in the composer’s career.

Staging the difficult and extraordinarily costly *La vestale*, the last great *tragédie lyrique* and almost a forerunner of *grand opéra*, required a foray into Neoclassicism, a period that had fallen out of favor in the 1950s; the art critic Roberto Longhi, for example, had recently dismissed Antonio Canova as “the sculptor born dead.” Although Mario Praz, a great admirer of Callas, had already begun to re-examine the subject in his essays *Gusto neoclassico*, Visconti was among the few to explore it from a visual perspective. Yet the Neoclassicism he embraced was filtered through a twentieth-century lens, with echoes of Salvador Dalí, Gio Ponti, Fabrizio Clerici, and Piero Fornasetti.

At the same time, Visconti drew directly on works contemporary with *La vestale*: from Jacques-Louis David’s *Le Sacre* (1808), now in the Louvre, for Licinius’s coronation in Act I, to Canova’s pyramids – including the tomb of Maria Christina of Austria in Vienna’s Augustinerkirche (1805) – for the “accursed field” in Act III, where the Vestal Virgins were buried alive. For the final scene, set on Olympus, he evoked Jupiter in the form of Andrea Appiani’s 1808 fresco *Apoteosi di Napoleone* at the Royal Palace in Milan (which may also be the source of the monumental light fixtures on stage), while the entire auditorium was flooded with light. Visconti also subtly altered La Scala’s interior by adding, near the proscenium, two pairs of columns identical to the originals, creating the illusion that the action continued into the auditorium – a solution that seems to anticipate the strategies Luca Ronconi would frequently employ. The same might be said of Visconti’s many stage plans for

La vestale. The set designs and costume sketches were by the Romagnolo painter Pietro Zuffi, who had only recently turned to opera and who worked with Visconti this one time only, as they sometimes failed to see eye to eye. In the space of just a few months, between 7 December 1954 and 5 March 1955, Visconti moved from the Neoclassicism of *La vestale* to the Romanticism of *La sonnambula*, again with Callas in the leading role. In the meantime, in January, she had sung Umberto Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*, which she learned in record time. By his own admission, Visconti was fascinated by the mythology of the "diva," who "embodies the rare, the extravagant, and the exceptional." But he was equally struck by Callas's limitless gifts as an actress. Vincenzo Bellini's *La sonnambula*, with a libretto by Felice Romani, was one of Visconti's particular favorites. He had already included one of its arias, "Ah, non credea mirarti," in the anchovy-salting scene in *La terra trema*, his 1948 film inspired by Giovanni Verga's *I Malavoglia*. Later, in *Il gattopardo* (1963), a general in Garibaldi's forces would sing "Vi ravviso, o luoghi ameni," though this was not Visconti's invention but an actual detail from Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel.

The tone is dramatically different from *La vestale*, not least because of the very different creative team, beginning with the great Leonard Bernstein at the podium. (Many years later, in 1966, Visconti would work with Bernstein again on *Falstaff* in Vienna, but as early as 5 February 1955 he was remarking on how well they worked together.) Sets and costumes were by the brilliant Piero Tosi, a young Florentine who had been a creative collaborator of Visconti's for several years and would remain so until the end of the director's career. *La sonnambula* was the first time Tosi had designed a production at La Scala on his own; in 1952, his sets for Carlo Goldoni's *La locandiera*, influenced by Giorgio Morandi, were credited jointly to Tosi and Visconti. Audiences were treated to an idealized vision of the Swiss Alps, framed by faux-wood borders and leafy garlands – which also helped narrow the stage – and complete with lakes, woods, mills, and inns with neo-Gothic interiors based on models contemporary with the opera's first production (composed in Moltrasio, *La sonnambula* had premiered in Milan at Teatro Carcano in 1831). The staging, meticulously planned down to the smallest detail, was likewise governed by the conventions of the period: symmetry, stillness, and a deliberate rejection of naturalism.

In the role of Amina, Callas – fragile yet regal, despite playing a peasant girl – was a remarkable visual evocation of early nineteenth-century divas, singers and dancers alike, from Giuditta Pasta and Maria Malibran to Maria Taglioni. As the poet and music critic Eugenio Montale put it, she was "a Saxe porcelain statue (an image reinforced by the costumes) with an enchanted music box

inside.” After the darkness during “Ah, non credea mirarti,” the final apotheosis called for all the lights in the house to be switched on, including the enormous central chandelier, visually uniting the auditorium with the stage. “*La sonnambula* requires the footlights to be moved forward, because everything is brought right to the front of the stage in a quintessentially Romantic theatrical style. Just think of the finale, with the lights coming on to halo the protagonist, the ‘Prima donna,’ just like in a concert,” Visconti wrote to Callas.

Research in the Rai archives has yielded no trace of the fledgling Italian television network’s recording of the second act (some say that Callas had it destroyed). Although La Scala’s superintendent, Antonio Ghiringhelli, appears not to have been a fan of Visconti’s *La sonnambula*, it was one of the productions to which the director himself was “most attached.” In 1957, with Callas still in the lead but Antonino Votto conducting instead of Bernstein, it was revived at La Scala in March, in Cologne in July, and in Edinburgh in August. Audiences later saw it again at La Scala without Callas, in 1959, 1960, and 1962. A planned revival with Callas at the Teatro di San Carlo in Naples in 1956 never materialized. Toward the end of Visconti’s life, *La sonnambula* returned to the Teatro Comunale in Florence in 1975, his staging revived by the young and ill-fated Ruggero Rimini, who had served as Visconti’s assistant for *Manon* in Spoleto. Finally, the bodices worn by some of the peasant women in Visconti’s *La sonnambula* were later used by Ronconi for Rossini’s *Il viaggio a Reims*, with sets and costumes by Gae Aulenti, at La Scala in 1985.

IV. LA TRAVIATA, 1955

La traviata, which Visconti had dreamed of staging for years, finally came to life on 28 May 1955. The opera had held a central place in his world from the very beginning, and Verdi was his favorite composer. One of its arias, “Di Provenza, il mar, il suol,” had appeared repeatedly in his first film, *Ossessione*, in 1943. In 1963’s *Il gattopardo*, during the scene in which the Salina princes arrive in Donnafugata, a band plays the chorus of the gypsy girls and matadors, while in the church an organist plays the melody from “Amami, Alfredo.” When Visconti finally had the opportunity to meet Callas in person, at Tullio Serafin’s home, she sang “È strano” and “Sempre libera” for him.

The La Scala production was conducted by Giulini, who had taken over from De Sabata after a heart attack; Callas sang Violetta; and sets and costumes were by Lila De Nobili, assisted by the young and brilliant Danilo Donati. Verdi’s masterpiece, to a libretto by Francesco Maria Piave (based on Alexan-

dre Dumas fils's 1848 novel *La dame aux camélias*), dates from 1853 and the story it depicts is set in contemporary Paris and its environs. While *La traviata* was "the first non-comic opera to bring contemporary, that is, bourgeois, subject matter and milieu to the stage," the dazzling La Scala production was set around 1870–1880, shifting the action forward by some twenty years, out of the Romantic period and into the Paris of Zola and the Impressionists, the paintings of Constantin Guys and Giuseppe De Nittis, and the photographs of Félix Nadar.

Interestingly, Visconti, who also had in mind "certain descriptions of Proustian women's drawing rooms," suggested that De Nobili draw inspiration from the illustrations in Graham Reynolds's *Painters of the Victorian Scene*, published in 1953. He followed the set design process step by step, concerned only that any excessive grandeur or monumental tone might compromise his vision. The same was true of the costume sketches: "Splendid. Delightful. I wouldn't change a thing, and I approve them all. It will be a matter of deciding who wears what, when. Even Violetta's golden dress in Act III (though I had dreamed of a 'ruby red' one). Would you try making one in red as well? Just to see what it would look like." And the definitive costume for the evening at Flora's apartment would, of course, be red. Personal recollections also come into play here, as they do elsewhere in Visconti's work: hence his request for Turkish-style furnishings in Flora's salon, intended to evoke "the Turkish room (which was, naturally, the joy of us children)" in his grandmother's large apartment on Via Marsala in Milan.

The implications of this are not merely visual but also interpretive, projecting *La traviata* into the future and giving it an almost naturalistic tone, while Callas's iconography, if not her gestures, were influenced by Eleonora Duse and Sarah Bernhardt. As a boy, in 1921, Visconti had seen the aging Duse perform Ibsen's *La donna del mare* and later called it "one of the defining impressions" of his life. He was well aware that for his Violetta, he had drawn on what Proust writes in *Recherche* about Rachel's acting as she comes to eclipse the legendary Berma. And he gave Callas pages of directorial notes showing her how to become Violetta.

Between its 1955 premiere, with just four performances, and its revival the following season in 1956, Visconti's *La traviata* was performed 21 times at La Scala. No filmed record survives of this landmark of twentieth-century culture. Yet the sound recording alone, beyond the delirious applause mid-scene and the astonished cries, conveys the awestruck reaction when the curtain goes up on Act I, when Violetta Valéry's lavishly furnished Parisian home comes into view: the fireplace on the left serving as the focal point while the walls fade into the half-light.

The theatre itself did not immediately grasp the momentousness of the production, to the extent that its revival in 1956, which ran for seventeen performances between January and May, was achieved only after torturous negotiations. Meanwhile, in 1955, La Scala recorded its own *La traviata* for its record series in collaboration with the label La voce del padrone, conducted by Tullio Serafin and featuring Antonietta Stella in the role that Callas had just performed. Alfredo Germont was sung by Giuseppe Di Stefano, who had distanced himself from Visconti's production immediately after opening night and was promptly replaced.

Visconti had a lot to say about the hostile reception toward the May premiere of *La traviata*: "...toward a production, that is, which in its entirety got terribly on the nerves of the mediocre, the obtuse, the jealous – of everyone who senses and foresees the collapse of their comfortable world of pettiness, routine, and intellectual laziness." When the revival was announced, he wrote to Callas: "It was the one real satisfaction I demanded from La Scala: the revival of *Traviata*. [...] To bring *Traviata* back is a joy – not only because I'm convinced of my work, but first and foremost to hear you sing it again, and second, to give those critics another absolute fit! Ah, what a thrill!" And to Meneghini: "*Traviata* will endure, whatever the diehards or the irredeemable idiots may say. And it will endure because that particular rethinking of nineteenth-century opera has now become an established artistic reality, thanks to the artistry of a great actress like Maria. And mark my words: all the *Traviatas* that are soon to come – not immediately, because human presumption is hard to eradicate – will have something of Maria in them. Just a bit at first, then once people believe enough time has passed to avoid direct comparisons, a great deal – and then everything. The Violettas of the future will be Maria-Violettas. It is inevitable in art, whenever someone teaches something to others. And that's what Maria has done."

Among those dazzled by Visconti's *La traviata* of 1955–56 were musicians, writers, and artists, from Hans Werner Henze, who met Visconti on that very occasion, to Ingeborg Bachmann, Hector Bianciotti, and Giorgio de Chirico. Orio Vergani's diaries give a good idea of the audience reaction. But Visconti's profound critical understanding of Verdi goes far beyond the moments that have passed into legend: the shoes Violetta tosses into the air as she sings "Sempre libera" in Act I, or the hat she places on her head before dying in the final scene. Not to mention "Amami, Alfredo" in Act II, which she sings down on her knees.

In 1957, De Nobili's sets and costumes were taken to the Staatsoper in Vienna, where *La traviata* was conducted by Karajan. But instead of Visconti, the production was directed by Mario Frigerio, and Callas was replaced by Virginia

Zeani. Many years later, in 1970, there was talk of possibly reviving the La Scala production at the Paris Opéra, with Callas. In the meantime, however, Visconti had staged *La traviata* twice more, with radically different approaches. In 1963 at the Spoleto Festival, conducted by Robert La Marchina and starring Franca Fabbri, he restored the original setting to around 1850, but in a stripped-down version making do with improvised solutions: period furniture lent by local antique dealers, objects brought from his own home, and so on. In 1967, at Covent Garden in London (again conducted by Giulini and with Mirella Freni in the title role), he paid an all-black-and-white homage to Aubrey Beardsley, the subject that year of a major exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, thus drawing on the recent vogue for Art Nouveau. Film recordings survive of both: a fragment of the second scene of Act II from the 1963 production, and the second scene of Act II and the entire third act from the 1967 production.

And yet, Visconti's *Traviata* par excellence remains the 1955 La Scala production. His version with and for Maria Callas was long in the making: a goal finally achieved after countless obstacles. Not all of De Nobili's splendid set and costume designs, whose true stylistic influences – Boldini? De Pisis? – have yet to be fully established, are preserved in La Scala's archives. Some are held at Sartoria Tirelli in Rome, some at the Yannis Tsarouchis Foundation in Athens, and some in private collections. Still others, including of uncertain attribution, have appeared on the antiques market. The original costumes themselves are nowhere to be found, raising the question of whether they ever came back from Vienna. Piero Tosi, who out of pure devotion reconstructed Violetta's black costume from Act I, was convinced that the entire Milanese production had been sold to the Austrian theatre.

V. MARIO E IL MAGO, 1956

It was this “choreographic work by Luchino Visconti based on the story by Thomas Mann” – *Mario und der Zauberer. Ein tragisches Reiseerlebnis*, published in 1930 and translated into Italian in 1945 – that was supposed to kick off Visconti's collaboration with La Scala. *Mario e il Mago* was in fact announced as part of the 1953–54 season, with its premiere initially scheduled for 20 February 1954 and then postponed to early June. The composer was thirty-year-old Palermo native Franco Mannino, who would later become Visconti's brother-in-law by marrying his sister Uberta in 1955. The choreography was assigned to Léonide Massine, fresh from his work with the Ballets Russes and his appearances in Powell and Pressburger's films (not to mention his per-

formance as Antonio Petito in Giannini's *Carosello napoletano*). For the sets and costumes the theatre had hired Lila De Nobili, then living in Paris and working with Visconti for the first time; he had admired her ever since seeing her work on Raymond Rouleau's 1951 adaptation of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, staged in two acts and seventeen scenes. Gerardo Guerrieri was also involved in the dramaturgy, though he was not credited. The selected performers were Jean Babilée as Mario, Luciana Novaro as Silvestra, and Ugo Dell'Ara as Renato, while the role of the Magician, who was to act rather than dance, went to Memo Benassi. There were also singers in the orchestra pit, including a soprano and a baritone, as well as small ensembles on stage; the popular song "Un'ora sola ti vorrei" would be performed.

Visconti, who had admired Thomas Mann since his youth, had begun working on the project in 1951 and continued to collaborate with Mannino in the summer of 1952 in Ischia. In April 1953, at the home of Alba de Céspedes in Rome, Visconti met the great German writer, who had come to Italy to receive the Feltrinelli Prize from the Accademia dei Lincei. Having read the score, Mann approved of the project and granted production rights for La Scala, where it would have been staged shortly thereafter.

By the spring of 1954, work on the project had advanced considerably. In March, the libretto for the "*azione coreografica*" was printed in Milan, and according to Mannino the pre-dress rehearsal had been scheduled for the end of May. But then La Scala's superintendent, Ghiringhelli, pulled the plug because the work called for bicycles to appear on stage – and he feared this would cause an uproar among the audience. The scandal unleashed by the appearance of an actual automobile, a Topolino, in *La gita in campagna* was still too fresh. That one-act opera by Mario Peragallo, with a libretto by Alberto Moravia and sets by Renato Guttuso, had premiered on 24 March 1954 and the protests had been so violent that the production was dismantled after only its second performance.

The standing Visconti had earned in La Scala circles, following three successful productions – though they were not without detractors – helped break the deadlock over *Mario e il Mago*, which had rankled Mannino. And so, on 25 February 1956, the work finally received its world premiere, attended by two of Mann's daughters, Erika and Elisabeth. The following year, *Mario e il Mago* was staged at the Teatro Quirino in Rome, and, it seems, at the Staatstheater in Hamburg; it also won the Prix Diaghilev in Paris. The work formed the centerpiece of an evening of ballets, with Luciano Rosada conducting, alongside two other new productions: of Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty* and de Falla's *El amor brujo*. By then Thomas Mann had died, on 12 August 1955, and Benassi – who had been outstanding as Vershinin in the Visconti produc-

tion of Checkhov's *Tre Sorelle* – was unavailable. The Magician was therefore played by Salvo Randone. De Nobili and Novaro (with the latter replaced in some performances by the very young Carla Fracci) had in the meantime worked with Visconti on other projects: De Nobili had designed the sets and costumes for Giacosa's *Come le foglie*, which premiered on 26 October 1954 with Randone in a major role, and, above all for La Scala's *Traviata*, choreographed by Novaro. *Mario e il Mago* coincided with the revival of *La traviata*, while Checkhov's *Zio Vania*, also directed by Visconti, was on stage at the Teatro Nuovo.

In two acts with pronounced dreamlike qualities, Visconti's *Mario e il Mago* does not literally follow Mann's story, set in 1926 when Italy was already under Fascist rule. Instead, Visconti uses it as a springboard for a work – if such a thing is possible – of even greater ambiguity. He keeps the original setting on the Versilia summer holiday coast between Viareggio and Forte dei Marmi, but shifts the time to around 1935. He centers the choreography on the contrast between the awkward Mario, a waiter at the Esquisito café, and the handsome, athletic ice-cream man Renato, who vie for the love of the beautiful Silvestra amid popular songs and bicycle rides. The magician Cipolla, a purveyor of illusions, ensnares Mario in his web; Mario kills him in revenge and is arrested. De Nobili's enchanting creations, almost all of which have been preserved in La Scala's archives, are split evenly between a “popular-realistic side” for the real-world part of the story and a “fantastic, unreal side” for the magical one. A director's note suggests that “for the first part, bear in mind some of those naïve, extraordinarily evocative ex-voto paintings – often on glass (which gives the material and the brushwork an even more palpable roughness and simplicity) – and for the magical part, think of Méliès's flights of fancy with all the poetically valid absurdity of his fantasies.” The innovations of *Mario e il Mago* would become even more pronounced in Visconti's next choreographic project: *Maratona di danza*, to music by Hans Werner Henze with sets and costumes by Renzo Vespignani. Rejected by La Scala, it premiered in West Berlin at the Städtische Oper on 24 September 1957. Judging from a number of production photographs, it almost seems to anticipate the Tanztheater of Pina Bausch.

VI. ANNA BOLENA AND IFIGENIA IN TAURIDE, 1957

In the spring of 1957 Visconti took on two new productions at La Scala, while also working on *Notti bianche*, a neo-Romantic film based on Dostoevsky's novella of the same name, but set in contemporary Livorno (as recreated at

Cinecittà by Mario Garbuglia, the set designer of the future *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*). Its shy protagonist is named Mario, like the protagonist of *Mario e il Mago*. The film would be presented at that year's Venice Film Festival; meanwhile, over the summer, Visconti staged Goldoni's magical *Impresario delle Smirne* at the Teatro La Fenice, with music by Nino Rota.

In the two productions for La Scala – *Anna Bolena* and *Ifigenia in Tauride* – Visconti found himself, for the first time, having to work directly on sets and costumes with Nicola Benois, the theatre's all-powerful head of stage production since 1937. In his previous four productions, he had always brought in outside set designers; and this time too, for *Iphigénie*, he would have preferred Marcel Escoffier, with whom he had already collaborated on the costumes for Chekhov's *Tre sorelle* and *Senso*. Meanwhile, in April 1957, Francesco Siciliani, fresh from the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino festival, became La Scala's artistic director, a position he would hold until 1966.

Donizetti's *Anna Bolena*, with a libretto by Felice Romani, was first performed in 1830 at Milan's Teatro Carcano. The new staging, which premiered on 14 April, has been authoritatively described as “the most influential Visconti production of all, marking the decisive turning point in the way opera is staged and, consequently, in the way we experience it.” On the podium was Gianandrea Gavazzeni, from Donizetti's home town of Bergamo, while Maria Callas sang the title role.

In 1957, Donizetti's thirty-fifth opera was practically a novelty: La Scala had not staged it since 1877. With Visconti's production masterfully recreating the operatic world of *Bolena*'s origins, it made a definitive and triumphant return. In keeping with the conventions of the time, Gavazzeni cut the score here and there, going so far as to omit the opening symphony altogether: “When bringing back works that have fallen into oblivion, I have no qualms about making cuts, because I believe they should be presented as living works and not museum pieces.” All proceeded smoothly between conductor and director, except for Gavazzeni's aversion to extending the front of the stage toward the audience, which Visconti considered indispensable (and Callas favored as well): “If Gavazzeni agrees, fine. Otherwise, either he goes or I do.”

The production was revived the following season and Callas increasingly embodied the role, which in some ways was coming to resemble her life. It made a belated return to La Scala in 1982, with Montserrat Caballé and Cecilia Gasdia taking on the role created by Callas, in a version reworked by Sandro Sequi. In the meantime, in 1979, Filippo Crivelli had revived Visconti's production at the Teatro dell'Opera in Rome.

After *Bolena* in 1957, Visconti would soon return to Donizetti with the even rarer *Il duca d'Alba*, staged at the Spoleto Festival in 1959 under the baton of

Thomas Schippers. He used the sets Carlo Ferrario had designed for the opera's first production in 1882, thirty-four years after the composer's death: an exercise, then, in historicization – perhaps a somewhat cerebral one – of a sixteenth-century event in a *fin de siècle* setting, itself far removed from the period in which the opera was composed.

For La Scala, Visconti had asked Benois for a certain degree of historical fidelity to 1536, the year Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII's second wife, met her tragic end in and around Windsor and London. Alongside rapturous enthusiasm for Callas (and Simionato, too, playing Seymour), the audience was thrilled once again by the magnificent sets, painted throughout in monochromatic tones. The reaction was especially intense when the curtain rose on Act II: a gallery lined with paintings, receding in a dizzying telescopic perspective. The sets were framed by the scrolls of a painted curtain on the main drop, reproduced on a smaller one lowered during the scene changes – a detail that so impressed Luca Ronconi, an enthusiastic spectator at *Anna Bolena*, that he kept photographs of it for the rest of his life. Visconti himself provided Benois with precise visual references, including the suggestion that he draw on Hans Holbein's paintings for the costume sketches. The designs are indeed literal transpositions from the painter's masterpieces, from the numerous portraits of Henry VIII at whose court the German-born Holbein had settled, to the celebrated *Ambasciatori* in London's National Gallery. Some are also borrowed from Pontormo's *Alabardi*, then in the Stillman Collection and now in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

A month and a half after the premiere of *Anna Bolena*, on 1 June came Christoph Willibald Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride*, with a libretto by Nicolas-François Guillard based on Euripides' tragedy. It was sung in Italian (in Lorenzo Da Ponte's version) and conducted by Nino Sanzogno, with Callas, more of a diva than ever, in the title role. Peter Brook was in the audience for the premiere. Benois was once again in charge of the sets and costumes for this *tragédie lyrique*, revived for the occasion after Gluck's *Alceste* – also starring Callas – was staged at La Scala in 1954.

Visconti's radical choice was to set the action, in two acts rather than the original four, within a single setting evoking the period in which the opera was composed (it premiered in Paris in 1779) rather than the era when the story takes place. So this was not the Greece of myth, but the Rococo world of the eighteenth century, still untouched (despite the dates) by any hint of Neoclassicism. The visual models Visconti had in mind were drawn from the stage-design tradition of the Bibiena family (some of whose drawings had been owned in Russia by Benois's father, the great Aleksandr Benois) and the architectural genius of Juvarra. Thus appeared the courtyard and colonnades of

a royal palace, with angular perspectives, where the characters moved about in costumes copied sometimes literally from the frescoes of Giovanni Battista Tiepolo – particularly the Antony and Cleopatra frescoes painted around 1750 in the Palazzo Labia in Venice, which had returned to the spotlight in 1951 thanks to a ball organized there by Charles de Beistegui.

Visconti's insistence – “This opera must look like a Tiepolo fresco come to life” – had consequences for the staging as well (“the whole show should be concert-like”). The result was worthy of a court theatre, from the use of a wind machine to the projection of clouds. At first, however, even Callas was unconvinced; she preferred a more direct, less intellectualized vision of ancient Greece. Critics such as Massimo Mila and others, and Gavazzeni himself, were no less skeptical. By contrast, Rossana Rossanda stood out for her enthusiastic response and her ability to grasp the director's intention.

VII. FROM *POLIUTO* TO THE *RING*, 1960-1972

Visconti was asked to open the 1960–1961 season with *Poliuto*, to a libretto by Salvatore Cammarano (based on Pierre Corneille's tragedy of the same name) and Antonino Votto conducting. The production starred Maria Callas (making her return and now performing under her maiden name rather than Meneghini) as Paolina, alongside Franco Corelli in the title role. Once again, the sets and costumes were designed by Nicola Benois. For this production too, Visconti drew upon the staging conventions of the period – *Poliuto* dates to 1838 – expressly channeling the slightly earlier scenic designs of Pietro Gonzaga.

But on 16 November 1960, some three weeks before the premiere, Visconti – outraged by the repeated censorship of his work, from *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, screened on 6 September at the Venice Film Festival, to his staging of Testori's *L'Arielda*, due to premiere in Rome at the Teatro Eliseo – withdrew from the production in protest. The Viennese director Herbert Graf (who as a child had been Freud's “Little Hans”) was brought in to take over, and *Poliuto*, with Visconti's staging, opened on 7 December 1960 as a glittering high-society event, to the tune of 15,000 flashbulbs and 16,000 pink carnations filling the auditorium.

Nicola Chiaromonte immediately sided with Visconti and expressed his admiration: “One would hope that his gesture might spark a wave of support, through which the most vital part of Italian culture would express, in the firmest possible terms, its refusal to submit any longer to the humiliating conditions being imposed on it. In any event, he will have set an example. That

Italian theatre in particular – directors, actors, authors, critics – owes him gratitude and solidarity seems to me beyond doubt.”

Callas wrote to Visconti: “Censorship is stupid because, instead of taking issue with the theatre, where after all one can choose to go or not go according to one’s wishes, it ought to begin by taking a firm stand against newspapers that publish obscene things about other people, inaccuracies, and all manner of defamatory material: yet all of this is freely permitted. One has to admit that there is a truly strange idea of freedom and morality in this so-called Catholic country where we live, where even today divorce is condemned as immoral, while at the same time the most absurd, pathetic, and unbelievable family situations are tolerated, and indeed created, with illegitimate children being born left and right. All these inconsistencies cause me pain; it all seems so absurd to me, so contrary to common sense, that at times I cannot understand how any of this can still exist in our own age.”

Thus ended Visconti’s collaboration with Callas, which he was convinced had yielded his finest opera productions, all of them at La Scala. Looking back in 1966, he would add to the list Verdi’s *Don Carlo* and *Macbeth*, both from 1958, the former conducted by Giulini at Covent Garden and the latter by Schippers to open the Festival dei Due Mondi in Spoleto. “When I met Callas more than eleven years ago, she was certainly a great singer, but she was not yet a great actress. I directed her for the first time in *La vestale*, at La Scala, in December 1954. Then I worked with her on *La sonnambula*, *La traviata*, *Anna Bolena*, and *Ifigenia*. Those were Callas’s golden years, and I’ll take some of the credit myself. With Maria, I had the satisfaction of seeing an extraordinary actress emerge. Her *Traviata* and her *Anna Bolena* remain two outstanding examples of stage interpretation, as well as vocal. Callas is a complete theatrical phenomenon: musical and dramatic. I believe there are only two or three such cases in the entire history of opera: Grisi, so they say, then Pasta and Malibran.” It’s no coincidence that Visconti had wanted Callas to play Berma in the never-made film of Proust’s *Recherche* (the Queen of Naples would have been played by Greta Garbo, of *Camille* or Lady of the Camellias fame).

Visconti would not work on a production intended for La Scala again until 1964, when he staged *Il trovatore* – although its premiere would take place on 10 September at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, as part of an ambitious tour by La Scala involving five operas, numerous concerts, and an exhibition of some seven hundred items. Verdi’s opera, with a libretto by Cammarano inspired by Antonio García Gutiérrez’s play of the same name, had premiered in Rome in 1853 and was one of Visconti’s favorites since childhood. When asked what profession he would have chosen had he not become a director,

he replied: “A tenor, so I could draw my sword and sing ‘Di quella pira’ as Manrico.”

Visconti had been meant to stage *Il trovatore* in 1949 at Maggio Musicale Fiorentino and at La Scala too, to open the 1957–58 season, with Gavazzeni conducting and sets and costumes by De Nobili. It was Visconti himself who had pulled out of the La Scala production, largely because of Benois’s efforts to thwart the project, in the hope of either securing the assignment for himself or reviving the work of his father Aleksandr, who had designed the sets for La Scala’s *Trovatore* productions of 1948 (conducted by De Sabata and directed by Carlo Piccinato) and 1953 (conducted by Votto and directed by Frigerio). To understand Visconti’s decision to yield to Benois’s demands, colored they were by filial devotion and backed by Gavazzeni, we should remember that Benois père’s sets for the third and fourth acts of *Il trovatore* had been used by Visconti himself for the memorable opening sequence of *Senso*, on the stage of the Fenice Theatre.

A proposal for *Il trovatore* to open the 1961–62 season, again with Gavazzeni at the baton, likewise came to nothing because it overlapped with preparations for *Il gattopardo*; the idea was brought up again – in vain – for the 1962–63 season. Meanwhile, in 1958, Visconti had considered staging *Il trovatore* with Callas for the inauguration of the Spoleto Festival, but ultimately directed Verdi’s *Macbeth* instead. On 7 December 1962, *Il trovatore* did finally open at La Scala under Gavazzeni’s baton, but with Giorgio De Lullo directing and sets and costumes by Pier Luigi Pizzi, who had to contend with the usual hostility from Benois.

The 1964 *Il trovatore*, rehearsed entirely in Milan (while Visconti was working on the film *Vaghe stelle dell’Orsa...*), was again conducted by Gavazzeni, with sets and costumes by Benois and Alberto Fassini serving as his assistant. It would be the only new production for La Scala’s tour to Moscow, where Visconti’s direction was “eagerly awaited and welcomed in Soviet cultural circles,” and where Benois returned for the first time since 1924.

For *Il trovatore* – whose highly intricate plot unfolds over four two-scene acts set in fifteenth-century Spain, between Biscay and Aragon – Visconti had suggested that Benois draw on the work of Piero della Francesca, among an array of visual sources. Hence the appearance of several figures from the Arezzo frescoes among Leonora’s attendants and the men-at-arms in the Aljafería Palace (curiously, the same models were put to an entirely different use that year as sources for Pasolini’s *Vangelo secondo Matteo*). The sets and costumes make use of fabrics supplied by the Bemberg company, whose name appears in unusually conspicuous fashion in the program.

Visconti did not go to Moscow with the production because he was busy with

another *Il trovatore* at Covent Garden in London, which opened on 19 November. This latter *Trovatore* was not very successful, in part because it suffered overwhelmingly from comparison with the dazzling *Don Carlo* staged at Covent Garden in 1958. Conducted by Giulini, its sets and costumes by Filippo Sanjust were once again replete with references to Piero della Francesca and fifteenth-century painting; filmed footage survives of the second, third, and fourth acts. Both 1964 productions feature the highly acclaimed Simionato in the role of Azucena.

The Moscow *Il trovatore* (performed not only at the Bolshoi but also at the enormous Kremlin Palace of Congresses) was conceived as a touring production, although Visconti himself was not especially satisfied with the result. After various back-and-forths and without Visconti present, it would eventually reach La Scala on 4 April 1967, and a few months later travel to Montreal for the '67 Expo. It would subsequently enjoy a certain degree of success, with revivals continuing until 1978 for La Scala's Bicentennial.

In 1967, Visconti announced that he was working on a film about Giacomo Puccini (*Ritratto di sconosciuto*, with screenwriters Enrico Medioli and Giuseppe Patroni Griffi), with Marcello Mastroianni in the title role. Aiming finally to come to terms with the composer, who until then had perhaps felt "too close to home," Visconti planned to open the film with Puccini among the crowd at Verdi's funeral, held in Milan. It would include scenes shot at La Scala, for which he had already sought permission from Ghiringhelli. The film would end with the premiere of *Turandot* at La Scala, conducted by Toscanini on 25 April 1926, which the twenty-year-old Visconti had attended. Beyond Puccini's life story, the underlying theme was to be an artist's confrontation with changing times: "the tormenting doubt of being surpassed, of feeling oneself prisoner to a formula."

It was also in 1967, but after *Il trovatore*, that Visconti last appeared on the stage of La Scala. The date was 15 December, and the occasion was a guest production of Goethe's play *Egmont* (written between 1775 and 1787 at the same time as his *Iphigenie auf Tauris*), accompanied by the incidental music Beethoven composed in 1810 as interludes, although Visconti occasionally used it as background music instead. The play was translated for the occasion by Fedele d'Amico, the husband of Suso Cecchi, who would not spare the director his misgivings about the interpretation that came through in the production or the numerous cuts that were made. The five-act tragedy – with a cast of some twenty actors, including Romolo Valli and Giorgio De Lullo, in the title role, and seventy-four extras – had been produced by Maggio Musicale Fiorentino in collaboration with the De Lullo-Falk-Valli-Albani Company and had premiered in Florence on 6 June, in the courtyard of Palazzo Pitti,

with Gavazzeni conducting. The set consisted of a kind of monumental, multilevel scaffold, stripped of all decoration, and the costumes were by the young Ferdinando Scarfiotti (assisted by his contemporary Oliva di Collobiano). Scarfiotti had trained alongside Visconti, whom he met in 1960 when he was not yet twenty. He had acted in *Vaghe stelle dell'Orsa*... and gone to Moscow to see *Il trovatore*; he would design the theatre sets for *Il giardino dei ciliegi* and the film sets for *Morte a Venezia*; and would go on to work with Ronconi and become Bernardo Bertolucci's scenographer for *Il conformista*, *Ultimo tango a Parigi*, and *L'ultimo imperatore*, to mention just a few highlights of his extraordinary career.

Egmont is set during the Dutch wars of independence against Philip II's Spain. The story has certain affinities with Verdi's *Don Carlo*, which Visconti had already staged twice (in London in 1958 and in Rome in 1965) and is something of a sequel to Donizetti's *Il duca d'Alba*, revived by Visconti and Schippers in Spoleto in 1959. Shortened by more than fifteen minutes and with the actors freed from their microphones, *Egmont* arrived at La Scala with Aldo Ceccato at the baton, before traveling in early 1968 to the Teatro Comunale in Bologna, the Teatro dell'Opera in Rome, and the Teatro San Carlo in Naples. On the poster, this time at least, the conductor and the director had equal billing.

Between the Florence and Milan performances of Goethe's drama, for the Brignone-Fortunato-Fantoni-Ronconi Company Visconti staged Testori's play *La monaca di Monza*, which opened at the Teatro Bonci in Cesena on 28 October. Once again there were arguments and protests, including between director and playwright. Heavily cut by Visconti, *La monaca di Monza* tells the backstory of Gertrude in Alessandro Manzoni's novel *I promessi sposi*, in part drawing on seventeenth-century documents that had only recently become accessible and on a sensibility reminiscent of D'Annunzio. Perhaps with this much-awaited collaboration in mind, Testori had given Visconti an invaluable Francesco Cairo image of Mary Magdalene. This seventeenth-century Lombard painter was one of Testori's favorites and Cairo's work had long engaged his imagination, where he saw parallels with the world of theatre and particularly with the contemporary tragedies of Federico Della Valle.

Unlike during the staging of *Arialda*, Visconti's and Testori's artistic visions were now consciously diverging. The playwright was distancing himself from the "grand manner" of Visconti's work, aspiring instead to an almost ascetic reduction of expressive forms to the theatre's entrails and the actor's voice. Visconti did not attend the Milan premiere of *La monaca di Monza* and recalled seeing Testori, on the opening night of *Egmont* at La Scala, "spend the intermissions holding rallies in the foyer against the production, the actors,

and the direction.” Over the years, the two would quarrel and make up, amid misunderstandings and illness: for health reasons, Visconti was forced to pull out “with great sorrow” from a production of Wagner’s *Ring* at La Scala, which he had been asked to stage in early 1972 over a four-year period beginning in 1973. Finally, in 1976, death came to settle their accounts once and for all. It was at La Scala itself, during its first exhibition dedicated to Luchino Visconti in 1978, that Testori would publicly ask forgiveness for what had happened between the two of them.

With studied nonchalance, trying to make what he did seem effortless – despite having “time for nothing but work” – Visconti had once said of himself: “I always find putting on an opera to be very pleasurable and mentally relaxing; few things calm me more than music.”

Giovanni Agosti

*Luchino Visconti
is 1, 8, 16, 51 and 68
years old*



Grazie a V Luchino Visconti

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