



# Toni Servillo: An Actor “Fallen” into Cinema

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Among the most famous and revered actors of Italian cinema, Toni Servillo’s career started off, as is well known, in the theatre, and more precisely, between the 1970s and the 1990s, in Naples-based avant-garde theatre experiences. This is where the deeply theatrical features of Servillo’s acting practice first developed. However, these features have not prevented him from fine-tuning a distinctive cinema style. In fact, they have possibly even helped him to do so.

An 18-year-old Servillo made his first appearance on stage in 1977, when he founded the “Teatro Studio” company. Less than ten years later, he joined forces with two other leading figures in Naples’ theatre scene, Mario Martone and Antonio Neiwiller, and launched “Teatri Uniti.” Within this framework, together with Martone and the other actors of Teatri Uniti, Servillo made his first steps into cinema—with Martone trying his hand at directing. The outcomes can be seen in *Morte di un matematico napoletano* (*Death of a Neapolitan Mathematician*, 1992), *Rasoi* (*Razors*, 1993), *La salita* (episode of *I vesuviani*, 1997), and *Teatro di guerra* (*Rehearsals of War*, 1998). But it is only in the early 2000s, after meeting directors Paolo Sorrentino and Antonio Capuano, that Servillo’s

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cinema profile more clearly emerged. *L'uomo in più* (*One Man Up*, 2001) and *Luna rossa* (*Red Moon*, 2001) mark in this sense a turning point toward greater awareness and a clearer commitment to cinema. Although Servillo kept returning to the theater—in 2002 he was on stage with *Sabato, domenica e lunedì* (*Saturday, Sunday and Monday*, Eduardo de Filippo, 1959) and later in plays by Marivaux, Goldoni, Molière, and De Filippo too—as a film actor, he progressively focused on creating a unique style, which, despite owing much to his learning the ropes on stage, had clear specificities.

While developing in the extraordinary milieu of the post-avant-garde and “nuova spettacolarità” (which one may translate in English as “new spectacularity”), Servillo’s approach to theatre is strongly anchored—ideally and factually—to few actor/author personalities, such as Eduardo de Filippo, Leo de Berardinis, Carlo Cecchi, and Louis Jovet, who may be seen as swinging back and forth between tradition and innovation. A distinctive “research within the tradition,” as Anna Barsotti puts it, qualifies the early days of Servillo’s artistic journey (Barsotti 2016, 42). At a very young age, he crossed path with Leo de Berardinis and Perla Peralgallo’s Teatro di Marigliano; on stage he met Eduardo de Filippo and Carlo Cecchi; later on, he stumbled upon Louis Jovet essays and his insights on acting.

The center stage is given by Servillo to his role as an actor: “whenever asked ‘what do you do?’, my answer is ‘I act, I feel I am an actor’. In a year, what I mostly do is acting, and this is the profession I identify with” (Servillo and Capitta 2008, 5). When it comes to theater, this implies choosing not to outsource the direction, and to become the director of his work himself, following, again, in the steps of de Filippo, de Berardinis, and Cecchi.

For Servillo, directing and acting a play does not simply mean putting together a given interpretation of the text. Clearly, it is. But, first of all, it is approaching in a certain way what happens on stage during the performance. The actor/director pre-arranges the scene, prompted by the director’s interpretation, in order to best allow the actors to meet the audience and artistically express themselves.

In 2005, in relation to staging *Le false confidenze* (*Falses Confidences*, Pierre de Marivaux 1737), Servillo said: “I am not a believer in the ‘mysticism’ of rehearsals: rehearsals are a key moment in the creative process, but an actor’s true creativity is in daily life, in the match with the audience. This is what gives theatre its charm” (Servillo 2006, 5).

As a result, Servillo’s stage works are able to produce a strong feeling of vitality, almost freshness. This is due, mainly, to the fact that each performance appears to the audience as a living organism, overflowing the narrow space of a “sequence of performances”—where night after night, actors invariably reproduce on stage the ideas of a director—and rather “renewing” itself over time by being especially capable of keeping track of the “here and now” of theatre, that is to say, of the ever-changing actors–audience relationship.

While commenting on his work on de Filippo, Servillo, for instance, affirmed:

Let’s consider the case of *Sabato, domenica e lunedì*. The show was rehearsed for fifty days and ran for four years. What do you do, in a case like that? Either you manage the routine, or, for four years, you let it decant, mature, age, like you let a piece of wood age: that’s how you do this job, stage after stage, town after town. (Servillo 2006, 5)

He also added elsewhere that:

A journey of three or four hundred performances is necessarily alive, in constant fermentation: it is the opposite of routine, not the punching-in salary-actor job, which being widespread has destroyed theatre and pushed young audiences away from it. The routinary exercise of theatre, with the greatest value given to rehearsals and then the mechanic[al] repetition of performances, makes theatre a depressed organism. Instead, the joy of theatre manifesting as vital élan should be kept alive through a constant invitation to think. (Barsotti 2016, 275)

Let’s pause briefly on one example: *Le false confidenze* (2005), which highlights some key aspects of Servillo’s approach to theatre. First of all, the show has a very peculiar soundtrack. Monotonous drumming, always the same, sets the tempo on stage, like a kind of metronome. This emphasizes the “geometric” style of the performance as well as the mechanicalness of the plot contraption developed by Dubois-Servillo. But it also works as a tool to make clear that theatre time is real, concrete, actual time: the time of each uttered line. What is at stake is not only the trick put together by the main character in the story, the Dubois-Servillo servant, but also the trick devised by Servillo-Dubois as servant-director

of actors. This is the subtler mechanism unfolding throughout the performance in front of the audience, without them being fully aware of it.

The metronome is there—invisible to the eyes of the audience—also to imperceptibly remind them of the nature of theater contraptions. Everything is “play” in its deepest meaning: like in “games.” This word might evoke simply playful and recreational references. But this is not always the case. Playing can be cruel, as in theatre, which Carlo Cecchi—one of Servillo’s reference points—would define as a “beautiful and terrible game” (Petrini 1999, 28).

Servillo’s interpretation underscores in fact the “darker” tones of Mari-vaux’s play. The sparkling seduction game leading the rich bourgeois widow, Arimante, into Dubois’ trap turns into slight apprehension as we come to see that the young Dorante is genuinely in love with her, and he is therefore suffering because of the deception. The whole story ends on an imperceptibly dark note. The end is very dry, almost cut off, as to downplay its importance: it had to end like that; it could only end like that. What counts is how we got to the end; what counts is the preceding and preparatory “play.”

The Italian translation of the play—by Cesare Garboli—contributes to the pared-down features of the show. Streamlined and lightened, it runs as fast as a score in which rhythm is more important than the actual unfolding of the story. Also, the set design works in the same direction, with highly stylized and geometric lines that are merely functional to outline the action spaces for the actors. Finally, Servillo’s acting is edgy, dry, stiff, no frills—nothing more (or less) than what is needed according to the chosen style. An essential approach to acting, intentionally non-naturalistic, very theatrical, with no falling into psychologism, which makes Dubois something of a Stoic, this latter feature being a (most interesting) refrain in Servillo’s acting style.

In the transition to cinema, Servillo deals with a very different approach to acting compared to theatre. He is definitely fully aware of this aspect and focuses a great deal on it, albeit based on his own experiences on stage. In cinema endeavors, there is, first of all, no sequence of performances. What Servillo describes as the “elating” moment and the core of theatre work, which, although being “tremendously tiring,” allows the “true intimate relationship actors nurture in their daily life with their characters” (Servillo and Capitta 2008, 8, my translation), is missing. A theatre character is never *set*—or “built,” according to the title of a

famous book by Stanislavsky, already critically discussed in this respect by Peter Brook—and actors progress based on “variation,” progressive approximations. As Servillo notes, actors “add or take off [to and from their character] every night, based on their temperament or what happens to them” (Servillo and Capitta 2008, 8).

Cinema instead requests from actors that in one sequence or one shot (in *that* sequence or in *that* shot) they unpack their whole interpretative journey. There is no sequence of performances; there is no character evolution in time. A character is, so to speak, *set* on film. The pressing and binding effects of this process are made even more so by the fact that final touches to a character can be added by the director (or, on their behalf, by the editor, etc.). Someone else can, to a certain extent, appropriate what the actor did in front of the camera. This is a “sacrosanct *abuse*,” Servillo notes, which is after all made necessary by the very nature of filmic language (Servillo and Capitta 2008, 15). Servillo claims that: “Concerning cinema ... one thing I get is this sacrosanct *abuse* of the actor by the director. Since the director is thinking about you without telling you, while writing: they use you and then *process* you during the editing phase. At any rate they abuse you then” (Servillo and Capitta 2008, 15). This also explains Servillo’s choice to work with a certain kind of director—and most of all, going back, over time, to certain directors: “Clearly, I work with directors, with whom I’d like to share an intellectual and artistic profile. Collaboration takes place already at the screenwriting stage” (Servillo and Capitta 2008, 15). One should mention here Servillo’s relationship with Paolo Sorrentino, with whom he reached not only the most significant outcomes of his film career, but also important awards and international recognition. However, unlike theatre actors, film actors are never in complete ownership of what they do: “the unpredictability aspect in your acting exercise is enormous, because at the end of the day the director takes it all, brings it home, and edits it ... In a sense, you *fall* into a film” (Servillo and Capitta 2008, 15–16).

If, on stage, Servillo’s crucial interest in the work of the actor leads him to also become the author of the performance as a whole (which becomes a way of co-arranging or, in other words, of experiencing creatively, together with the actors and the audience, what is happening on stage), in cinema, this interest leads him to circumscribe his attention essentially to the character—to cut out, so to speak, his room for maneuver around the interpretation of the part.

This is why Servillo's style of acting and his chiseled interpretative details are particularly striking on screen. Certainly equally present on stage, these aspects emerge with unmistakable clarity and power in his films.

Given that, as Anna Barsotti claims, "many aspects of his acting transfer unaffected from theatre to cinema" (Barsotti 2016, 61), the deepest point of contact between the two languages is, above all, the approach, the sensitivity, the urge for expressive research that characterizes both moments and that is largely transferred from the theatre to the cinema. Barsotti also remarks that "at the origins" of Servillo's work, one finds "the energy of theatre" (Barsotti 2016, 53). And Servillo himself points out, with his typical acumen—possibly resulting from his uninterrupted researching—that the actor's job, both in theatre and in cinema, is based on "energy reserves" of the most peculiar kind:

The actors' language is articulating other selves, not other than themselves, because that's what trained monkeys do. The actors, instead, articulate other selves that are included in their own personality and simultaneously in the minds of dramaturgs and screenwriters. In order to achieve this articulation, actors turn their life into an energy reserve for reflection, a piling up of materials. (Magrelli 2011, 10)

The film set can sometimes resemble the theatre stage: "As much as possible I act for the troupe, choosing it as my first audience. I therefore try to get an emotional response on set" (Magrelli 2011, 23).

Each character is defined by fine, rigorous details, which might be minimal, but they are deeply intentional—to the point of preciosity—both in terms of mimics and gestures, and in vocal terms: an eye movement, a walking style, the inflection of one word, the rhythm of one phrase. What is at stake are true "masks," which Servillo develops starting from a "neutral" level of expression—i.e., his own face and voice—and working carefully on minute adjustments and precise compositional movements. In other words, starting from his own body and his own voice he creates an acting score that comes *alive* on the set and at the time of the set.

In terms of facial expressions—which are often very defining of the characters Servillo plays—this results in "mimetic stills" (Barsotti 2016, 67), with strong and intentional iconographic references, often based on subtraction and expressive minimalism; in vocal terms, instead, he works on a composition heavily based on rhythm prevails—picking up

and slowing down, pausing and all in one go—alternating, equally clearly and deliberately, “extroversion” and “introversion” (Barsotti 2016, 47).

Servillo’s acting style, both in theatre and in cinema—if we are looking for one more element of continuity—plays entirely on a distinctive balancing of artificiality and naturalness. His acting presence has a lot to do with a form of expressive naturalness—he is indeed fond of a “certain simplicity” (Servillo and Capitta 2008, 46), not “naturalism,” but rather “naturalness,” where naturalness means, as aptly remarked by Carlo Cecchi, perform in “the actor’s natural place” (Petrini 1999, 48). Such a place, though, implies it is even based upon, a construction, the fake game of “playing,” a *natural artifice*.

As a result, audiences are often caught off guard by some unexpected element peeking through his performance. Mainstream cinema has accustomed us to acting styles that are trivially naturalistic, basic, and simply mimetic. Instead, Servillo almost always adds a tiny detail, a little quirk or movement that reveals—usually imperceptibly—the actor’s “false” playing. He also relies on the rhythm of his voice to the aim of “de-automate” his diction (Barsotti 2016, 75) as well as on facial expressions, like masks, to produce an “uncanny” effect on the viewers (Barsotti 2016, 60).

In this respect, the roles Servillo impersonates on screen—as before him, in a similar vein, did Gianmaria Volonté—should be seen as “types” rather than as characters, according to the still very useful distinction made, among others, by Mejerchol’d:

From reality we always choose what is most typical; we take a series of events typical of one single order; we connect them as to bring the goal of the show to the fore; in two-and-a-half hours, in fact, it is impossible to present an unprocessed fragment of reality. Therefore, we have to choose every typical element, so that the hand of the master, the hand of the artist, can be felt, so that everything is clear, so that a show is put together with no element hindering the transfer of ideas. (Mejerchol’d 1933, 82)

Servillo, like Volonté before him, works precisely on the composition of *types*: this process, compared to simply introspective *character* development, is a wider, airier, more interesting way of conceiving acting.

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