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In Taormina

The somewhat clumsily translated 'Europe Prize for the Theatre' (wouldn't it be better to keep its Italian original in evidence and call it 'The Europa Prize for Theatre?') Was founded by the Taormina Arts Foundation (Taormina Arte) in 1987 and given by its first jury (presided over by Irene Papas) to Ariane Mnouchkine and the Theatre du Soleil. The winners in the following two years were Peter Brook and Giorgio Strehler, both of whom came to the Sicilian resort to pick up their awards (generous money prizes) and participate in well-attended seminars on their work.

On the occasion of the Strehler event in 1990, a second award was established, for what the organisers called 'New Theatrical Realities'. It was given that first time to the Russian director Anatoli Vassiliev whose production of Pirandello's *Six Characters In Search Of An Author* had been one of the most praised theatrical events seen in Europe during the late '80s.

The Europa Prize jury — which includes UK representative Michael Billington of *The Guardian* and Dublin Festival director Lewis Clohery and is presided over by Spanish Theatre historian Jose Monleón — met in 1991 and decided who that year's winners would be. But financial problems beset the Taormina organizers and it was not possible for the 4th Premio Europa awards ceremony to be held until late in 1994.

The jury stuck to their choices of three years before and though one member of the jury had died in the meantime, the fortunate winner of the 60,000 ecus prize, German dramatist and director Heiner Müller, in spite of a grave illness which had threatened his life, was fit enough to come to Taormina to collect his cheque and listen to two days of accolades from friends and admirers.

One of the Italian members of the Premio Europa jury, critic Franco Quadri, introducing the seminar on Müller's work, said 'The prize was given for the first three years to directors who in their way have a right to be considered 'authors' thanks to the

theatrical invention they bring to their interpretations of the plays they stage. This time we are giving the prize to a real 'auteur' who is however also a director of his own and other people's work'.

Müller's work, anyway outside of the German speaking world, is still confined very much to the fringe theatres. Bob Wilson, himself

something of an elitist guru, is probably right in saying that people who want theatre to be easily understandable should stick to television.

The only work by Müller himself given during the weekend in Taormina was the rather overwhelming execution of his short libretto *The Liberation of Prometheus* for what is called a 'scenic concert', with a virtuoso execution by Heiner Goebbles (director as well as pianist) French actor Andre M Wilms and American percussionist David Moss, with sound by Willy Bopp and lighting by Mathis Paul which gave the younger members of the audience at Taormina's Palazzo dei Congressi auditorium an experience of post-Modern performance such as the island which gave birth to Luigi Pirandello hasn't seen since the last eruption of Etna.

Otherwise the performances or workshops seen in Taormina during the Premio Europa weekend were by the winners of the New Theatrical Realities awards. Vassiliev, who was to make the presentations to this year's winners, took over the ballroom of the San Domenico hotel to offer a sample of the extraordinary talents of the actors at his company The Moscow School of Dramatic Art, in scenes from Moliere's *Amphytrion* which they are playing in Moscow. The six players, three male and three female, exchange roles, and in the confusion of identities of the original play (which we were listening to in Russian) Vassiliev's actors tease each other and us with their Kabuki-inspired skills with sticks and flags.

Vassiliev had won the 'New Theatrical Realities' award in 1990 all to himself (20,000 ecus). When the jury made its decision the following year to divide the prize between three groups, they were concentrating on what was happening at the beginning of the '90s. Would they have made a different choice today? Maurizio Scaparro, the Italian director and festival entrepreneur — he brought the

theatrical carnival back to Venice and enlivened the Columbus celebrations in Seville — went on record during the Taormina seminar as saying 'This is not a great moment of creativity for our stages'.

Even so, the three companies who shared the 'new theatrical realities' award do represent trends that in their respective territories still win praise from critics and even popular acclaim. The much-travelled Els Comediants from Barcelona were not able to perform their recent work while in Taormina because somewhat incongruously the local authorities hadn't given permission for them to perform outdoors and fly their montgolfier. Comediants actor Jaime Bernhardt spoke of 'an increasing