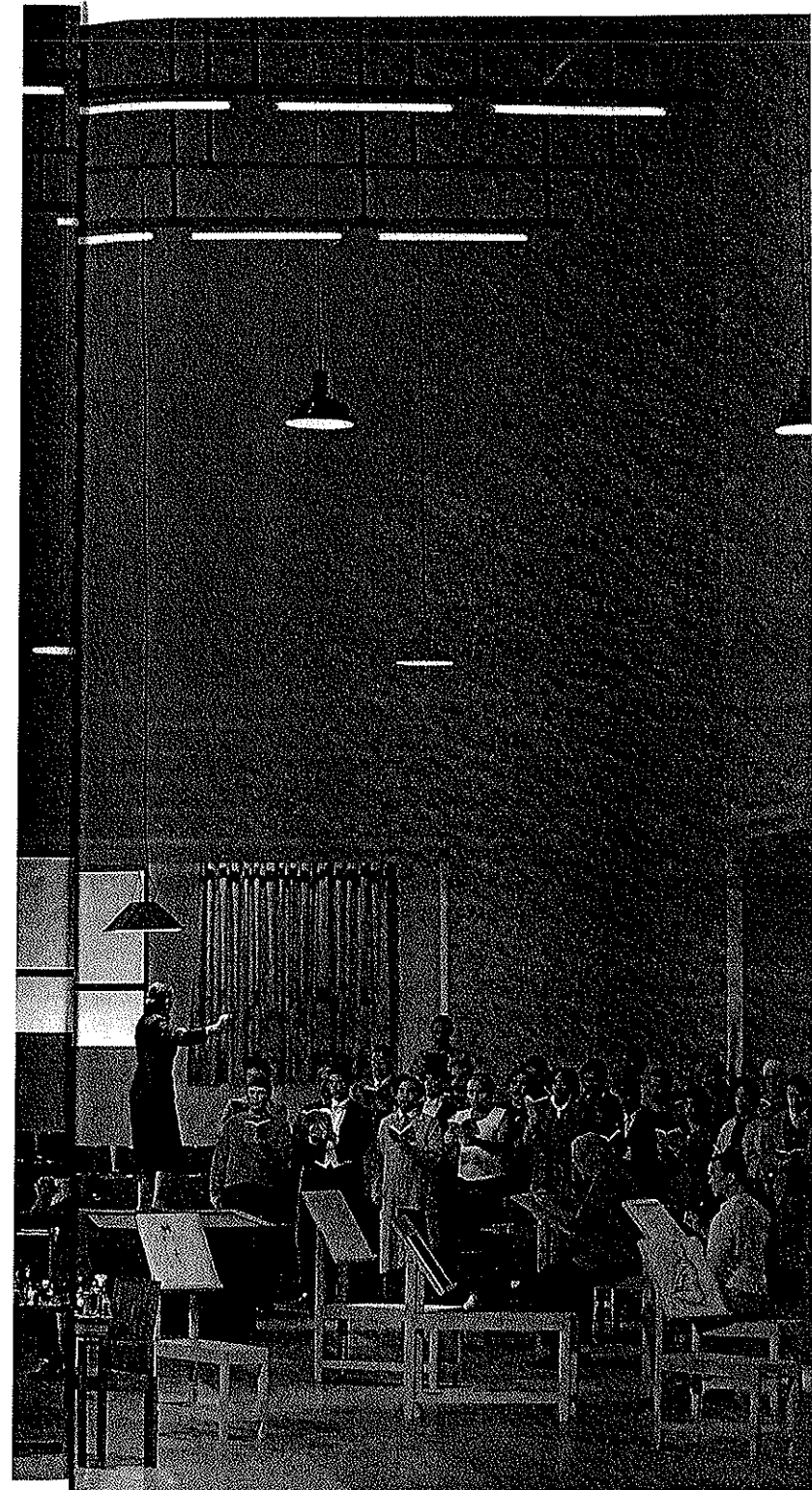
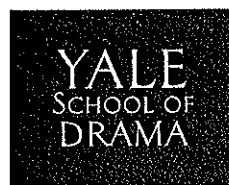


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Javier del Real

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Productions and Events

ALLEN J. KUHARSKI

GOMBROWICZ FURIOSO:

LUCA RONCONI'S *PORNOGRAFIA*

Pornografia

Adapted from Witold Gombrowicz

Piccolo Teatro, Milan (2014)

Polish critic Michał Głowiński described the plot of Witold Gombrowicz's 1960 novel *Pornografia* as impossible to summarize.¹ The same could be said of the directing career of Luca Ronconi, which closed a significant circle last year with the Italian master's mounting of *Pornografia* at Piccolo Teatro in Milan before his death in early 2015.

Ronconi, born in 1933, first created a sensation with his sprawling *auteur* production of *Orlando Furioso*, freely based on the sixteenth-century epic poem by Ludovico Ariosto and originally performed at the 1969 Spoleto Festival, later touring in Italy and internationally. *Orlando Furioso* was staged outdoors on a series of platforms in vast public spaces holding up to eight thousand spectators. The production launched Ronconi as a leading theatrical presence in the artistic and political crucible of the "generation of '68" in Italy and abroad, though he was not among the directors who founded their own companies. Ronconi went on to create a series of landmark original experimental productions noted for their visual flamboyance and extraordinary explorations of performance space. This work carried over in numerous productions of classic Italian, European, and American plays. Since the 1970s, Ronconi has also been in great demand internationally as an opera director, including numerous productions at La Scala in Milan. His production of *Pornografia* caps a series of stage adaptations of major literary works that began with *Orlando Furioso* and includes Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1998), Nabokov's screenplay for *Lolita* (2001), and Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* (2002).

The creation of *Orlando Furioso* in 1968–69 overlapped with the breakdown of Ronconi's negotiations with the ailing Gombrowicz to direct the world premiere of the writer's last play *Operetta* at Rome's Teatro Stabile. (Gombrowicz died in the summer of 1969.) Ronconi was associated with the Italian Communist Party at the time, and he was pressured not to direct Gombrowicz's play, which satirically portrays the overthrow of Europe's pre-World War II bourgeoisie by alternating fascist and communist revolutions. While Gombrowicz's fame was cresting in Western Europe in the late 1960s, restrictions on the performance and publication of his work in Poland and the Soviet bloc were as strict as ever. The Italian and world premiere of *Operetta* took place instead in 1969 in the provincial setting of Aquila under the direction of Antonio Calenda, with the true international launch of the play taking place in Paris in 1970, under Jacques Rosner's direction at the Théâtre National Populaire. The historic sig-



Luca Ronconi's
Pornografia, Piccolo
Teatro, Milan, 2014.
Photo: Luigi Laselva

nificance of the rupture between Ronconi and Gombrowicz has only grown with the passage of time, and their correspondence in 1968 has since been published in Polish and English [see *Theater* 34, no. 3, 2004]. Tactfully, perhaps, Ronconi does not mention *Operetta* in an interview included in the program for *Pornografia*, which opens with his memory of first reading Gombrowicz's other plays, short stories, and novels (including *Pornografia*) in the 1960s.

Ronconi's choice to do *Pornografia* at Piccolo Teatro as both his belated first production of Gombrowicz and would-be swan song was therefore a potentially charged artistic and political gesture. (In the tradition of aging theatrical divas, Ronconi subsequently agreed to direct a new production at the Piccolo.) In contrast to his earlier outdoor spectacles, operas, or elaborate spatial installations, Ronconi's *Pornografia* is a chamber play, done on the intimate four-hundred-seat main stage of Piccolo Teatro (the production was first performed at the 2013 Spoleto Festival). Ronconi is meticulous in

his handling of Gombrowicz's text and limits himself to verbatim passages of the novel onstage.

Pornografia is set in Nazi-occupied Poland, at a country estate where its two protagonists have gone to escape Warsaw on the eve of the uprisings there. The narrator is named after Gombrowicz, though the author spent the entire war in Argentina and never returned to Poland afterward. The novel is Gombrowicz imagining an alternative life in occupied Poland, with its settings explicitly referencing places where his

family lived before the war. In both Gombrowicz's novel and Ronconi's stage production, the Nazis appear only fleetingly and in the background of the action. Similarly, Poland's Jews are mentioned in passing only once, noted for their conspicuous absence in the vicinity after four years of the Nazi occupation. The ethical crux of the story is what transpired between the Polish characters in the wake of the progressive collapse of traditional social and moral



Pornografia, 2014.
Photo: Luigi Laselva

authority following the combined Nazi and Soviet invasions in 1939. It is a study in both sociological and metaphysical "demoralization"—the creation of a vacuum in values that is filled by unexpected forces. Czesław Miłosz attested to the depth and accuracy of Gombrowicz's imaginative exercise in *Pornografia*, writing that "those who claim the background of the novel is 'unrealistic' (not the plot; it has a different aim) prove that they had not been in Poland during the war."² John Updike described the plot of *Pornografia* as "perfectly shaped and thoroughly sinister."³

In a typical gambit, Gombrowicz in *Pornografia* in fact presents a double self-portrait: the comically inept narrator Witold and his Mephistophelean companion Fryderyk, an actor and avant-garde theater director who happens to share a first name with Chopin. Fryderyk consistently proves a provocative and destabilizing presence in the Chekhovian world of the manor, eventually convincing Witold to help him stage an erotic "happening" with two young people in the house, Henia and Karol, saying "I have an idea . . . for a screenplay . . . a film screenplay . . . but some scenes are a bit risky, need work, one has to experiment with living material." In spite of the novel's title, *Pornografia* contains no sexually explicit language or action and instead culminates with a

sequence of murders rivaling the end of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, during which Henia and Karol together are initiated into violence by the older characters, rather than into sex.

As with Gombrowicz's last play, *Operetta*, the title of *Pornografia* is that of a genre that creates an expectation betrayed by the actual content of the work. In his introduction to the novel, Gombrowicz wrote: "And what if *Pornografia* were an attempt to renew Polish eroticism? . . . An attempt to revive an eroticism which would bear a stronger relationship to our destiny and our recent history—composed of rape, slavery, and boyish squabbles—a descent to the dark limits of the conscience and the body?"

The goal of Gombrowicz's experiment in reviving Polish eroticism is revealed to be the birth of a new category of both Polish and contemporary tragedy. The outward promise of sensationalistic erotic fiction provocatively set in Nazi-occupied Poland gradually assumes overtones of Euripides's *The Bacchae* and Racine's *Phèdre*, as well as *Hamlet* and *Othello*. As in the late plays of Shakespeare, the elements of comedy, pastoral, and tragedy in *Pornografia* are freely blended, but here they are embedded in the form of a novel. At the core of Gombrowicz's tragic vision is a timeless pacifist argument: the deadly manipulation of the young by the old in the service of war.

Pornografia is also in part a philosophical reflection on the meaning and manipulation of perceptions, a kind of metatext on the ethics of both directing and spectating. Gombrowicz was wary of these issues being confused with superficial voyeurism as a theme or strategy on his part. The novel ultimately both embodies and critically examines the concept of scopophilia.

Repeating a convention used in *Orlando Furioso*, Ronconi's only liberties with the text are occasional adjustments of verb tenses (to emphasize the present) and the use of prose passages as Brechtian narration or soliloquies by the actors (who move freely between first and third person in speaking about themselves and other characters). The production's acting style is presentational, blending elements of Brecht, *commedia dell'arte*, and Shakespeare, rigorously emphasizing the actions and social masks of the characters, with their inner lives (if any) a mystery to be solved by them and us. This play of psychological surfaces reflects the work's theme of the manipulation of the gaze. While we endlessly hear the thoughts of the narrator Witold, his bored and barren inner life hungrily seeks stimulation and satisfaction from without.

Visually, the production's design is selective and minimalist, first invoking a metaphysical black void, which shifts under light to reveal a backdrop that could be a wall in a slaughterhouse. Ronconi and designer Marco Rossi assemble quirky sliding set pieces out of old upholstered furniture and farm equipment that glide on- and offstage and create visual evocations or even explicit quotations of paintings by Balthus and Francis Bacon.

The first half plays as erotic farce. Witold is portrayed by Riccardo Bini as a middle-age and slightly manic Harlequino in an elegant gentleman's suit and wire-rim spectacles. Though gray and past a certain age, Bini's Witold is loquacious, loose

limbed, and easily excitable, both quick-witted and shallow. He plays the confidante, dramaturg, and coconspirator to the crumpled, unshaven, and strangely charismatic Fryderyk, played by Paolo Pierobon. Witold is the audience's antic guide and proxy in the drama, and his shared vicarious excitement with Fryderyk at the sight of the sexy young pair Henia and Karol is the spark of *Pornografia's* perverse comedy.

Bini's Witold carries the first half of the show, the centerpiece of which is a mass at the local village church during which the very presence of Fryderyk in the congregation mysteriously voids the service of all substance. Bini's key prop in the production is a rolling lectern from which he narrates as needed, with which he functions as the priest in the pulpit in the church scene, with the pews consisting of a set of dining room chairs also used throughout the show. The congregation is made up of the other characters from the manor. As Bini's Witold informs us:

I realized that introducing this man [Fryderyk] into the church was sheer madness: one should have kept him away from it all, for God's sake! The church was the most terrible place for him to be! But what happened, happened. The process that had taken place arrived at reality in crudo . . . first and foremost it was the ruin of salvation. Nothing could save those boorish, fusty mugs, now extracted from any sanctifying mode and served up raw, like offal. This was no longer a "populace," these were no longer "peasants," these were not even "people," these were creatures such as . . . such as they were . . . and their dirt had been deprived of grace. But the unbridled anarchy of this multihead was like the no less insolent shamelessness of our faces that had ceased to be "lordly," "cultured," or "refined" and had become something glaringly themselves—caricatures that had been deprived of a model: no longer caricatures of "something," they were just themselves, and bare as an ass! . . . The bells rang for the Elevation. Fryderyk kneeled. This time his kneeling had a crushing effect, like killing a hen, and the Mass rolled on, though stuck mortally and babbling like a madman. *Ite missa est.*

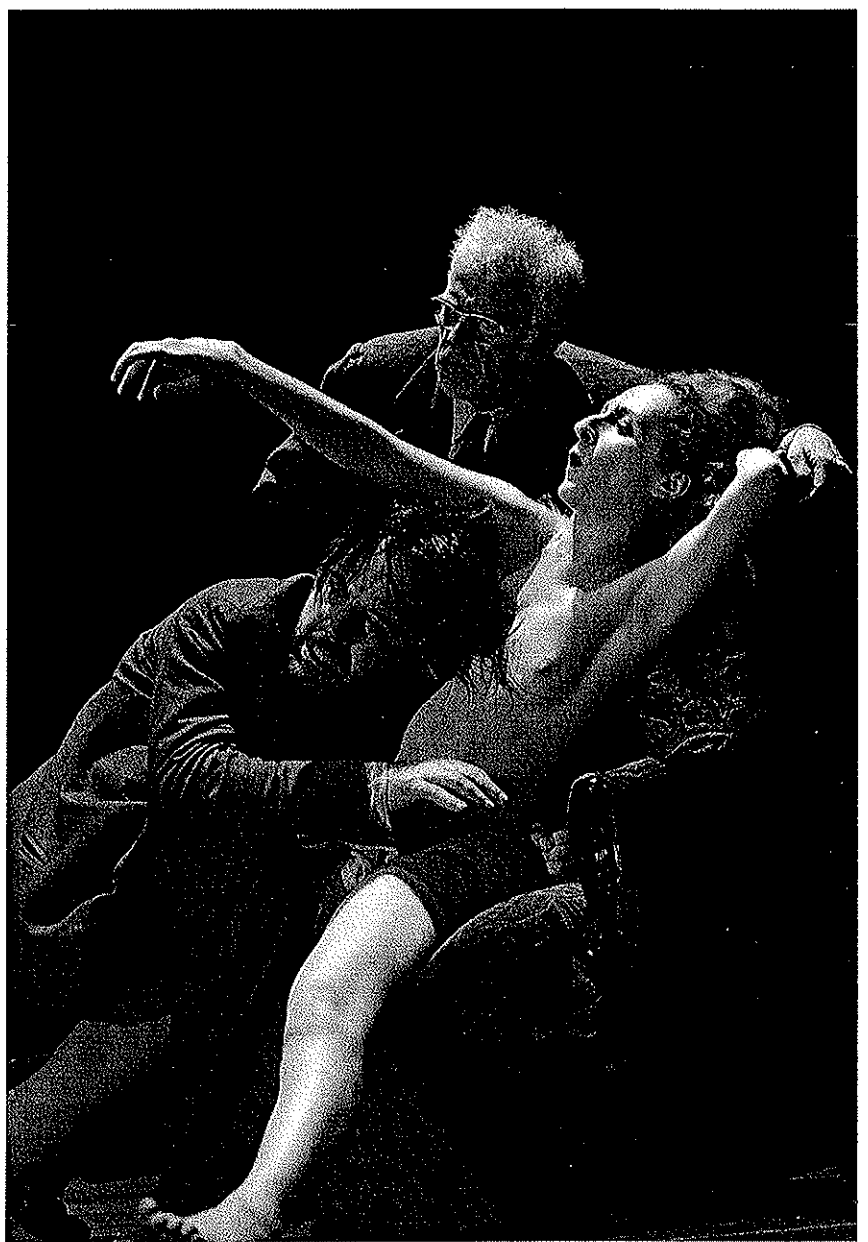
Fryderyk's silent overthrow of the traditional Catholic mass is immediately followed by Witold's first excited glimpse of Karol and then Henia leaving the church. The true nature of Fryderyk's presence is revealed here: as the destroyer of old forms and values and the catalyst for the release of suppressed sexual energies and other taboos. To the deadly challenges to traditional Polish values and structures represented by Hitler and Stalin is added the pagan Nietzschean artistic presence of Fryderyk/Gombrowicz.

Ronconi's casting of Lucia Marinsalta as Henia and Loris Fabiani as Karol sustains the production's comic tone: both actors are attractive, vivacious, and appropriately naive, but neither projects a smoldering sexuality. Their callow prettiness is akin to the conventional young lovers of *commedia dell'arte*, even when their sexual know- ingness is revealed. Karol, for example, stuns and crushes Witold when he jokes that

he would just as soon have sex with Henia's mother as with the girl. Marinsalta's Henia is able to both pose provocatively as a dead ringer for the adolescent model in a Balthus painting and still justify Witold's vexed description of her as "a goose." The farcical essence of Witold and Fryderyk's obsessive interest in provoking an erotic connection between Henia and Karol is the total lack of physical chemistry between the two young people, in spite of what is revealed to be their general lack of sexual inhibitions (which only excites Witold even more). Their familiarity with each other since childhood proves an impenetrable sexual firewall. The alienated consciousness of Witold's pornographic voyeur is confounded by the simplest and most ordinary human ties. Bini brilliantly captures the brutal comedy of Witold's growing sexual excitement and frustration at every turn. More than two hours into the performance, Witold finally has to start masturbating to get some relief, without stopping to interrupt his manic narration. He is Fryderyk's ideal spectator.

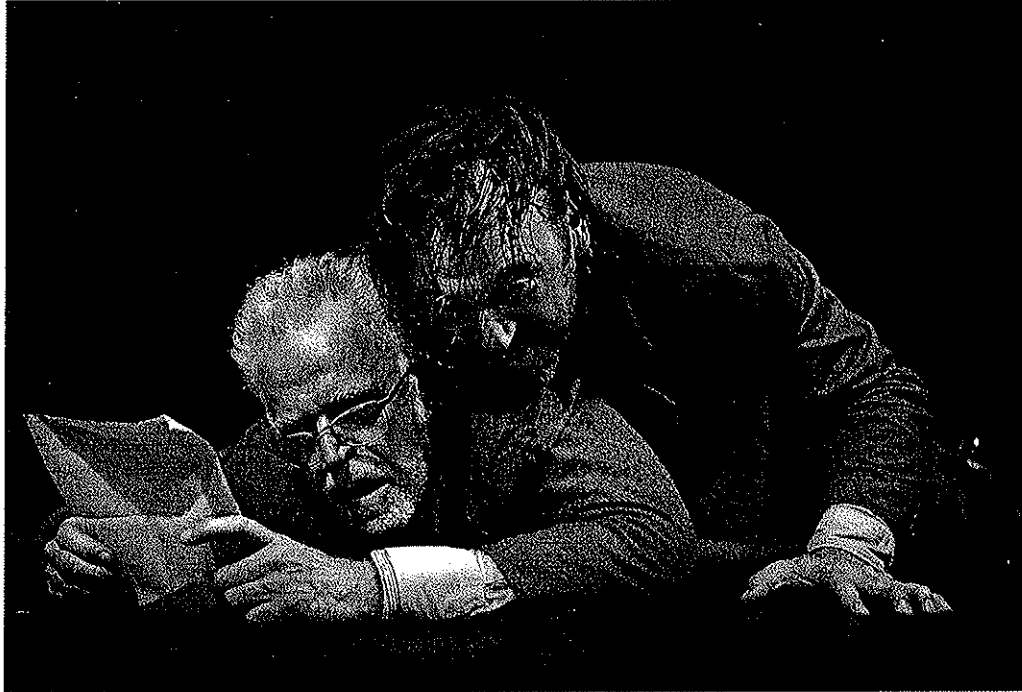
The young people's desperate need for leadership by the older generation is captured both by Henia's steadfast commitment to a conventional engagement to the chaste and elegant older lawyer Wacław (the social antithesis of Witold and Fryderyk) and in Karol's electrified and worshipful response to the sight of Siemian, an officer in the Polish underground, who is in turn commanding in public and panicked in private. The plot takes an ominous turn with the arrival of the traumatized Siemian, who has been secretly marked for execution by his comrades as a possible security risk.

The real discovery and revelation of Gombrowicz's novel and Ronconi's production is the Nietzschean artist Fryderyk. The second half of Ronconi's version opens with the enigma of Fryderyk's encounter with the dignified Catholic matriarch Amelia,



Pornografia, 2014.
Photo: Luigi Laselva

the story's modern embodiment of an aging Demeter or Artemis in the anachronistic Arcadian world of her Polish country manor. Their meeting begins with Amelia's apparently fatal intellectual attraction to Fryderyk and ends with her startling death as a result of a mysterious offstage scuffle in the pantry with a feral Cupid-like peasant boy wielding a bread knife. The eruption of a pagan Slavic rite of spring is suggested by the event, which Ronconi elaborates with the entrance of the naked and bleeding Amelia (Valentina Picello), who glides onstage splayed on one of the production's fraying upholstered armchairs. Amelia spurns both the sight of her son and that of the crucifix



Pornografia, 2014.
Photo: Luigi Laselva

offered her for her last rites and instead calls for Fryderyk, who initially kneels before the nude Amelia like a worshipping lover in full view of the other characters and, after her death, rises as the victorious prophet or god of a new, unnamed religion.

The death of Amelia is followed by Fryderyk's sustained psychological assault on her blandly handsome and conformist son Waclaw (Ivan Alovio), Henia's fiancé, who unwittingly plays Othello to Fryderyk's Iago when the director finally shares his "staging" of a compromising encounter between Henia and Karol. That Fryderyk's motives are far removed from Witold's superficial prurience is revealed here both to the narrator and to us. When the elaborate plot to use Henia and Karol to complete the assassination of Siemian takes its winding course, and the stage slowly fills with rolling platforms with the bodies of the intentionally and unintentionally killed (which include Waclaw and the peasant boy), Fryderyk is revealed to be insane. Fryderyk, holding a bloody knife matching the one that killed Amelia and that he has now gratuitously

used to kill the boy, is ultimately both the fool and the agent of these violent and amoral new gods of the twentieth century. When Witold describes the deluded Fryderyk as “beaming with innocent naïveté,” Pierobon resembles a latter-day Agave holding the head of her son Pentheus, or a violent reanimation of the mad Friedrich Nietzsche.

Ronconi pays homage to Gombrowicz’s self-portrait as the protean and frenzied theater director Fryderyk, becoming a willing partner in the writer’s paradoxical crimes of the imagination. Fryderyk/Gombrowicz is a shapeshifter, revealed in turns as a well-mannered son of the Polish gentry, a scruffy and provocative bohemian recalling Tadeusz Kantor, an over-the-hill satyr, Hamlet staging *The Mousetrap*, Iago, and Dionysos as imagined by Euripides or Nietzsche. His character is one of Gombrowicz’s ultimate jazz-like riffs on diverse classical and Polish sources, as well as a self-portrait. Fryderyk/Gombrowicz is the mature Ronconi’s muse, his proxy, his Prospero, his Polish Orlando Furioso.

In the language of the novel’s curtain line, Ronconi and Gombrowicz are joined in a predicament, in a catastrophe: sin. And they invite us to watch.

Ronconi clearly understood that the sprawling novel is extraordinarily difficult to cut or dramatize, even though it simultaneously invites stage and screen adaptation. The numerous dramatizations of *Pornografia* attempted in Western Europe, Poland, and the United States since the 1960s, including more than a dozen abortive film treatments in addition to Jan Jakub Kolski’s deeply flawed 2003 screen version, have so far produced a vexed and uneven history in performance. Ronconi’s first half is, if anything, too faithful to the details of the book, which at times dampens the production’s comic verve. In the second, the director makes bolder and freer strokes with ever more satisfying results. Ronconi’s late homage to Gombrowicz ultimately proves the most notable production of the playwright in Italy to date—and the most accomplished dramatization of *Pornografia* in any language.

NOTES

1. Michał Głowiński, “Komentarze po Pornografii,” *Pornografia* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1994), 151.
2. Czesław Miłosz, “Who Is Gombrowicz?,” introduction to *Ferdydurke*, by Witold Gombrowicz (New York: Viking/Penguin, 1986), viii.
3. John Updike, “Behold Gombrowicz,” review of *Ferdydurke* and *Pornografia*, by Witold Gombrowicz, *New Yorker*, September 23, 1967, 172.