

Article

Go and Sin No More: The Afterlife as Moral Teaching in Italian Catholic Educational Theatre

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Abstract: Catholic religious orders that have education as part of their mission have often used visions of the afterlife in theatre productions as vehicles to transmit a message of conversion, especially to those who, because of age or illiteracy, would not benefit as much from Scripture readings or complex sermons. In this article, I look at how such visions of the blessed and the damned, of heaven and hell, of angels and demons, were used in educational theatre in Italy by the Jesuits in the 16th century and the Salesian sisters in the 20th century. The historical background for the Jesuit and Salesian plays I analyze also reveals a propagandistic layer of meaning in their representation of the afterworld, as the Jesuits' tragedies date to the years of the Counter-reformation, while the Salesian sisters' plays belong to era of the cold war. Thus, the Jesuit and Salesian theatrical depictions of heaven and hell provide insight not only into the religious understanding of the eras, but also into the social and political concerns of the times in which they were composed, as well as the diverse educational messages transmitted to young men and young women.

Keywords: heaven; hell; purgatory; Jesuits; Salesians; drama; education; Italy

1. Introduction: The Good Place and the Bad Place

In early 2018, an interview by journalist Eugenio Scalfari of *La Repubblica* with Pope Francis (Scalfari 2018) made world-wide headlines: “The Holy Father, the Supreme Pontiff, the infallible definer of Catholic doctrine, said nope, he doesn’t believe in hell”, reported one newspaper in New Zealand (Lapsley 2018). “Pope Francis ‘abolishes hell’, saying souls of unrepentant sinners will simply disappear”, stated the *Times* (Willan 2018). Although quickly contested by the Vatican (Parole del Papa 2018), the reported words of Pope Francis on hell not being an actual place seemed to complement what he had said regarding heaven during the general audience of 26 November 2014. More than a place, he affirmed, heaven “is a ‘state’ of soul in which our deepest hopes are fulfilled in superabundance and our being, as creatures and as children of God, reach their full maturity”. There, he added, we “will finally be clothed in the joy, peace and love of God, completely, without any limit, and we will come face to face with Him!” (Francis 2014).

Today, perhaps, the suggestion that heaven and hell might not be actual places may correspond to widespread beliefs. Even those who believe in the existence of an afterlife can disagree as to what it might look like (Paradise Polled 2015), or as to how the good and bad places might even differ (as in the 2016–2019 Netflix series “The Good Place”). In 16th century Italy, however, there was no such confusion. Christians lived their lives knowing beyond doubt that the *dies irae*—the day of wrath—was imminent.¹ On that day, the world would dissolve into ashes; with universal dread the Book of

¹ In fact, according to Mirko Breitenstein, daily life during the Middle ages presented these two challenges: “to know that there are representatives from the other world, and to behave towards them adequately, that is, to search them or to flee

Consciences would be read out—judging the living and the dead; at that very moment “when the doomed can no more flee from the fires of misery”, the sheep would be separated from the goats, the righteous would shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father, while the sinners would be cast into the fiery furnaces where there would be but weeping and gnashing of teeth (*Dies Irae* 1998).² If there were a choice between spending eternity dancing in a heavenly garden with the saints and angels, or being chewed to pieces by Satan,³ most believers would try to behave in such a way as to be destined to the good place and not the bad.

Catholic religious orders that have education as part of their charism⁴ have often used visions of the afterlife in theatre productions as vehicles to transmit a message of conversion, especially to those who, because of age or illiteracy, would not benefit as much from Scripture readings or complex sermons.⁵ The goals of such plays set in heaven and hell, with angels and demons, the blessed and the damned—in addition to being visually entertaining, with special costumes, light and smoke effects—were meant to move a young or illiterate audience to follow or avoid the examples of others who now witnessed the experience of eternal triumph or suffering. These plays did not debate the existence of heaven and hell; in a Catholic setting, such an understanding of the afterlife was taken for granted. Rather, they indicated what kind of people, and sometimes, like Dante Alighieri, even which historical figures, would go there—and thus they educated the spectators on which role model to follow.

In this article, I will look at how such visions of the blessed and the damned, of heaven and hell, of angels and demons, were used in educational theatre in Italy both by Jesuit priests in the 16th and 17th centuries, and Salesian sisters in the 20th century. My goal is to discuss how the afterlife was used in theatre for the education of the youth during these centuries. I have chosen these two congregations in particular because both used theatre as an essential part of their educational system. Moreover, given that the Jesuits educated only young men, and the Salesian sisters only young women, the diverse blessed and damned souls that they stage allow us to discuss what virtues and vices young men and women were to pursue or avoid. Finally, the historical background for the Jesuit and Salesian plays that I will analyze will also help uncover a propagandistic layer of meaning in their representation of the afterworld, as the Jesuits’ tragedies date to the years of the counter-reformation, while the Salesian sisters’ plays belong to the era of the cold war. These two periods, although separated by some four centuries, include similarities of political and religious tensions, each creating a climate of disagreement and suspicion which gave rise to anti-protestant (in the counterreformation years) and anti-Communist (in the 20th century) beliefs and propaganda within Catholic religious institutions. Thus, the Jesuit and Salesian theatrical depictions of heaven and hell which I will discuss will provide insight into not only the religious understanding of the eras, but also the social and political concerns of the times in which they were composed, as well as the diverse educational messages transmitted to young men and young women.

2. Jesuit Theatre and the Afterlife

The connection between theatre and the Catholic church dates at least to the middle ages. In fact, the earliest recorded theatre in Western Europe appears to be the liturgical drama of the church,

from them [and] to develop strategies in order to avoid hell or to reach heaven within the Beyond after death” (*Breitenstein* 2018, p. 122).

² See, for example, Mt 13: 41–43.

³ See, for example, the dance of the blessed in Beato Angelico’s “Last Judgment”, in the Museo Nazionale di San Marco of Florence, or the depiction of Satan chewing on the bodies of the damned in the “Last Judgment” by Coppo di Marcovaldo, in the Battistero di S. Giovanni in Florence. For early modern artistic depictions of heaven and hell, see *Hughes* (1968).

⁴ In the New Testament, the word ‘charism’ refers to a spiritual gift given to individuals through divine grace (1Corinthians 12) or gifts of community leadership (Ephesians 4: 1–16). In Catholic theology, it has come to refer to the particular form of service to the church that a religious congregation has chosen or inherited from their founder (*McFarland* 2011).

⁵ Several religious orders also used theatre as a vehicle for evangelization in missions abroad. See, for example, *Isgro* (2015).

used to tell stories from the Bible, teach doctrine and encourage good behavior. In Italy, the oldest remaining dramatic text is a 12th century lament of the Virgin Mary at the foot of the cross, part of a passion play. Other genres that flourished in the middle ages were the lives of the saints and sacred plays (Medieval Drama 2000). Beginning about the time of the Renaissance, the educational purpose of Catholic theatre expanded from the churches and the squares to the schools of those religious orders that devoted themselves to the education of the youth. This form of Catholic educational theatre reached its maximum success with the plays performed in Jesuit schools in the 16th and 17th centuries.⁶

The Jesuits opened their first Italian college in Messina in 1548; by 1556, the year their founder Ignatius Loyola died, they had established some twenty colleges throughout Italy and several more throughout Europe. By 1773, when the order was suppressed, there were about 700 Jesuit schools in Europe and 100 in the rest of the world (Grendler 2014, p. 8; Sani 2009, pp. 33–34).⁷

Jesuit education was meant to confirm Catholic youth in their faith, confute heresy, and educate future leaders toward the good of society (Grendler 2014, p. 9). From nearly the beginning, theatre had a role in achieving these goals. “The Jesuits embraced theater as a didactic tool” explains Kevin Wetmore, “even as they feared its potential for immorality. They recognized its power, but worked to ensure the students seeing and performing the shows realized the drama was a means to an end, not an end in and of itself” (Wetmore 2016). Already by 1555, or possibly even earlier,⁸ comedies and tragedies began to be performed in Jesuit schools (Oldani and Yanitelli 1999, p. 18),⁹ bringing several benefits to both the students and the school. Students gained exercise in memory and Latin as well as acquiring virtue by emulation. In addition, since Jesuit performances on special occasions (the feast of a patron saint, or a prizegiving ceremony) were open not only to school members but to the entire community, theatre was as well “a form of advertising for Jesuit education, but also [. . .] a way of dialogue and alliance with civil and religious authorities” (Gallo 2018). Finally, the public nature of educational theatre helped the schools’ prospects of gaining the support of wealthy donors (Sani 2009, p. 44). In 1556, in a letter to “Those Going to Begin the College in Prague by Commission”, Ignatius himself encouraged the staging of plays “to aid and encourage the students and their families and to gain authority for the classes” (Ignatius of Loyola 2006, p. 636).

Because it was part of the Jesuits’ educational system, theatre in the Jesuit tradition had to follow rules that were spelled out in the Ratio Studiorum of 1599: “Tragedies and comedies must be in Latin, and they must be very few. Their subjects should be religious and edifying, and there should be no interludes that are not in Latin and in good taste. No female characters or costumes may be used” (McCabe 1983, p. 14).¹⁰ Thus, most Jesuit plays, at least for the first century, were in Latin. To facilitate understanding, a summary of the events of the play in the vernacular would often form the preface to the publication, be distributed to the audience or, in some cases, even read aloud before each act (Saulini 2002, p. 50). Plays were distinguished as either *ludi sollemnes*, that is, tragedies performed

⁶ The bibliography on Jesuit theatre is constantly growing, from the seminal article by Schnitzler (1952) to the more recent O’Malley (2013); Wetmore (2016) and Gallo (2018); see also Oldani and Yanitelli (1999); Sani (2009) and Zanlonghi (2004, 2006) for Jesuit theatre in Italy in particular.

Elissa Weaver has suggested that the Jesuits may have been aware of and possibly influenced by the tradition of theatre used in the education of young women in convents before the establishment of Jesuit schools (Weaver 2002, p. 4). Some of the theatrical works staged in convents in Renaissance Florence also had angels and devils as characters and referred to the joys or torment of the afterlife as consequences of the choices made during one’s life. See for example Haraguchi (2009) on *Rappresentazione delle virtù e dei vizi* [Play of the Virtues and Vices] (1650) by Eleonora de Montalvo (1602–1659). Using the structure of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, this play shows one group taken by St Michael the archangel at the moment of their death, while the second—those that did not repent in time—is dragged away by Lucifer.

⁷ Jesuit schools were open to males of all social classes “who could pass the courses and obey the rules”; there was no tuition fee to pay (O’Malley 2013, p. 59). The number of students would range from 100 to more than 2000 in individual schools, with an average of about 400 (McCabe 1983, pp. 8–9).

⁸ McCabe states that there is evidence of plays being staged in Messina even in 1551 (1983, p. 38).

⁹ Performance of drama in Latin by Plautus and Terence was already part of Humanistic schools in Florence (Black 2007, p. 164).

¹⁰ These rules appear somewhat more relaxed than previous ones. For example, in the guidelines emitted in 1591, there was also a prohibition of women spectators (McCabe 1983, p. 13).

by senior students, or *ludi priores*, often comedies performed during the Carnival season by younger students (Oldani and Yanitelli 1999, p. 18). There was a tendency to not reuse a play which had already been staged in another college, hence the necessity to create always new works. William McCabe calculates the number of plays produced in Jesuit colleges “conservatively at nearly one hundred thousand” (McCabe 1983, p. 47). Schnitzler claims, however, that although plays may have been new, they may not have been entirely original, as they would follow a typical dramatic scheme and an ethical message which reflected the mission of the order, that is, the salvation of the souls: “every play was to exalt the blessing of a devout life and to inspire the audience with the Christian values of humility and piety” (Schnitzler 1952, p. 285). This common theme was used in a variety of theatrical genres, from tragedy to comedy, and pastoral play to pantomime, including even farce, opera and ballet (Schnitzler 1952, p. 286). In many cases, however, summaries are all that are left of the thousands of plays written for Jesuit theatre (Filippi 2001, pp. 13–15).¹¹

Looking at the summaries of these numerous plays, it is evident that most would focus on the fight between good and evil, the battle between the two forces that vie for the human soul and the salvation of the world, as embodied on stage in the characters of Christ and Satan (Saulini 2002, p. 42). In fact, the aspect of Jesuit drama that I intend to explore here is the use of allegorical figures, be it the personification of ideas, or supernatural characters such as angels and demons. Such characters “were used in frequent dream scenes, in episodes showing magicians and sorcerers at work, in frightening images of Hell, or in dazzling visions of Heaven” (Schnitzler 1952, p. 286).¹² While on the stage itself human life developed, moving from town to forest, or fortress to port, “from heaven descend[ed] patron saints; angels and allegorical characters show[ed] themselves from the clouds; while from the abyss there suddenly emerge[d] demons, infernal spirits and magical prodigies” (Filippi 2001, p. 55).¹³ Thus, the use of special effects on stage would deeply affect the spectators’ senses, rendering more effective the educational message presented in the play even for illiterate audiences (Schnitzler 1952, p. 288).¹⁴

This “tendency to exhibit constant activity” on stage was certainly due to the needs and preferences of the audience (McCabe 1983, p. 64). But the reason behind such effects also connects to Jesuit spirituality: as part of the spiritual exercises, Ignatius Loyola instructed on the “application of the senses” to make one’s meditation or contemplation more effective. In other words, as Wetmore (2016) summarizes, “the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* are a form of acting exercise in which one imagines oneself as a character in various biblical situations and explores what it means, physically, emotionally, and (most important) spiritually to experience it”.

In the Jesuit tradition, therefore, theatre and spiritual exercises unite; theatre is, in fact, rooted in Ignatian spirituality. Consider the Spiritual Exercises themselves: in the fifth exercise of the first week of the Spiritual exercises, the exercitants are instructed to imagine themselves in hell. First, they should “see with the eyes of the imagination the huge fires and, so to speak, the souls within the bodies full of fire”. Then, “hear the wailing, the shrieking, the cries, and the blasphemies against our Lord and all his saints”. After seeing and hearing, the exercitants will have to employ their other three senses, as they are instructed to experience “the smoke, the sulphur, the filth and the rotting things [. . .] the bitter flavors of hell: tears, sadness and the worm of conscience [. . . and finally] feel how the flames touch the souls and burn them” (Ignatius of Loyola 1991, p. 141).

In the second week of the exercises, on the fourth day, we see another image that will influence Jesuit theatre, as the exercitant is further invited to visualize “Christ, our supreme commander and

¹¹ See Filippi (2001, pp. 16–26) for a description and discussion of the remaining Jesuit theatre scenarios.

¹² Schnitzler (1952, p. 287) also points to another important characteristic of Jesuit theatre, which is the use of elaborate stage effects: scenic effects, trap doors, costumes, music, light and sound.

¹³ All translations of quotations from the Italian and Latin in this article are mine. I am grateful to Dr. Christina Robertson of the University of Auckland for her help with the Latin texts.

¹⁴ That is one of the reasons why Jesuits used theatre with such great success in their missions abroad (Schnitzler 1952, p. 285) and within Italy as well (Selwyn 2004, pp. 211–18).

Lord” and “Lucifer, the mortal enemy of our human nature”; each wants all humans to militate under his standard.¹⁵ The images invoked in the exercise present a battlefield, in which both commanders prepare their armies.¹⁶ The section that is relevant to Jesuit theatrical representations is the description of Lucifer as commander-in-chief, as well as a list of his deceits. The penitent is instructed to imagine the devil “in that great plain of Babylon. He is seated on a throne of fire and smoke, in aspect horrible and terrifying” as he “summons uncountable devils, disperses some to one city and others to another, and thus reaches into the whole world”. He then tells them “to set out snares and chains”, to lure men with promises of riches, then honor, then pride; “and from these three steps the enemy entices them to any other vices” (Ignatius of Loyola 1991, pp. 154–55). In other words, it would appear that according to Ignatius Loyola himself, the root of all evil is not so much the pursuit of pleasure as the quest for riches, honor and pride.¹⁷

In many of the Jesuit plays, similar demons and angels appear as part of the background action, as for example in the *The apotheosis or consecration of Saints Ignatius and Francis Xavier*, staged for the first time in 1622 at the Collegio Romano on the occasion of the canonization of Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier. Mixing acting, opera and ballet, the play contained scenes set in hell, as well as acts in which demons attacked the saints (Wetmore 2016). The play ended with “a spectacular earthquake [which] gives way to an opening in the heavens [and] all the countries prostrat[ing] themselves before the new saints and a chorus of angels” (Cohelho 1997, p. 31). In another play, also staged in 1622 for the celebration of the canonization of Francis Xavier, *Pirimalo*¹⁸ by Gino Angelo Capponi, infernal spirits “emerge furiously and impetuously from a horrid cave” attempting to distract Francis Xavier from prayer (Filippi 2001, pp. 108–9).¹⁹ Just as demons try to interfere with the life of humans, in the same play Francis Xavier’s guardian angel, armed with lightening, intervenes in a human battle defeating and submerging the enemy ships.

Among the many works of Jesuit theatre where angels and devils show their influence on human souls, two in particular stand out, as their entire Latin text remains: Stefano Tuccio’s *Christus Iudex* [The Judging Christ], first staged in Messina in 1569, and Vincenzo Guiniggi’s *Ignatius arma mutans* [Ignatius changing arms] first staged in Rome in 1622.²⁰ *Christus Iudex* enacts the very day of judgment, when souls are eternally assigned to heaven or hell, the last and only moment in human history in which there will no longer exist the possibility of repentance. *Ignatius arma mutans*, on the other hand, allows spectators to see the demonic forces at work throughout human history, even in the present, warning against those human ambitions and desires which, though they might appear justifiable, may well be of demonic origin. Thus, both plays stage angelic and demonic figures as characters, and heaven and

¹⁵ See Conrod (2010) on the importance of creating an image of Hell as a place of eternal punishment for indigenous populations that did not have a hell as part of their cosmology.

¹⁶ See Prosperi (2015, pp. 368–69) for the imagery of the two standards: “The two standards are those of Christ and Lucifer, the two captains who, according to military practice, planted their standards and enlisted those willing to gather under their ensigns. [...] The vision presented for the fourth day is of the whole world as a place of conflict where the armies of the two opposing captains line up and confront each other”.

¹⁷ See Mk 1: 12–13, Lk 4: 1–13, and Mt 4: 1–11 where the devil tempted Jesus himself with riches, honor and pride.

¹⁸ The play staged the martyrdom of Pirimalo, prince of Ceylon, killed by his father the day after he was baptized by Francis Xavier.

¹⁹ Demons also appear in Leone Santi’s *Il gigante* [The giant] (1632), a retelling in Italian of the story of David and Goliath. In the first scene of the second act, the play stages an infernal council modelled on Canto IV of *Gerusalemme liberata*. The council concludes in a scene of music and dance. Lucifer and other demons are also present in *Isacco* [Isaac] by Antonio Casilio staged in 1637 (Filippi 2001, pp. 159–66). A dance of devils who predict the crown for a cruel and revengeful tyrant is mentioned in the argument for the Italian tragedy *Alessio Comneno* (1674) of unknown author (Filippi 2001, pp. 348–51). An infernal spirit declares to have abandoned hell and has taken up human form in order to act as a tempter of the protagonist in the hagiographic play *Alessio* (1690) of unknown author (Filippi 2001, pp. 378–80). The celebrated tragedy *Crispo* by Bernardino Stefonio, modelled on Seneca’s *Phaedra*, staged multiple times after its 1596 premiere at the Collegio Romano, also has scenes that take place in hell. More specifically, hell opens and Fausta (the protagonist’s lying stepmother) is set up by demons on a throne and shown honors (Filippi 2001, p. 457).

²⁰ Future cardinal Giulio Mazzarino played the role of the protagonist Ignatius (Filippi 2001, p. 62).

hell as locations, in order to offer their actors and spectators an educational message on the need to repent now and follow a virtuous life.

3. Stefano Tuccio's *Christus Iudex*

Sicilian Jesuit Stefano Tuccio (1540–1597)—educator, orator, poet, priest, theologian and playwright—is well known for his use of angels and devils and their influence on human nature in many of his biblical and Christological theatrical works.²¹ In his 1564 play *Giuditta*, based on the biblical character of Judith, for example, the demon Asmodeo enters Olophernes' dream convincing him to try to seduce Judith, thus suggesting to the audience a connection between sexual arousal and the devil in this story (Saulini 2002, p. 81). In his *Christus patiens* (1569), on the passion of Jesus, during a scene set in hell, the aptly named Cacodemon encourages several of the souls to recount their past lives of sin. In this particular case, the souls of the damned were chosen as representatives of their profession: a politician, a rich man, a lecher, and a philosopher. They all blame their ignorance of the consequences of their earthly behavior on their eternal life. The politician asks: “Why during the course of our lives did nobody show us the miseries, what course each of us should follow, what behaviors or frames of mind were best in life?” The rich man admits to being thirstier for gold than charity, but “nobody lived with me who could show me the riches of the life to come” (Tuccius 2011, p. 82). The same play also stages the descent to earth of archangels Gabriel, Raphael and Michael with the intention of freeing Jesus from his suffering on the cross, a help which, however, he refuses: “There is no need of your help; put away your swords [. . .] let this go, nothing is hard which this happy destiny will follow” (Tuccius 2011, p. 130). Such a scene would have served both symbolic and theatrical purposes, as yet a further demonstration of the strength of the forces of good opposed to those of evil, as well as a spectacular use of theatrical machines that would have allowed for a descent from heaven of the three angels (Saulini 2002, p. 109).

The most famous of Tuccio's tragedies is the aforementioned *Christus Iudex*, also known as *De Ultimo Dei Iudicio* [The last judgment], which is reported to have caused many conversions among its spectators (Saulini 2002, p. 113).²² The educational intent of the play emerges even from the prologue, which explicitly states that spectators should learn such behaviors as will obtain clemency from God the judge. Like a modern-day Jonah calling Nineveh to conversion, a subsequent address summons the city of Messina to purification and repentance or the city will be destroyed by plague, famine, storm, sweeping sea waters and a devouring flame: “The flame will destroy those ports and travelled shores you are so proud of. The flame will destroy your high walls. The flame will turn to ashes your crops and your fields scattered with fruits, your meadows and your homes” (Tuccius 2011, p. 148). In addition to anticipating the apocalyptic images that will be developed in the play itself, the prologue serves as a reminder to the citizens of Messina, a city that was known for its wealth, culture and independent spirit among Sicilian towns, that the desire for riches is the root of all evil (Saulini 2002, pp. 120–21).²³

Though the prologue may elicit images of Old Testament prophecy, *Christus Iudex* finds its main source in Revelation 20: 2–11, staging the end times, when Satan, the antichrist, is set free of his 1000-year bondage before the impending final judgement of Christ (Saulini 2002, p. 116). Set in Jerusalem, heaven and hell, the play would have afforded spectacular scenes of angels descending from heaven into hell, as Michael does in obedience to Jesus' order to free the arch-enemy “such that with a sinister light he might corrupt the peoples and begin the ultimate ruin of the world [. . .] disturb the realms of men, the seas, and the people who live in peace” (Tuccius 2011, p. 158). It would also have allowed for scenes of battle, meant to showcase the physical and military skills acquired by students in

²¹ Saulini (2002) offers an exhaustive introduction to Tuccio's life and works.

²² On the difference between the play as staged in Rome and Messina, see Saulini (1999). See also Saulini (2002, p. 179) for the debates over the date of the first performance at the Collegio Romano.

²³ See 1Tim 6: 10.

a Jesuit school, as well as, in the last act, the moment of the final judgment itself, when Christ gives his sentence first against the devil and then against each and every human being. The souls of the damned hurl themselves to the ground pleading for mercy first from the Judge, then from the angels and the saints. But their cries go unheard. As Christ rises to heaven with the blessed, the condemned remain behind weeping and gnashing their teeth until that time when Michael the Archangel utters his last command: “I order you, Acheron, to gape open, splitting the earth, and snatch away these souls plunged headlong into the deepest heart of Dis [. . .] And now, crushing the damned three times with my heel, I fasten the gates with iron bars forever” (Tuccius 2011, p. 268). And thus does our tragedy end.

As in most Jesuit plays where there is an abundance of spectacular activity on stage, one wonders how their technical skills would have allowed, for example, for the many blessed to be taken into heaven, or for the earth to swallow the damned. That aside, however, one scene, though less spectacular, stands out as far more significant from an educational point of view, as it displays the Jesuits’ educational goals, united with their propagandistic spirit. At the end of the play, after the final judgment, following the example of Dante’s *Inferno* written more than two centuries before, the author gives one last opportunity for some of those souls condemned for eternity to speak: the first to appear are Alexander the Great and Julius Cesar, two of the most important military leaders of antiquity, who now recognize the fragility and meaninglessness of such symbols of power as the scepter and crown that they had considered so important during their lives. “Where is the Martia legion?” asks Cesar. “Where are all the cohorts? Why don’t they lift their swords to free their master from pain? Why haven’t they employed their frightening spears against the Stygian enemy? Why don’t they defend their leader? Alas, there is no help, no attendants for the king!” (Tuccius 2011, p. 266). Next comes Croesus, the embodiment of one who amasses wealth only to realize that death has reduced his riches to nothing; then Achilles, the great warrior, who finds himself now in chains; and finally, the last king of Assyria Sardanapalus, a symbol of decadence and self-indulgence, who remembers a life spent “playing the lyre, crowning my head with lilies and myrtle, taking my place at lavishly decked tables, [. . .] hunting young women for love from all over the place”, and now fears the effect of the “Stygian fire” over his “tender limbs” (Tuccius 2011, p. 266).²⁴

The speeches of these condemned are structured similarly: a synthesis of their past lives and earthly accomplishments join with the awareness of the present situation, too late for repentance. They condemn the quest for power, riches and pleasure, all of which block the human aspiration for the divine good (Saulini 2002, p. 146). In other words, they indicate to the audience precisely which earthly attitudes and desires are more likely to condemn one to an eternity of suffering. Furthermore, by taking as spokesmen for sins famous characters from the historical or literary tradition (instead of generic sinners such as politicians or lechers, as he does in *Christus patiens*), Tuccio also encouraged those young minds that might have been fascinated by their studies of brave generals or wealthy kings, to reconsider the values transmitted during their history and literature classes, leading them instead not toward personal glory or riches or even the glory of the state, but rather toward ethical and religious values.

The concluding two speeches by the souls of the damned are possibly even more important for their polemical value in the Catholic Church’s then contemporary historical situation: at the time, Spain was engaged in war against the Turks, and only a few years prior the Council of Trent had firmly condemned the Reformed Church (Saulini 2002, p. 147). The penultimate damned soul to introduce himself and his sins is Maometto [Muhammed],²⁵ the founder of the Islamic religion which was at

²⁴ Some of these characters also appear in Dante’s *Inferno*. Alexander the Great is probably the tyrant pointed out by Nessus in *Inf. XII, 107*; Julius Cesar is encountered by Dante in *Limbo (Inf. IV, p. 123)*, while Achilles is found amongst the sexual sinners (*Inf. V, 65*). The name of Sardanapalus, on the other hand, is mentioned in Dante’s *Paradiso* as an example of debauchery (*Par. XV, pp. 107–8*).

²⁵ In Dante’s *Inferno*, Mohammed is found among the sowers of dissension (*Inf. XXVIII, pp. 22–63*).

that time considered the ultimate enemy of Christianity. Like Jeremiah and Job before him, he curses the day he was born and every moment of his life, attributing infernal influence to the rules of the religion he created. The final character is Martin Luther, who defines his teaching against the sacred laws as foolish and false: “I am Luther. Ponder, friends, the ruin of your Luther. In what lands was Luther once unknown? What country did not hear the name of Luther? I who once preached so many heresies, I, the fool, who wanted to erase the traditions of the fathers and the rights of the Popes, I who wanted to cancel the sacred laws . . . Now the infernal fire forces me to unlearn my foolish nonsense, to understand, and that is right” (Tuccius 2011, p. 268). Author Stefano Tuccio, in other words, has made good use of Dante’s lesson here as well. By showing the recently deceased Martin Luther in hell, Tuccio takes his revenge against the most recent enemy of the Roman Church just as Dante had done against his political enemy Filippo Argenti, whom the poet reports encountering in the fifth circle of hell, or Pope Boniface VIII who was not dead yet in the year of Dante’s fictional journey, but already had a place waiting for him in the eighth circle of hell. As distinct from Dante, however, Tuccio never shows the Church’s historical and present enemies suffering the torments of hell; rather, he presents them at the moment of the final judgment, when the realization of the error of their ways and of the eternal punishment that follows is inevitable—again, the only moment in human history in which repentance is impossible. Tuccio’s educational message to his audience resounds loud and clear: repent now, while you still can. Go and sin no more.

4. Vincenzo Guiniggi’s *Ignatius Arma Mutans*

The second Jesuit play that stands out for its description of heaven and hell is *Ignatius arma mutans* by Vincenzo Guiniggi (1588–1653), performed in Rome in 1622.²⁶ At first sight, the work appears to have unity of action, as it concerns Ignatius and his change from knightly arms to governing a sacred militia; and unity of place and time, as all the action occurs in Montserrat within one night and one day (Cao 1623, “Argomento abbreviato”). Despite this formal respect for the traditional unities of classic tragedy, however, the play also includes such dissonant scenes as an opening chasm, a pirate attack, the clash of armies, and a revelation of the heavens. The cast of characters include the Moors, young Indians, groups of Centaurs and Nereids, Neptune, a ghost, the king of Ethiopia, the good and the bad geniuses of Europe, Asia, Africa, America and the evil genius of Luther, arriving on a chariot through the air (Cao 1623, passim). Of the many events presented in this 5-act tragicomedy, again we find that some of the most powerful are the scenes set in heaven and hell, as well as those where angelic or diabolical characters intervene in earthly matters.

The main plot of the play refers to the night when Ignatius Loyola hung his sword and dagger at the altar of the Virgin Mary in her sanctuary of Montserrat. Such a portentous decision spurred great interest both in the infernal and heavenly spheres. As soon as Ignatius expressed his intention, the scene moves quickly from Montserrat to hell “represented by fiery mountains all around, and fires rolling beneath, and smoke and haze in the air” (Cao 1623, Act 2, sc. 5). There appear four demon tyrants representing the four corners of the earth; next an even larger mouth opens, and a deeper hell appears, from which the king of darkness and his court emerge.²⁷ The devil declares that the world is in a period of transition. There could be great gains—or great losses. He asks his demons for news from each region of the world. As in Tuccio’s *Christus Iudex*, Guiniggi uses the infernal environment to make both political and educational statements. Continuing the Jesuits’ battle against reformist thought, the author at this point stages the flying demon from Germany, who reports with satisfaction

²⁶ See Mertz et al. (1989, p. 193) for a very short biography of Guiniggi in English. The play has been printed in Latin; a detailed summary in Italian can be found in Cao (1623). Marii also summarizes the play in Italian, using the success and the request for repeated stagings of this five-act play in Latin as proof of the decadence of the educational system in Italy, since at the time when he was writing “even just the announcement of a play in Latin” would scare away anyone wishing to attend (Marii 1922, p. 491).

²⁷ This scene may have been influenced by Canto IV of Torquato Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581), which opens with a conclave of devils in hell, in itself a parody of the council of the gods of the Greco-Roman epic.

that his pupil Martin Luther has escaped from the hands of the Catholics.²⁸ The demon master of Luther recounts “the many schemes he [Luther] is plotting, the credit he has been obtaining, and the fact that his followers, whom he convinced to abandon the study of sciences, have brought their books into the public squares and set them on fire” (Cao 1623, Act 2, sc. 6). Though in keeping with chronological events, Guiniggi could not put Luther in hell as Tuccio did—given that the events of the play take place in 1522 and Luther did not die until 1546—still he manages to convey the idea that Luther was in fact the devil’s pupil, and that his reform was the work of the devil.

If the demon from Germany helps Guiniggi in his polemic against the Reformation, the demon from Spain announces that Ignatius is presently in the Montserrat sanctuary, ready to devote himself to a mission to “convert the peoples, traverse Jerusalem, and enflame the World in the love of its Creator”. At the news, “the king of hell is taken by great fear” and in fact all demons join him “in a desperate lament” (Cao 1623, Act 2, sc. 7). As at all costs Ignatius must be stopped from his plans, the evil genius of Spain brings under his command four minions: idolatry, atheism, heresy and national interest. This fourth evil minion takes the form of a soldier friend of Ignatius, who tries to convince him to resume his military life in defence of Spain; in fact, Ignatius “soon begins to feel the effects of the infernal spirit, experiencing an internal struggle of opposing ideas” (Cao 1623, Act 3, sc. 8). Thus, Guiniggi’s educational message warns not only of the errors of religious heterodoxy, but also of one’s false sense of duty towards civic life. Even military, political undertakings and nationalistic fervor, lie within the realm of Satan.

In the meantime, the celestial realm has shown interest in Ignatius as well. In scenes set in heaven, St Michael the Archangel explains to the Church that God is preparing for her a special protector. Since this protector, Ignatius, at that very moment is deposing his weapons in a church and devoting himself to the Blessed Virgin, St Michael asks that from the heavenly armory materials be selected for this man’s new arms. The angels create for Ignatius an impenetrable armor, as well as a sword which takes strength, agility and splendor from lightening, and then give him a banner bearing Jesus’ name. Eventually, Ignatius is taken up to the sky where he is shown the wonderful future achievements of his companions (in particular Francis Xavier, Luigi Gonzaga and Ignacio Azevedo). With their reference to books VI and VIII of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, in which the hero Aeneas foresees his descendants, and receives divine weapons from his mother Venus, these scenes create a clear parallel between Ignatius the founder of the Jesuit order, and Aeneas the founder of Rome, as well as between the two heroes’ civilizing mission throughout the world. In the final scene, the infernal monsters make one last desperate attempt, but Ignatius, now fortified with his heavenly weapons, scatters them. Rejoicing follows, not only on earth but also among the celestial spirits who carry Ignatius’s name to heaven.

It is not difficult to see that this play, staged at the Jesuit Collegio Romano on the occasion of the festivities for the canonization of Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier (16 March 1622), represents heaven and hell in order to show the extent of the influence that the Jesuits had on the history of the world. And although the play claims to be about that 24-h period in which the founder of the Society of Jesus made a solemn promise to leave his military career and become “a Captain in the sacred army devoted to the defence of the holy Church [. . .] with no other goal in front of his eyes than the greater glory of his Lord” (Cao 1623, Act 5, sc. 9), it uses heavenly intervention to give Ignatius (in the play) and the spectators (in the Collegio Romano) a vision of the future development and world-wide achievements of the order. These visions of heaven and hell, however, are concerned with much more than the afterlife. Heaven and hell exist here; they influence life now. The message is clear: beware the friend who tries to convince you to do something that is not right. He could be a false friend—he could be the devil himself.

²⁸ This section probably refers to the time when Martin Luther, after being excommunicated in 1520, stayed at Wartburg Castle and translated the New Testament into German. In his summary, Cao alludes to Luther’s “retreat into his Patmos” (1623, Act 2, sc. 6), in reference to the island where John wrote the Book of Revelation.

5. The Salesians' *Teatrino* and Its Educational Purposes

Christus Iudex and *Ignatius arma mutans* are but two examples of the educational and spectacular nature of Jesuit theatre. The Jesuits' use of theatre became such a distinctive and successful trait of their programme of education that it influenced other religious orders devoted to the education of youth as well: the Scolopians, for example, and the Barnabites, the Somaschans and the Salesians. The Salesians, in particular, stand out for their use of theatre as part of their educational programme because it was directed towards both young men and women, in a tradition that started from their origins and continues until today.

In 1859, the future saint Giovanni Bosco founded the Society of St Francis de Sales, commonly known as the Salesians of Don Bosco, an order devoted to the education of boys and young men of the most disadvantaged classes. A few years later, together with the future saint Maria Domenica Mazzarello, Don Bosco also founded the order of the Daughters of Mary Helper of Christians, also known as the Salesian sisters, which would instead be devoted to the education of girls and young women.²⁹ Whereas the Jesuits were born to confront the social and religious fragmentation caused by the Protestant Reformation, the Salesians came about at the time when the Industrial Revolution had created a new urban lower class. The two Salesian orders were different from the Jesuits in as much as they worked with both young men and women, particularly of the lower classes, and not just in schools, but also in the so-called oratories, or youth centers where both students and young workers could spend their free time in a safe environment, away from the dangers of the streets. The Salesian orders were similar to the Jesuits, however, in that they confronted the challenges of their time with the use of theatre within their educational programs.

Together with study, work, play and physical activity, theatre was in fact, from the beginning, an integral part of Don Bosco's "preventive system" of education, which "rejected corporal punishment and strove to place youths in surroundings that removed them from the likelihood of committing sin" (Fardellone 1967, p. 714). Salesian educational theatre, however, did not solely attempt to prevent evil. It also endeavored to offer youth positive alternatives, supported by the continued presence of educators, who would associate with the young people both inside and outside the classroom (Lenti 2008, pp. 159–60). Moreover, in a recently united Italy, where less than 3 per cent of the population could read and write Italian, theatre was used not only to entertain, but also to transmit the Catholic message and stories even to the young and illiterate (Pivato 1993, pp. 446–48).

Like the Jesuits before them, the Salesians preferred single gender casts in their theatre for both moral and practical reasons: to avoid promiscuity among young people, and to facilitate rehearsal time, as schools, oratories and vocational centers in Italy were all single gender until the mid-1960s. Thus, dozens of Salesian priests and sisters took it upon themselves to create hundreds of single-gender plays or to adapt the classics for all-male or all-female casts, plays that would then be published in one of the many Salesian publishing venues and thus be spread in the Salesian schools and oratories throughout the country. Like Jesuit theatre, the educational message of Salesian theatre often addressed not only individual behaviors, but also societal and political concerns. As in the Counter-reformation years the Jesuits had included in their plays a condemnation of the enemies of the Church—Muslims as well as Protestants—in the 19th and 20th centuries the Salesians would now have to fight Protestantism, atheism and communism.

Other characteristics of Salesian theatre, however, mark it as significantly different from the Jesuit model: one is the avoidance of violent situations that might negatively affect young people. Don Bosco called his educational theatre *teatrino* (little theatre) to distinguish it from professional theatre and its often non-educational characteristics. Don Bosco's *teatrino* was meant to avoid situations that might "harden the hearts of the young people" or negatively affect their young sensibilities (quoted in Braido 1999). Again, as opposed to the spectacular nature of Jesuit theatre, Salesian theatre was characterized

²⁹ Don Bosco (1815–88) was canonised in 1934; Maria Mazzarello (1837–81) in 1951.

by its simplicity: the texts of the plays had to be suitable for the age and level of education of the young audience; costumes and settings could not require excessive expenses or create envy. Yet, in Don Bosco's mind, simplicity did not equate with poor planning or inadequate training: "I want [. . .] performances that are simple, not showy. When do simple things ever displease the audience? Usually when they are poorly performed or when the taste of the spectators has been tainted by gaudy shows" (quoted in [Stagnoli 1967–1968](#), p. 142).

A discussion of the development of Salesian theatre is beyond the scope of this article which will, instead, consider only a few plays written by Salesian authors for all-female casts in a specific period of time, that of the post-WWII years. This was a difficult time for Italian society, which was going through a period of extreme poverty after the close of the war and the end of the fascist dictatorial regime. But a positive sense of renewal also pervaded the era, supported by a popular referendum in which women voted for the first time, choosing a republic over the monarchy, and the consequent writing of a new democratic constitution. The Salesians' care of the youth was particularly important in these post-war years, when countless families had been torn apart and many children left orphan or at risk. Plays written by Salesian sisters and directed to young women, in particular, made clear that certain pastimes which became more popular or more accessible in the post-war years, such as cinema and dancing, were to be avoided. And what better way to frighten young people away from movie theatres or dance halls than to portray these places as the earthly homes of infernal creatures?³⁰ In *La vittoria del bene* [The victory of the good] (1946), by sister Caterina Pesci (1906–1970),³¹ for example, the devil explains that "our representatives here on earth are three: bad friendships, bad books, [and] bad shows. Among the latter, cinema is the most powerful". It is through cinema, the devil boasts, that "we demons un-Christianize the world. From this school graduate murderers, suicides, adulterers, thieves, dissolutes, and betrayers of every law and faith. This is the temple of paganism, brutalization, superstition and idolatry" (p. 7). But movie theatres were not the only entertainment places which Salesian theatre described as inhabited by devils. In *La rete di Satana* [Satan's Net] by sister Lina Dalcerci (1902–1998),³² also of ([Dalcerci 1946](#)), the demons claim that their most effective way of conquering souls is through dance; dance-halls are their "kingdom". As a demon explains to his companions, "everything in here—from music and movements, to touches, gestures, words, looks, and attitudes—you need to make everything vibrate like the strings of an instrument, in an infernal note of malice and sin" (p. 25).³³

As might well be expected in educational theatre, the ending of the two plays sees the demons defeated and virtue triumphant. What is significant in both, however, is that the victory of good,

³⁰ Other plays authored by Salesian sisters, on the other hand, staged guardian angels leading young women away from cinemas toward a life of purity, respect and church attendance. *La vera figlia di Maria* [The true daughter of Mary] ([Pesci 1949](#)) by Caterina Pesci consists of a dialogue between a girl and her guardian angel. Wishing to follow the Virgin Mary's example, the young protagonist declines her friends' offer to go to the cinema because a nun had said it was not a good film, and refuses to read the novel that one of them has left for her, sure that it would be of little value either. She throws it in the river, so that nobody will find it, and decides to read the Gospels instead. *In cammino con gli angeli* [Walking with angels] ([Pesci 1955a](#)) also by Caterina Pesci, portrays teenage Maria being tempted by a schoolmate who owns picture magazines, a radio and even a TV, and who has invited her to go by car to a meeting of a dubious nature. Maria's guardian angel warns her that those magazines are impure, that the television shows people who are not good; and Maria herself is aware that the association she has been invited to attend is led by godless people. Despite being sorely tempted by the novelty of the television, the protagonist ultimately manages to resist—thanks to the angel's inspiration—and even to convince two other friends not to yield to the temptation. Although no devils appear in this play, the underlying idea is that the bad press and the unnamed association are both manifestation of the devil's works.

³¹ [Ossi \(1990\)](#) provides an exhaustive biography of Sr. Pesci in Italian. For a short biography in English, see [Cavallaro \(2017\)](#), pp. 228–29.

³² See [Cavallaro \(2017\)](#), pp. 224–25 for a short biography of sister Dalcerci in English or [Cavaglià \(1999\)](#) in Italian.

³³ The author of this play appears to be quoting Don Bosco's warning against dancing with a person of the opposite sex. Drawing on the authority of classical authors and the fathers of the Church, Don Bosco described dancing as "very dangerous for morality and, like theatre or even more than theatre, a school of unrestraint, which every good Christian must avoid" ([Bosco 1868](#)). Although he had once written that "dancing in itself is not sinful if practised with a person of the same sex" ([Bosco 1868](#)), in the deliberations of the second general chapter of the Daughters of Mary Helper of Christians he stated that "as a general rule, dancing should not be allowed, not even among girls" ([Bosco 1886](#)).

announced already in the title of Pesci's play, is not obtained thanks exclusively to angelic intervention, but requires the active participation of the Salesian-educated young women on stage and among the audience. At the end of act 1 of *La vittoria del bene*, the audience witnesses how the angel on stage enlists young women who attend Salesian schools, to "renounce the evil shows, the forbidden books, the dangerous friendships" (Pesci 1946, p. 17), and promise to work as mothers and educators to raise their children or students according to the principles of the Catholic faith. *La rete di Satana* ends instead with the protagonist and her friends making a solemn vow in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary to never attend or participate in a dancing event. Thus, these Salesian educational plays have a double purpose: on the one hand, they are cautionary tales of the physical and spiritual dangers of dancing and going to the movies. On the other hand, the protagonists' vows pronounced on stage were meant to induce the members of the audience to renounce the temptation caused by dancing and cinema as well. In other words, the plays aim to affect a real conversion not only by scaring the young spectators off with demonic characters, but also by having the members of the audience join in the vow pronounced on stage by the young actresses.³⁴

6. The Afterlife as Staged in the Salesian Sister's Theatre

In addition to these and the many other plays that stage angelic and demonic influence in our daily lives, Salesian sisters also used images of the after-world to reach their goal of educating and converting young women in the post-war years. One drama and two comedies in particular may give us a good idea of what sort of behavior might guarantee a young Italian Catholic woman in the 1950–1960s a place in heaven, purgatory or hell.

Interpretiamo Dante [Let's stage Dante]³⁵ (1955b) by sister Caterina Pesci is a new take on Dante's depiction of the arrival of souls to the shores of purgatory, where the Roman orator Cato stands guard. During the course of the play, Cato interrogates six women's souls, choosing some to ascend to the mountain of purgatory and others to descend into eternal damnation, thus offering the young audience models with which to sympathize and others to avoid. The first three souls, Afrodisia, Russikà, and Abulia, as their names suggest, were guilty of the sins of luxury, atheism and materialism, and cowardliness. The story of Afrodisia is quite appropriate for the young audience: heeding neither her mother nor her parish priest, at age 16 Afrodisia left school and ran away from home: "I told myself: why study and work? Why go to school every day? Someone whispered: 'You're beautiful. Come with me'" (p. 52). After a brief life of "flowers and jewels . . . riches and sins" (p. 52) Afrodisia lost her youthful beauty, fell into financial ruin and ultimately committed suicide. Russikà, on the other hand, recounts how even though Italian, she always took the part of Russia, to facilitate Russia's conquest of her country. In all reality, she reveals, she did not care for anybody, not even when protesting for the rights of the workers. Furthermore, Russikà would badmouth priests, nuns and especially the Pope. Even her funeral "without priests . . . red flags as far as the eye can see [. . .] and ultimately the very flames of cremation" (p. 52) symbolized her loyalty to the devil. Russikà, the play explicitly states, is among those souls destined to hell with no possibility of redemption. As Cato explains: "You preached the theories of the godless people, you deceived the weak and the ignorant. [. . .] you slandered God's ministers, you cursed the Pope, the Vicar of Christ, you betrayed your conscience and those of your compatriots. You've been excommunicated, you are more guilty than this miserable Afrodisia, who sought pleasure out of self-love. You ruined souls for the love of Satan . . . [. . .] Go! Like Afrodisia you are destined to hell, but your hell will be incommensurably harder than hers" (p. 55).

If Afrodisia and Russikà end up condemned for what they did, Abulia is convicted for what she did not do: she did not defend the Pope when others blasphemed him; and she did not speak

³⁴ On the inspirational effect of Salesian educational theatre on both actresses and audiences, see Cavallaro (2011), in particular page 37.

³⁵ The Italian title plays on the two meanings of the verb "interpretare" as both to stage and to interpret.

up against the godless people. While the word “communism” or “communists” is never specifically pronounced in this play, there is no doubt as to whom Abulia should have stood up to. In the end, the demons come on stage and drag the screaming souls away toward eternal damnation. In particular Russikà, who during life insisted that nothing exists after death, exits the stage cursing the heretics, the godless and even herself.

The three women who will be allowed to proceed toward the mountain of purgatory, on the other hand, all bear names which refer to the Virgin Mary: Maria, Assunta and Concetta. Maria’s sins are sculpted on her forehead: “frivolity, vanity, disobedience and laziness” (Pesci 1955b, p. 58); Assunta for a while was swayed by godless heresy, but later abandoned the error of her ways; Concetta, though a good wife who raised five children and died while reciting the rosary, still counted among her sins impatience, gossip and the occasional lie to her husband. These three souls are allowed to be purged of their sins and will eventually be admitted to the presence of God.

The choice of the shores of purgatory as a setting for a judgment play differentiates Salesian from Jesuit theatre. A shore with a dantescan mountain backdrop would have been easier to create than the infernal abyss. Moreover, as Salesian theatre aims to avoid violence and negative images, the play never actually shows the torments that await the sinners in hell. On the other hand, like *Christus Iudex*, *Interpretiamo Dante* displays the moment in which repentance is no longer possible. Again, as in Jesuit theatre, the Salesian play refers to both the personal and the political; on the level of personal behavior, it condemns frivolity and sensuality, shows that repentance in this life is possible, and presents imperfect but still forgivable role models of wives and mothers, who pray the rosary and travel to Rome to see the Pope. On the political level, the play attacks both the supporters of the “godless heresy”—published in 1955, the play perfectly stages the ideological division of Italy during the cold war—and those who do nothing to stop it. Like Dante and the Jesuit playwrights, sister Caterina Pesci condemns these current enemies of the Church to hell. But perhaps even more interestingly, sister Pesci also condemns Dante if not to hell, at least to many years in purgatory. At the end of Caterina Pesci’s play, Cato reveals that Dante’s spiteful treatment of many popes, especially Boniface VIII, as mentioned earlier, destined him to a very long time in purgatory, from which he emerged only recently by the direct intervention of the Virgin Mary, to whom he was devoted. In fact, the play ends with Cato revealing that Dante, from heaven, is now smiling down upon this new interpretation of his work, and Pope Boniface VIII is happy as well.

In her comedy *Davanti a San Pietro* [In front of St. Peter], which stages several souls who arrive to the gates of heaven to be judged by St. Peter, Gina Saffirio (1909–1994)³⁶ treats the reckoning of sin in a much lighter way. Published in 1962, this play also contains male characters, who may or may not have been acted by young women anyway. However, the presence of both men and women among the recently departed souls also allows us to see what kind of sins were typically attributed to each gender.

The setting is simple: a desk with an enormous book and a chair; the audience is not allowed to see the delights of heaven. St Peter, distinguished as so often in the Christian tradition by a large set of keys,³⁷ welcomes the recently arrived souls, checks his book, and decides their destiny. Spoiler alert: all the souls will go to purgatory—but for what sins? The first is a 14-year old girl—the very representative of the typical spectator. Apparently, young Marisa has devoted more time to outings than homework, has been distracted at mass, has sometimes mistreated her younger siblings, and has not always respected her mother. Another young woman, on the other hand, is guilty of far worse sins, as she was hoping to smuggle into heaven several copies of the glossy magazines *Bolero Film* and *Grand Hotel*—the most popular *fotoromanzi* of the times. In addition to international and local film star gossip, these “photonovels” or “photomagazines”, a genre created in Italy in the post-World War II era, consisted of love stories represented by photos, with lines of dialogue as in comic strips written in

³⁶ Gina Saffirio was a primary school teacher in a village of the Piedmont region who published her educational plays in the Salesian theatre magazine for girls.

³⁷ Mt 16: 19.

speech balloons. These weekly publications, aimed almost exclusively at a female audience, became wildly popular in the post-war years among the lower socioeconomic classes, as they “filled a void left by both the high culture of literature and the mass culture of the cinema” (Garbin 2007, p. 769). Thirdly, a widow, who expects to be accepted into heaven because of the many charities to which she contributed, is accused by St Peter of doing charity work only “to be seen” or “to show off her clothes” (Saffirio 1962, p. 56); she too is in need of purification.

Purgatory is also the destination for two young men who have kept bad company, attended wild parties and watched excluded films; a drunkard who was only saved by a final confession arranged by his wife; and finally, to St. Peter’s great surprise, even a shopkeeper whose accounting was not always honest. Bearing in mind that spectators in the Salesian plays would include not only other members of the school or oratory (hence the two young women’s souls, guilty of superficial readings and disobedient attitude), but also the parents (hence the drunk and the dishonest shopkeeper), benefactors (hence the widow) and sometimes young men of the community who may have been interested in the young women on stage and in the audience (hence the movie-going couple of friends), one can see that the educational message of this play extended to the entire Salesian community.

Both *Interpretiamo Dante* and *Davanti a S. Pietro* are set on the threshold of purgatory or heaven. Both are plays in which souls are judged and sent on their way, either to hell or to purgatory; and both give the audience a moral compass on which behaviors to avoid. One final play, on the other hand, gives us a glimpse into heaven itself, a glimpse of what heaven might look like and the sort of people who get there, thus providing the audience with the best of role models to follow.

If in Gina Saffirio’s *Davanti a S. Pietro* the protagonist St Peter had complained of the time it took to judge each arriving soul, the two doorkeeper angels who are acting as St Peter’s substitutes in *Gran festa in Paradiso* [A grand celebration in Heaven] (Fornara 1965) by sister Flora Fornara (1902–1971)³⁸ complain of the enormous amount of people admitted into heaven since Don Bosco’s arrival: “teenagers, priests, nuns, girls and boys, men and women with their badge of ‘supporter’, as well as young women, young men, adults, seniors, mothers, countless grandmothers, and all those with an ‘alumnus’ or ‘alumna’ badge” (p. 109), in addition to other individuals with no badge whatsoever who need only say ‘Salesian benefactor’ to simply waltz in. The other problem with this Salesian community in heaven is that they are awfully noisy: they cheer, laugh, sing and shout just like they did on earth, perhaps bothering that corner of heaven which belongs to the Trappist and Carthusian monks. Such a depiction of a Salesian heaven brings to mind the Simpsons episode “The Father, the Son and the Holy Guest Star” (season 16, episode 21) in which Marge imagines Protestant heaven as an aseptic, snobbish place of limited entry, as opposed to the several branches of Catholic heaven, where Hispanics dance, Irish drink and fight, and Italians sit around a table, eat, drink and kiss. In other words, according to Salesian educational theatre, what is needed to enter heaven? Basically, as long as you are part of the Salesian community, you will be just fine. Such an inclusive vision of heaven may well have been reassuring for the play’s audience, made up most probably of students, families, alumni and benefactors, and would have confirmed the sense of belonging to a special group, already predestined to a joyous afterlife thanks to the special place that Don Bosco and St Maria Mazzarello have acquired in heaven for themselves and their community.

7. Conclusions: Repent. Go and Sin No More

A few conclusions can be drawn from these examples of 16th and 17th century Jesuit and 20th century Salesian theatrical representations of heaven and hell.

First, of course, there was the educational goal: although the Jesuit theatricality would have been much more elaborate than the home-spun Salesian sets and costumes, the basic idea was the same. Look at the beautiful, winged, triumphant angels; consider the ugly, horned, screaming demons; listen

³⁸ For a short biography of sister Fornara, see Cavallaro (2017, p. 225).

to the life experiences of those who will be whisked upwards by angels into heaven, and ponder the inglorious tales of those who will be dragged down by demons into eternal suffering. Then choose. Which role model will you follow? The time to make that choice is now.

Both congregations, in fact, insist that conversion happen now. Now you can still recognize the error of your ways; now you can still change. There will come a time, however, as Jesuit priest Stefano Tuccio staged in *Christus Iudex*, or as Salesian sister Caterina Pesci demonstrated in *Interpretiamo Dante*, when repentance will no longer be possible. Wait no longer to make that confession, pray that rosary, pay attention in church or cease coveting riches and glory. Repent now.³⁹

The sins to avoid, on the other hand, varied somewhat. The 16th and 17th century Jesuit school students were educated toward lives of civic involvement or religious commitment. Thus, Tuccio chose famous examples of influential men condemned to hell because of their thirst for power, riches or self-indulgence. And Jesuit priest Vincenzo Guinaggi showed that not only idolatry, atheism and heresy, but also sometimes even nationalism or a forced sense of civic duty may be inspired by the devil, hence stressing once again the Jesuits' model of life devoted not to the greater glory of individuals, kings or nations, but rather to the one and only God.

The young women who received an education in the Salesian schools and oratories in the 1950s, on the other hand, were mostly destined to their mission of wives and mothers, perhaps educators of the younger generations. Purity and faith were essential to those roles. Consequently, the Salesian sisters' educational plays stress the importance of avoiding sensual temptations that may be found in the darkness of a movie theatre, in the physical promiscuity favored in dance halls, in the romantic reveries portrayed on the pages of *fotoromanzi*.

Despite the variance of the sins, however, the educational plays of both congregations helped their audiences to identify as works of the devil those temptations to which an educated young man in the 17th century and a lower-class young woman in the mid-20th century could be subject. And for both there was an urgency in their message: Repent. Now. And avoid the near occasion of sin.

There are other common characteristics which translate into other common goals as well: by placing their enemies in hell, both the Jesuits and Salesian added a polemic, propagandistic layer to their educational plays, showing the eternal punishment that awaits those who in the counter-reformation era followed Martin Luther, or in 1950s Italy aligned themselves with the godless communists. As for themselves, both the Jesuits and the Salesians theatrically show their founders Ignatius Loyola, Francis Xavier, Don Bosco and Maria Mazzarello as part of the celestial realm, and thus able to support the members of their community in their quest for heaven. In other words, the scenes set in heaven create not only angelic visions, but also promote the congregations themselves—they now have their own saints in paradise—as well as a sense of belonging for the spectators, who find themselves well represented among the characters onstage.

Of course, the tradition of setting educational plays in the afterlife is not exclusive to Catholic Italy and did not die in the 1950s. In fact, that tradition continues to be very strong even today among evangelical groups who tour local churches to affect conversions among their spectators with their visions of heaven and hell. The drama *Heaven's Gates, Hell's Flames*, for example, created by Reality Outreach Ministries, according to their website, "is an evangelistic outreach tool that has been used to save hundreds of thousands of lives over the last 40 years, [performed by] 26 teams in over 20 countries".⁴⁰ The purpose of this 21st century American performance showing heaven and hell—like those of the 17th century or 1950s Italy—remains the same: to bring about conversions while involving the entire community. In other words, the message of these plays set in the afterlife and sponsored by religious groups—be they Jesuits, Salesians or evangelicals, from the 17th, 20th or 21st centuries—remains a part of a very traditional Judeo-Christian call: repent. Go and sin no more.

³⁹ This is also the most basic message of the Deuteronomic Historian (Dt 30: 15–20).

⁴⁰ <https://realityoutreach.org/>.

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