FEMALE DETECTIVES IN 1950S SALESIAN EDUCATIONAL THEATRE¹

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Summary: This article considers a little-known type of *gialli*: those staged by all-women casts in educational theatre performances in Italy between the early 1940s and the early 1960s. It shows how the Salesian priests and sisters who authored educational *gialli* focused not so much on identifying and punishing the culprits as on proving the innocence of previously suspected characters and restoring those who had strayed from the right path. The article looks at both professional and amateur female detectives of Salesian *gialli*, their credentials for being called to solve a mystery, and their investigative techniques and success rate. It claims that the amateur detectives on the Salesian stage were often characterized as comical or incompetent, while the professional detectives, even though they were more successful, were foreign and unfeminine, concluding that Salesian authors often exploited the popularity of the *giallo* genre to put forward conservative role models for young women on the stage and in the audience.

“... we can’t expect young ladies to sit at home and sew and shudder at the idea of crimes of violence in these enlightened days”

Agatha Christie, *Three Act Tragedy* (1935)

Sipping Chinese tea from a Dresden cup, Lady Mary Lytton Gore (from Agatha Christie’s 1935 novel *Three Act Tragedy*) complains that her young daughter is mixing herself up in what she euphemistically calls a “distressing business”: a murder investigation. “It does not seem to be ladylike,” Lady Mary explains (108). But in fact, as Agatha Christie’s own career and publications by 1935 had already

¹ For their help in retrieving primary and secondary sources on Salesian theatre, I am grateful to Tadek Lewicki SDB, of the Salesian Pontifical University in Rome; Michele Novelli SDB, of the Salesian Centre for Social Communication in Rome; and Renata Piovesan FMA, of the Salesian Sisters’ General House in Rome.

proved, while taking part in crime investigations has often not been considered very ladylike, young and elderly women detectives have long appeared in the pages of crime novels, on TV screens, in cinema, and on the amateur and professional stage. Frances DellaCava and Madeline Engel date the debut of the so-called “lady detective” to the 1890s (x) and Kathleen Gregory Klein places the first professional woman detective in 1864 (1), while Lisa Dresner notes the presence of early female investigators even in Ann Radcliffe’s gothic novels of the 1790s (2).²

Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan claim that there are several reasons for the proliferation of women detectives from the end of the nineteenth century: “novelty; dramatic effect (making the least-likely-person the sleuth instead of the culprit); in order to justify an unorthodox method of detecting; because the figure could be presented fancifully [...], whimsically or comically [...]; and because nosiness—a fundamental requirement of the detective—is often considered a feminine trait” (13). LeRoy Panek adds that creating women detectives also signalled an attempt to attract female readers toward crime stories focused on female interests (107).

Women’s investigative techniques were often markedly different from those of their male counterparts, Adrienne Gavin explains, as they used their “knowledge and observation of domestic environments and human behavior, female intuition, and their capacity for going unnoticed or being underestimated” in the male-dominated environment of detection (258). In fact, as early as 1929 Dorothy Sayers famously complained about the fact that the creators of female detectives would characterize them as being “so irritatingly intuitive as to destroy that quiet enjoyment of the logical” expected by readers of crime fiction, or so reckless as to put themselves in risky situations, thus endangering their male colleagues as well (qtd. in Watson 30).

While these scholars refer to the English-speaking world, Maurizio Pistelli has shown that there exists a tradition of female detectives in Italian fiction as well, dating back to Carolina Invernizio in novels such as *La sepolta viva* (1889), *La felicità nel delitto* (1907), and *Nina la poliziotta dilettante* (1909). The amateur female detectives in Invernizio’s novels investigate “per amore, per vendetta o per desiderio di giustizia” (Pistelli 56), as the crimes affect their personal or family life, and the professionals—police or tribunals—are unable to bring the culprits to justice.

² LeRoy Panek explains that the much used expression “lady detective” counterbalanced what was considered the “‘unladylike’ role” of the early female investigators (107).

Anna Nozzoli, who has argued that Invernizio's reputation as "mamma dei libri gialli" may well be deserved (52–53), makes two important points about her crime fiction. Because in her mystery novels Invernizio portrays women not only as victims or femmes fatales, but also as investigators or agents who work toward the resolution of the mystery, her female characters acquire "quei requisiti di intraprendenza, protagonismo, capacità risolutiva richiesti ai protagonisti di ogni giallo che si rispetti" (53). Thus, the structure of the *giallo* helps Invernizio depict "tutto un mondo dell'iniziativa femminile" with at its centre a female detective who takes the place of the usual male avenger figure (54). The second aspect of Invernizio's *gialli* that Nozzoli underscores is the importance of an educational message, with its insistence on the "esaltazione dell'ordine, dell'unità familiare, e del decoro esteriore" (55). The consequence of this educational intent is that often the punishment of the culprit disappears at the end of the novel in favour of his/her moral reintegration and the re-establishment of the shattered order.

Both these aspects—that is, the centrality of women through the figure of the female detective and the educational message of the texts—continued to constitute the essential elements of a later, little-known type of *gialli*, those staged by all-women casts in educational theatre performances in Italy from the early 1940s to the early 1960s.

Salesian theatre and gialli

By educational theatre, I refer to a kind of amateur theatre sponsored by the Catholic Church—usually featuring all-male or all-female casts—that had the dual purpose of entertaining and educating. Among the most successful educational theatre writers and publishers were Salesian priests and sisters, members of the two religious orders founded by Giovanni Bosco (1815–1888): the Società di S. Francesco di Sales, also known as the Salesians of Don Bosco, and the Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, also known as the Salesian sisters.³ Since their founding, both orders have made use of theatre as part of their educational method. Don Bosco, himself the author of several plays, called his educational theatre *teatrino* to distinguish it from the major theatre and its (often non-educational) characteristics.

³ The congregation of the Società di S. Francesco di Sales was founded in 1859 by Giovanni Bosco with the mission to educate youth, especially the most disadvantaged classes. Don Bosco, canonized in 1934, co-founded the order of the Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice in 1872 with Maria Domenica Mazzarello (1837–1881), canonized in 1951.

Theatres are to be avoided, he explained, since in them the spectators are presented with

amori tutt'altro che onesti, e talora apertamente disonesti; canti tutt'altro che casti, per non dire pienamente osceni, parole sdolcinate e molli, sospiri, intrighi di matrimonio, familiarità eccessive, proteste di adorazione prodigate a misere creature, e lagrime, e gemiti, e sospiri; in una parola tutto quanto può contribuire a far sì che si esca da quei luoghi meno casto di quando vi si entrò" (*Il cattolico*).

Don Bosco explained that the *teatrino*, on the contrary, was meant to "rallegrare, educare ed istruire i giovani più che si può moralmente" (*Deliberazioni*) and as such should avoid situations "che indurir possono il cuor dei giovani o far cattiva impressione sui delicati lor sensi" (qtd. in Braidò). Don Bosco opined that since young people are highly impressionable, cruel or immoral characters and violent acts such as duels, gunshots, and threats should not form part of a performance, not even with the purpose of a final conversion (Stagnoli 99–100). This insistence on avoiding any possible cause of corruption for the young audience would remain one of the main characteristics of Salesian theatre throughout the twentieth century.

If the representation of evil in all its forms was to be avoided for Salesian-educated youth, one may well be surprised by the presence of *gialli* on the Salesian stages and in their post-war theatre magazine for all-women casts, *Teatro delle giovani* (1947–1965).⁴ In a 1964 issue of the magazine devoted entirely to the genre of *giallo*, authors Franco Roberto and Ugo Rossella justify the reasons for this presence: everybody likes *gialli*, they say, as is proven by their success in television,

⁴ The Salesian *Teatro delle giovani* was not the only educational theatre magazine for women in the post-war years. Another popular publication, *Scena femminili* (1946–1959), published two *gialli*, authored by medical doctor Pompeo Grassi, which have the nurse and occasional police consultant Marisa Cesati as their protagonist. The amateur detective is introduced in the play *Corso Roma 43* (1951), where she solves the mystery of a man murdered in his living room, when the only person at home at the time was his elderly paralyzed mother-in-law, and all the people with possible motives (wife, sister-in-law, maid) have alibis. Marisa Cesati returns in *Ladro di cuori* (1952), in which she helps with the mysterious death of a student in an exclusive boarding house (in this play, however, she suspects the wrong person). Not only are these two plays the only *gialli* published in *Scena femminili*, but they are also unusual as they allow for characters to actually be murdered on stage.

cinema, theatre, and fiction.⁵ For the educational stage, however, it is important to point out their instructive value. In every *giallo*, they add, there is a conflict between the law and a person outside the law, the criminal. In most cases, the law triumphs, but even when it does not, the conflict itself alludes to the primacy of justice, be it of the courts, of one's conscience, or of God. In this the audience was to find the moral and educational values of *gialli* (6).

Many of the *gialli* published for the Salesian stage, however, do not appear particularly concerned with showing the primacy of justice, or even with suggesting an educational value. They use a crime scene to create a tense or comic situation—or preferably both at the same time. In order to avoid staging evil actions or wholly evil characters, the authors (mostly Salesian sisters and priests) created situations in which an apparent crime scene revealed no actual wrongdoing or in which a creepy, scary setting hid no mystery. To justify this lack of an actual crime, the authors themselves (or possibly the magazine editor) often modified the label “*giallo*” adding whimsical subtitles to their plays. Thus, for example, *L'impiccata* (1957), by Lidia Micaela Cressin, was defined as “quasi giallo.”⁶ The plot centres on the body of a woman that was seen hanging. By the end of the play, the woman who had been presumed dead appears on stage fully alive. Her coat and hat had been hung while being cleaned, leading to the misunderstanding. Another play in which the crime is only apparent is *L'anello col rubino* (1959), by Emilio Garro, defined as a “*commedia gialla*.”⁷ After the eponymous ring disappears, the protagonist's three children and maid are suspected of theft. Eventually, however, it is discovered that a magpie had taken the ring. *Telefonata a mezzanotte* (1964), by Flora Fornara, described as a “*giallo brillantissimo*,” stages no crime at all, not even an apparent one.⁸ However, it does make use of setting and plot devices typical of mysteries, as four young women are called to an isolated castle (with ghost-like

⁵ The popularity of the genre is confirmed in Angelo Beltrami's *Susanna la poliziotta* (see note 9). When a character mentions having had a bout of jaundice, the protagonist Susanna replies: “L'itterizia? Malattia gialla! Malattia moderna! Prodotto della moda. Libri *gialli*, films *gialli*, teatro *giallo*, romanzi *gialli*, giornali *gialli*, vestiti *gialli*; *giallo* di qui, *giallo* di là... Per forza deve venire l'itterizia” (53).

⁶ Lidia Micaela Cressin (?–1957) was a Canossian sister and a prolific writer for the Salesian theatre. See Pesci for her obituary.

⁷ Emilio Garro was a Salesian priest and a novelist.

⁸ Flora Fornara (1902–1971) obtained a degree in Humanities before she joined the Salesian sisters. She taught high school Classics, Italian, and History, and at the same time began to write plays and direct

apparitions) to hear the owner's last will. In reality, the owner is still alive but wishes to find out which of the four most deserved her inheritance. Another play that exploits isolated settings and mysterious events is the comedy *Paura... gialla!* (1960) by Renata Sassu Sprega. Strange things happen in an isolated house where two sisters live with their new maid, the recently widowed Bice: someone throws a stone with a mysterious message through their window; one of the sisters sees a girl's body in a closet—a body that promptly disappears; a shadow lurks in their yard; a gunshot pierces the silence; and the maid screams and cries. In the end, the mysterious events are explained as being caused by Bice's very-much-alive delinquent husband, who reclaims his wife after she had left their marriage.

A bit more intricate—but still not exactly criminal—were the plots created by Amilcare Marescalchi in his two mysteries for the all-women educational stage adapted from the French.⁹ In *Pensione dei glicini* (1952), the audience witnesses the theft of a necklace, which is eventually revealed as being nothing but a story imagined by the writer-protagonist of the play. And in *La detective Jackson* (1953), the protagonist discovers that the theft of a black diamond, for which she had originally been called, was merely part of a game, but that the theft of the secret plans for a new aircraft most certainly was not.

Amateur female detectives

Regardless of the seriousness of the crimes, perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the Salesian *gialli* are the detectives who try to solve the mysteries presented on the Salesian stage. Who were they? What were their skills and qualifications to attempt detective work? What were their investigative techniques and rates of success?

Most of the female detectives who appear on the Salesian stage are non-professional, called to investigate not out of a failure of the official channels but in their place, either because the people involved would rather keep the matter as private as possible and not involve the police or because the mystery to be solved does not yet constitute an actual crime. These accidental detectives often have no

performances of the theatre group that met at her school. Fornara wrote more than fifty plays (comedies, dramas, operettas, farces) and about thirty books of fiction or spirituality for youth.

⁹ Amilcare Marescalchi (1882–1959) was a well-known Salesian playwright, theatre scholar, reviewer, and organizer. On his contribution to Salesian theatre, see Novelli.

qualifications other than a family connection to a male policeman. Sometimes they presume that they have investigative abilities and volunteer their skills to solve a mystery. There are very few cases of professional policewomen. An early example of a female detective on the Salesian stage is the protagonist of *Friedel la detective* by Flora Fornara, first published in 1943 and republished in 1947. Despite having a detective as protagonist, like many others in the Salesian educational theatre this play is defined not as a *giallo* but as a “commedia brillante” and was probably intended to be performed in the Carnival season. While there is no actual crime committed in the play, the plot does include a sweet-talking niece who attempts to convince a countess into leaving her entire fortune to her, thus depriving another, more deserving relative of the inheritance. This possible future crime calls for the intervention of Friedel, a friend of the wronged relative. The back cover of the comedy defines the detective as “una fanciulla geniale e intelligente,” but the stage directions offer no description other than to say that she is “vestita nella maniera più bizzarra, un po’ uso inglese, con un bastoncino da uomo in mano” (6). And in fact, Friedel is a perfect example of the fanciful, whimsical, or comical female detective described by Craig and Cadogan (13). Her foreign androgynous name, her style of dress, and unusual behaviour mark her as quite different from the Contessa Maria de Simoni and her nieces and grandnieces, who make up the list of characters. Friedel comes on stage “come un bolide cantando” (6) and continues to sing as she rolls her walking stick. Later stage directions instruct her to spring up from a chair, jump around the room, and dance for joy. Her friend Viviana comments: “sei sempre la stessa matta” (7).¹⁰

Upon hearing of her friend’s situation, Friedel offers her detective services to Viviana, adding that the satisfaction of achieving the first triumph of her new investigative career will compensate her well enough (12). She justifies this sudden career choice by highlighting her natural qualities: intuition, a strong sense of smell, eagle-eyed vision, and acute hearing. She also reveals her planned method

¹⁰ Friedel is not the only caricaturized, eccentric policewoman on the educational stage. The protagonist of the farce *Susanna la poliziotta*, by Angelo Beltrami, first published in 1950, reprinted in 1957 and again as late as 1970, is thus described in the stage directions: “Età indefinibile, vestito eccentrico mascolineggiante, berrettino all’inglese, naso esageratamente lungo e variopinto” (39). The audience will soon learn, however, that unlike Friedel, who makes a sudden decision to be a detective and lacks formal instruction in the field, Susanna Nasoni is officially a “detective privata, la prima donna che ha preso il diploma in criminologia” (45). Another comic detective is Miss Carten from the play *Quel cappellin terribile* (1953), also by Angelo Beltrami, who introduces herself as “l’ispettrice della casa ‘Cipciap’, la prima del mondo” (15).

of investigation: even though she is a “soggetto singolare, genere femminile,” she is ready to become “anche di genere maschile, di numero plurale” (8). In fact, over the course of the play, Friedel will disguise herself as a male music and dance teacher, a female cook, and even a stammering male doctor in order to enter the wealthy countess’ house, discover and upset the greedy niece’s plans, and, finally, restore Viviana into the countess’ good graces.

There is no doubt that the possibility of dressing up as a man for the stage would have been highly desirable for a performer on the very traditional Salesian stage, where all-women plays were created precisely in order to avoid cross-dressing. Friedel’s comic disguises and mad behaviour would have also caused hilarity among the audience, thus producing a show suitable for the Carnival season. Friedel’s investigative methods could easily be defined as questionable: she shamelessly eavesdrops, reads and steals personal correspondence, makes phone calls under other people’s names, gets an innocent cook fired for stealing so that she can take her place in the countess’ household, and doctors the notary’s coffee so that he will feel sick and be unable to sign legal papers. The countess, however, ultimately admires Friedel’s skills, concluding: “la nostra geniale detective [...] con tanta saggezza, ha saputo sventare un delitto e riportare la colpevole sulla retta via” (47). Friedel, however, while considering herself “la più celebre detective di questo mondo” (48), plans a career change, as she asks the countess for a position as private tutor for her lazy and ignorant grandnieces.

One of the very few plays published in *Teatro delle giovani* in which an actual crime has been committed (not only off-stage, but also twelve years before the events of the play) is the “commedia drammatica” *Neve sulle sbarre* (1949) by Francesca Sangiorgio.¹¹ For twelve years, the protagonist Alberta Deangis has been in prison, accused of a murder that (she claims) she never committed.¹² Her younger cousin Monica Delori, armed with a law degree and an interest in criminology, wishes to prove her innocence. She organizes an encounter between Alberta and Irene, whom she suspects to be the real culprit, and hides a dictaphone behind a screen. Under Monica’s questioning, Irene confesses, and the recording makes

¹¹ Francesca Sangiorgio is the pen name that playwright Clotilde Masci (1918–1985) used for her early works of educational theatre. For more information on Masci’s life and works, see Cavallaro 246–262 and 388–389.

¹² A prison is an unusual setting for a Salesian play, and in fact the “note di regia” which precede the all-male version of this play, *Ergastolo*, recommend a select, mature audience and sobriety in the staging.

possible a new trial. However, Irene also reveals that she killed out of desperation for her family situation (a husband who had lost his job and gambled away their savings, and a son recently diagnosed with poliomyelitis). Realizing that she had shown no compassion for Irene's situation at the time and that Irene's family would collapse should she go to jail, Alberta first allows Irene two months to set her affairs in order. Finally, when Irene is ready to publicly confess even though her family is on the verge of breakdown, Alberta destroys the recorded confession and decides to remain in prison.

Neve sulle sbarre is concerned with the issue of guilt and expiation, and the final resolution implies that the murder was not the only offence committed: the protagonist Alberta, guilty of ignoring another's pain and offering no support, feels that she deserves her punishment, while she is sure that her antagonist Irene, who is unable to alleviate her son's suffering and receives only grief from her husband, is also serving a life sentence for her crime. Thus, amateur investigator Monica remains but a minor character in the plot, which focuses less on discovering the real murderer and more on re-establishing a sense of moral justice. Monica's motives for re-opening the investigation are probably quite selfish—the stage directions describe her as having “un fondo quasi inconscio di egoismo” (3).¹³ When she explains to the warden why she has started her investigation into this old murder case, she mentions that it would be “un processo clamoroso” and that she needs to think of herself and her future. She then adds that she of course also wants justice for Alberta (19). Monica expresses the same sentiments in Act 3, assuring Alberta, who wishes for privacy, that she will concentrate all the press's interest on herself, to launch her career. Her vision of the law is cold and impersonal and shows no space for compassion and redemption: “chi è colpevole, paghi,” she affirms. “Il codice penale non è una barzelletta e la legge è la vera, solida palafitta su cui la civiltà poggia le basi” (42).

Other amateur female detectives on the Salesian stage are less caricatural than Friedel and less professional than Monica, but at the same time less successful. Ornella, in *L'impiccata*, is a twenty-year-old woman, friend of one of the tenants of a large apartment building where the body of another tenant is seen hanging. The knowledge of the law that she is acquiring in her university studies,

¹³ The stage directions also specify that she is “sempre elegantissima” (3) and that she should wear something different in each act. Her clothing choices were probably meant to indicate vanity and superficiality of character. The corresponding character in *Ergastolo*, lawyer Alessio Deangis, is explicitly characterized as “egoista gretto ed antipaticuccio” (4).

and the fact that her father is a police commissioner, are sufficient credentials for the tenants, who ask her to look into the death as they await the arrival of her father. They also hope to protect the reputation of everyone involved through a preliminary private investigation. Ornella is ready to take up the challenge of a murder investigation (suicide having being ruled out as the victim was too good a Christian), claiming that she is possibly better at investigating than her father is and that women have better intuition anyway (32–33).

Ornella uses time-honoured investigative techniques: explaining that she has the duty to suspect everyone, she asks to talk to the building's residents individually, obtaining precise details, especially of the time of their movements. During each interrogation, she accuses the tenant of the murder, proving that everyone had a motive to want the victim dead—for either monetary or personal reasons—and advising each to confess immediately to diminish the severity of the inevitable conviction. Finally, when a very large cheque belonging to the victim is found in a nearby apartment, she is positive that the murderer is the resident of that apartment. As she explains to her friend: “Non sospettavo né di te, né delle altre presenti: con il mio acume ho subito intuito chi doveva essere l'autrice, ma ho voluto andare per esclusione, per avere una sicurezza” (39). Ornella is ready to arrest the apartment's tenant on behalf of her father, promising her thirty years' jail time. Only the appearance of the supposed victim, who is very much alive, convinces her of the accused's innocence. At that point, Ornella momentarily feels ashamed of her investigative qualities. Her first instinct, however, is not so much to apologize to the many people she has wrongly accused as it is to fear her father's reaction: “la figlia di un commissario prender un granchio simile e farlo chiamare per niente! [...] Cosa gli dico ora? Mi prenderà in giro per un anno” (41). The fact that, as a detective, she failed to check the crime scene and verify that there had actually been a crime is never mentioned. The play ends happily on a celebratory note, as Ornella concludes: “Se tutti i drammi finissero così! Che bellezza! Niente più prigionieri” (41).

Instead of a murder investigation that reveals no murder, *L'anello col rubino* is based on a theft investigation that reveals no theft. The protagonist calls her friend Wanda, who is married to a retired policeman, asking her to use her “acume poliziesco” (24) to help solve the mystery of who could have stolen her ring from the bedroom, given that the only possible culprits are her three daughters and a very honest maid, all people she cannot bring herself to suspect. Wanda, described in the stage directions as “tipo un po' caratteristico, ma serio, con giacchetta

attillata di taglio quasi maschile, con cappellino originale o basco e occhiali” (24), finds fault with the preliminary group questioning that her friend has already carried out and recommends a more appropriate tactic: “L’inchiesta va fatta separatamente. Una per una. Sarà una cosa sbrigativa. Vedrai che, chi è in fallo, si tradirà facilmente” (26). However, none of the suspects admits to having stolen the ring. Wanda will ultimately conclude that a very athletic person—possibly an acrobat—must have climbed a tree and then the water pipe to enter through the window—although she is unable to explain how such a person would even know that there was a ring to steal and why this person would not have touched anything else in the room. In the end, the mystery is solved—and the ring retrieved—when Wanda’s husband, out hunting, shoots a magpie with a ring in its beak. And as her friend comments at the end of the play, Wanda had failed in her investigative enterprise: “Dunque, il ladro non è salito dal basso, ma è sceso dall’alto. In ciò, cara Wanda, hai sbagliato, e non ti posso dare ‘dieci’” (30). As for Wanda, she appears happy enough to have simply confirmed the honesty and sincerity of her friend’s daughters and maid.

Linda, the protagonist of the “due atti gialli comici” *Paura... gialla!*, concludes this gallery of Salesian amateur detectives. Linda is twenty-five and describes herself as “curiosa e piena di manie” (20), revealing that until the age of twenty she wanted to be a policewoman. She is obsessed with crimes, and she sees threats and dangers everywhere. Her older sister Giulia makes fun of her and her “cumulo di idee assurde e [...] mille variopinti spauracchi di fattacci che non esistono se non nella [sua] mente” (18). She jokingly calls her “signorina Scherlok [sic] Holmes” (23) and wonders why she does not write a *giallo* herself (22).

But rather than picking up writing, Linda wants to experience the real thing. She thinks there is something fishy in their new maid’s change of mood and decides to investigate. She calls her friend Olimpia, who in the past shared her interest in solving mysteries and is now a successful journalist, to help her shed light on the situation. Linda questions Bice but discovers nothing. Olimpia then organizes a trap that will force the maid to reveal the truth: that her husband is not really dead and is, in fact, the cause of the change in Bice’s behaviour. Thus, Olimpia concludes to Linda, “il giallo in casa tua è finito, come supponevo, in una bolla di sapone” (41).

Modern readers would probably identify Bice as the victim of an actual crime: her dishonest husband, in trouble with the law, is guilty of domestic abuse. Offstage, he slaps Bice, making her cry out in pain, threatens her with a fake gun,

and stalks her by renting the house next door. In fact, Linda was correct in suspecting that Bice “ha i denti serrati da un terribile segreto e qualcuno, nell’ombra, la minaccia e trama contro di lei” (22). However, no character in the play takes Linda seriously, nor do they consider Bice’s husband’s behaviour criminal or even reprehensible. In fact, when his plan to publicly slap Bice for abandoning their home is brought to light, the husband’s little sister proudly comments: “Mio fratello è un fusto vero!” (41). Olimpia calls his behaviour typical of a “uomo affezionato” (41). And everyone expects Bice to quietly resume her rightful place in the home even though she has previously lamented that she would rather kill herself than return to live with her husband (24).

Professional female detectives

The first professional female detective on the Salesian stage appears in *La detective Jackson*, originally written in French by Marcel Dubois in 1934 and adapted as a “giallo-roseo” by Amilcare Marescalchi in 1953. The action takes place on the outskirts of London. The protagonist, Miss Annita Jackson, is a renowned Scotland Yard detective. Like Friedel, Detective Jackson assumes a false identity in order to investigate the case of a missing black diamond. Having been mistaken for a new maid upon her arrival, she takes on the maid’s role, thus eliciting the confidence of all involved. Like Friedel, she also eavesdrops and searches the suspects’ private rooms. However, unlike Friedel, Miss Jackson is not a comic character. Even though she playacts to take advantage of personal confidences, she does so with the full knowledge and approval of the victim of the theft. Her professionalism is never questioned, and her investigative reputation is well deserved. She takes mental note of everything people say, declaring: “il mio ufficio consiste a non sospettare mai di nessuno in particolare [...] consiste... nel sospettare di tutti” (51). The stage directions do not place great import on Miss Jackson’s physical appearance. On the other hand, she mentions the male colleagues she works with and her unmarried status at age thirty,¹⁴ suggesting a lack of femininity or at least a career choice that excludes the roles of wife and mother.

The play ends with not one, but two resolution scenes typical of classic investigations: first, Miss Jackson invites all possible suspects into a room and makes a show of identifying the home owner’s daughter as the diamond thief,

¹⁴ Among the other characters, the mother is forty and her daughter is twenty, suggesting that a possible average age for getting married is around twenty.

hoping (as in fact happens) that the real culprit will not let her innocent friend take the blame. Next, she has a final showdown with a spy who had stolen some secret plans. Miss Jackson threatens her with an (unloaded) gun, and when the spy looks ready to flee, Jackson reveals that the building is surrounded and that the accomplices have already been arrested.

Following a well-established tradition among the Italian *giallisti* of the fascist period (Pezzotti 17–18), Marescalchi chose to set the action of *La detective Jackson* abroad, thus allowing for the presence of a professional policewoman (in addition to a despicable spy ready to betray her country's national safety). Playwrights who wanted to keep their plots in Italy, and still maintain historical plausibility, could not have an actual policewoman as their protagonist until the early 1960s, since Italian women first entered the police force only in 1961.¹⁵ In fact, an Italian policewoman appears for the first time on the Salesian stage in a minor role only in 1964, in the comedy *La fortuna nel cassetto* by Laura Zani and Fausto Da Spoleto.¹⁶ She introduces herself as “Agente della Polizia femminile Matilde Lamberti” (54). The stage directions state that she is wearing a suit, that she could be any age over 25, and that one should be able to tell at first sight that she is a policewoman. One of the protagonists comments that “è la prima volta che vediamo una donna poliziotto,” and Lamberti replies, smiling: “Facciamo il possibile per essere utili anche noi” (57). The policewoman, however, does not conduct an investigation into the suspicious origin of a considerable sum of money that the protagonists have found in a drawer—the event constituting the main plot of the play. Rather, she only wishes to obtain information about the building doorman's family, as his son has applied to enter the police force. Nevertheless, as the main characters have something to hide, they are scared by her arrival. Clotilde faints when Matilde introduces herself, and her daughter and mother collapse onto their chairs. Act 2 closes with Matilde, who “balza da una all'altra senza riuscire a sorreggere nessuna delle tre” (54). Thus, although in principle she is presented as a serious character, Matilde Lamberti only serves to create a humorous situation, and her first stage movements are comically ineffectual.

¹⁵ The Italian Corpo di Polizia femminile was instituted after the introduction of law 1083 of 1959 (Petrolino).

¹⁶ Laura Zani is the pen name that Franco Roberto, one of the most successful lay writers for educational theatre, used for adapting his works for the all-women educational stage (Roberto).

Do female detectives always get their woman?

By the time Matilde Lamberti comes looking for information about the doorman's son, the golden era of educational theatre for single-gender casts was quietly coming to an end. Thus, no Italian policewoman ever did get the chance to conduct an actual successful investigation on the Salesian stage. Still, one could draw some conclusions even on the basis of these early attempts to present female detectives in all-women plays. Kathleen Gregory Klein's comment that the professional female investigator in crime fiction tends to be shown "as an incompetent detective or an inadequate woman" (5), or sometimes both (4), is a good starting point, as it can easily be applied to the female detectives of the Salesian stage.

Friedel and Annita Jackson are at the extremes of the range: the first is a purely cartoonish figure, a being of indefinite nationality, age, and gender who easily disguises herself and creates comic mayhem in a respectable high-class household. Rather than a detective who must solve a crime that has already been committed, Friedel acts more like an undercover spy who strives to prevent a crime that has yet to be committed. Once order is re-established, she chooses to leave her first and only experience in investigation behind for a more domestic career as a private tutor, a position for which she is just as unqualified as she was for detective work. Miss Jackson from Scotland Yard, on the other hand, is very professional. Even though she uses several of the same investigative techniques as Friedel, the resulting situations are more tense than comic—they constitute an actual *giallo* rather than a comedy. Miss Jackson also acts undercover for a while, but then, in a scene typical of the genre, she solves the suspected theft by calling everyone together. In addition, she uses deductive powers and investigative thoroughness, as well as the tools of her trade, her gun and the (male) police force, as support. Stage directions describe neither Friedel nor Miss Jackson as particularly feminine; they are probably older than most Salesian actresses or spectators. Both are foreign. Both work in such rarefied environments as homes owned by countesses or aeronautical heroes. In sum, both Friedel and Jackson are purely fictitious characters, not actual role models for the audience. They are female detectives, characterized as inadequate women. They do, however, succeed in their investigations.

Also lacking such traditionally feminine characteristics as compassion, gentleness, and altruism are Olimpia and Monica. Both unmarried professionals (Olimpia, a successful journalist; Monica, a lawyer with an interest in

criminology), they demonstrate an ability to conduct an investigation and a capacity to solicit a confession via their questioning. Monica even has knowledge of the technical tools required for recording testimonies but uses them deceitfully. Olimpia, for her part, often uses violence, both verbal and physical. The stage instructions specify that she grabs the little girl (35), holds her firmly by the arm (38), squeezes until she cries out in pain (39), and threatens her with jail or an institution. Even though she admits that Linda's suspicions of wrongdoing may be correct, Olimpia discounts her behaviour and refuses to help (37). In other words, Olimpia is capable but appears devoid of feelings, while her friend Linda is maternal toward the little girl but worthless as a detective. And even worse than Olimpia, Monica has little insight into the workings of the main characters' souls. Throughout the play, she is selfish and superficial, while Alberta's ultimate sacrifice and Irene's lifelong expiation constitute the play's resolution—a resolution from which Monica is conspicuously missing. Thus, while Monica is successful in theory—she does bring to light the real culprit in an old murder case—in practice she fails at her goal, which was not so much to exonerate her cousin Alberta as to acquire fame and advance her career. If the educational message of the play consists in awareness, generosity, and mutual understanding,¹⁷ Monica is an example of a person who has learned very little and whose self-centredness excludes her from the cathartic finale.

Olimpia, with her career in journalism, and Monica, with her degree in law, are much more professional in their investigations than Wanda and Ornella, the two amateur detectives who can count only on their second-hand knowledge of police techniques to solve mysteries, or Linda, who sees crimes and threats everywhere, are. Although she is married, Wanda is characterized as masculine. Even though she should have a main role as investigator, she only appears in the third and final act of the comedy, when she suggests an explanation for the crime scene so outlandish and unlikely that it borders on the ridiculous. Wanda, in other words, uses the right investigative techniques to arrive at the right conclusion (no one at home was responsible for the theft of the ruby ring) but at that point makes the wrong deduction about the identity of the thief. She fails both in detecting and in femininity.

¹⁷ This is confirmed in the “note di regia” for *Ergastolo*, which label it as “un lavoro che rivela profonda esperienza della sofferenza, epperò sa additare, con tanta sapiente semplicità, le sorgenti genuine della serenità e della pace interiore nella conoscenza, generosità e mutua comprensione dei fratelli: per questo riesce sommamente educativo” (3).

Ornella, for her part, is a young university student, and her crime scene is a busy apartment building in an Italian city, complete with a nosy *portiera*. Her character is more realistic than that of Friedel or that of Miss Jackson and closer to the life experience of her expected audience than the elegant lawyer Monica or the elderly Wanda. Yet among all the female detectives portrayed in Salesian theatre, Ornella is the most disconcerting. There was never any doubt that the resolution of the case would inevitably be that no crime had been committed. Still, the play could have reached that resolution thanks to Ornella's investigative skills. Instead, the protagonist fails in her mission. Why did the author set Ornella up for failure instead of success? I suspect that this "quasi giallo" had an underlying message that went beyond the happy resolution in which no evil was actually ever committed. Young Ornella prides herself in being as good as, if not better than, men. She dares to take up a male profession such as detective work and boasts of her abilities and talents. In the end, however, she gets everything wrong. She is humiliated. Ornella's role in the play, then, is not only to unsuccessfully lead an investigation but is also to learn (and embody for the audience) its educational message: contrary to her boasting, she is not, in fact, as good as a man. *L'impiccata*, in other words, is part of a theatrical trend that makes fun of women who, believing themselves as good as men, dream of being successful in traditionally male careers.

The case of Linda, the protagonist of *Paura... gialla!*, is similar. Linda is characterized as exaggerated and fanciful. Her sister remains calm, and her friend Olimpia acts, but Linda interprets every event as if it were a paralyzing threat or a mystery to solve. Like Don Quixote and his chivalric romances and Catherine Morland and her gothic books, Linda has read too many *gialli* and is unable to look at reality except through the lens of fiction. She is not the detective who solves the mystery (like Olimpia), or even the centre of the mystery itself (like Bice), but the character that the audience is supposed to laugh at, the one who needs to learn a lesson. By poking fun at women who read too many books and end up mixing fiction with reality, the play is possibly also exhorting the spectators not to spend their lives with their nose in a *giallo*. Thus, it would appear that the instructional value of Ornella in *L'impiccata* and Linda in *Paura... gialla!* may relate not as much to the victory of good over evil as it does to the role of women in the Italian society of the late 1950s.

Conclusion

In her analysis of Invernizio's crime fiction, quoted above, Nozzoli insists on the importance of the educational message in the re-establishment of moral order contained in Invernizio's crime stories. As has become apparent in this discussion of *Friedel la detective*, *L'anello col rubino*, *Paura... gialla!*, and particularly *Neve sulle sbarre*, the Salesian theatrical tradition emphasized not so much the identification of the culprit as proving the innocence of previously suspected characters and restoring those who had strayed from the right path. Friedel is praised not only for preventing a crime, but also for bringing the culprit back to the fold. She ultimately decides to work toward the academic and moral education of those young women who had grown up lazy and ignorant. Wanda is unable to find the ruby ring, but at least she can establish that no member of the household has lied or is responsible for a theft. And as much as a contemporary audience may not agree that the ending restores the social order, on an Italian Catholic stage of the early 1960s, it was essential that Bice, who had abandoned her marital home, return to her husband. In addition, Alberta understands that she must still expiate her past sins and that her sacrifice will help redeem Irene's family. *L'impiccata*, on the other hand, shows the importance of the re-establishment of a different social order: one in which women realize that they should not try to take on men's jobs and should instead learn to accept their domestic role.

But in the enlightened days of post-war Italy, young women could not be expected to sit at home and sew. They wanted to go out, meet, experiment with make-up and clothes, be protagonists. Performing in educational theatre, including Salesian theatre, encouraged them to do exactly that. It is true that on the one hand, the comic failure of Ornella, Linda, and other female detectives is a perfect example of the conservative message that some of the Salesian plays meant to convey to their young female audience. Women who read too much, or boast of their talents and attempt to occupy traditional male roles, are destined to fail. But while I have discussed the message of the Salesian *gialli* as texts, these *gialli* were plays meant to be staged by those same young women they aimed to educate. And so, for all their conservative or moralistic messages, performing in these Salesian plays did give young women the opportunity to take on the roles of detectives, spies, and lawyers, in addition to those of mothers and daughters. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly for the future Italian women of the 1960s, the experience of performing in single-sex educational theatre allowed young women in

the years of Italy's reconstruction to leave home in the evening for rehearsal, to meet, learn, stage women's stories, and take on the role of protagonists. And this taste of independence and protagonism would have constituted a longer-lasting educational experience for the young actresses and spectators of the Salesian *gialli* than the content of the plays themselves.

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