

Introduction

Feltre's Teatro Sociale and the Role of Provincial Theatres in Italy and the Habsburg Empire during the Nineteenth Century

Giulia Brunello, Annette Kappeler, Raphaël Bortolotti

I. The importance of provincial theatres

A boom of theatre-building in nineteenth-century Italy

On the Italian peninsula, the first half of the nineteenth century was an era of rapid political, social and cultural change as well as a period of unprecedented speed in theatre-building and renovation. This boom concerned major cities as well as medium-sized towns and small communes.

A census carried out in 1871 in then-unified Italy registered 942 theatres in 640 municipalities,¹ some of them having space for as few as fifty people in the auditorium² and two-thirds of them having been constructed or renovated after 1815.³ Among the latter, 116 theatres were provincial theatres, most of them having 200–400 places in the auditorium.⁴

This trend was noticeable also in the provinces of Lombardo-Veneto, controlled by the Habsburg empire from 1815 on. In Feltre and Belluno, new theatres were established: the Teatro del Consorzio in Feltre and the Teatro Sociale in Belluno.⁵ Feltre's theatre had already been in existence since the end of the seventeenth century under the name of Teatro della Senna in the hall of the Palazzo Pubblico (or Palazzo della Ragione) in the Piazza della Biada. It was initially dedicated to staging spoken plays but later also featured (theatrical) performances with music.⁶ It was closed in 1797 but reopened in 1813 as the Teatro del Consorzio and later renamed Teatro Sociale. In Belluno, the old seventeenth-century theatre hosted in the Palazzo del Consiglio was demolished at the beginning of the nineteenth century to make way for the court and the city hall. In return, in the area of the

¹ Carlotta Sorba, *Teatri. L'Italia del melodramma nell'età del Risorgimento*, Bologna 2001, p. 26.

² John Rosselli, Italy. The Centrality of Opera, in *The Early Romantic Era. Between Revolutions: 1789 and 1848*, ed. by Alexander Ringer, Basingstoke/London 1990, pp. 160–200, here p. 162.

³ Carlotta Sorba, Musica e teatro, in *L'unificazione italiana*, ed. by Giovanni Sabbatucci/Vittorio Vidotto, Roma 2011, pp. 533–549, here p. 534.

⁴ Sorba, *Teatri*, p. 45.

⁵ Giorgio Pullini, Il teatro fra scena e società, in *Storia della cultura veneta*, Vol. 6: *Dall'età napoleonica alla Prima Guerra Mondiale*, ed. by Girolamo Arnaldi/Manlio Pastore Stocchi, Vicenza 1986, pp. 237–282, here p. 253.

⁶ Anita De Marco/Letizia Braitto, Storia del Teatro della Senna, in *Rivista Bellunese* 2, 1974, pp. 189–196, 3, 1974, pp. 311–316, and 4, 1975, pp. 87–94.

old Fondaco delle Biade, a new theatre was built, called the Teatro Sociale (later known as the Municipal Theatre), designed by Feltre architect Giuseppe Segusini and inaugurated in 1835.⁷ The theatres of Feltre and Belluno are two of several medium-sized theatres built or renovated at this time in Italy, and especially the Feltre theatre serves as a case study for provincial theatres in the nineteenth century, providing insight into the daily operations of these theatres and their roles in the socio-cultural landscape.

State of research

Our current image of Italian theatre in this period (especially opera) is very much shaped by historical evidence related to large theatres with enormous auditoriums, big orchestras and large stages with a multitude of different sets.

The vast majority of nineteenth-century audiences experienced theatre in a very different way, however. Most theatres on the Italian peninsula were located in smaller towns or even villages and had neither vast scenic spaces nor an extensive on- or off-stage staff nor a big auditorium. The provincial theatres we try to track in this volume were an everyday reality for a non-negligible part of the population, and their practices differed in many ways from those of major theatre halls. Provincial theatres were, even more than major venues, a socio-cultural space where the population could meet and exchange ideas and where information was sought and public opinion formed.

It is thus surprising that, apart from monographies about single theatres, the subject of a 'provincial-theatre culture' is relatively new to the research community. Concerning European theatre traditions, there are a few notable exceptions:

For French speaking regions, Christine Carrère-Saucède's publications on provincial theatres give an impressive overview of theatre halls, theatre administration and performance practices;⁸ Romuald Féret's research on provincial theatre, also in France, focuses on its socio-political role;⁹ Lauren R. Clay's contributions reveal important facts about eighteenth-century provincial theatre culture in France,¹⁰ and Max Fuchs's seminal work set important milestones for the study of the circuits of theatre companies that performed in the provinces and of the tastes of small-town audiences.¹¹

⁷ Franco Mancini/Maria Teresa Muraro/Elena Povoledo, *I teatri del Veneto*, Vol. 2: *Verona, Vicenza, Belluno ed il loro territorio*, Venezia 1985, pp. 361–369.

⁸ See, for example, Christine Carrère-Saucède, *Bibliographie de la vie théâtrale en province au XIXe siècle*, online under http://ceredi.labos.univ-rouen.fr/public/IMG/article_PDF/Bibliographie-de-la-vie-thtrale-en_a55.pdf (15/04/2023).

⁹ See, for example, Romuald Féret, *Le théâtre de province au XIXe siècle. Entre révolutions et conservatisme*, in *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 367, 2012, pp. 119–143, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ahrf.12436>.

¹⁰ See, for example, Lauren R. Clay, *Stagestruck. The Business of Theater in Eighteenth-Century France and Its Colonies*, London/Ithaca 2013.

¹¹ Max Fuchs, *La vie théâtrale en province au XVIIIe siècle. Personnel et répertoire*, Paris 1986.

For German speaking theatre traditions, Katharina Wessely's publications are worth mentioning. They mostly concentrate on theatres in the Habsburg Empire and investigate questions of national identity.¹² Milena Cesnaková-Michalcová's contributions focus on the German-speaking theatres in Slovakia.¹³

For the British Empire, Frederick Burwick published a volume on provincial theatre during the Industrial Revolution that includes theatres in labour-class environments.¹⁴ Jane Moody's *Illegitimate Theatre in London* and Frederick Burwick's *Playing to the Crowd* do not examine theatre traditions in provincial towns but focus on popular theatre genres apart from major theatres.¹⁵

Regarding Italy, at the end of the twentieth century, several important publications united systematic studies of provincial theatres for various regions, providing valuable information not only about their history, organisation, repertoire and any scenic material preserved but also about the state of the resources available for study. Such works can be found for the regions of Veneto, Tuscany and Emilia Romagna.¹⁶ These books also deal with the architecture and visual aspects of these theatres.

In addition to these publications, some studies address more specific issues, in particular theatre architecture and theatrical space, such as *L'architettura teatrale nelle Marche, Teatri d'Italia* by Giuliana Ricci, *Lo spazio del teatro* by Fabrizio Cruciani and the article "Luogo teatrale e spazio scenico" by Mercedes Viale Ferrero.¹⁷

A previously uncommon perspective on provincial theatres can be found in Sandra Pietrini's interesting volume *Il Teatro dietro le quinte nell'Ottocento*. Drawing on literary and iconographic documents, the author sheds light on backstage life in the theatre world (its daily functioning and material conditions).¹⁸

Finally, there are countless locally published monographs about provincial theatres on the Italian peninsula. These works vary considerably in their comprehensiveness. For the Veneto region, specific studies on many provincial theatres,

¹² Katharina Wessely, Die deutschsprachigen Provinztheater Böhmens und Mährens zwischen lokaler, regionaler und nationaler Identität, in *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 59/2, 2010, pp. 208–226.

¹³ Milena Cesnaková-Michalcová, *Geschichte des deutschsprachigen Theaters in der Slowakei*, Wien/Köln/Weimar 1997.

¹⁴ Frederick Burwick, *British Drama of the Industrial Revolution*, Cambridge 2015.

¹⁵ Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840*, Cambridge 2007; Frederick Burwick, *Playing to the Crowd. London Popular Theatre, 1780–1830*, New York 2011.

¹⁶ For the Veneto region see Mancini/Muraro/Povoledo, *I teatri del Veneto*; for Tuscany see Elvira Garbero Zorzi, *I teatri storici della Toscana. Censimento documentario e architettonico*, Firenze 1990; for Emilia Romagna see Simonetta Bondoni, *Teatri storici in Emilia Romagna*, Casalecchio di Reno 1982.

¹⁷ *L'architettura teatrale nelle Marche. Dieci teatri nel comprensorio Jesi-Senigallia*, Jesi 1983; Giuliana Ricci, *Teatri d'Italia. Dalla Magna Grecia all'Ottocento*, Bramante 1971; Fabrizio Cruciani, *Lo spazio del teatro*, Roma/Bari 1998; Mercedes Viale Ferrero, *Luogo teatrale e spazio scenico*, in *Storia dell'opera italiana*, Vol. 5: *La spettacolarità*, ed. by Lorenzo Bianconi/Giorgio Pestelli, Torino 1988, pp. 1–122.

¹⁸ Sandra Pietrini, *Fuori scena. Il Teatro dietro le quinte nell'Ottocento*, Roma 2004.

from the largest to the smallest, have been written. Some of these are unpublished dissertations that can only be consulted in local or university libraries. These include Remo Schiavo's study on the theatre of Bassano; those of Maria Mazzocca and Giulia Miotto on the Teatro Accademico of Castelfranco Veneto; and studies by Gisla Franceschetto, Federica Zanardo, Giancarlo Argolini and Luigi Sangiovanni on Cittadella. For the Teatro Sociale of Belluno, there are dissertations by Andrea Rizzardini and Monica De Bona; for Este, the publication of the exhibition *La scena e la memoria* edited by Sileno Salvagnini; on the Teatro Sociale of Rovigo, the study by Leobaldo Traniello and Luigi Stocco; and finally, for Badia Polesine, the recent publication by Mara Barison and Francesco Occhi.¹⁹

Characteristics of provincial theatres

In nineteenth-century periodicals on visual arts, literature and theatre, provincial theatres – treated in this volume – and small theatres in large cities were both called ‘minor’ theatres. In large cities, minor theatres ideally stood alongside the larger and more important main theatre, which had an established tradition and were considered on a higher level in the cultural hierarchy. Although there could be several ‘minor’ theatres in a city in a well-defined hierarchy in terms of quality, size, etc., they were all called ‘minor’. Each theatre had a specific capacity and stage situation (with constant renovations and reconstructions), a particular repertoire that changed over the years, and its own audience, which also transformed itself over time.

In a provincial centre that represented the economic, administrative and cultural heart of the surrounding region, there was typically only one theatre. These theatres – exemplified by the one in Feltre – did not have the same socio-cultural functions or programming practices as a ‘minor’ theatre in cities like Milan; they also differed from theatres in smaller and geographically isolated towns. In order to compare such provincial theatres with one another, we have tried to establish a hermeneutically useful category of the ‘major provincial theatre’, defined as

¹⁹ For Bassano see Remo Schiavo, *Il teatro di Bassano*, in *Storia di Bassano*, Bassano 1980, pp. 617–635; for Belluno see Andrea Rizzardini, *Le attività di un palcoscenico di provincia. Il Teatro Sociale di Belluno tra il 1886 e il 1936*, Master thesis: Trento 1999/2000, and Monica De Bona, *L'archivio della Società del Teatro*, Master thesis: Udine 1999/2000; for Castelfranco Veneto see Maria Mazzocca, *Il teatro accademico di Castelfranco Veneto*, Master thesis: Padova 1968/69, and Giulia Miotto, *Il teatro Accademico di Castelfranco Veneto*, Master thesis: Padova 2014/15; for Cittadella see Gisla Franceschetto, *Il Teatro Sociale di Cittadella*, Cittadella 1975; Federica Zanardo, *Il teatro Sociale di Cittadella (1817-1928)*, Master thesis: Bologna 1987/88, and Giancarlo Argolini/Luigi Sangiovanni, *Il Teatro sociale di Cittadella 1817-2017. Duecento anni teatro e di vita*, Cittadella 2017; for Este see *La scena e la memoria. Teatro a Este 1521-1978*, a cura di Sileno Salvagnini, Este 1985; for Rovigo see Leobaldo Traniello/Luigi Stocco, *Il Teatro Sociale. Gli altri teatri e l'attività musicale a Rovigo*, Rovigo 1970; for Badia Polesine see Mara Barison/Francesco Occhi, *Antiche memorie. Il Teatro Sociale e i Palazzi di Badia Polesine*, Badia Polesine 2011.

middle-sized theatres in similar towns that served as the centre of an administrative area (e.g. a district). These theatres share the following characteristics:

- the size of the town (in the nineteenth-century Lombardy-Veneto region, often ca 3'000–15'000 inhabitants);
- its geographical and cultural importance;
- the number of seats in the auditorium (ca 300–800 seats);
- its form of organisation as a theatre society;
- the involvement of amateur artistic societies, which often overlapped with theatre societies and played a fundamental role in running the theatre;
- a certain regularity of performances during the year;
- a variety of programming (being the only theatre of a town, provincial theatres were normally not specialised in one genre but offered a diversity of spectacles);
- and finally, the status of principal theatre of a region.

These theatres were thus the main cultural centres not just of a single town but of an area and were a major attraction for a vast public, both local inhabitants and 'foreigners'.

Provincial theatres as municipal competition

The municipalist spirit of nineteenth-century Italy 'of the hundred cities' is well known. Theatres were one of the ways in which a municipal competition typical for this period was played out.²⁰ In the plan for the establishment of an Italian theatre troupe on the eve of the Italian unification, one can read: "Minor theatres multiply, like newspapers, being ephemeral existences, at the beginning of each year. Small villages no longer compete with their neighbours for the height of their bell tower, but rather for the decorum of their little theatre."²¹

Each provincial theatre had a symbolic function for its town and gave it a certain reputation, especially in relation to neighbouring ones. Towns often tried to outdo their neighbours through building a beautiful theatre with impressive programming. Driven by a love of their artistic and cultural heritage and a desire to enhance and promote it, local administrators devoted energy and space to building or renovating civic theatres, which resulted in constant work on their

²⁰ Carlotta Sorba, *Musica e teatro*, p. 534; Rosselli, Italy, p. 163.

²¹ "I teatri minori si moltiplicano, come i giornali, effimere esistenze, sul principio di ogni anno. I piccoli villaggi non contendono più coi loro vicini per l'altezza del loro campanile, ma sì per il decoro del loro teatrino." Guglielmo Stefani, Società del Teatro Drammatico Italiano. Programma artistico letterario, in *La Fama. Giornale di scienze, lettere, arti, industria e teatri*, 17/70, 2 September 1858, pp. 278f., here p. 278. All translations, if not otherwise stated, by the present authors.

decoration, restoration and expansion. The programming reflected the ‘good taste’ of the administrators and consequently enhanced the good name of the town.²²

Major provincial theatres were thus not only an important element in the cultural life of a town but also in its relationships with neighbouring communes. By means of its theatre, a small town such as Feltre could showcase its importance and compete with its neighbours.

Provincial theatres as sociocultural centres

In his article “Opera and Absolutism in Restoration Italy”, John A. Davis writes:

That Italy was building new theaters at an unprecedented rate, as well as restoring and enlarging old ones, at the time may seem surprising, since the period is more generally associated with the reactionary political and cultural climate of the legitimist Restorations, devastating epidemics, falling agricultural prices, and prolonged recession.²³

How was this phenomenon possible? To explain the surprising importance of the provincial theatre as a sociocultural centre in this period, we will now try to put the development of theatre-building and renovation in a larger sociopolitical context.

Provincial theatres in nineteenth-century Northern Italy can be seen as societal focal points. The reigning powers in Northern Italy (the Habsburgs, 1798–1805, 1813–1866; Napoleon, 1805–1813) both valued and feared them as a place where public opinion was formed. Under Napoleonic rule, the theatre was said to have a positive influence on the education of the masses and on the formation of public opinion.²⁴ According to a report of the theatre committee for the Cisalpine provinces from the year 1798, the theatre made an important contribution to public education.²⁵ The Habsburg government, too, supported theatres in the conquered regions.²⁶ According to an official document from 1825, the theatre was considered a great advantage for the internal security of a country because a major part of the population gathered there during the evenings and could thus be easily surveilled.²⁷ While the Habsburg government encouraged theatrical activities, other types of social gatherings were largely forbidden, leading

²² Sorba, *Teatri*, p. 101.

²³ John A. Davis, Opera and Absolutism in Restoration Italy, 1815–1860, in *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36/4, 2006, pp. 569–594, here p. 569.

²⁴ Claudio Meldolesi/Ferdinando Taviani, *Teatro e spettacolo nel primo Ottocento*, Roma/Bari 1991, p. 7; Claudio Toscani, “*D’amore al dolce impero*”. *Studi sul teatro musicale italiano del primo Ottocento*, Lucca 2012, p. 17.

²⁵ Antonio Paglicci Brozzi, *Sul teatro giacobino ed antigiacobino in Italia, 1796-1805*, Milano 1887, pp. 179–184.

²⁶ Sorba, *Teatri*, pp. 36, 39.

²⁷ Fabian A. Stallknecht, *Dramenmodell und ideologische Entwicklung der italienischen Oper im frühen Ottocento*, Stuttgart 2001, p. 139.

to a situation where the theatre was often the only social and cultural centre of a town.²⁸ In *Volere è potere* (1869), Michele Lessona writes: “Those who have not seen the theatre in Italy before 1848 cannot comprehend its importance. It was the only place where expressions of public life were possible, and everybody took part in it.”²⁹ In a context in which other means of public communication were banned or inaccessible – a large part of the population could not read, and the press was severely restricted through censorship – the theatre offered a space to congregate and communicate in public.³⁰

Nonetheless, the reigning powers feared the theatre for its potential to inspire political rebelliousness; theatres could also be a place for political manifestations and open critique of foreign powers.³¹

Provincial theatres during the Risorgimento

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the provincial theatre was a very popular place, and it constituted a major means of communication that was accessible to a good part of the population. Through performances of spoken theatre and opera, feelings and viewpoints about social realities could be expressed, making it possible to communicate political criticism or denunciations of political situations to the public. Research on music theatre has often presented opera “as a medium that amplifies and disseminates the political ideologies that surround it”,³² and findings about the Risorgimento period have confirmed this notion.³³

As the theatre disseminated political ideologies, the reception of performances became a way in which public opinion could be expressed and make itself heard, serving as a sort of social thermometer. Knowing about the theatre – what was performed and, above all, how it was received – was therefore an important objective of pre-unification governments. Reports from police officers and so-called confidants kept authorities informed about the sentiments that theatre plays aroused and which of them were stirring in certain political and cultural milieus, first and foremost the educated and urban ones, which remained their greatest source

²⁸ Ibid., p. 125.

²⁹ “Chi non ha vissuto in Italia prima del 1848 non può farsi capace di ciò che fosse allora il teatro. Era l'unico campo aperto alle manifestazioni della vita pubblica, e tutti ci prendevano parte.” Michele Lessona, *Volere è potere*, Firenze 1869, pp. 267f.; Harry Hearder, *Italy in the Age of the Risorgimento. 1890–1870*, Harlow 1983, p. 249.

³⁰ Davis, *Opera and Absolutism*, p. 572. In general, the idea of a universal participation in theatre performances, as formulated by Lessona in 1869, must be relativised: entrance fees, dress codes and the difficulty of travel prevented a non-negligible part of the population from taking part in theatrical events. But in provincial theatres, a bigger part of the population attended the theatre than in the major halls in cities like Milan or Naples.

³¹ Pullini, *Il teatro fra scena e società*, p. 240.

³² Peter Stamatov, *Interpretive Activism and the Political Uses of Verdi's Operas in the 1840s*, in *American Sociological Review* 67/3, 2002, pp. 345–366, here p. 359.

³³ Carlotta Sorba, *Il melodramma della nazione. Politica e sentimenti nell'età del Risorgimento*, Roma/Bari 2015.

of concern. In bulletins that the police periodically compiled for government authorities, the section on ‘public spirit’ presented also news from theatres: it provided information on who was attending performances and who was not, what rumours were circulating, how the authorities’ measures were being received, etc.

The 1848 revolution particularly revealed to what extent public opinion and political conflicts could manifest themselves in theatres. In Venice, on the eve of the revolutionary events, even the choice of going or not going to the theatre could have great political significance. Not going often meant being considered to be on the side of the protesters, not least out of solidarity with certain men who were forbidden from setting foot in the theatre, guilty of having demanded encores of airs thought to have revolutionary content. Even the municipal council in Venice complained about these circumstances because, after rebellious acts at the La Fenice theatre had taken place, the city had been treated “as if it were in a state of revolt” – to which the Habsburg governor replied that “seditious demonstrations” had taken place at La Fenice almost every night.³⁴

During the days of the 1848 revolution, the La Fenice theatre became one of the venues for rituals that accompanied the unfolding of the protest movement: cheering the constitution, the civic guard, Pius IX and Italy; patriotic choruses on stage; waving of flags; audience attired with scarves and national colours; handkerchiefs tied to one another to unite the people – especially women – in the boxes. If the theatre was serving as a stage for the display of civic order, the change of government was made visible at La Fenice.³⁵

Provincial theatres in unified Italy

After the unification of Italy, the theatre world entered a period of reorganisation. New laws such as regulation copyrights and new taxes put heavy financial pressure on theatre societies.³⁶ In 1862, the budget committee of the Ministry of the Interior proposed limiting subsidies for theatres and, after a heated debate, transferred them from the core to a special budget. Furthermore, the committee expressed the idea of ceding the ownership of theatres from theatre societies to municipalities.³⁷ The decision to limit subsidies particularly affected opera

³⁴ “[...] come fosse in stato di rivolta”; “manifestazioni sediziose”. Piero Brunello, *Colpi di scena. La rivoluzione del Quarantotto a Venezia*, Sommacampagna 2018, p. 115.

³⁵ A directive from the government reserved two boxes for the governor and the general director of the police for the commission of the nursery schools on 29 March 1848. *Raccolta per ordine cronologico di tutti gli Atti, Decreti, Nomine ecc. del Governo Provvisorio di Venezia non che Scritti, Avvisi, Desiderj ecc. dei Cittadini privati che si riferiscono all'epoca presente* I.1, Venezia 1848, p. 233.

³⁶ Sorba, *Musica e teatro*, p. 541.

³⁷ Maria Teresa Antonia Morelli, *L'unità d'Italia del teatro. Istituzioni politiche, identità nazionale e questione sociale*, Roma 2012, pp. 202f.

houses, which were most in need of financial support from the state because of their more expensive, spectacular scene designs.³⁸

With common regulations lacking throughout the Italian peninsula, the new government had to standardise legislation and apply similar regulations to theatres in different states. The most debated issues concerned the formal education of theatre artists, a centralised theatre organisation, the establishment of standing troupes and the ‘nationalisation’ of the theatre repertoire.³⁹

The debate over whether or not government interventions should be organised in a centralised way was particularly lively in the area of censorship. On the one hand, political decentralisation had allowed for faster and less time-consuming interventions; on the other hand, it had also led to unequal treatment in different regions and a certain arbitrariness of judgement and action. In the absence of uniform censorship regulations – each state had its own rules and objectives – authorities tried to enact unambiguous and universal regulations for public surveillance. In accordance with the centralised structure of the new kingdom, so-called prefects were directly responsible for censorship; an 1864 royal decree remaining in force after unification entrusted them with ensuring that theatrical performances did not disagree with morality, ‘common decency’ and public order.⁴⁰

In spite of these circumstances, the second half of the nineteenth century was a fruitful period in terms of theatrical production, supported by multiple cultural and political stimuli. The last decades of the century in particular saw an increase in the number of working theatres and a veritable explosion of amateur theatre and orchestra companies.⁴¹ As had been the case in the first half of the century, the theatre continued to play an important social and pedagogical role, in particular by establishing behavioural norms for gender, class and ‘race’ on stage; what was staged in theatres continued to be one of the main instruments for shaping models of masculinity and femininity in various social and cultural contexts.⁴² While ideals linked to a nostalgia for a lost homeland and an expectation of its rebirth had often been expressed in the theatre during the pre-unification period, once unification had been achieved, theatre performances often staged the bourgeoisie as Italy’s leading class and promoted its moral, political and cultural values.⁴³

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Sorba, *Musica e teatro*, p. 544.

⁴⁰ Morelli, *L’unità d’Italia del teatro*, p. 214 (the author cites the Regio Decreto No. 1630, published in the *Gazzetta ufficiale*, 9 February 1864).

⁴¹ Sorba, *Musica e teatro*, p. 546.

⁴² Simonetta Chiappini, *Folli, sonnambule, sartine. La voce femminile nell’Ottocento italiano*, Firenze 2006.

⁴³ Morelli, *L’unità d’Italia del teatro*, pp. 73f.

II. *The administration of provincial theatres*

Forms of organisation

Although both the Napoleonic and Habsburg governments promoted theatrical activity, only a few theatres on the Italian peninsula were governmental institutions. Provincial theatres were generally organised in self-governed theatre societies financed through the sale or rental of theatre boxes.⁴⁴ The municipality normally bought several boxes (the central ones with the highest prestige) and granted their theatre society annual subsidies in order to contribute to restoration work and the quality of performances.⁴⁵

In Feltre, a variety of sources about the administration of the theatre have survived. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the owners of theatre boxes at the Teatro Sociale formed a society that arranged for the renovation of the theatre and commissioned a set of new scenic material. The theatre became a central space offering entertainment, a place for people to gather, and a stage for amateur and professional troupes. By 1840 the theatre was believed to have had a capacity of 1'000 spectators.⁴⁶

Notarial documents of box sales during the eighteenth century – in particular during the years when the Feltre theatre was renovated – suggest a partial overlap of names of box owners and members of the amateur theatre troupe.⁴⁷ The society consisted of owners of boxes who paid an annual fee and attended regular meetings. They chose theatre companies, hired impresarios and established fees and programmes in accordance with “the decorum of the theatre and the interests of the company”, as stated in its regulations.⁴⁸

In general meetings, members of the society elected a three-member presidency that was then responsible for the practical and artistic administration of the theatre.⁴⁹ The members of the presidency were elected by majority vote: one box, one vote. In office for three years, the presidency in turn elected a cashier and a custodian. The rent for the boxes was paid in advance and separated in two payments per annum, one in January, the other in July. Those who did not

⁴⁴ Sorba, *Teatri*, p. 104.

⁴⁵ For Feltre's Teatro Sociale, see the minutes of the Feltre municipal council meeting of 14 July 1845 in which a subsidy of 1'000 lire was granted to the president of the Consortium; Archivio Storico comunale di Feltre (ASCF), *Serie 31 Deliberazioni del Consiglio 1815-1868*, n. 657.

⁴⁶ Mancini/Muraro/Povoledo, *I teatri del Veneto*, Vol. 2, p. 375.

⁴⁷ Archivio di Stato di Belluno (ASBL), *Notarile*, prot n. 4024, cc. 160r–161v, atti n. 161 and n. 194; prot n. 2517, cc. 505r–506r, atto n. 505; prot n. 4172, cc. 195v–196r, atti n. 195 and n. 197; prot n. 2511, cc. 737r–738v, atto n. 737; prot n. 7770, cc. 562v–563v, atto n. 563; prot n. 7506, cc. 232r–233v, atti n. 232 and n. 233; prot n. 7297, cc. 396v–397r, atti n. 396 and n. 397; prot n. 6983, cc. 434v–435r, atti n. 435 and n. 473.

⁴⁸ “[...] il decoro del teatro e gli interessi della società”. Polo Bibliotecario Feltrino “Panfilo Castaldi” (PBF), *Fondo Storico*, G VI 90 bis, *Piano disciplinare del Teatro Sociale di Feltre*, 1813 (approved in 1829).

⁴⁹ Sorba, *Teatri*, p. 79.

punctually pay their rent lost their boxes for one year, during which the box could be used by the presidency. If the rent was not paid for three consecutive years, the box became the property of the theatre society if no new offer for it was made.⁵⁰

Censorship

The Habsburg government – like other pre-unitary Italian rulers – saw it as an important task to control the circulation of ideas from the very beginning of their domination of the Veneto and Lombardy provinces.⁵¹ Publications were controlled by the censorship office, which not only surveilled publications printed on the Italian peninsula but also all foreign books introduced to the Habsburg territories. The imperial censorship offices were based in Milan and Venice, but they depended on the High Court Ministry of Police and Censorship in Vienna. The *Catalogo de' libri italiani proibiti negli Stati di Sua Maestà l'Imperatore d'Austria*, published in Venice in 1815, contains a long list of forbidden books that was constantly updated.

Theatres were particularly well controlled, both the performances and the public in attendance.⁵² Controlling the theatre was the responsibility of the police, who were in charge of giving their approbation of librettos, costumes and stage-design sketches in advance as well as surveilling the performances. A police officer had to attend rehearsals and performances of any new *mise-en-scène*. Censorship and theatre were so closely intertwined that the history of theatre can be seen as the history of censorship.⁵³

The need to control theatrical activities stemmed from the high social importance of theatres, as described above: they were supposed to “instruct the mind and entertain, and in doing so, form the intellect and the heart.”⁵⁴ Theatrical performances were often seen as a principal instrument of propaganda because the passions staged in theatre pieces were thought to have such a powerful impact on the public and because they could shape public opinion. That is why the theatre, while being supported as a means of entertaining the population in order to keep them away from political uprisings, was also very much feared by the Habsburg government. If on the one hand the government was able to exercise control, on

⁵⁰ PBF, *Fondo Storico*, G VI 90 bis, *Piano disciplinare del Teatro Sociale di Feltre*, 1813 (approved in 1829).

⁵¹ For a history of censorship on the Italian peninsula during the long nineteenth century see Vittorio Frajese, *La censura in Italia. Dall'Inquisizione alla Polizia*, Bari/Roma 2014.

⁵² Nicola Mangini, Sulla politica teatrale dell'Austria nel Lombardo-Veneto, in Id., *Drammaturgia e spettacolo tra Settecento e Ottocento. Studi e ricerche*, Padova 1979, pp. 67–73.

⁵³ Carlo Di Stefano, *La censura teatrale in Italia (1600-1962)*, Bologna 1964, p. 9.

⁵⁴ “[...] istruire la mente e dilettaando concorrere a formare lo spirito ed il cuore.” Circular dated 16 March 1813, n. 1769, cit. in Roberto Alonge/Guido Davico Bonino, *Storia del teatro moderno e contemporaneo*, Vol. 2: *Il grande teatro borghese Settecento Ottocento*, Torino 2000, p. 1109.

the other hand it took care to convey the image of an orderly and undisturbed political system through theatrical performances.⁵⁵

Theatres on the Italian peninsula were accessible to a wide audience. A common assumption during the nineteenth century was that spoken word could incite people much more than written text.⁵⁶ In contrast to reading, the ease with which the passions represented in the theatre could be transmitted to the public – in particular to lower classes consisting mainly of artisans and clerks – meant that the authorities were more concerned about the possible negative influences of theatre than that of printed publications.⁵⁷

What worried authorities most was everything that had a potential to offend moral or religious feelings in the slightest way, endanger the ‘good order’ of families or lead to the questioning of social divisions, which would put the established political and social order in danger. Another contested subject was sexuality: expressions that could have a double meaning were often modified while words referring explicitly to sexual contexts were eliminated.⁵⁸

The importance of theatre and opera for the Risorgimento has led historiographers to focus above all on censorship practices that targeted references alluding to national aspirations. For example, in Milan, the verses “Ho sparso / Pel germanico trono il sangue mio” were replaced with the words “Ho sparso / di Bisanzio pel trono il sangue mio” in Silvio Pellico’s *Francesca da Rimini*.⁵⁹

A study focusing on the censorship of costume sketches also shows how much the controlling authorities – in this case, the Neapolitan theatres – were “litterally obsessed” with the “ban on flesh-coloured shirts” of actresses and dancers:⁶⁰ the censorship notes forbade tight dresses, meticulously prescribed the length of

⁵⁵ Mangini, *Sulla politica teatrale dell’Austria*, p. 71.

⁵⁶ Robert Justin Goldstein, *Political Censorship of the Arts and the Press in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, New York 1989, pp. 116–177.

⁵⁷ This does not mean that books were not subject to careful censorship. The *Catalogo de’ libri italiani proibiti negli Stati di Sua Maestà l’Imperatore d’Austria*, published in Venice in 1815, contained a long list that was constantly updated; for the region of Lombardo-Veneto see Giampietro Berti, *Censura e cultura nella Venezia austriaca, 1814-1866*, ed. by Paolo Preto, Padova 2000, pp. 177–209.

⁵⁸ Francesco Izzo, *Laughter Between Two Revolutions. Opera Buffa in Italy, 1831–1848*, Rochester 2013, pp. 68–74.

⁵⁹ “I have shed my blood / For the German throne”, “I have shed my blood / For the Byzantine throne”. Silvio Pellico, *Francesca da Rimini*, act 1, vv. 224f. as quoted in Isabella Becherucci, *Imprimatur. Si stampi Manzoni*, Venezia 2020, p. 14.

⁶⁰ “La questione del divieto delle maglie color carne [...] letteralmente ossessiona la Soprintendenza.” Paola De Simone/Nicolò Maccavino, I figurini della collezione Carlo Guillaume. Dalla Biblioteca del Conservatorio San Pietro a Majella una fonte d’archivio ancora inedita per l’Ottocento musicale e coreutico sulla scena dei Reali Teatri di Napoli, in *Fashioning Opera and Musical Theatre. Stage Costumes from the Late Renaissance to 1900*, ed. by Valeria De Lucca, Venezia 2014, pp. 243–388, here p. 256.

skirts, and required skirts or tunics to be sewn to prevent dancers from showing off ‘their forms’ while doing pirouettes and somersaults.⁶¹

The control enforced by censorship rules made authors often act proactively: some did abstain from writing plays altogether while others self-censored by avoiding problematic situations or ambiguous characters, sometimes at the request of theatre managers.⁶² Texts were modified depending on the place where a piece was performed (in different regions of the Italian peninsula or abroad), taking into account different audience expectations within various local realities.⁶³

To avoid censorship or to demonstrate acceptance of its rules, authors transposed political and contemporary themes to remote times or places. The audience could glimpse Italian political reality in distant, if not exotic, settings (medieval times, Scottish fortresses, Gaulish forests or Renaissance courts) or detect political allusions in censored texts. For example, instances of foreign domination in previous centuries could bring to mind the contemporary conditions under the Habsburg empire. The chorus of the opera *Nabucco*, which represents the lament of the Jewish people subjugated to the Babylonian empire, could be perceived as regret for the Italian homeland “so beautiful and lost”⁶⁴ and a desire for liberation from foreign governments in a patriotic climate. Although set in distant times, Verdi’s operas stage recurring configurations typical of what Alberto Mario Banti has called a “Risorgimento canon”⁶⁵ in which the public could recognise their own reality: a nation oppressed by foreign domination, divisions within the nation, the threat to national honour and heroic attempts at redemption.⁶⁶

The activities of Feltre’s Teatro Sociale were controlled by the police, who sent periodic reports to the government in Venice via the provincial delegation in Belluno. These reports gave an account of the theatre’s operations, its renovation work and changes in the personnel of theatre societies. A provincial delegation was required to ask permission from the authorities before opening the theatre for any kind of performance.⁶⁷

⁶¹ Paologiovanni Maione/Francesca Seller, *Il magazzino delle meraviglie. Inventari e regolamenti per i costumi del teatro di San Carlo nell’Ottocento*, in *Fashioning Opera*, pp. 389–559, here p. 390.

⁶² Goldstein, *Political Censorship*, pp. 149f.

⁶³ Carlotta Sorba, *Il Risorgimento in musica. L’opera lirica nei teatri del 1848*, in *Immagini della nazione nell’Italia del Risorgimento*, ed. by Alberto Mario Banti/Roberto Bizzocchi, Roma 2002, pp. 133–156, here p. 137.

⁶⁴ “Oh mia patria sì bella e perduta!” Temistocle Solera, *Nabucodonosor. Dramma lirico in quattro parti* [libretto], Milan 1842, p. 26.

⁶⁵ Alberto Mario Banti, *The Nation of the Risorgimento. Kinship, Sanctity, and Honour in the Origins of Unified Italy*, New York 2020.

⁶⁶ Philip Gossett/Daniela Macchione, *Le “Edizioni distrutte” e il significato dei cori operistici nel Risorgimento*, in *Il Saggiatore musicale* 12/2, 2005, pp. 339–387, here pp. 355–357.

⁶⁷ On the police control of the Teatro Sociale in Feltre see, for example, the police files in Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASVe), *Presidenza della Luogotenenza delle province venete*, Atti, 1857–1861, b. 351, 6/6.

III. Spaces of provincial theatres

Architecture, auditorium and other theatrical spaces

Throughout the nineteenth century, the most dominant architectural model for theatres on the Italian peninsula was the so-called ‘teatro all’italiana’: stalls with removable seats and several rows of boxes, a model already firmly established in previous centuries throughout Europe.⁶⁸ Despite strong questioning of this model, particularly in France during the second half of the eighteenth century, all over Europe “there is an affirmation of a uniform architectural model that [...] reaffirms the diffusion of the Italian typology and reinforces the theatre form, aimed at responding to the new needs of social functionality.”⁶⁹

This architectural model became very popular in part due to the correspondence between the internal structure of the building and social stratifications: the boxes, often owned by prominent locals, ensured a social separation from the lower social strata, who also attended the theatre in provincial towns. One could attend a performance in a private space that allowed one to see but also to be seen. In these theatrical spaces, boxes could be used as a sitting room for dinner or to engage in business; just drawing the curtains was enough to create a private environment. In other words, the interior of the theatre reproduced the hierarchical structure of society, which continued to follow traditional patterns despite the big sociopolitical changes that took place during the nineteenth century.⁷⁰

As mentioned above, Feltre’s Teatro Sociale was located in a pre-existing building in the heart of the city, the Palazzo della Ragione, which had been used for various activities during the preceding centuries. From the seventeenth century on, it was used only for theatrical performances. The sources preserved in Feltre (contracts, invoices and other administrative documents)⁷¹ allow us to trace the vicissitudes of the restructuring of this theatre in the early nineteenth century, when it was renovated following the common Italian architectural model of four rows of twenty-four boxes. The result of this renovation can still be admired today.

⁶⁸ Anne Sengers, *Scénographies du théâtre occidental*, Paris 2011, pp. 84f., 167.

⁶⁹ “Nel Settecento [...] si assiste all’affermazione di un modello architettonico uniforme che [...] riafferma la diffusione della tipologia all’italiana e rinforza la forma del teatro, volta a rispondere alle nuove esigenze di funzionalità sociale.” Maria Ida Biggi, Architettura teatrale e spazio scenico nell’Europa del Settecento, in *Theatre Spaces for Music in 18th-Century Europe*, ed. by Iskrena Yordanova/Giuseppina Raggi/Maria Ida Biggi, Wien 2020 (Cadernos de Queluz, Vol. 3), pp. 1–19, here p. 5.

⁷⁰ Meldolesi/Taviani, *Teatro e spettacolo*, pp. 120–122.

⁷¹ Feltre offers a unique ensemble of sources, such as various archival documents that provide precious information about the repertoire, the administration of the theatre as well as its material aspects. The extant sources also include original scenic materials (sets, machinery, curtains, backdrops, lighting systems) that allow us to understand the material requirements of performances. Administrative documents and accounting books are stored in Feltre’s Archivio Storico Comunale, whereas contracts, correspondence between theatre and travelling theatre companies, invitations, regulations and playbills are in the Fondo Storico of the Polo Bibliotecario “Panfilo Castaldi”.

Special attention was paid to the decoration of the theatrical space. The spectators themselves were considered to be the main ‘ornament’ of the theatre;⁷² the painting of the space had to take into account their presence and match it, making this social space a real treasure chest. To this end, Feltre’s theatre society hired a renowned painter, Tranquillo Orsi (1791–1844), in 1842. He repainted the auditorium and made a proscenium curtain that still exists today.⁷³ The colours chosen (white, gold, pastel colours, blue), the antique character of the decorative motifs and the presence of Apollo on the proscenium curtain are characteristic elements of theatre decoration in Northern Italy and France during the first half of the nineteenth century.⁷⁴

Material conditions

Most provincial theatres in the Veneto and Lombardy regions – Feltre being no exception⁷⁵ – had a traditional set system consisting of backdrops, wings and borders. These painted elements could be set in motion by a complex machinery in order to make ‘a vista’ changes during a performance. Used on European stages since the seventeenth century, this system of Italian origin was perfected and reached a sort of apogee in the nineteenth century; at that time, even the smallest provincial theatres were equipped with such a system.⁷⁶

Small or middle-sized theatres were provided with a limited number of stock scenes, which were reused for various theatrical performances. The sets were sufficient for most performances of spoken theatre, where the plot did not usually require specific scenic elements and could be accommodated with sets of a generic character. In Feltre, these sets have been preserved to this day. It is therefore one of the very few European theatres with such historical stage materials.

On the other hand, opera often required settings that illustrated specific places or periods. In such cases, the travelling troupes had to bring the scenery with them to achieve the verisimilitude required for this type of repertoire.⁷⁷

In Feltre as in other theatres, the sets were illuminated by lights placed on the sides behind the wings, on the front of the stage, and probably above the stage. In the theatre hall, a chandelier provided uniform light in the auditorium for the whole evening. Each box owner was responsible for the illumination of his or her own space. Even though the lighting on stage was brighter than that in the auditorium, the complete theatrical space remained relatively dark. The question

⁷² Michèle Sajous D’Oria, *Bleu et or. La scène et la salle en France au temps des lumières*, Paris 2007, p. 78.

⁷³ Maria Ida Biggi, Tranquillo Orsi, in *Venezia arti* 11, 1997, pp. 153–158.

⁷⁴ Sajous D’Oria, *Bleu et or*, p. 78–97.

⁷⁵ PBF, *Fondo Storico*, G VI 90 bis, *Per la Rifabbrica e riforma del Teatro di Feltre a norma del Disegno, sive modello esibito, dessunto da quello del pubblico Architetto Sig. Selva*, 4 February 1804.

⁷⁶ George Izenour, *Theater Technology*, New York 1988, p. 13.

⁷⁷ Viale Ferrero, *Luogo teatrale e spazio scenico*, pp. 4–7.

of lighting was one of the main issues for theatres, both in terms of quality and safety. It influenced the work of various theatre artists, such as the technique of the painters and the placement of actors on stage.⁷⁸

In terms of lighting, the Feltre theatre partly followed the important technical innovations that had occurred since the end of the eighteenth century. For example, it was equipped with Argand lamps, which stabilised the flames, prevented smoke and improved safety.⁷⁹ The theatre also had a mechanism for changing the intensity of light and even its colour. The Feltre theatre never used gas as a fuel but switched directly from oil to electricity at the end of the nineteenth century.

IV. Stakeholders of provincial theatres

Actors on stage

Most provincial theatres offered a stage for itinerant professional troupes but also for the theatrical and musical activities of local amateurs (amateur orchestras, civic brass bands, theatrical societies).⁸⁰

Professional companies (both for opera and spoken theatre) travelled from one town to another and often passed through provincial towns. They were organised around a theatre manager who acted as an impresario: the impresario contacted the theatre, proposed actors and a repertoire and negotiated the remuneration and contract conditions in an often-intense correspondence with the theatre society's presidency. For companies that performed spoken theatre, the impresario – who was often but not always one of the main actors (*capocomico*) – acted as the director of the troupe: he managed the company's expenses, chose the repertoire, distributed the parts, directed the rehearsals (but was sometimes replaced by the prompter in this role) and drew up the actors' contracts.⁸¹

Theatre companies who performed spoken pieces were generally composed of about fifteen actors, sometimes more, and often consisted of families, including children who began to perform at a very young age.⁸² These companies travelled from theatre to theatre, trying to establish a schedule for the theatre season by organising transfers to and sojourns in different cities as best as they could.

⁷⁸ Raphaël Bortolotti, *Les décors et machines originaux du théâtre de Feltre. Enjeux techniques d'une scène de province dans l'Italie du XIXe siècle*, in *Performing Arts and Technical Issues*, a cura di Roberto Illiano, Turnhout 2021 (Staging and Dramaturgy: Opera and the Performing Arts, Vol. 4), pp. 235–268.

⁷⁹ Cristina Grazioli, *Luce e ombra. Storia, teorie e pratiche dell'illuminazione teatrale*, Roma 2008, p. 63.

⁸⁰ Playbills kept in the Fondo Storico of the PBF show an alternation of travelling and local companies performing in the Teatro Sociale throughout the century. PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Locandine.

⁸¹ Roberto Alonge, *Teatro e spettacolo nel secondo Ottocento*, Bari 1988, pp. 10–13.

⁸² The actress Laura Bon, daughter of Francesco Augusto Bon and Luigia Ristori-Bellotti and half-sister of Luigi Bellotti-Bon, debuted as a child in the theatre company Carlo Goldoni, directed by her father. In the book based on her memoirs, the actress recalls that she began

They travelled with trunks of clothes, props and sometimes with their own stage material.⁸³

Companies proposed sojourns to a particular theatre for various reasons: sometimes the head of the troupe knew someone in town or in the theatre administration; sometimes the company was already in a nearby town and wanted to continue the season without having to make too many trips; or fellow artists advised the head of a theatre group to propose an engagement to a theatre in which they themselves had previously performed.⁸⁴ Once an engagement was agreed upon, companies arrived in town a few days prior to their first performance – sometimes just a day before the dress rehearsal⁸⁵ – and they stayed for a few weeks, at least long enough to deliver the number of performances stipulated in the contract.

Theatre archives in towns near Feltre such as Belluno, Castelfranco Veneto, Cittadella, etc., and those of minor theatres in larger cities such as Venice, Padua and Trieste allow us to partially reconstruct the network of relationships that brought companies to Feltre and other provincial and minor theatres. As an example, the theatre manager Gaetano Benini wrote to the presidency of the theatre in Cittadella in 1877 proposing performances in the Venetian language for the following year. The same Benini had been in Feltre a year earlier for the autumn season with a very similar repertoire.⁸⁶

As in other provincial theatres, the Teatro Sociale in Feltre offered a stage not only for professional travelling troupes but also for theatrical and musical activities of local amateurs (the amateur orchestra, the civic brass band and the amateur theatre society).⁸⁷ The members of these groups were often also part of the theatre society of box owners. Their presence and activity in the theatre can be traced throughout the century. Some plays were written especially for them, such as the opera *L'avarò* by the Feltre composer Luigi Jarosch (1845).⁸⁸

Amateur musicians from Feltre also sometimes participated in the performances of travelling troupes. When the Moroni company presented a dramatic entertainment in 1867 at the Teatro Sociale in Feltre, the musicians from the

acting at the age of three together with her half-brother, who was nine, and then moved on to parts of 'little lovesick girls', followed by other roles. See Jarro [Giulio Piccini], *Memorie di una prima attrice (Laura Bon)*, Firenze 1909, p. 13.

⁸³ For a description of the artist's travels see the first chapter in Sandra Pietrini, *Fuori scena. Il Teatro dietro le quinte nell'Ottocento*, Roma 2004, in particular pp. 50f.

⁸⁴ See the letter from Antonio Scremin to the presidency of the society of Feltre's Teatro Sociale, 3 April 1856; PBF, *Fondo Storico*, G VI 90 bis, n. 73.

⁸⁵ John Rosselli, *L'impresario d'opera. Arte e affari nel teatro musicale italiano dell'Ottocento*, Torino 1985, p. 6.

⁸⁶ See Gaetano Benini's letters addressed to the presidency of Cittadella's theatre in the Archivio Storico comunale di Cittadella, n. 6 1877-1878. On Benini's company in Feltre see the playbill kept in PBF, *Fondo Storico* and the inventory of the theatre; ASCF, *Serie 12 A*, Carteggio generale della categoria V, classe 10, b. 21, *Inventari del teatro 1879 and 1880*.

⁸⁷ Playbills kept in the Fondo Storico of the PBF show an alternation of travelling and local companies performing in the Teatro Sociale throughout the century.

⁸⁸ Luigi Jarosch, *L'avarò. Opera in due atti*, Feltre 1844.

town's amateur troupes and local orchestra took part in it with a musical contribution that involved singing as well as piano and violin playing.⁸⁹

Musical ensembles

Most provincial towns had very active musical societies that were often linked to the theatre societies that managed the local theatre as well as to music schools responsible for educating the town youth. Traditionally, the wind and string instruments were separated into two separate ensembles – the philharmonic society and the civic brass band – that each had their own functions (e.g. military parades for the brass bands); however, they also joined forces on a variety of occasions, especially opera productions or concerts in the theatre.⁹⁰

Once again, the town of Feltre can be seen as a representative example of provincial amateur ensembles. Several musical institutions coexisted there during the nineteenth century: the theatre orchestra, the town's brass band and a philharmonic society (which until the 1860s was called the Società Filarmonica di Santa Cecilia, later on the Società Filarmonica Feltrina).

The history of the civic brass band and the Società Filarmonica di Santa Cecilia are intertwined with that of the orchestra of Feltre's Teatro Sociale, as their music masters served as directors of the music school and the band as well as concertmasters and orchestra directors during the opera seasons of the Teatro Sociale. There were occasions such as religious and civic festivities when the three musical institutions performed together according to a ceremonial logic that included the square, the cathedral and the theatre. All three institutions addressed not only the city's public but also outsiders passing through the town on business and families of notables coming from other towns to Feltre for a holiday, thus contributing to the good name of the city in a symbolic competition with neighbouring centres.⁹¹

The brass band was responsible for giving solemnity to local ceremonies and events, often in the open air. The philharmonic society also took part in public open-air events in the main square or in the streets of the city, such as the inauguration of the statues of Vittorino da Feltre and Panfilo Castaldi in the Piazza Maggiore in 1868. The brass band was involved in shows of instrumental and vocal entertainment in the philharmonic society's hall or in private salons. During these events in which amateur musicians and reciters of poetry performed,⁹² the band played opera pieces, sometimes accompanied by the town's orchestra. In the early 1870s, the band not only took part in official public events (such as celebrating the

⁸⁹ V., [Nostre corrispondenze.] Feltre, 25 febbraio, in *Gazzetta di Treviso*, 28 February 1867, pp. 3f.

⁹⁰ On the role of the banda and of the philharmonic societies, see Antonio Carlini, Società filarmoniche e bande, in *Musica nel Veneto. I beni di cultura*, ed. by Paolo Fabbri, Milano 2000, pp. 106–129; Id., Le bande militari austriache a Venezia. Dieci anni di concerti tra il 1856 e il 1866, in *Rassegna veneta di studi musicali* 9/10, 1993/94, pp. 215–252.

⁹¹ See the paragraph “Provincial theatres as municipal competition” in this introduction, pp. 23f.

⁹² See the playbills for concerts and the homages kept in the Fondo Storico of the PBF.

entry of the king's troops into Rome on 11 September 1870) but also performed in afternoon concerts that were successful and appreciated by both the local public and the press.⁹³

The Società Filarmonica di Santa Cecilia of Feltre was formally established in the mid-1850s as a music school and an expression of the city's desire to develop the arts, entertainment and culture in general. The society was one of the initiatives promoted and financially supported by private individuals who attributed a high social importance to music in the absence of most other means of civic participation. The historian Francesco Praloran recalled a few decades later that in the 1850s, the youth of Belluno

did not fight for the ambition of belonging to the municipal council, which was held in low esteem, nor could they otherwise give useful vent to their industriousness, because those institutions and gymnasiums that only take root in free states were lacking at the time. They therefore gave themselves willingly to music [...].⁹⁴

The Società Filarmonica had a president, a vice-president, a secretary and an auditor as well as delegates responsible for electing the Società's musical director. At its meetings, the society approved the budget of the music corps and the music school, appointed the director and laid down the rules of conduct to be imposed on the students. Members of the philharmonic society could be either those who supported the school financially (even if they did not attend it) or students, called 'amateurs', who paid a fee to be admitted to the school. The society trained musicians for the city's two main musical associations. At the end of their studies, they took a final exam, and, if they were particularly good, they could join the city's musical corps (band or theatre orchestra). Although not conceived for pedagogical aims, the society was attentive to the education of its students, who had to demonstrate "dignity, order and composure", especially on public occasions. Indiscipline, unpreparedness, damage to instruments or unjustified absence from lessons led to fines or even expulsion from the society.⁹⁵

In the course of the nineteenth century, the philharmonic society's operations were unstable; it was dissolved and reconstituted several times. The early 1860s in particular were years of inactivity, partly due to the participation of many young people in Risorgimento uprisings. During the century, various musicians took over the post of *maestro di musica* in quick succession and remained in office for

⁹³ Giovanni Poloniato, "Oibò, Signor Maestro, qui non spira buon vento per voi". Note sul maestro Pietro Bianchini, in *Rivista feltrina* 34, 2015, pp. 57–65, here pp. 60f.

⁹⁴ "[...] non lottava per l'ambizione d'appartenere al Consiglio Municipale, ch'era tenuto in poco conto, né poteva altrimenti dare utile sfogo alla propria operosità, perché mancavano in quel tempo quelle istituzioni e quelle palestre che attechiscono soltanto negli stati liberi. Essa si gettò adunque volenterosamente alla musica". Francesco Praloran, *Storia della musica bellunese*, Vol 5: *Istituzioni musicali*, Belluno 1891, p. 41.

⁹⁵ "dignità, ordine, compostezza"; Giuseppe Toigo, Insegnamento e pratica della musica in Feltre dal XVI al XX secolo (I), in *Dolomiti. Rivista di cultura ed attualità della provincia di Belluno* 5, 1987, pp. 7–18, here pp. 14f. The author quotes art. 36 of the 1875 statutes.

just a few years – sometimes even a single year, – with the exception of maestro Vittorio Pilotto, who held the post for thirty years from 1882 to 1912.⁹⁶

Agenti and impresari

John Rosselli, who has done extensive research on the figure of the impresario during the nineteenth century, describes him as a travelling businessman and an intermediary between the theatre manager and the artists. While the *capocomico*, the head of a theatre troupe, normally had an already existing group of actors and a repertoire ready to be presented, the impresario had to organise the theatre season for which he had been engaged through extensive correspondence with theatre administrators.⁹⁷

In contrast to principal theatres in bigger cities, in provincial theatres like Feltre, a season was normally not managed by a single impresario. Instead, the theatre consortium, i.e. the box holders, organised the calendar of the theatre season, entrusting individual itinerant theatre companies with performance series.

Although the archives in Feltre suggest that the presence of an impresario was not all that common, some names of impresarios or theatre agencies appear in the sources. For example, in 1841, the Venetian impresario Antonio Cattinari was invited to Feltre.⁹⁸ He had begun work in the theatre sector a decade earlier as a dressmaker who also rented and sold theatre costumes; in the following years, he worked for multiple theatres in the Veneto region, beginning with minor theatres such as the Apollo, the Gallo and the San Benedetto in Venice. He was well received in Feltre, especially because of the richness of his costume designs.⁹⁹

Some years later, the nobleman Camillo Gritti, also a Venetian theatre contractor, was vested with the management of a theatrical season at the Teatro Sociale in Feltre. This particular theatre season was an important one because the theatre had just been reopened with the inauguration of the new theatre curtain by the painter Tranquillo Orsi. Gritti brought two operas to the stage and

⁹⁶ Giuseppe Toigo, *Insegnamento e pratica della musica in Feltre dal XVI al XX secolo (II)*, in *Dolomiti. Rivista di cultura ed attualità della provincia di Belluno* 6, 1987, pp. 43–57, here p. 47.

⁹⁷ On the figure of the impresario see Rosselli, *L'impresario d'opera*.

⁹⁸ [Anon.], I teatri. Feltre, in *La Moda. Giornale dedicato al bel sesso* 6/80, 7 ottobre 1841, p. 322 [recte 320].

⁹⁹ “Il vestiario d’invenzione e proprietà del Cattinari è splendido e degno di qualsiasi Capitale” (“The costumes designed and owned by Cattinari are splendid and worthy of any capital”). Ermengildo Co. Wucassinovich, Teatri d’Italia. Venezia, in *La Moda. Giornale di Scene della vita, Mode di vario genere, e Teatri* 4/35, 2 May 1839, p. 140; and: “E sopra tutti merita lode il coraggioso ed ottimo Cattinari il quale decorò lo spettacolo di un vestiario magnifico, e quello che più importa ragionevole e conforme al costume dei tempi. Il bravo Cattinari come vestiarista conosce la verità” (“And above all deserves praise the courageous and excellent Cattinari who decorated the show with magnificent costumes, and what is more: reasonable and in conformity with the custom of the times. The good Cattinari as a dresser knows the truth”). Astasio Gregondo, Cronaca teatrale. Venezia. Teatro Apollo, in *Glissons, n'appuyons pas. Giornale di scienze, lettere, arti, varietà, mode e teatri* 6/34, 27 April 1839, p. 135f., here p. 136.

engaged famous actors and professional musicians from Venice and Padua for the orchestra.¹⁰⁰

Backstage workers and working conditions at the theatre

In addition to musicians and artists who performed on stage in provincial theatres, various theatre professionals were normally on duty on theatre evenings, some in contact with the audience, others behind the scenes. In the days leading up to performances, the theatre was not only frequented by the theatre company, the orchestra and the impresario but also by the custodian, machinists and stagehands, the prompter, tailors and make-up artists. On theatre evenings, the ticket inspector in the atrium, the porters for the various sectors of the theatre (stalls, gallery, stage), the doorkeepers, café workers, and the vendor at the fruit shop came in contact with the public. During the performance, theatre guards continued to perform their duties in the theatre hall, the gallery and the theatre stage while one guard worked at the main entrance door and several at the side exits. At the same time, the machinist (who often had one or more assistants), the stagehand, the orchestra assistant, the prompter and the curtain attendant, who also handled the movement of the wings and drapery, contributed backstage to the success of the performance. Before and during the performance, a doctor, a stage barber, security staff and a fire chief were also present.

In a provincial theatre such as Feltre, the custodian could perform a variety of tasks that were entrusted to different workers in bigger theatres. At the Scala theatre in Milan, for example, the “best custody and protection of the buildings” and the task of “watching over cleanliness and preventing fire hazards, as well as indicating and reporting on any repairs that were needed” fell to the custodian and vice-custodian¹⁰¹ while the lighting was entrusted to a stagehand “of known ability and honesty”.¹⁰² In big theatres, the chief stagehand was in charge of stage service, lighting and carpentry work on furniture and instruments belonging to the theatre; all these tasks were carried out by the custodian in Feltre. In provincial theatres, the custodian had to be present during rehearsals on the days running up to the performance.

Many other professional figures such as carpenters, bricklayers, ropemakers, tailors, tuners, and a printer’s boy were also involved in theatre operations; their work is noted in the expense records of theatre companies for all activities

¹⁰⁰ [Anon.], Gazzetta teatrale. Feltre, in *Il Pirata. Giornale di letteratura, belle arti e teatri* 9/25, 26 September 1843, pp. 99f.

¹⁰¹ “Il custode ed il vice-custode del teatro, sono destinati alla migliore custodia e tutela dei fabbricati, a vegliare per la pulitezza ed a prevenire i pericoli d’incendio, nonché per indicare e riferire sulle riparazioni che occorressero.” Enrico Carozzi, *Annuario teatrale italiano per l’annata 1887*, Milano 1887, p. 174.

¹⁰² “[...] un capo macchinista di conosciuta abilità e onestà”. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

related to managing the theatre, which are conserved in some provincial-theatre archives, including the one in Feltre.¹⁰³

The inventories also inform us about the working conditions and the hierarchy of backstage workers. The custodian received the highest pay, followed by the ticket inspector and the porters – the one at the entrance earned a little more than those at the side entrances because he had to be able to recognise spectators – especially subscribers – at first sight.¹⁰⁴ The machinist, the stagehands and the guards followed in the hierarchy of payment. Last were the desk clerks and stage trainees. With the exception of the custodian, who received an annual salary, the workers were paid for their day's work, and their engagement was limited to the duration of the theatre season.¹⁰⁵

The public

In cities with more than one theatre, each one had its own audience, differing in its social makeup, discernment and interests. The composition of the audience was always changing: the same theatre could be frequented by different publics depending on the day of the week or the time of day; those who attended premieres were a separate lot from those who attended subsequent performances; and the demographics of subscribers differed from those of single-ticket buyers.¹⁰⁶

Major theatres in cities often specialised in opera seria, and tickets were sold at a high price to attract mainly the city's elite; smaller theatres featuring mainly spoken drama, comic opera or other types of performances sold tickets at a lower price and were capable of attracting a wider audience. In general, major theatres opened during the high season of the city's fair with opera seria while minor theatres opened for carnival with opera buffa. A hierarchy was established between laughter and weeping: in the big theatres the public wept with melodrama; in the minor theatres they laughed with farces and comic operas.

A provincial theatre like Feltre had to satisfy both sides.¹⁰⁷ The audience of a provincial theatre was varied and therefore had a mix of tastes and expectations: theatre-goers included notable citizens who owned boxes (often members of the theatre society), foreigners who were in town for business, noblemen on holidays, women and families with children. The seasons of provincial theatres

¹⁰³ For Feltre, see the entries on the theatre society's liabilities in the theatre inventories kept in the municipal historical archives; ASCF, *Serie 12 A*, Carteggio generale della categoria V, classe 10, b. 21, *Inventari del teatro*.

¹⁰⁴ Giovanni Valle, *Cenni teorico-pratici sulle aziende teatrali*, Milano 1823, p. 174.

¹⁰⁵ ASCF, *Serie 12 A*, Carteggio generale della categoria V, classe 10, b. 21, *Inventari del teatro 1879, 1880, 1883-1888*.

¹⁰⁶ Maria Teresa Antonia Morelli, *L'unità d'Italia nel teatro. Istituzioni politiche, identità nazionali e questione sociale*, Roma 2012, pp. 187f.

¹⁰⁷ Wessely, *Die deutschsprachigen Provinztheater*, pp. 208–226.

thus coincided mostly with town fairs or holidays in order to attract outsiders and owners of country estates who were temporarily in town during these periods.¹⁰⁸

A large part of the audience went to all of the theatre performances, especially those who owned boxes. As is well known, boxes were used as salons and places for social gatherings. Those who bought tickets for a single evening chose places in the theatre according to their means – one has to bear in mind that opera cost twice as much as spoken theatre and a seat in the boxes or stalls twice as much as in the galleries (if they existed). There were special reductions for children and military personnel. Admission for public authorities and important guests was free of charge.¹⁰⁹

Even before seeing an opera, a part of the public – even in provincial towns – certainly knew about it in detail already – individual scenes, choruses, arias, duets, stage decorations – through the newspapers, which published reports, correspondence, judgements of critics and discussions about the theatrical event. Some of the provincial citizens also used to attend bigger theatres from time to time. From Feltre or Belluno one went to Venice to the Fenice, and those who had the opportunity to frequent this city would report the latest news in their home towns.¹¹⁰

In short, one should not think that the provincial public was unaware of what was new and fashionable in nearby cities. Between the 1820s and the 1830s, a correspondent from Fonzaso (a small village near Feltre) published several articles of music and theatre criticism in the *Gazzetta privilegiata di Venezia*, taking the liberty of criticising the Fenice's program. Initially, the identity of the correspondent was not known; evidence indicated that he was male, played the piano and was connected to the theatre in Feltre (which he refers to as 'ours'). Fortunately, recent research has uncovered that "A. B." was most likely Angelo Bilesimo, an amateur composer and member of the Feltre theatrical society.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Information about the composition of the public in Feltre can be found in theatre journals, e.g. [Anon.], I teatri. Feltre, in *La Moda. Giornale dedicato al bel sesso* 6/80, 7 October 1841, p. 322 [recte 320].

¹⁰⁹ Sorba, *Teatri*, p. 116.

¹¹⁰ See for example Maresio Bazolle's recollections of his wish to go to La Fenice in Antonio Maresio Bazolle, *Storia del Comitato provvisorio dipartimentale di Belluno ossia Narrazione dei fatti riguardanti Belluno nella rivoluzione del Marzo 1848*, in Giovanni Larese/Ferruccio Vendramini/M. Lieta Zavarise, *Jacopo Tasso e i moti del 1848 a Belluno*, Sommacampagna 2000, pp. 147f.

¹¹¹ A. B., Appendice di letteratura, teatri e varietà, in *Gazzetta privilegiata di Venezia* 17/223, 29 September 1832, pp. [1f.], here p. [2].

V. *Repertoires of provincial theatres*

A variety of genres

This mixed audience, together with the necessity of using limited financial resources in the best possible way, explains the variety of entertainments that were staged throughout the nineteenth century in provincial theatres on the Italian peninsula.

Most theatres in smaller or middle-sized towns seem to have hosted a diversity of spoken, musical and dance performances, concerts, lectures, festivities, pedagogical events, and spectacles like magician's shows and acrobatics. According to Rosselli, "[o]nly the grandest theatres specialised exclusively in opera [...]. Most other theatres put on a variety of performances, not only opera (serious or comic) but plays, occasional *accademie* (concerts) by visiting instrumentalists, equestrian or acrobatic displays, even performing monkeys."¹¹² In the case of Medicina (near Bologna), there is evidence of performances by rope dancers and acrobats as well as shows of exotic animals.¹¹³ On the other hand, the regulations of some provincial theatres explicitly excluded those performance forms (the Teatro Accademico in Castelfranco Veneto, for example).¹¹⁴ In provincial theatres like the one in Feltre, operatic performances were not always at the centre of the annual scheduling; instead, spoken theatre and *accademie* were very common, even during important moments of the theatre season.

In many ways, the repertoire performed in Feltre is representative of most nineteenth-century provincial theatres. What is probably most special about Feltre is a near-complete lack of dance performances and marionette theatre in a time when dance performances, including between opera acts, were considered a necessary element in the Italian cultural scene.¹¹⁵

Major themes of the provincial repertoire

The nineteenth-century repertoire in provincial theatres suggests a very pronounced interest in gender roles, mental health and what was considered to be 'normal', the importance of reading and writing, and in a nation-building process.¹¹⁶ Sometimes, pieces performed in provincial theatres addressed very current events and shaped the perception of political movements.¹¹⁷ All these topics

¹¹² Rosselli, Italy, p. 164.

¹¹³ Luigi Samoggia, *Il teatro di Medicina. Dal Seicento al Novecento. Vicende, personaggi, attività*, Medicina 1983.

¹¹⁴ Archivio Storico comunale di Castelfranco, *Fondo Teatro accademico*, Serie 3 Delibere, statuto e regolamenti 1778-1966, *Regolamento del Teatro accademico, 1844*.

¹¹⁵ Gerardo Guccini, *Die Oper auf der Bühne*, ed. by Lorenzo Bianconi/Giorgio Pestelli, trans. Claudia Just/Paola Riesz, Laaber 1991, p. 310.

¹¹⁶ See Annette Kappeler's contribution in this volume, pp. 273–291.

¹¹⁷ See Paola Ranzini's contribution in this volume, pp. 195–210.

have a very strong link to the expression of strong emotions, especially love and pain.¹¹⁸

These dominant topics seem to be closely linked to each other. The idea of an Italian nation, for example, is inseparable from the importance of 'blood ties' and their basis in women's reproductive roles. Women's struggles for sexual self-determination and for an appropriate education, on the other hand, show the limits of a theoretical construct of their reduction to a reproductive role. In the second half of the century, most pieces explore ideas of nationhood, purity of blood and women's reproductive role to a certain degree.¹¹⁹ At the same time, theatrical works very often portrayed alternative thought and behavioral norms that opened the door to new ideas for the very heterogeneous public of provincial theatres.

¹¹⁸ See Adriana Guarnieri Corazzol's contribution in this volume, pp. 251–271.

¹¹⁹ Alberto Mario Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento. Parentela, santità e onore alle origini dell'Italia unita*, Torino 2000, particularly chapter 2, pp. 56–108.

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Feltre's Teatro Sociale
and the Role of Provincial Theatres
in Italy and the Habsburg Empire
during the Nineteenth Century

Edited by

Giulia Brunello, Raphaël Bortolotti
and Annette Kappeler

With editorial assistance from
Daniel Allenbach,
Hochschule der Künste Bern,
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