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In the Wings

Offstage Labour in a Provincial Italian Theatre

Abstract: The historical archive in Feltre (Veneto) preserves inventories of its Teatro Sociale that testify to this provincial theatre's importance to the town and the surrounding area during the 19th century. These inventories are rare sources that have never previously been analysed. Based on these documents, this article investigates the world behind the scenes and extracts information on the staff involved in running the theatre. Offstage workers are generally forgotten on playbills and in theatre periodicals (which pay tribute to onstage artists and report the repertoire of travelling theatre companies), and they do not figure significantly in the documents of theatre companies such as contracts, correspondence and regulations. To a greater extent than other sources, these inventories provide a window onto the labour of these workers, who made a highly significant, if less visible, contribution to performances and the running of a theatre.

Introduction

Offstage[1] workers are mostly overlooked in theatre and performance studies, but they make a major contribution to the running of a theatre and the success of its performances. This article aims to make offstage protagonists in a 19th-century theatre and their labour more visible. Focusing on these workers helps to complete our under-

1 We use the term offstage to designate the whole theatre space excluding the stage, and backstage to refer to the areas behind/under/over the stage that are part of the larger scenic space.

Note: This article has been a collaborative effort by a research group working within the project „Italian provincial theatre and the Risorgimento", funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation and located at the Bern Academy of the Arts. Its subject, hypotheses, structure and conclusions have been developed by the whole group. Raphaël Bortolotti focussed on the roles of lighting technicians (5 b) and stagehands (5 c). Giulia Brunello transcribed the archival sources and contributed in particular to the paragraphs about the sources, the history of Feltre's Teatro Sociale (3), the custodian (5 a) and the salaries and working conditions of offstage labour (6). Annette Kappeler primarily contributed to the introductory sections (1, 2) and the conclusion of this article (7).

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QFIAB 102 (2022) — DOI 10.1515/qufiab-2022-0016

standing of theatre performances as collective undertakings involving multiple people interacting in a complex way.[2]

We shall here analyse rare 19th-century sources from the Teatro Sociale in Feltre (Veneto) in relation to the following questions:

- What kind of offstage labour was performed in a 19th-century Italian provincial theatre?
- What kind of artefacts were used or produced in relation to theatre performances?
- Who were those involved in offstage labour? What do we know about their working conditions?

We shall begin by summarising central concepts of onstage and offstage labour (1). We shall then reflect on the sources for offstage work, and present our sources for the Feltre Teatro Sociale (2). We shall introduce readers to the role of the Feltre Theatre and how it functioned in the 19th century (3), and we shall describe the typical course of events during a 19th-century performance in Feltre's Teatro Sociale in order to contextualise the tasks of offstage workers. This overview is not intended to describe in detail all the workers and their activities, but tries to define the different tasks at each stage of a theatrical performance: the preparations for the performance, entering the theatre, managing the event itself, and clearing up after the performance (4). This overview will be followed by a detailed description of some key figures in the offstage area and their particular roles in the Feltre Theatre (5). We shall then provide the reader with information on working conditions of these offstage labourers (6) and conclude with the implications for a general view of 19th-century offstage work (7).

1 Theatre Labour

Onstage and Off

The theatre is characterised by a polarity between visibility and invisibility. While actors and artefacts on stage (and often also in the auditorium) are the focus of attention for the audience (and the staff), offstage workers and their labour go largely without being either seen, valued, paid fairly or even named. While certain elements on stage draw the explicit attention of the audience, others are present but hidden from view, while yet others remain offstage altogether. The theatre is not just divided into onstage and offstage areas, but also into onstage and offstage artefacts and staff.

2 Christin Essin, Unseen Labor and Backstage Choreographies. A Materialist Production History of „A Chorus Line", in: Theatre Journal 67,2 (2015), pp. 197–212, here p. 199.

While onstage actors (singers, dancers and sometimes musicians) enter the stage to make themselves visible (and/or audible) to their fellow workers and the audience, offstage workers have one thing in common: they or their work remain invisible and often unrecognised. Some of them might be visible themselves but display the fruits of their labour on stage (scenographers, stagehands, costume designers and so forth). They are also sometimes named in the sources. Others contribute to the objects displayed on stage without being seen as their authors (such as dressers, laundresses or barbers), and their names have often fallen into oblivion.[3] Some offstage workers are physically present without actually being regarded as a vital part of the performance (e. g. ticket vendors or attendants in the auditorium), while invisibility to the audience is a prerequisite of the work of others (such as prompters). The labour necessary for a theatre production can be separated into visible and invisible tasks carried out by visible and invisible staff. Theatre workers can thus also be doubly visible or doubly invisible (with their bodies and their work). They are separated into different groups with different degrees of visibility, attributed value and remuneration.

Visible and Invisible Labour

Invisible labour has been studied in many areas and across different disciplines (e. g. sociology, industrial relations, critical race and feminist theory, science and technology studies, and global and international relations).[4] In these contexts, visible labour is defined as work that is readily identifiable, recognised and directly generates profits,[5] while invisible labour is understood as crucial work that is overlooked, ignored or devalued.[6] The invisibility of a person and their work is very often analogous to their lack of rights, fair remuneration and the possibility of making themselves heard.[7] It is thus not surprising that invisible work is very often carried out by marginalised groups, mirroring social hierarchies. Invisible workers are not only unseen and unrecognised by society, but also very often by each other. Their isolation makes it difficult to engage in collective efforts to improve their working conditions or make themselves heard.[8]

3 Ead., Working Backstage, A Cultural History and Ethnography of Technical Theater Labor, Ann Arbor 2021, p. 148.

4 Winifred R. Poster/Marion G. Crain/Miriam A. Cherry, Introduction. Conceptualizing Invisible Labor, in: id. (Eds.), Invisible Labor. Hidden Work in the Contemporary World, Oakland 2016, pp. 3–27, here p. 5.

5 Ibid., p. 3.

6 Ibid., p. 6.

7 Ibid., p. 9.

8 Arlie Hochschild, Foreword. Invisible Labor, Inaudible Voice, in: Crain/Poster/Cherry (Eds.), Invisible Labor (see note 4), pp. xi–xiv, here p. xiv.

While they rarely include examples from the arts, many publications about invisible labour are dominated by theatrical terms such as backstage, offstage, front stage or scene,[9] pointing to the importance of the theatrical space as a symbolic representation of a division of labour in categories of the visible and invisible, the meaningful and the mechanical, the valued and the unrecognised. The theatre stands out as a workplace where visible and invisible staff work shoulder to shoulder and where their (in-)visibility defines the kind of work they are doing, thus making the theatre a case study *par excellence*.

Skilled and Unskilled Work

Theatre historians often see the clear demarcation line between onstage and offstage labour as a result of the professionalisation of the theatre business. As actors tried to raise their status and legitimise their occupation as being socially respectable, they established a hierarchy that included a „superiority over the ‚rude mechanicals' of their world"[10] and over women who performed necessary tasks such as supplying costumes, properties and comestibles.[11] In the process of professionalisation, some occupations tended to be defined more and more as skilled, others as unskilled. As economists have argued, skill is a classification influenced by gender, ethnic and class biases. Skills connected to work performed by some groups thus receive greater recognition, respect and remuneration than others.[12] These biases and the concomitant access granted to training possibilities and to contact with a cultural/intellectual elite mean that actors (singers, dancers and sometimes musicians) still tend to occupy a different social sphere from offstage workers.[13]

Korda has identified certain groups of (female) offstage workers who were integral to Early Modern theatre, but are seldom spoken of. These include ‚tirewomen' who were responsible for dressing actors,[14] ‚gatherers' who collected entrance fees,[15] food and drink vendors[16] and workers who were responsible for washing, bleaching and

9 Ibid., p. xiv; Poster/Crain/Cherry, Introduction (see note 4), p. 21; Miriam A. Cherry, Virtual Work and Invisible Labor, in: Crain/Poster/Cherry (Eds.), Invisible Labor (see note 4), pp. 71–86, here p. 81; Eileen M. Otis/Zheng Zhao, Producing Invisibility. Surveillance, Hunger, and Work in the Produce Aisles of Wal-Mart, China, in: Crain/Poster/Cherry (Eds.), Invisible Labor (see note 4), pp. 148–168, here p. 149.
10 Essin, Working Backstage (see note 3), p. 158.
11 Natasha Korda, Labors Lost. Women's Work and the Early Modern English Stage, Philadelphia 2011, p. 1.
12 Essin, Working Backstage (see note 3), p. 187.
13 Ibid., p. 179.
14 Korda, Labors Lost (see note 11), p. 37.
15 Ibid., p. 47.
16 Ibid., p. 49.

starching costumes – a very necessary and time-consuming business.[17] In an early 20th-century article about employees in the Elizabethan theatre, Thaler also mentions sweepers,[18] doorkeepers and stage-keepers. De Rougemont, in her benchmark social history of the 18th-century French theatre, describes similar workers such as „concierge[s], portiers, ouvreurs, moucheurs de chandelles“ or „Distributrice[s] des douces liqueurs“.[19] French 18th-century theatre companies were largely organised as cooperatives in which actors (often men and women) had an equal right to vote on important issues, and split their earnings.[20] However, this cooperative system was mostly restricted to actors. Other workers were not members of the theatre companies, had no voting rights and tended to be underpaid (or even not paid at all).[21] All these offstage occupations had two things in common: they were often performed by socially disadvantaged people (like women), and mostly brought in miserable wages.[22]

2 Offstage Labour and its Sources

Research into offstage labour and its protagonists remains rare today.[23] While the theatrical onstage and offstage areas have been a topic of many recent publications, they have tended to focus on actors (and sometimes stage equipment such as machines) moving from one area to the other and thus creating a meaningful scenic space.[24] There are a few notable exceptions of which we shall name two here. Essin has recently published a volume on the production history of offstage labour (mostly in the US musical industry),[25] and Korda focuses on the role of offstage labour performed by women in Early Modern English theatre in her 2011 volume „Labors Lost“.[26]

The lack of research in this field is probably linked to the difficult source situation. As offstage workers and their labour often were not recorded or named (which is often still the case today), the task of understanding their contribution is not an easy one. Like most elements of a theatre performance (such as speech, music or even

17 Ibid., p. 96.
18 Alwin Thaler, Minor Actors and Employees in the Elizabethan Theater, in: Modern Philology 20,1 (1922), pp. 49–60, here p. 54.
19 Martine de Rougemont, La vie théâtrale en France au XVIIIe siècle, Paris 1988, p. 176.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., p. 186.
22 Thaler, Minor actors (see note 18), p. 55.
23 Essin, Working Backstage (see note 3), p. 9.
24 William Gruber, Offstage Space, Narrative, and the Theatre of the Imagination, New York 2010; Carla Dente/Jesús Tronch (Eds.), Offstage and Onstage. Liminal Forms of Theatre and Their Enactments in Early Modern English Drama to the Licensing Act, Pisa 2015.
25 Essin, Working Backstage (see note 3).
26 Korda, Labors Lost (see note 11), p. 3.

scenic elements such as backdrops), the product of the work of offstage staff is mostly ephemeral – for example, few traces of lighting devices or dresses have survived in museums or private collections today.[27] While documents on the labour of onstage artists, their names, their working conditions and their social networks can be found in archives around the globe, sources which describe offstage labour and its protagonists are scattered and difficult to access.[28] Even when one is lucky enough to find traces of offstage work, its protagonists often remain anonymous.[29]

We are thus very fortunate to have gained access to several sources from a 19th-century theatre in the Veneto region (Feltre). Its theatre inventories are a real treasure trove for information about offstage practices: they not only contain a list of objects owned by the theatre society, but also names of employees, their function and earnings, and they have never been analysed before.

The Feltre Sources: Theatre Inventories

Inventories are documents common in 19th-century theatre archives. Compiling information about the chairman of the theatre board, noting changes of ownership and keeping receipts and accounts in order was of central importance to the smooth running of a theatre. Moreover, such documents meant that the theatre society could prove the economic health of the enterprise and uphold its good name.

The inventories of the Teatro Sociale in Feltre are stored in the Archivio Storico Comunale in Feltre and are dated 1831, 1853, 1879, 1883–1888, 1889, 1899 and 1900. All the documents are well preserved, readable and intact throughout. The first two inventories comprise 7 and 6 A4-sized sheets respectively, while the others are bound booklets of A5 size.[30]

The inventories are valuable sources for multidisciplinary research into the Feltre Theatre, as they contain useful information on various aspects including the administration of the theatre society, the management of its finances (with accounts of ordinary and extraordinary expenditure), the structure and renovation of the building, its furniture, other objects and scenic materials inside the theatre, the activities of the theatre companies, their receipts and fees, and information on the repertoire performed. Last but not least, they include information about offstage labour such as the names, skills, salaries and tasks of the staff. These inventories also reveal information about the objects stored inside the theatre, such as hardware, machinery, scenery,

27 Ibid.

28 Essin, Working Backstage (see note 3), p. 10.

29 Korda, Labors Lost (see note 11), p. 3.

30 Feltre, Archivio Storico Comunale (ASCF), Serie 12-A Cat V (S12A), „Inventario del Teatro“, 1831, 1853, 1879, 1880, 1883–1888, 1889, 1899, 1900.

furniture, paintings, porcelain, curtains, fabrics, crystal, glassware, paint, strings, musical instruments and lights. It is this information on the items stored that makes inventories particularly useful for our purposes here.

It is mainly thanks to these sources that we can imagine what offstage work in the Feltre theatre constituted, and reconstruct the tasks related to a theatrical event in a reliable way. We will thus try to find answers to the following questions: Who worked behind the scenes? What kind of tasks did these workers perform? How were these tasks embedded in the theatre performance? What skills were required for these tasks? What kind of objects did the workers use? To begin with, we shall provide the necessary background to Feltre's Teatro Sociale in the 19th century.

3 Feltre's Teatro Sociale

A Provincial Theatre

Feltre's Teatro Sociale was one of hundreds of middle-sized, 19th-century provincial theatres that could be found in most towns of what is today Northern Italy. Throughout the peninsula, there was at least one such building in every urban centre, especially in the centre-north areas.[31]

The Feltre Teatro Sociale was a theatre with a so-called Italian-style hall: stalls with removable seats and four rows of boxes. Each box was a private space that could be used, for example, as a private sitting room for dinner or to engage in business. Although this structure was a model that had been established in previous centuries, it became very popular throughout the Italian peninsula during the 19th century. One of the reasons for its success was the correspondence between the internal structure of the building and society outside: the boxes, owned by prominent locals, ensured social separation from the lower social strata. One could attend a show in a private space that allowed one to see but also to be seen. In other words, the interior of the theatre – the so called „teatro all'italiana" – reproduced the hierarchical structure of the society without, which continued to follow traditional patterns despite the great socio-political changes that took place in the 19th century.[32]

Theatres operating in towns or smaller cities such as Feltre, Adria, Castelfranco or Belluno were called minor theatres. The major theatres in big cities had an undisputed tradition and were on a higher level of the theatrical hierarchy. This classification took into account the importance of the city (not just the number of its inhabitants, but also

31 Carlotta Sorba, Teatri. L'Italia del melodramma nell'età del Risorgimento, Bologna 2001.
32 Claudio Meldolesi/Ferdinando Taviani, Teatro e spettacolo nel primo Ottocento, Roma-Bari 1995, pp. 118–125; Fabrizio Cruciani, Lo spazio del teatro, Roma-Bari 1992, pp. 12 f.

its historical tradition, geographical location, etc.), the size of the theatre (the number of seats), and the quality of its performances. The activity of these theatres, minor or major, is reflected in the periodical press.

The municipalist spirit in the Italy „of the hundred cities" is well known.[33] The municipal competition typical of 19th-century Italian history also applied to theatres, which were representative of provincial culture.[34] Feltre is a typical example of these many 19th-century provincial theatres and their practices.[35] Each provincial theatre had a symbolic function in its city and gave it lustre, especially in relation to neighbouring cities. To have an important, beautiful theatre with an impressive programme reflected the competition between different towns. 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 theatres: they had to be decorated, expanded or restored regularly.

Theatres in 19th-century Italy were often the only cultural and social centre in the town and its surrounding area. They were the place where urban leisure practices were expressed.[36] In the course of the 19th century, a city's elites would meet regularly at their theatre, not only to attend performances, but also to stage social hierarchies and to reaffirm or build networks. Additionally, under the Napoleonic and Hapsburg governments, theatres were one of the rare places where groups of people were allowed to meet, where public opinion could be formed, and where that opinion could be monitored and manipulated.[37]

33 Carlo Cattaneo has emphasised the importance of city and town traditions in Italian history (Carlo Cattaneo, Per le autonomie locali, in: id., Le più belle pagine scelte da Gaetano Salvemini, Roma 1993, pp. 99–109). On the role of differences between regions and cities in the history of Italian literature, see: Goffredo Fofi, Le cento città. L'apporto delle regioni alla storia della nostra letteratura dall'Unità a oggi, Roma 2020. On polycentrism in the field of opera in Italy in the first half of the 19th century, see: Carlotta Sorba, Theaters, markets and canonic implications in the Italian opera system 1820–1880, in: Corman Newark/William Weber (Eds.), The Oxford Handbook of the Operatic Canon, Oxford 2020, pp. 207–226.

34 Carlotta Sorba, Musica e teatro nell'Italia unita, in: Giovanni Sabbatucci/Vittorio Vidotto (eds.), L'Unificazione nazionale. Le istituzioni, gli uomini, le idee, Roma 2011, pp. 533–550, here p. 534; John Rosselli, Italy. The Centrality of Opera, in: Alexander Ringer (Ed.), The Early Romantic Era Between Revolutions. 1789 and 1848, London 1990, pp. 160–200.

35 Giulia Brunello, Decoro artistico e orgoglio municipale. Note sul Teatro Sociale a Feltre nell'Ottocento, in: Rivista Feltrina 46 (2021), pp. 40–51.

36 Sorba, Musica e teatro (see note 34); Maria Teresa Antonia Morelli, L'unità d'Italia nel teatro. Istituzioni politiche, identità nazionale e questione sociale, Roma 2012; Giorgio Pullini, Il teatro fra scena e società, in: Girolamo Arnaldi/Manlio Pastori Stocchi (Eds.), Storia della cultura veneta. vol. 6: Dall'età napoleonica alla Prima Guerra Mondiale, Vicenza 1986, pp. 237–282.

37 Sorba, Teatri (see note 31), p. 81; David Laven, Venice and Venetia under the Habsburgs, 1815–1835, Oxford 2002, p. 208.

The Teatro Sociale: Role and Administration

Feltre's Teatro Sociale already existed at the end of the 17th century under the name of Teatro della Senna, in the hall of the Palazzo Pubblico (or Palazzo della Ragione), in the Piazza della Biada in Feltre. It was an Italian-style theatre with two rows of 20 boxes, dedicated initially to staging spoken plays, later also to performances with music.[38] It was closed in 1797, but was reopened in 1813 under the name of Teatro del Consorzio as an autonomous theatrical association that was now called the Teatro Sociale, with four rows of 24 boxes. Later, the fourth row was replaced by the gallery. By 1840 it is believed to have had a capacity of 1000 spectators.[39] The first performances recorded in any periodical date back to February 1820,[40] though there is a police source dating from 1816 that mentions granting permission for staging an opera buffa.[41] The inventories confirm that during the 19th century, the theatre was owned by a society consisting of the owners of the boxes, who paid an annual fee and attended regular meetings. The management board consisted of three members who were elected by majority vote: one box, one vote. They were in office for three years, and elected a cashier and a custodian.

The Teatro Sociale had to please a varied audience with different tastes and expectations: the owners of boxes, the audience in the stalls, foreigners who were in Feltre for business, aristocrats on holiday, soldiers, families with children, etc. The architecture of the theatre itself, with its boxes, visually represented the different social strata. The theatre seasons coincided with town fairs or holidays so that the performances could attract foreigners and owners of country estates who were temporarily in town. This was also the case with other theatres.[42] This mixed audience explains the variety of performances that were staged throughout the century, including operas, dramas, comic performances, concerts, vaudevilles, pantomimes, acrobatics, magicians' shows and other events.

The theatre society chose the companies, hired the impresarios, established the fees and fixed a programme in accordance with „the decorum of the theatre and the interests of the company", as is stated in its regulations.[43] As with other provincial

38 Anita De Marco/Letizia Braito, Storia del Teatro della Sena, in: Rivista Bellunese 4 (1975), no pages.

39 Franco Mancini/Maria Teresa Muraro/Elena Povoledo (Eds.), I Teatri del Veneto, vol. 2, Venezia 1985, p. 375.

40 A correspondent writing from Feltre to Venice mentions that, during Carnival, Feltre's theatre performed the piece „Agnese". See: Gazzetta privilegiata di Venezia, 18 February 1820, no pages.

41 ASCF, Busta nr. 720, Atti 1815–1816, fol. 280.

42 Information about the composition of the public in Feltre can be found in theatre journals, e. g. Teatri d'Italia, in: La Moda. Giornale dedicato al bel sesso 80,6 (1841), p. 322.

43 Feltre, Biblioteca civica „Panfilo Castaldi" (BCF), Fondo Biblioteca Storica (BS), G VI 90 bis, „Piano disciplinare del Teatro Sociale di Feltre", 1813 (approved in 1829).

theatres, the Teatro Sociale offered a stage for itinerant professional troupes, but also for the theatrical and musical activities of local amateurs.[44]

In addition to the artists performing on stage, there were multiple offstage workers at the theatre before, during and after a performance: a custodian, a stagehand and his assistant, an orchestra assistant, several ushers in different areas of the theatre (the stalls, gallery), lighting technicians, a curtain assistant who moved the wings and the curtains, a box office employee in the foyer, exit guards at every door, plus a clock regulator, a stage barber, a food and drink vendor, two employees for the coffee shops (one for the main coffee shop and another in the gallery), a theatre surgeon, security officers, and a chief fireman. From the records of expenses, we know that ropemakers, tailors, makeup artists, tuners and printers also worked for the theatre.[45]

4 Offstage Work: The Course of Events at a Theatre Performance

Infrastructure and Workers not Mentioned in the Sources

Naturally, countless workers were involved in the theatre infrastructure (in the running of the actual theatre building, the boxes, stage, substage, grid, machinery etc.) well before any performance could be planned. We shall limit ourselves here to describing the offstage work linked to preparations for a particular performance at the theatre, and shall rely mostly on the aforementioned inventories. We thus consider the basic infrastructure as given, and instead describe the tasks to be performed from the moment a programme was chosen for a performance (or a series of performances), when the performing troupe arrived in Feltre and the whole theatre building had to get ready to receive them. The resultant list of tasks is not exhaustive, but reflects the information given in the sources related specifically to the Feltre Theatre in the 19th century.

Preparing a Theatre Performance

When a particular piece or spectacle was chosen for performance in the Feltre Theatre, several tasks had to be performed prior to the evening in question. The scenic materi-

44 Playbills stored in Feltre's archive show an alternation of outside and local companies performing in the Teatro Sociale throughout the century.

45 Castelfranco, Archivio Storico Comunale (ASCC), Fondo Teatro Accademico (TA), Serie 7 XII M, „Custodia del teatro e mobili ed utensili d'illuminazione", 1844–1888.

als for the performance had to be chosen out of an ensemble of stock scenery that was kept in the Theatre. Accessories had to be brought out of storage or newly acquired. Scenic elements brought to Feltre by itinerant theatre troupes also had to be adjusted to fit the machinery of the Theatre, and all scenic changes had to be rehearsed. The lighting had to be prepared: fuel had to be poured into a multitude of lamps for the stage, the orchestra space, the dressing rooms, the auditorium and the recreation rooms, and safety equipment had to be installed (in case of fire or illness). For some performances, special scenic light effects had to be planned. For the rehearsals, lighting and other equipment had to be provided for the theatre troupes. Music stands, scores and musical instruments had to be set up and the clock, which was a typical feature of a civic theatre, had to be wound up. In order to attract the public, playbills had to be printed and hung out in public spaces, and invitations had to be delivered to interested residents and box owners. Last but not least, all spaces in the theatre had to be cleaned and tidied.

Entering the Theatre

Once the theatre was ready to admit its public, important tasks still had to be performed before the performance could commence. Multiple lamps had to be lit before the audience could be permitted into the theatre, which then had to be opened, the keys of all the boxes delivered, and tickets sold and checked at the entrance. The audience had to be welcomed and ushered to their seats, and the doors had to be guarded at all times.

Managing the Theatrical Event Itself

During the performance, a multitude of offstage workers had to be in attendance: scenic elements had to be moved around, set changes managed, the proscenium curtain let up and down, and special effects (if any) had to be executed. Once the lamps were filled with fuel, it still took a lot of extra work for the theatre to be illuminated. The stage, public areas, orchestra space and backstage rooms had to be kept illuminated, and one had always to be on the lookout for any outbreak of fire so as to keep the theatre safe. The actors had to be dressed, their hair and make-up done. The café and fruit-shop attendants had to get ready to welcome the public and sell their products during the evening.

Clearing up After a Theatre Performance

Once the performance was over, the public had to be ushered out of the theatre, but even then, the work of the offstage staff was not yet done. All the lights had to be safely extinguished, the scenic elements had to be tidied up, stored away, and often repaired. The stage, the dressing rooms, the atrium, the stalls, the boxes and the stairways had to be cleaned, lost objects had to be collected, and any missing or broken objects repaired or replaced. Then the theatre could be closed, and the last of the offstage workers could go home. Washing textiles such as the curtains was a task still to be performed after the theatre closed.

5 Offstage Workers in a Provincial Theatre

a *Il Custode* – the Custodian

The custodian was the main figure of the offstage area. He had to be a professional carpenter – clearly indicated by the regulations of the Teatro Accademico in Castelfranco and the Teatro Nuovo in Bassano[46] – or another ‚artist' useful to the theatre, such as a good craftsman, as the consortium of Feltre's Teatro Sociale wrote in its specifications in the year 1813.[47] In 19th-century Italy, artist meant both onstage artists and artisans including craftsmen. In this article we use the word artist in this historical sense.

The duties of the custodian are described in detail in the Feltre archive. First, he had to be able to solve urgent problems and carry out daily maintenance work. He usually repaired doors, windows, shutters, steps, chairs, tables, benches, stools, frames, cloak holders, shelves, ladders used to climb on stage, but also furniture and the accessories of dressing rooms and coffee shops such as locks, lamps, candle holders, sofas, armchairs, stools, footstools, book tables, shelves, clocks, cloak racks, carpets, pillows, mirrors and curtains. He was responsible for maintaining the stage machinery and the sets of the theatre, though he himself did not necessarily undertake any direct painterly interventions on stage materials (see section 5c). There was always something to fix, arrange, repaint, replace or clean in the theatre: the box curtains had to be washed (which seems to have been the responsibility of the custodian's wife or sister), handles adjusted, hinges well oiled, the lamps checked, the boxes repainted, steps and floors replaced where necessary, and backstage cabinets

46 ASCC, TC, Serie 3, „Progetto di statuto e soci compadroni", 1842; Piano di costituzione organica della società filarmonica del nuovo Teatro di Bassano, Bassano 1820, p. 18.

47 BCF, BS, G VI 90 bis, „Piano disciplinare del Teatro Sociale di Feltre", 1813 (approved in 1829), fol. 34.

and benches for the stagehands repaired. As can be seen from the accurate notes in the inventories, the custodian had to store all manner of objects, usually in his room, including lanterns, oil machines, pulleys, wheels, iron and brass items, wooden rods, iron rods, glass arms (additional light stands reserved for special occasions), pipes and tanks of sand in case of fire.

The custodian had to clean and check all spaces in the theatre, from the stage to the dressing rooms, the atrium, the stalls, the loggias and the stairways. If there were any problems or damage, he had to notify the management board. A few days before the theatre society held its meetings, he had to deliver an invitation by hand to its members (*palchettisti*) or their family or servants.[48] On rehearsal days he had to satisfy any of the impresario's needs. We can imagine that his close relations with the companies and impresarios would enable the custodian to obtain favours such as letting people without tickets enter the theatre. However, if the theatre regulations were strictly upheld, such behaviour could actually be punished by dismissal.[49]

At the beginning of a performance, the custodian had to raise the proscenium curtain. In his autobiography from the early 19th century, the well-known Feltre architect Giuseppe Segusini – who later designed the theatre in Belluno and many other buildings – recalled attending the workshop of the carpenter Pietro Lucca when he was a young boy. Lucca also worked in the theatre in those years, and ran the fruit shop inside the building. The young Segusini used to help Lucca raise the curtain – which was probably an ordinary activity for children. One evening, pulling up the heavy curtain, Segusini tripped over a rope and found himself upside down, off the ground.[50]

The custodian was responsible for any missing objects and equipment. Once the performance was finished, it was also his task to sweep the floor, collect any lost objects and store them, ensure that no one was locked in the theatre, and that no lights were left on.[51] His room was full of objects and tools that could be useful either onstage or off. Sometimes he also stored artists' personal effects and items belonging to the box owners.

The custodian was chosen because he was a „practical and gentlemanly" worker.[52] He held his position for many years and had to maintain good relations with the theatre society's members and their families. He was also kept informed about internal affairs with regard to the management of the theatre. However, he could be replaced at any time. One valid reason for dismissal was allocating empty boxes or tickets to friends or relatives free of charge, as already intimated above. In order to

48 Piano di costituzione organica (see note 46), p. 18.
49 ASCC, TA, Serie 3, „Regolamento del Teatro Accademico di Castelfranco Veneto", 1844, fol. 21.
50 Giuseppe Segusini, Autobiografia, in: Belluno, Biblioteca civica, ms. 670, fasc. I, paragr. 17.
51 Enrico Rosmini, La legislazione e la giurisprudenza dei teatri, vol. 2, Milano 1872, p. 141.
52 ASCF, S12A, „Inventario del Teatro", 1880, fol. 37.

keep a check on his work, the management board of the theatre society obliged him to report any disorder and to notify them when strangers entered the building (this last matter was specified in the Castelfranco theatre regulations).[53]

One Worker, Different Tasks

In provincial theatres such as the Teatro Sociale, the custodian carried out a series of tasks that were entrusted to different people in larger theatres. At La Scala in Milan, for example, the „best care and protection of the buildings" and the task of „ensuring cleanliness and preventing fire, as well as indicating and reporting on any necessary repairs" fell to the custodian and his assistant,[54] whereas the lighting was entrusted to a stage technician „of known skill and honesty".[55] The same was the case at the Carlo Felice Theatre in Genoa,[56] and also at the Castelfranco Theatre, which was not much bigger than the one in Feltre, and where the lighting operator (*illuminatore* or *custode dell'illuminazione*) was employed by the custodian and responsible for any missing lighting objects.[57] All these tasks were carried out by the custodian in Feltre, who received two separate salaries. However, there was at least one thing that the custodian of a larger theatre had in common with the custodian of a provincial theatre: they both had duplicate keys to the building and the boxes.[58]

b L'*Illuminatore* – the Light Operator

Lighting operators played an essential role in the running of a theatre. The Feltre Theatre stands out for the peculiarity of employing the same person as custodian and lighting operator (*illuminatore*).[59] Despite this peculiarity, the distinction between the two roles is maintained in the archival sources, which clearly differentiate between the two functions, each of which had its own duties and its own salary.

53 ASCC, TA, Serie 3, „Regolamento del Teatro Accademico di Castelfranco Veneto", 1844, fol. 20.
54 Enrico Carozzi, Annuario teatrale italiano, Milano 1887, p. 175.
55 Ibid., p. 168.
56 Ibid., p. 153.
57 The lighting technician is called *custode dell'illuminazione*, literally the custodian of the lighting system: ASCC, TA, Serie 3 I B, Normali e documenti di massima 1842–1888, „Disciplinare degli obblighi e dei compensi riguardanti il custode del Teatro Accademico di Castelfranco", 14 July 1845, fol. 3.
58 Carozzi, Annuario teatrale (see note 54), p. 208; Conte F. Avventi, Mentore teatrale. Repertorio di leggi, massime, norme e discipline per gli artisti melo-drammatici e per chiunque abbia ingerenza o interesse negli affari teatrali, Ferrara 1845, p. 87.
59 In the Feltre archives, we do not find the term *custode dell'illuminazione*, but rather the term *illuminatore*: ASCF, S12A, „Inventario del Teatro", 1883–1888, fol. 2.

What were these duties? Lighting operators were responsible for managing the various light sources in the theatre, both onstage and off – on the stage, in the backstage rooms (such as dressing rooms or the understage area) and in the audience areas (such as the auditorium and the recreation areas). The extent of their work is reflected in the aforementioned inventories, where a large section is dedicated to the lighting. They list the different types of light sources, the different places where they were located, and their quantity. Lighting was as essential to the theatre as it was dangerous, so great attention was paid to it. The preparation work involved in the lighting and its management during an evening at the theatre was considerable. The financial records show that the lighting manager was unequivocally one of the highest-paid positions among the theatre's offstage employees, as we will explain in more detail in section 6 below.[60] However, when comparing the different inventories, one realises that these sources contain many inconsistencies and that the terms used are sometimes imprecise. This makes it difficult to understand the different systems precisely. Nevertheless, we shall try to provide as accurate as possible an overview of the lighting situation in the Feltre Theatre.

Illuminating the Stage

For the stage, the inventories list oil lamps with a single or double flame. They mention both the crystal tube protecting the flame and the reflectors that allowed the light to be intensified without dazzling the audience. The „glasses provided" and „glass tubes" mentioned in the inventories[61] are reminiscent of the glass cylinders characteristic of Quinquet's or Argand's technical improvements for oil lamps.[62] These inventions, which had been used in theatres since the end of the 18th century, offered significant advantages during performance: protection from the movement of the flame (in particular, avoiding flame flares) and the elimination of smoke. Despite other technical innovations such as gas lighting, this type of light nevertheless remained the standard in most provincial theatres during the second half of the 19th century. Whereas larger theatres in the Veneto region were gradually equipped with gas lighting from 1840 onwards,[63] such an investment was too great for smaller theatres such as that in Feltre. At the end of the century, the Feltre Theatre went directly from oil lamps to electric lighting.[64]

60 Ibid.

61 „Appositi cristalli", in: ASCF, S12A, „Inventario del Teatro", 1831, fol. 2 and „tubi di cristalli", in: ASCF, S12A, „Inventario del Teatro", 1853, fol. 3.

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

63 Franco Mancini/Maria Teresa Muraro/Elena Povoledo (Eds.), I Teatri del Veneto, vol. 1/2, Venezia 1996, pp. 198–200.

64 De Marco/Braito, Storia del Teatro della Sena (see note 38).

An inventory from the years 1883–1885 lists the precise number of „flames" present in the theatre. Despite some inconsistencies, cross-referencing this document with other inventories allows us to gain a fairly accurate idea of the layout of the lights on stage. The stage was thus probably illuminated by 18 light sources distributed on 6 poles placed between the wings (with three light sources hung on each pole). These made it possible to illuminate the scenic elements on the sides of the stage and in the background.

Footlights were installed to light the proscenium. Traces of these specific lighting elements can be found in a contract drawn up in 1811 between Giovanni Domenico Curtolo, a master builder responsible for the restructuring of the theatre in the early 19th century,[65] and the management board of the Feltre Theatre: two machines of 16 lights each were provided for the front stage,[66] which are still preserved today in relatively good condition. The footlights could be lowered or raised in order to change the light intensity during a performance and to create special effects. Appearing later under the term *macchine all'inglese*, they were equipped with glass tubes and reflectors.[67] From the mid-19th century onwards, the writers of these inventories included the footlights in the *batterie di scena*. In addition to the 16 footlights, this included 6 more lights suspended just behind the proscenium arch. This makes 22 lights in all.[68] Such a concentration of light behind the proscenium arch was a common practice on Italian stages and was already mentioned by Nicolò Sabbatini in 1638 in his treatise „Pratica di fabricar scene e machine ne' teatri".[69]

The inventories also mention certain kinds of lantern designed specifically for the stage, allowing particular places to be lit according to the needs of the production. Three of these were coloured, thus tinting the stage with a specific colour in order to create particular moods.[70]

65 Giovanni Domenico Curtolo, called Bissa, was the director of the restorations of the theatre made during the first decade of the 19th century. Documents written by Curtolo in: BCF, BS, G VI 90 bis. About Curtolo, see Antonio Vecellio, Storia di Feltre, vol. 4, Feltre 1877, p. 458; Mario Gaggia, Il teatro di Feltre, in: Archivio Storico di Belluno Feltre e Cadore 52 (1937), pp. 891–895.

66 BCF, BS, G VI 90 bis, „Contratto di Giovanni Curtolo", 19 February 1811, unbound.

67 „N. 16 macchine all'inglese per dar lume al rimpetto anteriore al sipario con appositi cristalli e con 16 quadrati di banda a riverbero", in: ASCF, S12A, „Inventario del Teatro", 1831, fol. 2.

68 It is not clear from the archival documents, however, whether these lights were suspended behind the wings or above the stage behind the borders.

69 Nicola Sabbattini, Pratica di fabricar scene, e machine ne' teatri, Ravenna 1638, pp. 64 f., quoted in: Gösta Bergman, Lighting in the theatre, Stockholm 1977, p. 75.

70 „3 lucerne di ferro colorate per scena", in: ASCF, S12A, „Inventario del Teatro", 1879, fol. 6.

Illuminating the Public Areas

As was customary in the 19th century, the auditorium remained illuminated during the performance. Its lighting was provided solely by a crystal chandelier suspended from the ceiling, consisting of 19 lights.[71]

The interior of the boxes was also lit, but as the 1804 restructuring project states, the lighting in the boxes was the responsibility of the box owners. Only the boxes reserved for the management board of the theatre society were equipped with lights belonging to the theatre.[72] At the end of the 19th century, lights were also provided to illuminate the gallery or *loggione*, which suggests that the last row of boxes must have been transformed into a gallery in the mid-19th century.

On special occasions, the brightness of the theatre could be increased greatly by means of „eighty-five iron arms" that could be hung from the boxes.[73] The sources speak of „illuminazione a giorno", a particularly intense form of lighting in the auditorium. According to the account books, this type of lighting significantly increased costs.[74] This extraordinary illumination was used to mark special events or to solemnise days of political celebration, as for example 4 October 1825, when the theatre was „lit up as if in broad daylight" in honour of the Austrian Emperor Francis I. Similarly, the first illumination of the season increased the amount of oil required, suggesting that the theatre stayed lit for longer.[75]

Apart from the auditorium, the inventories refer to the various meeting and walking areas that also needed to be illuminated. These were essentially the stairways, the corridors (with oil lamps), the vestibule (lit by a crystal floor lamp with 6 lights), the café (requiring another floor lamp and 2 wall lamps), plus the outdoor areas of the theatre (lit by torches). From a diachronic perspective, comparing these sources also allows us to understand the evolution and use of certain spaces, such as the creation of a space to house a café in the middle of the 19th century, or the creation of another space called the *salone* in 1880.[76]

71 ASCF, S12A, „Inventario del Teatro", 1879, fol. 5.

72 „La fornitura delle stesse [logge], rispetto a stratti, portiere e lumiere resterà a tutto peso di essi Proprietari", in: BCF, BS, G VI 90 bis, „Per la Rifabbrica e riforma del Teatro di Feltre a norma del Disegno, sive modello esibiti, dessunto da quello del pubblico architetto Sig. Selva", 4 February 1804, fol. 3v.

73 „Nonché 95 braccialetti di ferro da appendersi ai palchi per l'illuminazione a giorno", in: ASCF, S12A, „Inventario del Teatro", 1831, fol. 2.

74 ASCF, S12A, „Inventario del Teatro", 1883–1888, fol. 4.

75 „Festa per il giorno onomastico di S M I R l'Augusto nostro Sovrano Francesco Primo, il teatro sarà illuminato a giorno", in: BCF, BS, „Locandine teatrali, concerti e rappresentazioni varie", G VI 91/92, playbill for Eduardo Stuard, 4.10.[1825?], unbound.

76 ASCF, S12A, „Inventario del Teatro", 1880, fol. 5.

Illuminating the Backstage Area

The sources also mention lights in the spaces provided for the theatre staff. There were lanterns and oil lamps in the actors' dressing rooms under the stage and in the box office area. For the orchestra, each music stand was equipped with an oil lamp with a crystal tube.[77]

Preparing and Handling the Lighting

Various objects evoke the handling of the lighting. The 1831 inventory mentions a room with a stove for liquefying oil for the lights. From 1879 onwards, the account books tell us exactly what kind of fuel was used: it was mainly petroleum, while a few stearic candles were used in the actors' dressing rooms.[78] Since it was no longer necessary to melt fat to prepare the fuel for the lights, petroleum seems to have made the oil stove obsolete. There were also various containers for pouring or collecting fuel in the various lamps, not to mention the presence of a four-and-a-half-metre long *ammorza* for lighting distant lamps.

Safety was also a constant preoccupation, with large sand trays above the stage and in the corridors to allow for quick action in the event of a fire. In addition, the custodian was obliged to keep a store of water and a blanket ready for use as part of his duties.[79]

The inventory from the years 1883–1885 suggests that the Feltre Theatre was equipped with a total of 127 „flames" (42 of which were intended for the stage).[80] Preparing these light sources and managing them during performances in the theatre thus involved a considerable amount of work. The person in charge of the lighting had to prepare the countless lamps, supply them with fuel, light them and extinguish them every evening, and keep a constant eye on them to avoid fires breaking out. Then there was the maintenance work needed, such as repairing light mechanisms or replacing broken glass (the account books regularly record costs related to the preparation of lighting systems). These technicians also had to manage the lighting during performances, collaborating with the stagehands and sometimes creating special effects.

77 Ibid.
78 ASCF, S12A, „Inventario del Teatro", 1879, fol. 4.
79 Ibid.
80 ASCF, S12A, „Inventario del Teatro", 1883–1888, fol. 3.

c *I Macchinisti* – the Stagehands

The 1880 inventories detail the personnel of the Feltre Theatre employed to handle the stage sets. They mention an assistant on stage, an assistant at the curtain, a stagehand and an assistant stagehand. Various objects evoke the presence of stagehands both on and under the stage (benches, lanterns, flasks, glasses and chamber pots) and allow us to differentiate clearly between three levels of the stage that required the intervention of stagehands:

- the under-stage area, where stagehands would operate the carriages that allowed the wings to slide onto the stage, or operate trapdoors on stage to allow actors to emerge;
- the stage, where they had to ensure the movement of the frames and sometimes change them in plays that required a lot of set changes;
- the grid, where stagehands had to manage the movement of backdrops, sky depictions or even flying machines (as suggested by the aforementioned 1831 inventory).

The under-stage and above-stage mechanisms allowed the stagehands to arrange the backdrops and wings precisely to create a scenic image. The wings could be slid on the rails under the stage, the borders and backdrops suspended from the grid above the stage, and their vertical and horizontal positioning adjusted. This system was of Italian origin, had been used on stages across Europe since the 17th century, and was perfected and reached a technical peak in the 19th century.[81] Various contracts and archival documents show that such a system was still considered modern in the first half of the 19th century: „The scenery should be produced in a way that is as manageable as possible, as is usual in the most modern theatres", stipulates the contract with Curtolo mentioned above.[82]

The inventories also mention the presence of borders and wings representing red draperies.[83] Placed just behind the proscenium, these painted drapery elements allowed the stagehands to adjust the frame of the stage without the audience being able to see any offstage areas.[84]

Stagehands played a fundamental role in the success of a performance. A clumsy stagehand could destroy the effect of a whole show. The playwright August von Kotzebue reminds us of this fact when he complains about the bad behaviour of stagehands in the Italian provinces during a performance at the Nuovo Teatro Filarmonico

81 George C. Izenour, Theater Technology, New York 1988, p. 13.
82 BCF, BS, G VI 90 bis, „Contratto di Giovanni Curtolo", 19 February 1811, fol. 2.
83 ASCF, S12A, „Inventario del Teatro", 1831, fol. 4.
84 Arthur Pougin, Dictionnaire historique et pittoresque du théâtre et des arts qui s'y rattachent, Paris 1885, p. 494.

in Verona in the early 19th century: „men show up to change the scenery before the end of the scene and go about their business as they please during the performance".[85]

Their skill, combined with the ‚modern' stage machinery available at the Feltre Theatre, made it possible to make a vista changes. These constituted one of the charms of the theatre, which even audiences in great capitals were not yet ready to renounce in the first half of the 19th century.[86] However, it was very difficult to operate such changes successfully. They required a lot of skill, strength and coordination. The difficulty of these effects, and the increasingly complex staging techniques of the second half of the 19th century, probably led stagehands to use the proscenium curtain for set changes.

Before outlining the role of the stagehand as described in archival documents, it is necessary to specify just what we mean by this term, namely any person who handled the sets before, during and after the performance, but also who maintained, repaired and sometimes created elements of the machinery.[87] As mentioned earlier, these tasks were part of the custodian's job. However, the custodian thus had various people under his command who would assist him with the scenic elements. The 1883 inventory lists the members of this team in Feltre. It was composed of a lighting manager (*illuminatore*), a stage assistant (*assistente scena*), a stage operator (*praticante scena*), a stagehand for the stage (*machinista*) and an assistant stagehand (*assistente macchinista*).[88] The precise division of tasks remains difficult to establish, however, especially since in Feltre the custodian was also the illuminator. We propose therefore to regard this term not as a specific profession as practised by a single person, but rather as a term used for a group of workers who performed a plethora of activities fundamental to the proper running of a provincial theatre.

Managing the Scenery

Long before the show, the stock scenery was the basic material with which the stagehand had to deal. Like many provincial theatres in the Veneto region in the

85 „Du reste, on ne fait pas plus de cas de l'illusion ici que par-tout ailleurs en Italie; des hommes viennent enlever les décorations avant la fin des scènes, et l'allumeur fait ses affaires pendant la représentation tout comme il lui plaît", August Kotzebue, Souvenirs d'un voyage en Livonie, à Rome et à Naples, faisant suite aux „Souvenirs de Paris", Paris 1806, p. 338, quoted in: Mancini/Muraro/Povoledo, I teatri (see note 39), p. 98.

86 Catherine Join-Diéterle, Les décors de scène de l'Opéra de Paris à l'époque romantique, Paris 1988, pp. 186–193.

87 An invoice written by a machinist in 1872 and sent to the society of the „Teatro Accademico" in Castelfranco testifies to the production of a machine for rain sounds, with a list of materials and prices: ASCC, TA, Serie 7, XII M Custodia del teatro e mobile ed utensili d'illuminazione, 1844–1888, „Fattura di Leonardo Zeroni", 26 September 1872, fol. 24.

88 ASCF, S12A, „Inventario del Teatro", 1883–1888, fol. 2.

19th century, Feltre's Theatre had a limited amount of stock scenery that was reused for various performances. A multitude of contracts and inventories document the Feltre's stock of scenery throughout the 19th century. However, it is important to be cautious when drawing information from these documents. They tell us nothing about the restoration and transformations that this décor might have undergone over the course of the century. Such lists also depend on the knowledge and precision of the person who made them: different terms are sometimes used to define the same pieces of scenery. This variability reminds us of the flexibility with which the scenic location represented on these sets was perceived. Nevertheless, these documents show the persistence of certain scenic locations throughout the 19th century, forming the core of Feltre's scenic repertoire. They can be listed as follows: palace, cabinet, noble room, simple room, square, forest, vestibule, underground, rustic room, maritime horizon.[89]

Managing Accessories

The inventories also mention the existence of various painted props: four statues, vases with flowers, and various backdrops to cover doors, fireplaces, tombs, doors and windows. They suggest that these different painted props could be added to the set elements (wings or backdrops) to modify them.[90] These elements were given to the stagehands. Sometimes they had to be restored or replaced. In Feltre, for example, during the renovation of the theatre by Tranquillo Orsi in 1842, the society asked the painter to replace the nine stock scenes.[91] With permission of the theatre's presidency, they could be modified or adapted as required.

Managing the Scenic Elements Brought by the Troupes

The Feltre archives contain playbills that provide us with valuable information on the practices of theatre troupes visiting Feltre. For example, a playbill for a pantomime presented in Feltre in 1825, „Il ritorno di Pietro il Grande Czar di tutte le russe in Mosca ossia La gran congiura de Strelitzi", specifies that the large square scenery was created by the celebrated scenographer Francesco Bagnara.[92] The troupes thus

89 For more information on Feltre's sets and on the issue of scenery in provincial theatres, see 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: Roberto Illiano (Ed.), Performing Arts and Technical Issues. Staging and Dramaturgy. Opera and the Performing Arts, vol. 4, Turnhout 2021, pp. 235–268.

90 „Otto pezzi in tela rapp. finestre, caminetti e fondi porte", in: ASCF, S12A, „Inventario del Teatro", 1883–1888, fol. 9.

91 Bortolotti, Les décors et machines (see note 89), p. 238.

92 BCF, BS, G VI 91/92, „Locandine teatrali, concerti e rappresentazioni varie".

brought elements of scenery with them, complementing or replacing a theatre's stock scenery, allowing them to respond to the specificities of the plays. This is confirmed by the presence of an *apparatore* in a list of troupe members sent to the presidency of Feltre; he was responsible for setting up the scenery for the plays. According to this document, the troupe was also provided with a *trovarobe*, a sort of prop-maker whose task was to find furniture and props that the actors might need, for example by borrowing or renting objects at antique dealers or private individuals, thus avoiding having to carry cumbersome items.[93]

Adjusting and Moving the Scenery

The skill or clumsiness of the stagehands (whether local or with a touring troupe) was most noticeable during performance, when they had to set up the various sets and move them during any a vista changes. The inventories mention the various elements that supported the wings (poles) or operated the backdrops (pulleys and hinges). Surprisingly, they do not mention the machinery under the stage; only the contracts from the beginning of the century testify to these elements. However, they still exist in the Feltre Theatre, and are very well preserved.

It is difficult to know exactly how many people worked as stagehands in a theatre like Feltre during the 19th century. The account books mention two stagehands, which does not seem to be enough for operating the sets of an entire theatre.[94] It is therefore possible that people helped out without being paid. To better understand the question of the workers' remuneration, it is necessary to relate it to the whole of the personnel employed in the theatre and to other workers in 19th-century Italy.

6 Remuneration and Working Conditions

The inventories of Feltre's Teatro Sociale suggest a low staff turnover. As regards the custodian, recurring names are Giacomo Bonetti, custodian in the 1850s, and Pietro Bonetti, employed in the 1880s. A similar situation is found at the Teatro Accademico in Castelfranco where the role was held by only three people in the space of eighty years.[95]

93 See the list of the artists of the „Nuova Drammatica compagnia Carlo Goldoni", in: BCF, BS, G VI 91/92, „Locandine teatrali, concerti e rappresentazioni varie".

94 „Otto pezzi in tela rapp. finestre, caminetti e fondi porte", in: ASCF, S12A, „Inventario del Teatro", 1883–1888, fol. 9.

95 In 1845, after a long career, Bortolo Dal Negro was replaced by Raimondo Bresolin, who remained in office until his death in 1873, when he was replaced by his son Lorenzo. ASCC, TA, Serie 7, XII M „Custodia del teatro e mobile ed utensili d'illuminazione", 1844–1888, „Lettera del custode Bortolo dal

The job of the custodian tended to be handed down from father to son – thus from Giacomo Bonetti to Pietro, and from Raimondo Bresolin to his son Lorenzo – and the same was the case for other employees. Kinship often helped one to integrate into the offstage labour environment. The Feltre sources reveal that several tasks were carried out by people with the same surname (they could have been brothers, cousins, or father and son). In all such cases, these job positions involved offstage, so-called unskilled tasks and had similar salaries, mainly attendants or assistants. The lists of offstage workers also show that it was possible to move up the career ladder: the same name can be found once for an assistant and then, a few years later, for example, for a driver with slightly better pay.[96]

The theatre seems to have been a largely masculine work environment. Indeed, no female names can be found in the inventories of the Feltre Theatre. There is an exceptional case at the Teatro Accademico in Castelfranco from 1877, where an invoice proves that a seamstress was employed to sew a blanket.[97] But a few documents do suggest that tasks such as cleaning curtains and fabrics were performed by women (perhaps sisters or wives of employees).[98] An invoice of the theatre society in Cittadella proves that the custodian's mother also worked at the theatre.[99] A custodian's wife could also officially replace her husband in case of death, as happened in Castelfranco in 1852, when Lucia Brotta, the widow of the lighting operator Antonio Fiorentin, had to pay the management board the value of all the missing lighting equipment.[100] Something similar had happened at the San Pietro Theatre in Trieste almost a century before: when the custodian died, his wife asked to take his place and be allowed to continue doing ordinary tasks while the rest was assigned to a carpenter who was already working for the theatre.[101] These documents testify to the fact that women worked alongside their husbands, but could gain public recognition for their

Negro", 12.5.1845, fol. 3; ASCC, TA, Serie 3, I B Normali e documenti di massima 1842–1888, „Lettera di Raimondo Bresolin alla Presidenza del Teatro", 17 March 1845, fol. unbound; „Lettera di Lorenzo Bresolin alla Presidenza del Teatro", 16 September 1873, fol. 22.

96 Pietro Conte was an assistant in 1879 and was paid 0.40 lire a night (0.50 lire the following year), while a few years later he was engaged as a machinist and his salary rose to 0.60 lire (while an assistant continued to earn 0.50 lire): ASCF, S12A, „Inventario del Teatro", 1879, 1880 and 1883–1888.

97 ASCC, TA, Serie 7, XII M „Custodia del teatro e mobile ed utensili d'illuminazione", 1844–1888, „Fattura Angela Sanson", 1877, fol. 3.

98 Matilde Bresolin, for example, washed curtains: ASCC, TA, Serie 7, XII M „Custodia del teatro e mobile ed utensili d'illuminazione", 1844–1888, „Prospetto delle spese", 1878, fol. 7.

99 Cittadella, Archivio Storico Comunale di Cittadella (ASCCIT), Archivio della Società del Teatro (AST), Busta nr. 3, vol. 1858–1870, „Fattura per Lucia Bertin", 26 February 1865, fol. unbound.

100 ASCC, TA, Carteggio con titolario 1818–1888, IV D Illuminazione e orchestra, „Deliberazioni relative alla nuova illuminazione e alla nuova orchestra, 1844–1873", 10 January 1852, fol. 8.

101 Carlo Leone Curiel/Bruno Brunelli, Il teatro di S. Pietro di Trieste 1690–1801, Milano 1937, p. 156.

work only in men's absence. While they are mostly invisible in the official documents, wives were probably well acquainted with their tasks and how to fulfil them.

In Feltre, the custodian was at the top of the hierarchy of employees, a fact that was reflected in his salary. He received one-and-half lira per evening and, as already mentioned, he was also the lighting manager and received an additional two lire for this task (the inventories specify two separate salaries). The worker who managed the box office (*bollettinaro*) received one lira and twenty-five cents; the doorman at the entrance was paid seventy cents, a little more than the doormen at the side entrances because he had to be able to recognise the spectators at first sight, especially the box owners.[102] The stagehand, stage assistants and stewards received fifty cents each. The lowest in the hierarchy were the stall assistants (*commessi agli scanni*), who were paid even less, between twenty-five and forty cents per evening.

The information in the inventories on the salaries of offstage workers is of little consequence without knowing the value of these wages compared to those in other fields. In 1871, according to the memoirs of Cesare Cantù, fifty cents – which was what a worker with few or no qualifications earned on an opening night at the theatre – constituted „the daily living" of a worker. Cantù recalled that half a lira was the amount he received from coach passengers travelling from Milan to Venice when he carried their luggage. This was just enough to live on, he wrote.[103]

In the 1880s, a daily wage for an artist's work was two lire, and this was what a worker earned for adjusting the wheels used to move the sets from one place to another inside the Teatro Accademico in Castelfranco.[104] The same amount was earned by a bricklayer called to fix the theatre's roof or to repair doors or walls,[105] while an engineer in Castelfranco received four lire for an inspection at the beginning of the theatre's restoration.[106] These invoices demonstrate the apparent low qualifications of offstage workers and their low wages compared to other artists.

Looking at the industrial environment during this period, a worker in an industrial factory could earn on average between 15 and 20 lire per week until the end of the 19th century, with big differences between jobs. A worker's daily wage varied from 50 cents to 1.50 lire per day, depending on the size of the factory, the type of task, and the age and sex of the worker: 50 cents was the wage in a small textile factory; knitters in Milan earned 70 cents for 11 hours a day, in Novi Ligure women worked „for a lira

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

103 Cesare Cantù, Portafoglio d'un operajo ordinato e pubblicato da Cesare Cantù, Milano 1871, p. 11.

104 ASCC, TA, Serie 5 Spese ordinaria manutenzione 1873–1882, „Spese per il restauro del teatro di Castelfranco 1880–1881", 15 February 1881, fol. 14.

105 Ibid., 25 October 1881, fol. 16.

106 Ibid., 31 December 1881, fol. 19.

or a little more“ for 12 hours a day, and 1.20 lira was what a worker earned at „Da Re and C.“ in Milan.[107]

Offstage workers in theatres were therefore paid less than industrial labourers or artisans, especially in jobs for the poorly qualified, such as doormen or assistants. But since we do not know exactly for how many hours these workers were employed, it is difficult to compare the social level of these professions. Moreover, offstage professionals probably needed other jobs to survive, as the theatre was only open during a certain number of days each year. Unfortunately, little is known so far about the life of these workers.

Unlike offstage workers who were only paid per day, the custodian probably received an annual salary in addition to each evening's service: we know that in Castelfranco, for example, the custodian's contract in 1845 stipulated a fee of 50 lire per year in two instalments, in addition to his evening pay. The same was the case in Cittadella, where the custodian received 50 lire per year until 1869, when he asked for a pay rise to 100 lire per year.[108] In the small theatre San Pietro in Trieste, the custodian was already receiving an annual salary in the early 1780s.[109] We do not have any sources in Feltre on this issue, but we can imagine that working conditions were similar, as the custodian lived close to the theatre and had to be willing to be there at any time. In comparison, the doorman at the Museo Correr in Venice was paid 800 lire a year in 1877, that is about two lire per day. His boss principal received 1000 lire and accommodation next to the museum; the salary doubled for a secretary and quadrupled for a manager.[110]

The artists in the theatre (singers, actors and musicians) often received much better remuneration than offstage workers. In the case of Feltre's Teatro Sociale, the sources give general indications about the takings of the itinerant theatrical troupes without specifying the pay for each artist. We know that in the 1880s each troupe received on average between 90 and 150 lire per performance, depending on genre and season. More precise notes on the personal wage of each singer, chorus member and musician can be found in a financial document of the 1872 season in Castelfranco, which takes into account the income and expenditure for the 20 productions of an entire season. The salaries vary widely: from 1000 lire per season for the first tenor to 800 lire for the prima donna, 750 for the first bass singer, and 700 for the most

107 Stefano Merli, Proletariato di fabbrica e capitalismo industriale. Il caso italiano 1880–1900, Firenze 1972, p. 161–171.

108 ASCCIT, AST, Busta nr. 3 1858–1870, „Polizze e ricevute 1866“, fol. Unbound, and „Verbali adunanze 1869“, fol. unbound. The custodian actually continued to earn 50 lire per year, even in the 1880s.

109 Curiel/Brunelli, Il teatro di S. Pietro (see note 101), p. 156.

110 Archivio Veneto 14 (1877), p. 239.

important baritone (i. e. from 50 lire per performance for the tenor to 35 lire for the baritone). All the other singers received between 200 and 300 lire each (thus between 10 and 15 lire per performance). As regards the chorus members, outside singers were paid between 100 and 170 lire for the season, while those who were residents of Castelfranco were only paid 34 lire. Sometimes, chorus members received even less than this: the second tenor and second bass were paid 20 lire for the season, which means one lira per evening – the same as a stagehand. In the 1872 season, the musicians were all from outside and were paid between 140 and 200 lire (i. e. 7–10 lire per evening); the exception was the conductor, who received 330 ire.[111] In summary, while a famous artist could get 50 lire for a performance, a chorus member from the local amateur group might receive just one lira.

The information given in the sources for the Feltre Theatre in the 19th century allow us to conclude that offstage workers were given a daily salary comparable to other so-called unskilled workers (more or less one lira per day, depending on their tasks). The custodian of the theatre was an exception, as he was paid per year and had a more stable, better remunerated job. We can also deduce from our sources that there was no clear-cut distinction between the salaries of onstage and offstage workers. Whereas the difference in remuneration between an onstage star and a so-called unskilled offstage worker could be as big as 1:50, the salaries of the worst-paid onstage artists could be comparable to those of offstage workers.

7 Conclusion

The inventories of a typical 19th-century Italian provincial theatre like Feltre's Teatro Sociale provide us with valuable information about offstage workers. Such information is otherwise difficult to obtain because a theatre society usually kept records of other aspects of management, but not detailed information about offstage staff. We are thus lucky to have gained access to this kind of source.

The inventories reveal a high number of offstage tasks that required many different, advanced skills, but which are rarely seen or acknowledged – neither in contemporary sources nor in present-day research. Each task is necessary for the smooth running of the theatre and therefore enables us to gain knowledge about theatre performances as complex practices rooted in the expertise of multiple stakeholders. The lighting, stage sets, stage machinery and many elements of the theatre building itself interact directly with the materiality of performances, and with the theatrical space that is shaped every day by offstage workers. Without these material objects and

111 ASCC, TA, Serie 8, „Atti della società filodrammatici di Castelfranco", 1872, fol. unbound.

without these offstage workers and their skills, the performance could not take place and the theatre business could not exist.

Offstage work in 19th-century provincial theatres was often a long-term occupation, especially regarding employment, which included several tasks or assignments that had to be trained. Jobs could be handed down within a family, and the training could thus be carried out gradually, with the next generation helping out and performing small tasks from childhood onwards. However, the inventories provide little information about employment contracts and therefore about issues such as job security, daily working hours or a worker's rights and duties. What we do know is that these workers were paid per day and that there were many possible reasons for dismissal. Even the custodian, despite having signed a contract, could be dismissed at any time by the management board. Most offstage workers had to work multiple jobs because their payment was insufficient, because they were only employed for part of the year, and because they could be dismissed easily.

Despite a hypothesis that there was a cleft between the celebrated onstage artists and the supposedly exploited offstage workers, the Feltre sources suggest a continuum of payment between those who worked onstage and offstage – ranging from those who were rather well paid to those who rarely earned sufficient for their basic needs. It is difficult to assess the social standing of these offstage workers, since the sources provide very little information about their background. Judging from their remuneration, they seem to have been part of a lower social class, perhaps with the exception of onstage artists such as chorus members, who might have been members of a social elite who just happened to be taking part in amateur activities. This continuum of payment suggests that the local offstage staff in a provincial theatre like Feltre might not have belonged to any marginalised group, but were perhaps integrated in a provincial community where the residents knew each other and where different social groups were accustomed to working side by side, both onstage and off. However, this subject requires further research.

In the theatre environment of 19th-century Italy, women mainly worked when they were relatives of employees and they were generally neither named nor officially remunerated. Even when they were involved in the theatre business themselves, there were only a few cases where women held a recognised position. Performing offstage labour probably thus did not mean getting any recognition, let alone autonomous financial remuneration.

Our analysis of the Feltre inventories can thus broaden our understanding of a theatre performance as a collective undertaking that involves multiple stakeholders in different economic situations. It can help us to see the 19th-century theatre as a multifaceted working environment that involved considerable knowledge and expertise that was handed down from one generation to the next, and that contributed to an art form that was the central attraction of a town and its environs.