

Stage Space Maquette: Device of Illusion and Theatrical Practice

Massimiliano Ciammaichella

Abstract

Between the Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment, the theatrical spectacle moves from the static image, of the fixed scene, to the changing image of moving backdrops that simulate the centrality of frontally arranged spaces, evolving them into the Bi-bienesque corner view. The perspective's theories and methods are progressively absorbed by empirical staging inventions, while drawings of individual apparatuses and machines that reveal their kinematics are often fragmentary. Even more so are the analog models, traces of which remain only in sporadic reconstructions displayed in exhibitions: they are magic boxes suitable for rediscovering the perspective space dimension, evoking the original mise-en-scène configurations.

The essay rereads the maquettes by relating them to the iconographic and textual sources that determined their design logic. The burgeoning literature reflecting on the practices of theatricality from the second half of the sixteenth century onward is analyzed to rediscover the fundamentals of relief perspectives and the determination of the optimal point of view, starting with the constructive rules of the stage, evident as in the treatises of Scipione Chiaramonti and Nicola Sabbattini. This makes it possible to trace the real spatial configurations of the contexts in which the performances took place, while also verifying the proportionality relationships of the proscenium arch, which can be inferred from the study of the frontispieces and engravings accompanying the operas' librettos.

Keywords: melodrama, perspective, set design, telari, Venice.

Introduction

Illusione e pratica teatrale is the title of an exhibition held in Venice in 1975, whose main means of communicating the contents offered to visitors –drawings, engravings, documents, and heterogeneous sources– was entrusted to the maquette, understood as three-dimensional analogical restitution of the compositional dynamics of the stage space, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries [1].

As a design tool of a double invention, that of first scenography and then 'Italian' theater, with its performances in a melodrama set to music, today we record the few pieces of evidence that have come down to us, mainly attributable only to the wooden prototypes of the instituting building. Yet, it is well known how several

artists have used these devices to simulate the spatiality and poses of actors, bringing their settings back to the plane support of the painting. One need only think, for example, of the work of Tintoretto, who created wax or clay models of the characters dressed in rags [Grosso 2018, p. 70], and then placed them within "perspectives, composed of boards and cardboards, accommodating little candles in the windows, thus obtaining the lights and shadows" [Ridolfi 1642, p. 8]. However, in this essay what is being investigated is the reverse process.

In the absence of concrete evidence of the theatrical works, the maquettes can house possible reconstructions of the realized sets, because the iconographic sources that have come down to us depict

illusory architecture and landscapes whose perspective restitution allows us to understand their feasible spatial arrangement, confirmed by the dimensions of the stages, most often described in the documents and contracts for the renovation of theaters to be modernized. Unfortunately, many of these have completely disappeared, just think of Venice, which in 1581 inaugurated the first paid public theater –owned by the Tron family near the parish of San Cassan– and by the end of the seventeenth century had some fifteen.

Talented set designers whose work is not always recognized worked in this city: described in the literature as inventors of scenes and machines, architects, engineers, and scene painters, their names appear in opera librettos sporadically [Ciammaichella 2021]. Therefore, being able to prefigure the spatiality and illusory effects of an artfully designed *hic et nunc* means recomposing the fragments of drawn, engraved, and written memories, bringing them together in analog models corresponding to the methodologies through which, at the time, performances were designed.

Musical Intermedi and changeable scene

The Renaissance scenic model tends to recover the centrality of static relief perspectives, keeping the settings virtually unchanged throughout the performance, so much so that Serlio, in rereading the Vitruvian codes in a modern key, offers three possible variants for the tragic, satiric, and comic scene. Of the latter, he delves mainly into the constructive aspects, where the architectures are represented by the high relief structured by moving backdrops and painted telari. But several scholars have expressed not a few perplexities about the small size of the stage that was supposed to locate them, considering that the plan published by the author indicates a precise subdivision into square modules of two feet on a side [2]: the podium measures 60 by 12 feet [Serlio 1545, p. 64] and its horizontally is interrupted by the sloping surface on which the *Casamenti* rest, occupying an area of 22 by 5 feet approx (fig. 1).

This poses a problem for the movements of the actors who would see their action take place, almost and exclusively, in the proscenium. “If, as the dramatic reading of the time suggests, from Machiavelli’s *Man-dragola* (1521) to Piccolomini’s *Amor costante* (1536)

or A. Landi’s *Commodo* (1539), which requires at least four practicable houses, we considered the ‘streets’ marked by Serlio on the tilted plane to be practicable, we should arrive at a plan significantly deeper than that of the treatise” [Mancini, Muraro, Povoledo 1975, p. 35]. In any case, the model exhibited relates to the practice he carried out himself, creating the temporary setting of a wooden theater together with the scenes of a play commissioned by the Compagnia della Calza of Vicenza, which took place in the courtyard of Ca’ da Porto [3] during the carnival of 1539 [Zorzi 1969].

The Renaissance recovery on the classical amphitheater continues to be orchestrated by the *prince’s eye*, seated in the center of the first tier of tiers; therefore, the optimal incline of the stage declivity does not exceed 6 degrees [Chiaromonti 1675]. The gradual abandonment of the fixed scene, on the other hand, is due to the dramaturgical demands of the plays themselves, whose narrative marked by acts is often interspersed with the *Intermedi*: autonomous forms of performance that break into the plot of the main narrative with pantomime, acrobatics, ballet, and singing performances. These impose a rapid transformation of the stage design, given by the movement of flat panels and the painted curtains, activated by the ingenuity of machines and hoists to be hidden in the under-stage and attic.

Specific expedients can be found in the practices described in treatises, from which one of the best ruses, to disguise the house facades and their foreshortened profile planes, is to wrap the telari on two vertical wooden rods. The former is to be nailed to the end of the fronts hidden by the proscenium, the latter is conveniently slid by two or more men moving in the back of the roofs [Sabbattini 1638].

Stagecraft’ daring developed in the service of private courts, as was the case in the Florentine where Bernardo Buontalenti, in 1589, showed off his prowess with six Intermedi to be cadenced during the performance of the comedy *La Pellegrina*, by Girolamo Bargagli, performed in the Uffizi Hall to crown the wedding of Ferdinando I de’ Medici and Christina of Lorraine.

In this celebration, amazement is fueled by credible illusion, whereby one witnesses the apparitions of mythological subjects suspended in the clouds, simultaneously appreciating the changing atmospheres that echo the semblances of possible spatiality. But by the end of the century what marks the break with the structural static

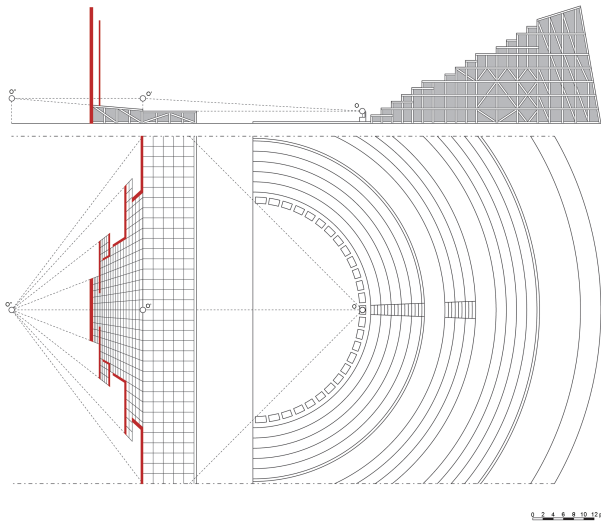


Fig. 1. Reconstruction in plan and elevation of Sebastiano Serlio's temporary theater [Serlio 1545] (drawing by author, 2024).

nature of comedy is precisely the supremacy of the Intermedio, whose inevitable evolution is consequential. In 1600, in Florence, the Camerata de' Bardi initiated "the rampant fortune of melodrama, the spectacle of music, song and vision that would become the 'important' spectacle, the one on which theater buildings would measure their validity" [Cruciani 2001, p. 24]. Taking up this challenge will be the public pay-per-view theaters inaugurated in Venice, with melodramas in music suitable to qualify their programming.

After the fire of 1633, the San Cassan Theater was rebuilt and four years later debuted with Benedetto Ferrari's *Andromeda*, set to music by Francesco Manelli. This was only the beginning of an intense cultural activity, due to the refinement of artistic impresario systems under which companies rented theaters to owners, also paying the production costs.

The typology of the building, housing the audience distributed in the stalls and over several orders, is confronted with spatial optimizations due to the minimal space of the boxes designed around the horseshoe cavea. Conversely, the stage expands out of proportion, depending on the effects provided by the individual performance.

The Teatro SS. Giovanni e Paolo, owned by the Grimani family, was opened in the carnival of 1639. Also, in the same parish [4], an association of nobles rented an area granted by the Dominican friars, entrusting Giacomo Torelli –then a naval engineer employed by the Venice Arsenal– with the design of the Teatro Novissimo, where he demonstrated his extraordinary talent as a set designer and machines inventor, starting in 1641.

For the staging of *Venere Gelosa* [5], in 1643, the depth of the stage acquired an additional 12 feet, thanks to the agreement made with the friars in renewing the annual lease, amounting to 300 ducats [Bianconi, Walker 1975, p. 415].

Historical sources agree in attesting that the proscenium was 9 meters wide and about 7 meters high, with the last backdrop at least 12 meters away from it [Mancini, Muraro, Povoledo 1995, p. 323]. The models displayed in the above-mentioned exhibition take these valuable pointers into account, focusing on two scenes from the second act [6], relating to the very deep hellish cavern with burning towers in the background and the courtyard of the King of Naxos (fig. 2).

The memories of the melodrama are reported by Count Majolino Bisaccioni with a certain descriptive emphasis, accompanied by Marco Boschin's engravings in which actors are shown at a very small scale, to exaggerate the effects of the central relief perspectives simulated by the layered sequence of painted telari –called *Principali*– pierced in the center and lowered from the ceiling, through complex systems of balconies anticipating the gridiron. Then the setting is lickety-split transformed, with on-sight changes given by the horizontal translation of elements that recompose the king's court architecture. Thus, in a kind of surplus homage to the Torellian 'long scene', it is declared that the square of Naxos "was composed of forty-eight Telari, which the mere thought a so great a multitude, makes one believe marvelous the challenge of back together them in a moment" [Bisaccioni 1644, p. 20].

It is well known that the rapid stage transformation aroused the applause of the audience and was governed by a large winch with counterweights, connected with the under-stage to a large revolving wheel to which all the backdrops converged [Guarino 1992], but the disproportionate number of the latter is not likely. Generally, even the most elaborate and wasteful Baroque sets required a maximum of eight or nine panels per side (fig. 3).



Fig. 2. Models of the scenes for the melodrama in the music of the *Venere gelosa*, Teatro Novissimo, Venice 1643. [Photographs courtesy of the Institute for Theater and Melodrama. Giorgio Cini Foundation, Venice 2024].

The interpretation of the engravings and the restitutions of the apparatus, traceable to the scale of the wooden models, attests to this. Moreover, from the study of architectural perspectives framed in the redrawing of the proscenium front, the optimal viewpoint can be traced. Since it is assumed that the Novissimo had three overlapping box orders, the tendency is to approximate it to the height of the box of honor, completing the strategic functionalities of a typological model of theater, known as the 'Italian theater', to be exported around the world (fig. 4).

Angular scene and painted scene

The last quarter century consolidates a practice able to extrapolate, from the establishing building, the good rules of proportioning the stage space. The treatises measure the stage according to its length, to derive the slope, which must not exceed the twelfth part, so the number 12 also becomes the regulating module of the entire width of the theater itself [Carini Motta 1676]. Instead, regarding the perspective configuration of the system of backdrops and drop-curtains –converging in the central stage vanishing point, in *O*– Andrea Pozzo

mirrors it in the visual pyramid that maintains the distance from the picture framed by the proscenium arch; thus, PA is equal to AO (fig. 5). This demonstrates how the ideal point of view does not always correspond with that of the unambiguous spectatorship elected by the perpetuated sixteenth-century model, because the 'scenic theater' redesigned in plan places it outside the access to the central box of the first order.

A further problem is posed by a certain seventeenth-century habit [7] of slanting the canals for the slide drop-curtains, which should all be parallel to the stage front [Pozzo 1693]. It can be understood how the level of complexity, to which the Jesuit priest turns his attention, precisely concerns the tracing of the perspectives to be painted in sequence, resolved beforehand in sketches from which to transfer the graticule system directly onto the oblique telari. Thus, all the vertical lines of a backdrop sequence, whether left or right, remain parallel while the horizontals converge to a single vanishing point [Baglioni, Salvatore 2021].

"By placing the 'eye' in an inaccessible zone, Pozzo subordinates the perspective scene to individualized observation and thus superimposes, as it were, on the existing (fixed) perspective arrangement a changing perspective

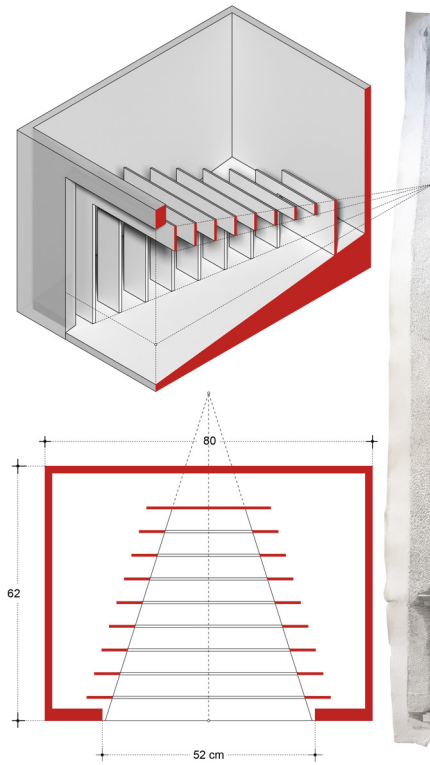


Fig. 3. Reconstruction in plan and axonometric section of the stage set at the maquette's scale (graphic elaborations by author, 2024). Engraving of the scene with an infernal cavern [Bisaccioni 1644].

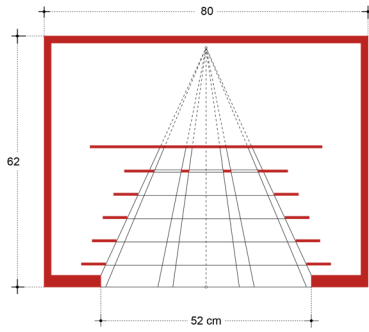
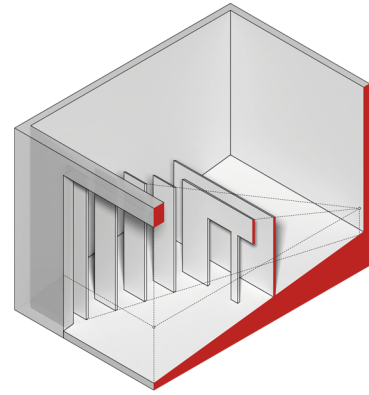


Fig. 4. Reconstruction in plan and axonometric section of the stage set at the maquette's scale (graphic elaborations by author, 2024). Proscenium front and engraving of the scene with a courtyard of the King of Naxos [Bisaccioni 1644].

of vision. This is equivalent to formally postulating the 'objectivity' of the simulated space. Perspective loses its 'illusionistic' character and is set to become the instrument of identification between real space and stage space" [Marotti 1974, p. 85].

Inheriting this paradigm shift is Ferdinando Galli Bibiena, whose work is congenial to a period of decay of the splendor of the machines, until then useful to the spectacle of the mythological matrix, with its rapid appearances and flights of characters suspended in the clouds. The dramaturgy becomes romanticized earthy, and the transformation of melodrama in music already heralds lyric opera.

As the renewed taste for bel canto predominates over the entire staging, the placements of the protagonists –predominantly proscenium or center stage– help its success, which explains the thickening of the proscenium arch wall designed to amplify the theater acoustics. Throughout, the set design continues to change from act to act, but it acts as a backdrop in making up for the abandonment of the symmetrical depth of the height-decreased panels that are no longer needed. It follows that the rhythmic repetition of the painted symmetric telari is interrupted by the off-center monumentalization of the architectural image. The scene becomes autonomous concerning its host site, and the ways to enable it depend on the scientific methods of angular perspective, changing the assumptions of consolidating the uniqueness of a vanishing point that now accommodates other points, far beyond the frame of the proscenium arch, to dilate its perceptual extension and foster the ensemble of the multiple viewpoints of the spectators, seated in the stalls or on multiple orders of boxes.

Anticipations of this trend can already be seen in Lotto Lotti's pseudo-historical drama *Didio Giuliano*, which opened the renovated Ducal Theater in Piacenza in 1687, with music by Bernardo Sabatini. The libretto, accompanied by a figured frontispiece and ten engravings of the sets, contains the author's signature. Some scholars agree that Bibiena sets them "according to perspective axes oblique to the proscenium and with gradually different vanishing points, but always at a measurable logical distance, never to infinity as in seventeenth-century scenography" [Lenzi 2000, p. 41].

It must be pointed out that several engravings still represent central perspectives but with a misalignment of

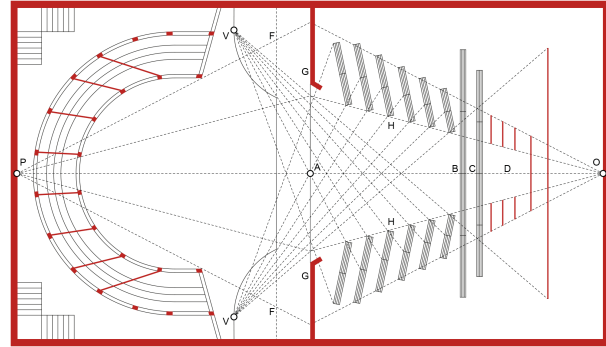


Fig. 5. Plan reconstruction of the scenic theater [Pozzo 1693] (drawing by author, 2024).

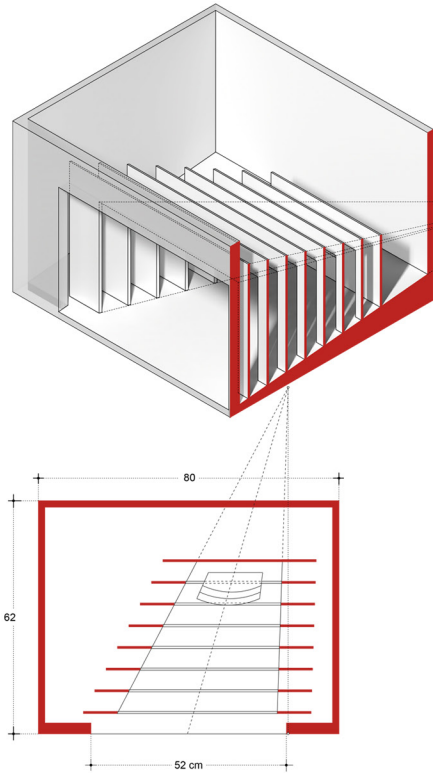


Fig. 6. Plan reconstruction and axonometric section of the stage setting at the maquette scale (graphic elaborations by author 2024). Maquette of Nerone fatto Cesare, Teatro Malvezzi, Bologna 1695. [Photograph courtesy of the Institute for Theater and Melodrama, Giorgio Cini Foundation, Venice 2024].

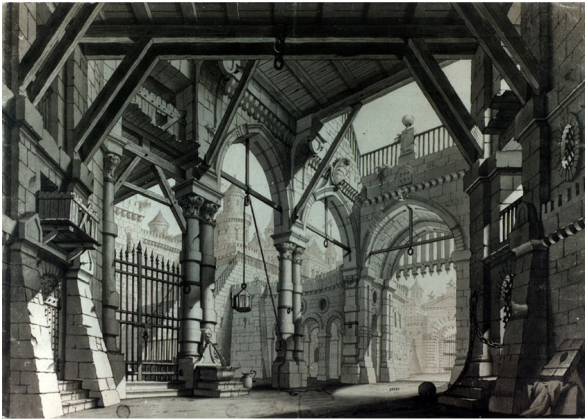


Fig. 7. Ferdinando Galli Bibiena, Prison courtyard, 1699-1700, Special Superintendence for the Historical, Artistic, and Ethno-anthropological Heritage and for the Museum Pole of the city of Naples. [Maquette, photograph courtesy of the Institute for Theater and Melodrama. Giorgio Cini Foundation, Venice 2024].

the principal point to be moved near the edges of the proscenium. This form of dynamization of the illusory space is replicated by Marcantonio Chiarini in *Nerone fatto Cesare* [8], a drama set to music by Giacomo Antonio Perti at the Teatro Malvezzi in Bologna, in 1695. In particular, the maquette exhibited at the Venetian exhibition focuses on the opening scene of the first act, with Agrippina sitting on the throne in the illuminated hall of the imperial palace (fig. 6).

The composition is structured by seven drop-curtains from the ceiling, a backdrop, and a canopy with semicircular steps shifted to the right, as can be seen from the reconstruction in the plan. We can therefore venture that the imminent invention of the *'scena per angolo'* is suggested by the empirical practice assisted by the Andrea Pozzo rules, well before publishing *L'Architettura Civile* [Bibienna 1711] that follows many of his valuable teachings. In particular, the well-known plates 22 and 23 of the treatise reaffirm the importance of preparatory drawing, tripartite by the plan of the architecture to represent, by its rotation in conical projection, and by the perspective representation of buildings for which the ground line coincides with the horizon. So, the stage becomes more leaning reaching the tenth part

of its length, to agree with the view offered by the middle box of the first order. These expedients allow Ferdinando Galli Bibiena to prepare the apparatuses of the shows, equipping himself with a principal pierced drop-curtain that acts as a sort of proscenium, which can follow at least another parallel and a closing backdrop (fig. 7).

If the end of machines and oblique canals delineate the sunset of baroque opulence, in the mid-eighteenth century the stagecraft simplification process has now reached, combining with musical productions and the economic needs of less expensive comedies.

Returning to Venice, in 1755 at the Teatro Grimani in San Samuele Carlo Goldoni debuted with the playful drama *La Diavolessa*, confirming the solid collaboration with the playwright and composer Baldassarre Galuppi. The scenes are curated by Andrea Urbani, and the engraving that accompanies the libretto shows a dark cellar very faithful to the watercolor sketch by the set designer, from which you can interpret the composition of the entire space, structured by two openwork drop-curtains and a backdrop that recompose a setting with a strong pictorial worthiness. Not that perspective construction is denied, but here the

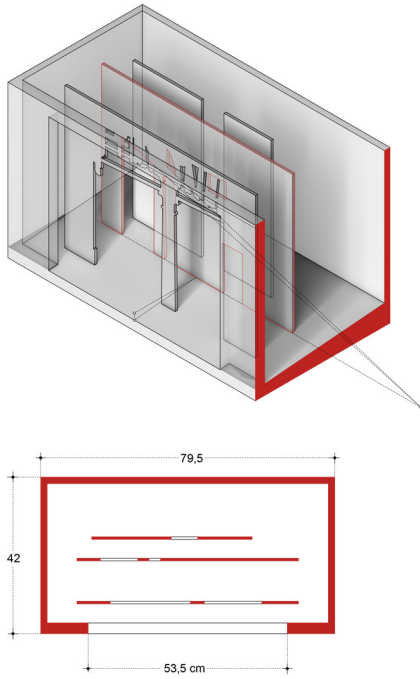


Fig. 8. Plan reconstruction and axonometric section of the stage setting at the maquette scale, graphic elaborations by author, 2024. Maquette of *La Diavolessa*, Teatro San Samuele, Venice 1755. [Photograph courtesy of the Institute for Theater and Melodrama. Giorgio Cini Foundation, Venice 2024].

appeal to off-center vanishing points harmonizes with the idea of a credible depth masked by the real distribution of surfaces close to the proscenium (fig. 8). What stands out is the so-called 'painted scene' (*scena-quadro*), entirely resolved by painted canvases. "The roof, now loaded with major tasks such as the vertical change of scenes, is provided with a gridiron or perforated ceiling to which the 'gargami' (guides) are attached. The new notion of the painted scene resolves the scenography through canvases and backdrops disengaging itself from the perspective convention of telari [...]. It is this traditional yet gradually renewed scene that the nineteenth-century performance will acquire and subject to verification" [Sinisi, *Innamorati* 2003, p. 139].

Conclusions

The in-depth study of some maquette specimens, exhibited at the 1975 *Illusione e pratica teatrale* exhibition, made it possible to investigate the design

Credits and Acknowledgements

The analog models displayed here are the result of rigorous restoration work that engaged the Giorgio Cini Foundation's Institute for Theater and Melodrama in Venice. Today they are exhibited in the Scenography Room of the same institute, documenting the outcomes of many years of research on scenic and stagecraft practices from the 16th century to the late 18th century. We thank the director, Maria Ida Biggi, and the institute secretary (Marianna Zannoni and Linda Baldissin), for their

Notes

[1] *Illusione e pratica teatrale*, exhibition curated by Franco Mancini, Maria Teresa Muraro, Elena Povoledo, Giorgio Cini Foundation, Venice 1975. Analog models of the scenes on display were made by: Domenico Berardone, Roberto Contenti, Vito Galgano, Pasqualina Jorio, Angela Norvillo, Annunziata Peluso, and Lina Zirpoli, students at the School of Scenography at the Academy of Fine Arts in Naples, directed by Franco Mancini, Claudio Chirivino, Massimo Paragona and Rosanna Piscitelli Mancini.

[2] The Vicentine foot is equivalent to the Venetian foot: 0.348 cm approx.

[3] da Porto Colleoni Palace, in Contrà Porti.

[4] The Teatro Novissimo was in the Cavallerizza area, in SS. Giovanni e Paolo, so called because it housed a riding stable for horse racing.

[5] Libretto by Niccolò Enea Bartolini, music by Francesco Sacrati.

methods and rules of a performance-making process that never disregards the spatial context in which it is set. The transition from the semicircular amphitheater to the Italian theater also determines the rules of transformation of a fixed scene dynamized by backdrops with visible change sets, to pander to the baroque expectations of an audience entirely devoted to melodrama in music.

The centuries-old cultural affairs that can be summarized in the individual case studies examined, however, demonstrate how perspective always assumes a central role in devising settings capable of harmonizing with the dramaturgical necessities.

This is evidenced by the opera librettos, engravings, and the few sketches that have come down to us, but especially by the burgeoning development of treatises on scenic perspective, through which reconstructions of the apparatuses and stages that housed them can be conjectured.

The research mainly dealt with the traces of an intangible memory to be rediscovered, to enhance a cultural heritage that still deserves to be studied and enhanced.

cooperation and for allowing us to share the valuable images accompanying the text.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the title of the exhibition and the present contribution [9], also evoke the title of an important international conference: *Illusione scenica e pratica teatrale* [Biggi 2016], dedicated precisely to the scholar Elena Povoledo to whom the author owes many of the arguments here written.

[6] They are 1:17 scale wooden boxes with a base of 80 cm, height of 59.5 cm, and depth of 62 cm. The proscenium measures 52 by 43 cm.

[7] A similar configuration of the stage setting, with oblique canals, can be seen in the drawing by Tommaso Bezzi (1691-1693), depicting the plan and longitudinal section of the Teatro SS. Giovanni e Paolo in Venice. Today it is housed in the Soane Museum in London.

[8] The engravings accompanying the libretto are by Carlo Antonio Buffagnotti.

[9] The article is part of the outcome of the research project funded by the Department of Architecture and Arts, Università Iuav di Venezia (2023), entitled: *Drawing of the Ephemeral. Reconstructions and itineraries of a disappeared theater scene*, scientific coordinator: Massimiliano Ciammaichella.

Author

Massimiliano Ciammaichella, Department of Architecture and Arts, Università Iuav di Venezia, massimiliano.ciammaichella@iuav.it

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