

Readings/Rereadings

The World as Theater, the Theater as World. On Scenography as an Expanded Epistemology in Massimiliano Ciammaichella's Research

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The book by Massimiliano Ciammaichella titled *Scenography and Perspective in Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries in Venice. Preconditions and Developments in the Baroque Theatre* [Ciammaichella 2021] presents on its cover a digital drawing by the author, an axonometric section of the ephemeral wooden theater designed by Andrea Palladio for the *Antigono*, staged in Venice in 1565. The three-dimensional virtual model underlying this drawing declares the continuity between artifacts whose physical matter has been lost as well as the persistence of their cultural value in the present and, thanks to Ciammaichella's own published research, into the future. In her *Preface*, Francesca Fatta observes how, in the "multitude of actors, technicians, and spectators" and in the "training of experts in the field of stagecraft, in the design of enchantments and spells," there took concrete form the "material culture of the theater pertaining to the period described by Ciammaichella, made of panels, canvases, and scaffolding, and produced by craftsmen who often remained anonymous, which the author reconstructs in three-dimensional models" (p. 9; all transl. from the volume are by the author). Indeed, through the study of numerous archival and bibliographic sources and through operations of drawing and modeling, the book traverses the invention

of modern scenography in Venice and restores importance to the figure of the scenographer, a figure too often kept in the background by theater studies, which have concentrated chiefly on the authors of texts and music. Ciammaichella connects the foundations of the science of perspectival representation with the projects of the scenographers and architects active in Venice, by means of three-dimensional reconstructions made possible by a rereading of the original drawings, by comparison with the sources, and by the spatial relationship with the architectural and urban spaces in which the spectacles were produced. The urban dimension is an active part of the argument: the peculiar conformation of Venice—its *campi*, its palace courtyards, and its repurposed volumes—conditions the forms and placements of the productions, so that the city itself becomes the first of the scales on which the book focuses. As throughout Massimiliano Ciammaichella's work, drawing is the *trait d'union* that skillfully weaves connections among fields of knowledge that are sometimes still distant from one another, generating new knowledge by activating sources that are at times mute, thereby making them available to a plurality of disciplinary contexts and interests. The cover drawing may thus be understood as a declaration of method for research that

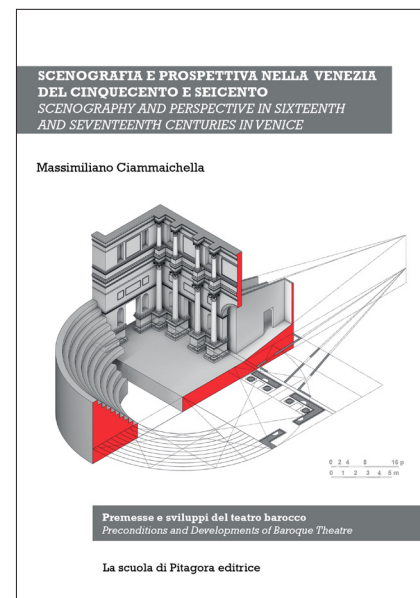


Fig. 1. Cover of the book [Ciammaichella 2021].

takes up drawing not as the illustrative accompaniment to a historical inquiry, but as its primary instrument of knowledge. The book opens with a dense survey of the festivities –both public and popular– and spectacles staged in Venice during the sixteenth century. The first chapter, *The City and the Spectacle*, rests on an imposing labor of documentary and bibliographic excavation, with archival sources transcribed at several points and articulated into a unified and original argument. Theater reveals itself here as the ideal field in which Massimiliano Ciammaichella's manifold interests converge: geometry and drawing, first of all, but also their political, social, historical, and performative implications. Theater is a representation of the world, and by reading its vicissitudes in depth it becomes possible to understand the world more fully, and to grasp how the very idea of the world has changed over the centuries [Ciammaichella, Ena, Liva 2024]. The chapter reconstructs, in parallel, the passage from ephemeral productions to the first permanent theaters. Among the cases analyzed in detail, one that stands out is the 1542 apparatus in Campo Santo Stefano for Pietro Aretino's *La Talanta*, with the stage designed by Giorgio Vasari, commissioned in 1541 and begun in December, for which the author offers a graphic reconstruction based on all the sources he was able to trace (pp. 30-36). The narrative proceeds through successive episodes, identified as salient moments in the change under way; episodes that, as we know, will converge upon Andrea Palladio's Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza (1585): the idea of the theater as a public building, anticipated by Alvise Cornaro; the ephemeral Palladian productions of *Amor costante* (1561) and of Trissino's *Sofonisba* (1562); and, finally, the episode evoked by the cover, the *Antigono*

of Shrove Tuesday 1565, a tragedy by Antonio Pigatti, for which Palladio designed the wooden theater and Federico Zuccari painted the solid perspectives of Jerusalem in twelve scenes. Here the author does not simply record the sources, which are often discordant: he tests their soundness by reconstructing, through drawing, the layout of the structure and by verifying whether its dimensions were compatible with the location that historiography has hypothesized in the courtyard of Ca' Foscari. From the author's account there also clearly emerges the relationship with the theoretical framework of the stage and theater designers: the reworking of Vitruvius's *I dieci libri dell'architettura* undertaken by Daniele Barbaro together with Palladio [Barbaro 1556], giving rise to a conception of the stage designed on the basis of geometries.

The chapter further traces the reasons for the birth of Venice's paying theaters, "forerunners of the Baroque theater" (p. 54), beginning with the Teatro Michiel in 1580 and the Teatro Tron in 1581. Built at great economic outlay, they were equipped with a pit and several tiers of boxes and, in the case of the Tron, with a horseshoe-shaped cavea that already prefigured the *teatro all'italiana* of the following century. It is the idea of theater that would welcome the arrival of Claudio Monteverdi as a choirmaster of the Serenissima in 1613 and would influence the Teatro San Cassiano (1637) and Giacomo Torelli's Novissimo (1641): a model, the author observes, destined to take root throughout Europe and still flourishing today.

The second chapter, *The Mathematics of Illusion*, is the shortest one (pp. 67-99), yet within the architecture of the book it constitutes the crucial hinge that allows expertise in perspective and stagecraft to emerge as fundamental to the birth and development of the Baroque

theater. Perspective is considered here as the science capable of determining the mode of reception and the role of the spectator; while the static, Vitruvian-derived stage of the Teatro Olimpico gives way, in Venice, to the liberation of the fourth wall, which makes possible a dynamic, mutable scenography able to follow the unfolding of the *melodramma* (pp. 67 ff.). This observation follows from the historical-critical study the author conducts on the treatises and verifies through redrawing: from the Vitruvian *periaktōi* with their three scenes –tragic, comic, and satyric– to Serlio's *Secondo libro* (1545) and the solid perspectives; to the fourth part of Daniele Barbaro's *Pratica della prospettiva* (1568), devoted to scenography; and as far as the unpublished treatise of Ludovico Cardi, known as Cigoli, brought out by his nephew Giovan Battista Cardi in 1629, in which Massimiliano Ciammaichella recognizes an anticipation of the eighteenth-century solutions of Ferdinando Galli Bibiena. The analysis of the theater of Sabbioneta, designed by Vincenzo Scamozzi between 1588 and 1590, is exemplary of this manner of proceeding. Beyond the solid perspective, the author brings to light its functional modernity –separate entrances for the public, dressing rooms for performers and musicians on two levels, a multipurpose vocation for tragedy and comedy alike– and offers a three-dimensional reconstruction that makes it possible to recover the vantage point of the privileged observer, positioned along the longitudinal axis in line with the door that was designed at the middle of the wall. The most eloquent fact is geometric: sets ten meters deep yield a street perceived as three times that length, through the effect of accelerated perspective, and the position of the elect observer reconnects the geometry of the stage to its political dimension.

For Ciammaichella, digital modeling is the contemporary continuation of the very perspectival thinking that is the object of his study: the digital model becomes the place where a historical hypothesis is made verifiable and can be actualized, demonstrating how today's instruments of representation can restore scientific dignity to a heritage otherwise consigned to fragmentary and discordant sources.

The third chapter, *The Baroque Stage*, occupies the entire second half of the volume (pp. 100-187) and opens with a lively, at times tragicomic, examination of early-seventeenth-century Venice: the decline of the Republic, the Interdict of 1606, and the expulsion of the Jesuits all help to explain, in causal terms, the progressive rise of Venetian theater; otherwise incomprehensible at a moment of economic, political, and military crisis for the Serenissima. After the reopening of the Tron family's Teatro San Cassan in 1637, paying theaters proliferate, and the companies' need for self-financing gives rise, within the span of two decades, to the professional figure of the theatrical impresario. Through drawing, the author shows how theatrical spaces and productions evolved in relation to an audience ever more demanding and ever more willing to spend ever more, to take part in ever more astonishing spectacles. We are thus able to understand and to compare the projects for the Teatro San Cassan, whose 1670 configuration is set beside the later design by Francesco Bagnolo of 1762; for the Teatro San Moisé, converted into a musical theater in 1639 and destined to host, in 1810, Gioacchino Rossini's debut with *La cambiale di matrimonio*; and for the Teatro San Samuele, opened in 1656 and managed by the Grimani family.

The subchapter *Scenographers and Spectacles* (pp. 125-183), lavish in iconographic sources, shows how far the book exceeds

pure theatrical topography, considering simultaneously three closely interrelated scales: the city of Venice, the individual theaters, and the complex work of the scenographers, between fixed scenes animated by light and dynamic scenes in which people, animals, and objects fly and are transformed, with results of increasing spectacularity and European resonance. Scenography itself is followed in its public and private aspects, without neglecting the ephemeral productions commissioned by nobles for the courtyards and halls of their palaces and thereby reconnecting, ideally, with the context of the sixteenth-century festivities reconstructed at the opening of the volume.

A little-known economic history of spectacle also emerges with clarity: paid admission, speculation on the boxes, the self-financing of the companies, and the birth of the figure of the impresario make of Venetian theater a productive system that helps keep alive the cultural relationship between Venice and the world. The finest architects and scenographers converge on Venice from several Italian cities and from there radiate outward into the courts and theaters of Europe, according to a model –the so-called *teatro all'italiana*– of long-lasting fortune. The figure of Giacomo Torelli is emblematic here, capable as he was of transferring his scenographic inventions into the engineering and military spheres, to buildings and warships; and it is significant that this brilliant openness of mind should be recognized by a scholar who owes his own *forma mentis* to that very multidisciplinary approach, and who had found in the theater the world where one can study, in their reciprocal relations and among many other things, Drawing, Descriptive Geometry, the human body, fashion and costume, music, writing, politics, architecture, the city, and what we now call the

performing arts. It comes as no surprise, then, that the volume takes its leave by defining the theater as “the democratic institution that clearly grasps the concept of *Representation*” (p. 191).

This book can be read as a refined work of directorial staging: it orchestrates a crowd of authors, draftsmen, treatise-writers, and designers, some of whom had until now remained in the shadows, restoring to each of them dignity and a web of reciprocal relations. It is an undertaking that reflects the singular figure –within the Italian and international landscape alike– of the scholar Massimiliano Ciammaichella, able to connect, on the most solid of scientific foundations, worlds apparently distant from one another, bringing forth their hidden aspects. This is, then, a book on the Baroque theater of great present relevance, and its author is profoundly contemporary, if it is true that “The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. [...] This means [...] that to perceive this darkness is not a form of inertia or of passivity, but rather implies an activity and a singular ability, which [...] amounts to a neutralization of the lights that come from the epoch in order to discover its obscurity, its special darkness, which is not, however, separable from those lights” [Agamben 2009, p. 44], and, moreover, that “the contemporary [...] is also the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times. He is able to read history in unforeseen ways, to ‘cite it’ according to a necessity that does not arise in any way from his will, but from an exigency to which he cannot not respond” (p. 53) [see also Ciammaichella 2023].

The text, rich in quotations from the documents of the period, is complemented by a substantial iconographic apparatus in

which the author's drawings dialogue with the historical engravings he has tracked down: the latter are working material, a point of departure for reconstructing the vantage point, the design rationale, the innovations. Where the period image is missing or grows reticent, redrawing takes over; where it survives, eidographic analysis interrogates its graphic features to the point of allowing, in some cases, hypotheses of attribution for the drawings and hence for the projects. Here one can take the full measure of the repertoire of cognitive uses to which drawing may lend itself: spatial reconstruction, the testing of historiographic hypotheses, regressive dating, attribution. And the reader senses, as a common ground, a love for drawing that is the author's own. Rereading this book on the occasion of this brief commentary has led me to recall the many moments in which

Massimiliano Ciammaichella shared this love, with care and generosity, communicating his discoveries and submitting his own intuitions to discussion with the people around him. I remember his words, during a telephone call or a meeting in Venice, and I remember how much he valued exchange, first and foremost with his beloved Stefania, but also with colleagues, doctoral students, students, and friends (and often these categories were anything but separated). These ideas continue to exist, to proliferate, and to generate new ideas, in the memory of those who knew him and in the minds and the work of those who continue to study his research. *Scenography and Perspective in Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries in Venice* contains the seeds for many other possible inquiries, as is shown, for instance, by the volume *Tutto il mondo è teatro. Digitalizzazione,*

accessibilità e valorizzazione della scena scomparsa, edited by Massimiliano Ciammaichella together with Roberta Ena and Gabriella Liva [Ciammaichella, Ena, Liva 2024], which documents the outcomes of the eponymous seminar organized by the editors at the Università Iuav di Venezia on May 20, 2024, and which, as Agostino De Rosa notes in his preface, proposes a stratigraphic reading, organized across multiple levels, of the theme of vanished theaters, in some sense bringing back to life and actualizing the work of people who had been active in the Baroque age. The research continues with the PRIN 2022 project *SCAENAE – Italian Baroque Theatre: Paradigms of Scene and Cultural Memory* [cf: Valenti, Ciammaichella 2025], which Massimiliano Ciammaichella had shaped and will surely continue along paths and through connections that will animate the stage of the theater of the world.

Note

[1] Principal Investigator: Graziano Mario Valenti, Sapienza Università di Roma; Associated Investigators: Massimiliano Ciammaichella, Università Iuav di Venezia (now Gabriella Liva, Università Iuav di Venezia), Elena Gigliarelli, CNR. Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche.

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