

Disciplining Theatre Workers

Fines and the Fined in Nineteenth-Century Ferrara (Italy)

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At a sign from Etienne Lousteau, the doorkeeper of the orchestra took out a little key and unlocked a door in the thickness of the wall. Lucien, following his friend, went suddenly out of the lighted corridor into the black darkness of the passage between the house and the wings. A short flight of damp steps surmounted, one of the strangest of all spectacles opened out before the provincial poet's eyes. The height of the roof, the slenderness of the props, the ladders hung with Argand lamps, the atrocious ugliness of scenery beheld at close quarters, the thick paint on the actors' faces, and their outlandish costumes, made of such coarse materials, the stage carpenters in greasy jackets, the firemen, the stage manager strutting about with his hat on his head, the supernumeraries sitting among the hanging back-scenes, the ropes and pulleys, the heterogeneous collection of absurdities, shabby, dirty, hideous, and gaudy, was something so altogether different from the stage seen over the footlights, that Lucien's astonishment knew no bounds.¹

Introduction

If in general it is not legitimate to reduce human activities to 'texts' and 'languages', it is perhaps even less so in the case of theatre, which establishes a living and reciprocal relationship between authors and their audiences through performers and performances. A step further is required if the study of theatrical life is to be taken away from idealist hypothecation, and brought back to concrete relations and real contexts: the institutional, economic and social aspects of the theatrical fact, that is, the wider conditions of possibility of the daily staging of works.²

Thanks to the work of scholars who have not contented themselves with the 'stage' but have reconstructed its practical aspects, the material making 'behind the scenes', we have a less-approximate picture of financing models; theatrical structures; the activities of impresarios, agents and companies; and the lives of actors

¹ Honoré de Balzac, *Lost Illusions* [orig. *Illusions perdues* (1837–1843)], transl. by Ellen Marriage, ed. by Project Gutenberg, online, 2004/2020, www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/13159/pg13159-images.html.

² A call to overcome the "centrality of the aesthetic object" ("centralità dell'oggetto estetico") is to be found in Livia Cavaglieri, *Il sistema teatrale. Storia dell'organizzazione, dell'economia e delle politiche del teatro in Italia*, Roma 2021, p. 20. Generally, in brief: Roger Chartier, Why the Linguistic Approach Can Be an Obstacle to the Further Development of Historical Knowledge. A Reply to Gareth Stedman Jones, in *History Workshop Journal* 46, 1998, pp. 271f. On theatres and historical-social sciences see Christophe Charle, Sociétés du spectacle, in *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 186/187, 2011, pp. 4–11.

and musicians.³ Less frequented are the offstage and the backstage: the activities, framed in precise labour relationships, that allow the curtain to rise, accompany the performances and continue when the curtain falls and which represent a cost for the owners and a source of income for the workers but also a management problem for the organisers, not without more or less acute conflicts.⁴

I summarise here some surveys of the rich theatrical sources offered by the nineteenth-century archives of the Italian city of Ferrara,⁵ which is my usual laboratory of historical investigation.⁶ With the necessary brevity I will articulate my exposition around four sections. In the first I will present the case study and the general coordinates of theatre life in Ferrara in the second half of the nineteenth century. I will then illustrate some aspects of the functioning of the theatrical organisation in the city's main theatre, the Comunale, focusing on programming methods, the management of activities, and the personnel involved. In the third section I will analyse the disciplinary regime of theatre work through an examination of the fines imposed on the different types of workers. Finally, I will examine a case of a strike and its repression, with some final considerations on the possible matrices and relations of the two forms of conflict, the daily and ordinary one that prompts fines and the extraordinary and open one of explicit resistance.

³ Limiting the mentions to a few examples: Daniele Seragnoli, *L'industria del teatro. Carlo Ritorni e lo spettacolo a Reggio Emilia nell'Ottocento*, Bologna 1987; Irene Piazzoni, *Spettacolo, istituzioni e società nell'Italia postunitaria (1860–1882)*, Roma 2001; Carlotta Sorba, *Teatri. L'Italia del melodramma nell'età del Risorgimento*, Bologna 2001; and Livia Cavaglieri, *Tra arte e mercato. Agenti e agenzie teatrali nel XIX secolo*, Roma 2006.

⁴ Raphaël Bortolotti/Giulia Brunello/Annette Kappeler, In the Wings. Offstage Labour in a Provincial Italian Theatre, in *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 102/1, 2022, pp. 333–359. For pioneering articles cf. John Rosselli, Il sistema produttivo, 1780–1880, in *Storia dell'opera italiana*, Vol. 4: *Il sistema produttivo e le sue competenze*, ed. by Lorenzo Bianconi/Giorgio Pestelli, Torino 1987, pp. 97–165; and Tracy C. Davis, Laborers of the Nineteenth-Century Theater. The Economies of Gender and Industrial Organization, in *Journal of British Studies* 33/1, 1994, pp. 32–53.

⁵ On Ferrara sources: Corinna Mezzetti, Fondi archivistici e documenti tra Archivio Storico Comunale e Biblioteca Ariostea per la storia dei teatri di Ferrara nell'Ottocento, in *Lorenzo Barbirolli (1798–1867). Un musicista tra due patrie*, ed. by Nicola Badolato/Corinna Mezzetti/Antonietta Molinari, Ferrara 2016 (Quaderni dell'Archivio Storico Comunale di Ferrara, Vol. 4), pp. 95–101; Maria Cristina Bergamini, Note intorno al riordino del fondo archivistico "Municipio di Ferrara. Commissione pubblici spettacoli. Direzione teatrale", in *Bollettino di notizie e ricerche da archivi e biblioteche* 1, 1980, pp. 45–50.

⁶ I became interested in theatre not only because of old personal passions (the discovery of Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud and the Living Theater, and the vision of Teatro Nucleo, Odin Teatret and others, when I was in high school) and research vicissitudes (Michele Nani, Una zuffa di simboli. Il Cristo di Bovio e il suo pubblico, in *Scene di fine Ottocento. L'Italia fin de siècle a teatro*, ed. by Carlotta Sorba, Roma 2004, pp. 147–192) but also as part of a 'pilot' project for a historical-digital atlas of the city (WebGIS), centred, for reasons of cartographic and demographic sources, on 1881 (Francesco Di Filippo/Davide Guarnieri/Corinna Mezzetti/Michele Nani/Giuseppe Scandurra, Per un Atlante storico digitale di Ferrara. Note sul progetto-pilota Ferrara1881, in *Popolazione e storia* 2, 2022, pp. 37–54; <https://ferrara1881.wordpress.com/> [5 August 2025]). I would like to thank the staff of the Municipal Historical Archive of Ferrara and in particular its head, Corinna Mezzetti. I drew valuable insights from the discussion with Livia Cavaglieri and useful tips from Daniele Seragnoli and Fabio Andreazza.

Ferrara and its theatres

Ferrara is a medium-size city in northern Italy at the eastern end of the Po plain at the beginning of the river delta. Once the capital of the Este dukedom and a European centre of culture during the Renaissance, in 1598 it was absorbed by the Papal States. Apart from the revolutionary and Napoleonic parentheses, it remained a frontier city of the papal dominions until the Risorgimento. A provincial capital in the Kingdom of Italy, Ferrara was a classic ‘Mediterranean’ city, not industrialised despite the arrival of the railway, and nourished by agricultural rents and profits as well as by the presence of institutions. Its population (around 30,000 inhabitants in 1881) lived within the old walls (still extant today), which surrounded an urban space filled with vegetable gardens and orchards. It had a modest cultural life, strong above all in a technical culture (agronomy and hydraulic engineering) shaped by the needs of a territory that was undergoing a revolutionary transformation: the mechanical reclamation of half the province.⁷

As elsewhere, all along the nineteenth century, known as “the century of the theatre”, theatres were the “centre [...] of urban life” in Ferrara.⁸ In Ferrara, too, theatrical life was framed within a structured system of public performances, which also included open-air and children’s theatres, fairs and festivals, performances of curiosities, band concerts, and concerts in other kind of venues (e.g. cafés). The hierarchy of venues reflected the hierarchy of genres and audiences, with opera at the municipal theatre at the top. However, even common people went to the opera, although confined to the gallery.⁹ Confirming their role of openness to social mixing, the theatre venues were used for multiple functions and not only for performances: political meetings, charity evenings, galas and dance parties were held there.

Ferrara’s municipal theatre (Teatro Comunale), inaugurated at the height of the republican season in 1798, had been wanted by the papal administrators since 1773.¹⁰ Located close to the Castle, the seat of political power, and the Curia, seat of the religious one, it was consecrated to operas and balls, generally divided in two seasons. It goes without saying that the construction of a large Italian-style opera

⁷ There is no general history of Ferrara and its province in the nineteenth century. Still useful are Teresa Isenburg, *Investimenti di capitale e organizzazione di classe nelle bonifiche ferraresi (1872–1901)*, Firenze 1971; and Alessandro Roveri, *Dal sindacalismo rivoluzionario al fascismo. Capitalismo agrario e socialismo nel ferrarese (1870–1920)*, Firenze 1972.

⁸ “centro della vita sociale, ludica, culturale urbana.” Cavaglieri, *Il sistema*, p. 38. Cf. Giulia Brunello, *Decoro artistico e orgoglio municipale. Note sul Teatro Sociale a Feltre nell’Ottocento*, in *La rivista feltrina* 46, 2021, pp. 40–51.

⁹ Incidents of theft in the gallery reveal the presence of schoolteachers there: see for example the episode when an elementary school teacher was robbed of her wallet, and a pickpocket was arrested ([Anon.], In trappola, in *Gazzetta ferrarese*, 16 January 1880, p. 3). Even in the boxes, however, the disappearance of a gold necklace worth 300 lire was recorded ([Anon.], *Furto o smarrimento?*, in *Gazzetta ferrarese*, 24 May 1880, p. 2).

¹⁰ Alessandro Roccatagliati, *Ferrara dà spettacolo. Vicende, persone e denari nell’organizzazione del Teatro Comunale (1786–1940)*, in *I teatri di Ferrara. Il Comunale*, ed. by Paolo Fabbri/Maria Chiara Bertieri, Lucca 2004, Vol. 1, pp. 51–198.

house (1,800 seats) was symbolically important for Ferrara's urban identity. The city's second venue, the Tosi-Borghesi arena, was built close to the southern walls in a square of the medieval city. Inaugurated in 1857 (seating up to 2,000 people), it hosted dramas and comedies, with a mixed audience and more affordable prices.¹¹ Other performance venues were the Bonacossi theatre, renovated in 1846 (800 seats), and the Montecatino theatre (300 seats). In 1881, the theatre of the Philharmonic-Dramatic Academy (formerly the Church of San Giovannino, 400 seats) was still active but soon destined for closure (Fig. 1).¹² Other performance spaces were in Santa Margherita and in secondary squares (such as the Piazza Travaglio). As many as nine small towns in the province had a theatre (between 200 and 800 seats).¹³

Precisely because of its centrality in the city's claim to prestige and the provision of leisure and entertainment, the theatre had a significant economic and therefore social weight in nineteenth-century urban society. In 1870, in the same year that the city endowed itself with a musical institute for the training of instrumentalists and singers (the nucleus of the future conservatory), the local daily newspaper *Gazzetta ferrarese* published a long and significant article. It estimated that at least 350 families lived off what today we would call the theatre's 'linked economic activities', drawing an average of around a hundred lire a year (around €500 today – assuming, with reservation of course, that this kind of conversion makes sense) but with a distribution that ranged from 20 to 1,600 lire (€100 to €7,500 today), without taking into account the income gained from the consumption by outsiders. The estimate, the methods and sources of the author are not stated; in any case the article was intended to denounce the risks of an eventual closure or downsizing of the municipal theatre, which, in addition to the economic damage, would have precipitated Ferrara's decline to the level of secondary towns such as Cento and Lugo. It was also a response to the first rumours of protest against municipal expenses, considered a luxury in the face of social malaise.¹⁴ In March 1880, the opening of the theatre for the spring season was considered by some municipal councillors to be a sort of "relief" owed "to the shopkeepers" in the face of the winter subsidies distributed to unemployed rural labourers, while others recalled that "in Ferrara one [had] to live not only on bread, but that there [had] to be some decorum as well, also in the interest of the

¹¹ Maria Chiara Bertieri, *I teatri di Ferrara. Il Tosi-Borghesi (1857–1912)*, Lucca 2012.

¹² For the liquidation of the Academy's assets, including the theatre, see the handwritten reports in Archivio storico del Comune di Ferrara (hereafter ASCFe), *Deliberazioni di Giunta dal 3 gennaio al 30 dicembre 1882*, pp. 392f. and 396 (31 October and 4 November 1882).

¹³ From the results of the 1868 enquiry summarised in Sorba, *Teatri*, pp. 267–296. On theatre life in Ferrara, see Domenico Giuseppe Lipani, Cronache di provincia. Annotazioni sull'Ottocento teatrale ferrarese, in *Annali online sezione di Lettere* 2, 2016, pp. 210–218 (from two contributions to *Dizionario storico dell'Ottocento ferrarese*, www.ottocentoferrarese.it/ [5 August 2025]). We have robust general studies on the two main theatres (see footnotes 10 and 11) in the last decades of the seventeenth-century. For the Bonacossi Theatre see Chiara Binaschi, *Il Teatro Bonacossi o di S. Stefano, poi Ristori*, in *I teatri di Ferrara (I). Commedia, opera e ballo nel Sei e Settecento*, ed. by Paolo Fabbri, Lucca 2002, pp. 289–293.

¹⁴ [Anon.], Teatro e consiglio comunale, in *Gazzetta ferrarese*, 25 July 1870, pp. 1f.

model was in force, not a social (managed by associated box owners) or private (as an ordinary business) one.¹⁶ One only has to glance through their acts and minutes or even just take a look at the local pages of the *Gazzetta ferrarese* that summarise their contents. Between 1880 and 1882, there were at least eighty items on the agenda of the discussions that took place in the council and between the board and the council. What were they about? The financing of ordinary maintenance work, extraordinary maintenance work to remedy the risks after a leak of the gas used for the lighting, petitions to hold the season, renewal of materials, dealings with state authorities (the prefect or the civil engineering office) and the new *Regolamento*.¹⁷ But at the centre of the discussions was always the endowment (*dotazione*) or subsidy (*sussidio*), i.e. the funding that the municipality provided so that the shows could be held and be of a good standard.

Managing performances and workers

The municipality did not deal directly with theatre seasons but left the supervision of all performances in the city and the management of the public theatre to the Public Performances Commission, or Theatrical Direction (*Direzione*), whose members were appointed by the council and who enjoyed a certain cultural autonomy but who had to receive authorisation from the administration for all expenditure.¹⁸ The *Direzione* organised the seasons, contacting companies and signing contracts. The basic problem, as in many other cases, was the strong presence of the private owners of the boxes (*palchi*), who could choose individually whether to pay the subscription to the proposed season or to leave the keys to the municipality, which had to rent them at set costs. Subscriptions were a guarantee of takings, but the withdrawal of a large quota of box owners undermined the season's financial foundation because it was not certain that the boxes would actually be taken, and relying solely on municipal funding meant that only mediocre performances could be organised, which the public would reject.¹⁹ In the three-year period of 1880–1882, the theatre management was made up of three people.²⁰ Luigi Alberto Trentini, already a member of the first post-unification provincial council, was born in Ferrara in 1817 and would die in 1886, a few years

¹⁶ See always *ibid.*, pp. 52–55.

¹⁷ Other traces of ordinary works carried out in ASCFe, Carteggio amministrativo (hereafter CA), XIX, Teatro e spettacoli, bb. 20, 46 e 93 and *ibid.*, Commissione pubblici spettacoli (hereafter CPS), b. 76.

¹⁸ During these years, the management was supported by two municipal employees, assigned with extra pay: ASCFe, *Giunta [...] 1882*, p. 256 (22 July 1882).

¹⁹ Open conflict arose in the spring season of 1880, which is amply documented not only in the minutes of the council board and in the acts of the city council but also in the *Gazzetta ferrarese* between February and April 1880. For the organisation of the performances in the seasons between 1879 and 1881 cf. ASCFe, CPS, bb. 43 e 44.

²⁰ The *Direzione* was often divided and just as often the source of controversy, e.g. P.C., Appendice. Musica dell'avvenire, in *Gazzetta ferrarese*, 1 December 1880.

after his three-year stint in theatre management. The son of Countess Beatrice Gulinelli and widower of Marquise Vittoria Costabili, Trentini lived with his son, who was an engineer, and two maids in the 26 rooms of his central palace on corso Giovecca.²¹ Trentini took care of administrative matters, leaving artistic matters to the two other younger members of the theatre management. Severino Sani was born in 1840 in Massa Superiore in the Polesine area on the other side of the river Po. A former Garibaldino, follower of General Garibaldi in the battles of the Risorgimento, although he never fought, he was active in the veterans organisations,²² which in turn would support him in his long local political and parliamentary career as leader of the democrats and then the radicals. During his tenure, he was constantly at the centre of controversy for his alleged inconsistencies, especially when it came to alliances. He lived in the nine rooms of his house on the affluent via Mascheraio with his wife Marianna (née Trentini), a young daughter and three servants.²³ The third member was the lawyer Giovanni Battista Boldrini, who was born in Ferrara in 1844 and would die in 1886, the same year as Trentini, but at a much younger age. He held several positions, was a justice of the peace (*conciliatore*) but also supervised the music band and was involved in the administration of the city hospitals. He lived a stone's throw from the theatre in 14 rooms on via Borgo Leoni, with his wife Antonietta (née Agnelli), two small daughters and two servants.²⁴ Resigning at the end of 1882, the commission would be reconstituted in the figures of Antonio Finotti, Giulio Gatti Casazza (future director of the Metropolitan Opera in New York) and Trentini himself.²⁵ The *Direzione* was also responsible for the management of the large number of workers needed for the evenings: in the theatre (guardians, doormen, ticket-takers, cleaners), behind the scenes (stagehands and lighting men; tool-makers and carpenters; tailor, hairdresser and shoe-shiner; announcer, stage servants and firemen) and on stage (choristers, orchestra members, dancers, pages and extras). Suspended (and segmented) between guarantees and liberalisation,²⁶ these fig-

²¹ ASCFe, Stato civile-anagrafe (hereafter SCA), Censimento 1881, b. 10, f. "Corso Giovecca"; *ibid.*, Registro di popolazione (hereafter RP), Città, p. 3334.

²² Associations that, on the strength of their prestige as fighters for national unity, continued the political struggles of the Risorgimento, distinguishing themselves from the moderates in power.

²³ ASCFe, SCA, Censimento 1881, b. 11, f. "Via Mascheraio"; *ibid.*, RP, Città, p. 3815. About Sani cf. Davide L. Mantovani, *Liberali, radicali, socialisti. La battaglia delle idee, in 1892-1992. Il movimento socialista ferrarese dalle origini alla nascita della repubblica democratica*, ed. by Aldo Berselli, Cento (FE) 1992, pp. 49-60.

²⁴ ASCFe, SCA, Censimento 1881, b. 2, f. "Via Borgo Leoni"; *ibid.*, RP, Città, p. 8160.

²⁵ *Atti del consiglio comunale. 1882-83*, Ferrara 1883, pp. 138 (10 November 1882) and 150 (20 December 1882). Trentini would once again resign in the same year 1882 and then be replaced by Gaetano Forlani.

²⁶ Rosselli, *Il sistema*, pp. 129-148. Cf. also Seragnoli, *L'industria del teatro*, pp. 125-130. On the recruitment of orchestra members cf. *Le orchestre dei teatri d'opera italiani dell'Ottocento. Bilancio provvisorio di una ricerca*, ed. by Franco Piperno, in *Studi verdiani* 11, 1996, pp. 119-221, esp. pp. 119-133 and 219-221; and Franco Piperno/Antonio Rostagno, *The Orchestra in Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera Houses*, in *The Opera Orchestra in 18th- and 19th-Century Europe*, ed. by Niels Martin Jensen/Franco Piperno, Berlin 2008, Vol. 1, pp. 15-62.

ures were recruited periodically on the basis of written applications,²⁷ which we imagine were at least partly the result of informal contacts and/or recommendations (for example it is evident that family relationship played a role) while for the artistic staff, examinations were organised or references sought. After a probationary period, they became part of a recognised ‘corps’ but worked and were paid only when required, depending on the works staged and the need for local staff. Staff salaries were very unequal: in the 1879/80 Carnival opera season, the per-day salary spectrum ranged from seven lire for the tailor to a few tens of cents for the secondary doorkeepers and guardians; from seven lire for the choirmaster to two to four lire for the choristers and chorus girls and 25–30 cents for extras and pages; from 25 lire for the orchestra director to seven lire for the ‘first’ instruments and 1–1.5 lire for the second violins.²⁸

Disciplinary fining

All around Europe performing arts workers had to be supervised to ensure that they performed their duties well but also decently as they were invested with a public function that put urban prestige at stake. In 1865, in addition to the *Regolamento (Regulations)* issued by the local chief of the state police and addressed to the public of all shows, the municipality of Ferrara printed a *Regolamento disciplinare (Disciplinary Regulation)* for its theatre, which meticulously regulated access to the stage and wings, clothing and the conduct of all workers in the productions.²⁹ Guaranteeing compliance with the regulations was an inspector who, when necessary, would compile a report on non-compliance and propose fines to the *Direzione*, to whom the final decision is entrusted. The inspector could be a member, in turn, of the *Direzione* itself, but in 1880–1882 the task was entrusted to Enrico Manfredini and paid 2.5 lire per evening. Born in 1816 in Cassana, a village in the countryside, Manfredini was an elderly member of the local ‘philharmonic’ orchestra who, like Boldrini, lived close to the municipal theatre in a seven-rooms house he owned on via Borgo dei Leoni with his wife Anna Poltronieri, their son Nemesio (a municipal employee but also a musician) and their daughter Ester.³⁰

The main source for this examination of the fines are the inspector’s *rapporti*, preserved among the papers of the Commissione Pubblici Spettacoli (Public Entertainment Commission) in the historical archives of the municipality of Ferrara.³¹

²⁷ Hundreds of instances, especially individual ones, are in ASCFe, CPS, b. 84. Cf. also *ibid.*, b. 79.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, b. 43, Teatro municipale di Ferrara, *Spesato Serale. Spettacolo d’opera seria. Carnevale 1879–1880*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, b. 86, f. 2, Comune di Ferrara, *Regolamento disciplinare pel servizio dei teatri di proprietà comunale*, 21 April 1865 (manifesto). Cf. Enrico Rosmini, *Legislazione e giurisprudenza dei teatri. Trattato dei diritti delle obbligazioni degli impresarij, artisti, autori, agenti teatrali, delle direzioni, del pubblico, ecc., ecc.*, Milano ³1893, pp. 172, 533 and 732.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, SCA, Censimento 1881, b. 2, f. “Via Borgo Leoni”; *ibid.*, RP, Città, p. 864.

³¹ *Ibid.*, CPS, b. 87 (1869–1873, 1880–1882, 1883–1889, 1891–1898), and, to a lesser extent, *ibid.*, bb. 43 (1879–1880) e 95 (1863).

Registers of fines and bulletins of payments also existed but were only exceptionally preserved.³² By comparing the lists of performances and the dates of the progressively numbered reports, it is clear that *rapporti* were only compiled when problems arose. Of the 184 incidents recorded between 1880 and 1882 (although for 1882 the documentation is meagre), 46 concerned absences for proven health reasons, which obviously did not give rise to fines. The actual violations recorded (138) comprised mainly unjustified absences for the entire evening or rehearsal (41% of the total) and tardiness, early departures or partial absences (35%).³³ For example, the first note in this three-year period concerns the chorister Alessandro Martinelli, who was absent from the rehearsal of Fromental Halévy's *L'Ebrea* on 9 May 1880. Martinelli himself arrived late at the performance on 3 June at 8.15 p.m., and although he had claimed he had "arrived on time" (because of a "delay" in "raising the cloth") he was nevertheless fined fifty cents withheld from his pay.³⁴ Much less frequent was another set of fines levied for mistakes, clothing or decorum in general (9%). On 20 May 1880 at another performance of the *L'Ebrea*, the soprano chorister Vittoria Baccarini must be dressed as a princess in the third act: "instead she comes on stage dressed as a peasant girl" and was fined fifty cents (Fig. 2).³⁵

More serious was the attitude of the dancer Luigia Naldi, who was fined two lire (later forgiven) because during the Giacomo Meyerbeer's opera *Gli Ugonotti* (The Huguenots) on the evening of 2 February 1881, "before starting the first danceable, there was continuous laughing and loud chattering in the wings".³⁶ Cases of indiscipline or outright insubordination were rare but not insignificant (9%). Violinist Vittorio Mingardi was fined ten lire – later divided in half with fellow violinist Ulisse Pasquali – for being co-responsible for opening the windows of the staircase leading to the boxes during the rehearsal of Giovanni Battista Bergamini's *Ugo e Parisina* on 2 February 1881, a heavy fine that was not pardoned despite several attempts. Similarly, the choristers Paolo Vancini and Ferruccio Scanavini had threatened the audience who booed them at the performance of Charles Gounod's *Faust* on 9 February and they were fined 2.5 lire each directly by Severino Sani himself, although their fine was later remitted.

³² *Ibid.*, *Spettacolo di Carnevale 1880–1881 – Multe* (register); *ibid.*, b. 95 (bulletins 1869–1881).

³³ Even in nineteenth-century theatres, as in contemporary factories, the ways of discipline pass through regulations and fines centred on attendance and timing. Cf. Edward P. Thompson, *Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism*, in *Past & Present* 38, 1967, pp. 56–97; and Franco Ramella, *Terra e telai. Sistemi di parentela e manifattura nel Biellese dell'Ottocento*, Torino 1984.

³⁴ "arrivato alle 8¼, avendo tardato un poco l'alzata della tela è arrivato a tempo". ASCFe, CPS, b. 87, f. "1880 Primavera", Reports of stage inspector, 9 May and 3 June 1880.

³⁵ "[N]el 3° atto deve essere vestita da Principessa, invece viene in scena vestita da contadina". *Ibid.*, Report of stage inspector, 20 May 1880.

³⁶ "prima d'incominciare il primo ballabile, fra le quinte è stato un continuo ridere e ciarlare forte". *Ibid.*, f. "Stagione Carnevale 1880–81", Report of stage inspector, 2 February 1881.

Table 1 summarises the data on absences and offences recorded in 1880–1882 as well as in earlier or later years.³⁷

Table 1. Absences and fines, Municipal Theatre of Ferrara, 1869–1889

	1869–1873		1880–1882		1883–1889		<i>sum/average</i>	
<i>N absences (fines + illnesses)</i>	474		184		243		901	
<i>N Illness</i>	110		46		21		177	
<i>% of illness on total absences</i>	23		25		9		20	
<i>Reasons for the fines:</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Sum N</i>	<i>Avg %</i>
<i>unjustified absence</i>	209	58	56	41	119	54	384	53
<i>tardiness and partial absences</i>	106	29	48	35	51	23	205	28
<i>errors, clothing, decorum</i>	37	10	13	9	28	13	78	11
<i>indiscipline/insubordination</i>	11	3	13	9	17	7	41	6
<i>other/not indicated</i>	1	0	8	6	7	3	16	2
<i>Total</i>	364	100	138	100	222	100	724	100

The three-year period of 1880–1882 was a phase of declining unexcused absences, offset by an increase in tardiness and partial absences. These years also seem to mark an increase in insubordinate conduct, destined to be confirmed in subsequent years.

According to the available sources, in two years the individuals fined or absent for health reasons were about one third of the choristers and regular orchestra members (154), but many external musicians, dancers and extras were also fined. Limiting ourselves to the three seasons of 1880–1881 (Carnival 1880, Spring 1880, Carnival 1881; NB in 1881 no spring session was held) and separating absences due to certified illness and those subsequently justified, 25 of the 51 fined are recidivists, such as the ‘foreign’ violinist (i.e. not part of the Ferrara municipal corps) Ulisse Pasquali (five fines), chorister Vittoria Baccarini, viola player Odoardo Cristofori and violinist Giuseppe Tagliati (four fines each) and another four violins and a trumpet (three fines each). Of these nine multiply fined, four were engaged for only one season, and only Cristofori was to be engaged again in 1882. Several striking cases are recorded, starting with the collective fines imposed in January 1881: to chorus girls who “did not maintain a serious demeanour” and to

³⁷ Although their variations stand up to an elementary test of statistical significance (chi-squared), the data are often incomplete and should be taken as indicative (it would make no sense, e.g., to calculate annual averages).

dancers who “danced carelessly”.³⁸ The aforementioned Baccarini did not dress properly and even laughed on stage, as did other chorus girls. Some of the dancers omitted to perform expected figures while others made noise, laughing and talking. In February 1881, some of the extras were expelled from the corps for disapproving of the audience’s reactions while lighter punishments, as mentioned before, were handed down to the choristers Scanavini and Vancini for similar behaviour. A singer, a dancer and a band member were caught smoking in the dressing room. In addition to Mingardi’s and Pasquali’s case, perhaps the most interesting episode is that of the chorister Eugenio Ghiraldi, who arrived late in January 1881, quarrelled with the porter as he went on stage and then, having taken off his stage clothes, sat in the stalls to enjoy the opera. He was suspended and then readmitted to the corps within a week.³⁹ Controversially, even the choirmaster Giuseppe Ungarelli was fined for being slightly late, and then he blamed Manfredini for not calling him and was outraged at receiving his first fine in twenty years of service.⁴⁰

Beyond fines

The 1881 Carnival season marked a change in the choral corps. On 24 November 1880, a commission consisting of the *maestri* Tullio Finotti, Giuseppe Ungarelli, Francesco Renone and Serafino Cristani selected 30 new choristers out of 51 aspirants who had presented themselves for examination (three out of five women, 27 out of 46 men). They were introduced into the choir after gathering information from the local police headquarters, which reported only one conviction for battery, later amnestied, and one indictment for perjury that resulted in an acquittal.⁴¹ Partly dictated by ordinary turnover, the selection was mainly due to an incident that occurred in June 1880, which perhaps also explains the aforementioned recourse to the police. The choir had been offered a half-paid evening by the management for the benefit of the impresario Federico Tati; accepting, they planned to donate the sum to their comrade Guglielmo Masotti, who had been “struck down by grave misfortune”.⁴² Shortly afterwards, they were asked to perform for free, a request that divided the choir. Gathering most of the members at the tavern of Sant’Antonio, they asked for at least the promised pay, but the impresario refused. They were even summoned to the police, but in the end, convinced that the management had let them off the hook, 22 did not turn up. They found

³⁸ “non mantengono un contegno serio”; “hanno ballato con disattenzione”. ASCFe, CPS, b. 87, f. “Stagione Carnevale 1880–81”, Report of stage inspector, 23 January 1881.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Report of stage inspector, 9 February 1881; *ibid.*, Reports of stage inspector, 16 January, 27 and 28 February 1881; *ibid.*, minutes of reunions of the *Direzione* and correspondence, 1–5 February 1881.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, f. “1880 Primavera”, Report of stage inspector, 26 May 1880 and letter of Ungarelli to the *Direzione*, 29 May 1880.

⁴¹ ASCFe, CPS, b. 79, f. 2.

⁴² “colpito da grave disgrazia”. ASCFe, CA, XIX, Teatri e spettacoli, b. 43, *Istanza dei coristi espulsi*, 11 March 1881.

themselves expelled “forever” from the choir. The management blamed chorister Enrico Buccelli in particular for “insinuation and pressure” on his colleagues.⁴³ Born in Ferrara in 1837, Buccelli worked daily as a waiter, and although he was married with children, he had been living separately from his wife since 1875 and in 1881 was living in a single room on the Vicolo delle Stalle.⁴⁴ The choristers who went to the theatre took a stand in the press as did the expelled, asking “whether it is right that poor and poorly paid people such as we are should have to give alms to a rich impresario.”⁴⁵ Since the management did not accept the appeals, in order to set an “example” in the name of “order”, “discipline” and the “public interest”,⁴⁶ 21 of the expelled choristers turned to the city authorities, but on 16 April 1881 the city board decided to dismiss the appeal as the choristers were not “salaried employees of the Administration”. In the following seasons, despite explicit requests, they were not readmitted to the choir.⁴⁷ It should be noted, however, that between 1882 and 1883 the city board and the city council, in order to avoid the recurring problems posed by the theatrical ‘masses’, went so far as to discuss the payment of a fixed salary to choristers and orchestral players.⁴⁸ Agitations were anything but rare among the male and female choristers, non-professionals who sang in their free time and were once described as the “always restless” (Bologna 1855) “pariahs of art” (Rome 1872).⁴⁹ In Ferrara, the near-strike of 1880, the endemic absenteeism and the not-infrequent cases of indiscipline cannot be reduced to a common matrix, not least because of the diversity of relations among the theatre personnel (from the *maestri* of the orchestra to the extras and stagehands) as well as between them and the members of municipal administration. We learn from some later correspondence that in the event of a successful season (in economic terms), those who were fined could expect to be graciously reimbursed, as happened in 1884.⁵⁰ However, relations between theatre management and workers were not always paternalistic. A large part of the personnel did not live off their theatre earnings: at the 1881 census, only a few heads of

⁴³ “che siano per sempre esclusi da qualsiasi spettacolo” and “per insinuazione e pressione su loro esercitata, secondo il solito, da Buccelli Enrico”. ASCFe, CA, XIX, Teatri e spettacoli, b. 43.

⁴⁴ About Buccelli cf. *ibid.*, SCA, Censimento 1881, b. 20, f. “Vicolo Stalle” and RP, *Città*, p. 4216; in 1870 he had obtained a morality certificate to enroll his ten-year-old son Vittorio at the Liceo Musicale (*ibid.*, Fondo popolazione, b. 39).

⁴⁵ “se è giusto che povera gente, mal retribuita quale noi siamo, debba fare l’elemosina ad un ricco impresario”. See the column “Dichiarazione” in the *Gazzetta ferrarese*, 15 June 1880, p. 3.

⁴⁶ “nell’interesse dell’ordine e della disciplina, e perché si era riconosciuta la necessità di dare un esempio”. ASCFe, CA, XIX, Teatri e spettacoli, b. 43, *Istanza dei coristi espulsi*, 11 March 1881.

⁴⁷ “non essere [...] salariati del Comune”. *Deliberazioni prese dalla Giunta municipale dal 5 gennaio al 30 Dicembre 1881*, pp. 225f. (16 April 1881).

⁴⁸ *Atti del consiglio comunale. 1882–83*, Ferrara 1883, pp. 120f. (9 December 1882) and 347–353 (23 June 1883).

⁴⁹ “sempre irrequieti” and “paria dell’arte”. Quotations from Rosselli’s delightful treatment of the world of choristers (Rosselli, *Il sistema*, pp. 133 and 135).

⁵⁰ ASCFe, CPS, b. 87, f. “1883–84 Rapporti Provvedimenti generali”, Theatre choristers to “onorevole Direzione”, 22 February 1884 and the *Direzione*’s handwritten resolution, 23 February 1884.

families declared themselves to be choristers or orchestra players; and it is enough to scroll through the professions of the aspiring choristers to come across many shoemakers, carpenters, hemp workers, porters, bricklayers, painters, tailors and many other manual workers, with a few exceptions (housewives on the one hand, students and clerks on the other). Multi-activity was a double-edged sword.⁵¹ The salary for an evening at the theatre was often higher than that of a day's work for a farm labourer in the countryside or an urban labourer,⁵² thus it was as a valuable resource to cope with the precariousness of work and existence that characterised nineteenth-century European society. However, precisely because the main theatre, Teatro Comunale, did not provide them with their only or main source of income and because there were alternatives on the show-business labour market (e.g. the Tosi-Borghesi Arena, which was open almost all year round), many of the theatre workers could afford to behave in a somewhat deviant manner and did not refrain from complaining about the too-low wages and demanding wage increases (as did the female choristers, who in 1869 demanded rehearsal pay like their male colleagues – in vain, it seems).⁵³ The mutual aid and trade-union organisations of male and female theatre workers, founded in Ferrara in the years at the end of the nineteenth century, rested on a social and cultural autonomy dating back a couple of decades, which deserves careful investigation.

⁵¹ Cf. Fritz Trümpi, Ironworks as Venues of Music Production. The Ostrava/Vítkovice Case from the 1890s to the 1910s, in *Music as Labour. Inequalities and Activism in the Past and Present*, ed. by Dagmar Abfalter/Rosa Reitsamer, London/New York 2022, pp. 23–36.

⁵² *Lotte agrarie in Italia. La Federazione nazionale dei lavoratori della terra, 1901–1926*, ed. by Renato Zangheri, Milano 1960; Francesco Saverio Rotili, *L'organizzazione sindacale edilizia dalle origini all'inizio del secolo (1886–1902)*, Roma 1989.

⁵³ ASCFe, CPS, b. 87, f. “1869–1873”, Female choristers to Casanova (representative of the theatre company), 1 April 1869.