

# Provincial Scenography in Nineteenth-Century Italy

## The Stock Scenery of Feltre's Theatre

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The theatre of Feltre is unusual in possessing original, well-preserved stage equipment and set elements (wings, backdrops, the proscenium curtain, stage machinery and props) that can be dated back to the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> At that time, like many other provincial towns in the Veneto, Feltre had a theatre run by a group of citizens organised into a society that offered the town's inhabitants a place to come together and a space for entertainment that could accommodate both touring companies and local amateur troupes.

Every small Italian town of that time had its own theatre with its own sets and machinery,<sup>2</sup> but these provincial theatres have since been transformed or have simply disappeared. The stage equipment they used has rarely been preserved. These theatres were usually equipped with 'stock scenery' – sets that were not created for a specific performance but were intended to be re-used in different productions.<sup>3</sup> They were thus an integral part of the theatre, and painters gave them a generic character so that they could be adapted to different productions.

Given the large number of city theatres of this type in nineteenth-century Italy, investigating them is a broad field that requires researchers to examine rare, often scattered sources that seldom allow one to draw conclusions without lapsing into generalities. However, since Feltre still has its original scenic materials as well as archival documents relating to the theatre administration and the dramatic representations given there, we propose using Feltre as a concrete example, articulating it within the context of Veneto in the nineteenth century, and then extrapolating and identifying putative artistic and theatrical practices relating to the sets of Italian provincial theatres.

We will first try to identify the distinctive characteristics of these scenic elements, beginning with the first mentions of sets in the archives relating to the restoration of the theatre in the years 1804–1813. We shall then proceed to examine the stage repertoire in the course of the nineteenth century before opening

<sup>1</sup> These different elements are the subject of an article dealing with the technical aspects of 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 *Performing Arts and Technical Issues*, ed. by Roberto Illiano, Turnhout 2021 (Staging and Dramaturgy. Opera and the Performing Arts, Vol. 4), pp. 235–268.

<sup>2</sup> Esteban de Arteaga already described this phenomenon in his treatise on Italian theatre published at the end of the eighteenth century: "In ogni piccola città, in ogni villaggio si trova inalzato un Teatro." Esteban de Arteaga, *Le rivoluzioni del teatro musicale italiano. Dalla sua origine fino al presente. Tomo secondo*, Bologna 1785, p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> For a full definition of stock scenery, see Elena Povoledo, Dotazione, in *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, Vol. 4: *Dag-fam*, ed. by Silvio D'Amico, Rome 1957, p. 912.

up our field of investigation to other theatres in the province of Veneto by comparing their stage repertoires with that of Feltre.

We will then investigate the function of sets in a provincial theatre. The dramatic repertoire presented in Feltre will allow us to compare these stock scenes with the different scenic locations required by theatrical works, allowing us to reflect on the conditions of representation and to correlate them to the Italian theatrical system. In doing so, we will outline the expectations that the different protagonists in provincial theatre had of these objects (ranging from the audience to sponsors, professional actors and local, amateur thespians). The theatre of Feltre thus invites us to open a window onto common, widespread practices and a provincial reality that was representative of the majority of theatres in nineteenth-century Italy.

### *The characteristics of Feltre's stage sets*

In Feltre's archives, various contracts between the theatre board and a certain Domenico Curtolo, master builder, document the renovation of the theatre that was undertaken at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Different clauses reveal the needs and expectations of the theatre board regarding the scenography and allow us to examine some of the characteristics of stock scenery. In an initial contract in 1804, Curtolo undertook to

create the sets and the stage in their most modern form [...] so that the changes of scene can be carried out in a decent manner. The movement of the wings and borders will be carried out by a machine under the stage. There will also be a grid above the stage. So many things that have never been seen before in this theatre [...].<sup>4</sup>

The theatre's patrons wanted to provide their theatre with a stage system that they associated with qualities of modernity and efficiency. They may have had the Fenice Theatre in Venice in mind, which had opened a few years earlier and was considered one of the most efficient in Italy.<sup>5</sup> In fact, when they decided to initiate the restoration of their own theatre, they turned first to La Fenice's architect himself, Giannantonio Selva, to draw up a project.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> "L'orditura del Scenario, ed il Palco del medesimo sarà ridotto nella forma la più moderna, e di più la Tessitura delle Arie sarà fatta in modo, che potranno essere eseguite le trasfigurazioni in maniera decente. La tessitura intanto delle quinte, quanto delle Arie sarà costruita, e condotta da una Machina riposta sotto il Scenario. Sarà egualmente formato il Pradelone d'appoggio sopra il detto Scenario, cose tutte, che fin ora non vi sono mai state". Polo Bibliotecario Feltrino "Panfilo Castaldi" (PBF), *Fondo Storico*, G VI 90 bis, *Per la Rifabbrica e riforma del Teatro di Feltre a norma del Disegno, sive modello esibito, dessunto da quello del pubblico Architetto Sig. Selva*, 4 February 1804.

<sup>5</sup> This assessment is particularly evident in the highly competitive context of the creation of Fenice. See Franco Mancini/Maria Teresa Muraro/Elena Povoledo, *I teatri del Veneto*, Vol. 1, part 2: *Venezia e il suo territorio. Imprese private e teatri sociali*, Venice 1996, p. 185.

<sup>6</sup> The municipality of Feltre still preserves a letter from Giannantonio Selva to a nobleman from Feltre concerning the renovation project. PBF, *Fondo storico*, *Lettera di Gian Antonio Selva a Domenico Berettini*, 15 June 1802.

A new contract drawn up a few years later specifies the constitution of the sets. They were to comprise “complete scenes with borders and wings, backdrops, curtains”.<sup>7</sup> These elements refer to the traditional system as found in most theatres at that time, consisting of wings on the sides, plus backdrops and borders.<sup>8</sup> Mechanisms placed underneath and above the stage allowed these different elements to be set in motion in order to perform ‘a vista’ changes.<sup>9</sup> This type of stage machinery, which was widespread at the time, seems to have been considered a constituent element of a modern, efficient provincial theatre.

The 1811 contract also specifies that “the whole [will be] painted by a good and intelligent hand, according to the rules of art and perspective”.<sup>10</sup> This clause reveals both the theatre board’s willingness to provide the theatre with quality scenery and highlights the specificity of a stage painter’s required skills in the nineteenth century. However, when the theatre was inaugurated in 1811, Domenico Curtolo’s son, Giovanni Curtolo, seems to have been obliged to provide the theatre with makeshift sets in order to ensure a minimum assortment of scenes.<sup>11</sup> Two years later, the wings could still not be made “according to modern theatre practice, due to a lack of knowledge”.<sup>12</sup> An inventory from 1831 nevertheless lists a complete repertoire of stock scenes, with wings and backdrops.<sup>13</sup> The society had probably turned to a qualified set designer to complete the scenery whose identity remains unknown today. The inventory nevertheless states that some sets are in poor condition and need to be replaced.<sup>14</sup> In 1842, the theatre board hired the scenographer Tranquillo Orsi to renovate the decorations of the theatre’s

<sup>7</sup> “Di dare alestite completamente con Soffitti ed arie analoghe quinte, tende, tendon”. PBF, *Fondo Storico*, G VI 90 bis, *Il progetto di proseguire i lavori, e stabilir interamente questo Teatro in modo servibile a qualunque rappresentazione*, 19 February 1811.

<sup>8</sup> This system was Italian in origin and had been used in European theatres since the seventeenth century. It reached its apogee in the nineteenth century. See George Izenour, *Theater Technology*, New York 1988, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to the set elements, the remains of this system can still be found in Feltre, such as rails under the stage, stage wagons, and masts to support the backstage frames.

<sup>10</sup> “Il tutto dipinto da buona e intelligente mano secondo le regole dell’arte e della prospettiva”. PBF, *Fondo Storico*, G VI 90 bis, *Il progetto di proseguire i lavori, e stabilir interamente questo Teatro in modo servibile a qualunque rappresentazione*, 19 February 1811.

<sup>11</sup> “Sicome il progettante [Giovanni Curtolo] sottoscritto per la ristrettezza del tempo trova impossibile di completare il Scenario di tutto le otto sudichiarate trasformazioni nel prefissato tempo, così di queste s’impegna di darne alestite quella quantità che sarà bastante per l’apertura dell’Opera di Settembre 1811”. PBF, *Fondo Storico*, G VI 90 bis, *Il progetto di proseguire i lavori, e stabilir interamente questo Teatro in modo servibile a qualunque rappresentazione*, 19 February 1811.

<sup>12</sup> “Mancano li telleri delle quinte nel modo più menomabile ad uso de moderni teatri [...] per mancanza di cognizione”. PBF, *Fondo Storico*, G VI 90 bis, *Lavori che rimangono da eseguirsi a norma del contratto del 20 febbraio 1811 a farci di Gio. Curtolo*, 26 March 1813.

<sup>13</sup> Archivio Storico del Comune di Feltre (ASCF), Serie A, *Carteggio generale della categoria V*, classe 10, b. 21, *Inventario del Teatro*, 1831.

<sup>14</sup> “Un giardino di carta con sei quinte in mal ordine esistente nella sala come inservibile”. Ibid.

auditorium. On this occasion, the painter created nine scenes.<sup>15</sup> The choice of artist is not insignificant, because Orsi was a renowned set designer at the time. He had trained with Paolo Landriani and Alessandro Sanquirico at La Scala in Milan, had worked as one of the main set designers at La Fenice in Venice, taught perspective as a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice, and realised the ceiling of the Fenice auditorium during its renovation of 1837.<sup>16</sup> In addition to guaranteeing stage materials of quality, hiring an artist of such stature who was a member of an august institution also enhanced the reputation of Feltre's theatre, as is illustrated by a contemporary report of the inauguration of the theatre after Orsi's restoration work:

And Feltre too has a theatre that is worthy of a gracious city, not a small town. The old one is being restored and redesigned, and Professor Orsi has transformed it with his beautiful paintings into a real jewel of good taste and elegance. [...] Great applause was given to the artists, but even more to the noble painter and to those whose ideas and attentiveness occasioned this elegant restoration work, thereby demonstrating that the homeland of Vittorino does not lag behind any other city in the advancement of culture.<sup>17</sup>

The choice of Tranquillo Orsi thus had a direct impact on the reputation of the theatre society and enabled it to assert itself on the regional cultural scene.

Let us return to the contract of 1811. The title of this contract specifies the purpose of Curtolo's interventions: "they must make the theatre usable for any type of performance".<sup>18</sup> This reflects the need for a provincial stage to be versatile, capable of hosting different productions. In small towns, theatre often represented the prime focal point for its people: a place where the locals could meet and where all kinds of entertainment could be presented. Curtolo also undertook to "build the most important and necessary scenery, which will be delivered with their wings, backdrops, ceilings and borders, etc."<sup>19</sup> This last clause is significant, because certain stock scenes were considered indispensable for the proper functioning of a provincial theatre. It is therefore necessary to identify this "important and necessary" scenery more precisely.

<sup>15</sup> Tranquillo Orsi writes in his memoirs: "ò dipinto il teatro di Feltre unitamente a nove scene ed un sipario". These memoirs are held by the Museo Correr in Venice and have been published by Maria Ida Biggi. See Maria Ida Biggi, *Tranquillo Orsi*, in *Venezia arti* 6, 1997, pp. 153–158, here p. 158.

<sup>16</sup> Mancini/Muraro/Povoledo, *I teatri del Veneto*, Vol. 1, part 2: *Venezia e il suo territorio*, p. 243.

<sup>17</sup> "E Feltre anch'ella or possiede un teatro, degno di non piccola e ben gentile città. Si restaurò, si riformò l'antico, e il professor Orsi lo fece con le sue belle pitture un vero gioiello di buon gusto e d'eleganza. [...] Grandi applausi si mandarono a' cantanti, ma più ancora all'egregio pittore e a chi ebbe il pensiero e la cura dell'elegante restauro a dimostrare che la patria di Vittorino non rimane indietro a nessun'altra città nell'avanzamento della cultura." [Anon.], *Notizie teatrali*. Feltre, in *La moda. Giornale di mode, letteratura, arti e teatri* 8/53, 25 September 1843, p. 424.

<sup>18</sup> "In modo servibile a qualunque rappresentazione". PBF, *Fondo Storico*, G VI 90 bis, *Il progetto di proseguire i lavori, e stabilir interamente questo Teatro in modo servibile a qualunque rappresentazione*, 19 February 1811.

<sup>19</sup> "Alestire le più importanti e necessarie scene che saranno dateci con le loro quinte, tende, arie, soffitti, ecc." PBF, *Fondo Storico*, G VI 90 bis, *Proposizione dei lavori di compimento del teatro*, 4 May 1810.

### *The composition of the stock scenery*

Numerous archival documents list different scenic and set elements in the Feltre theatre: contracts, invoices and inventories.<sup>20</sup> They allow us to follow the vicissitudes of these elements throughout the nineteenth century. Some elements appear in the very first mentions of scenery and are thereafter listed in successive documents. Other elements seem to change their name: the “cabinet” is sometimes called a “room”,<sup>21</sup> the “temple interior” becomes a “vestibule”, and the “prison” becomes an “underground space”.<sup>22</sup> Some scenes make fleeting appearances. For example, an inventory of 1831 mentions the existence of a “room” and a “garden” in paper (in poor condition). Other scenes were added to the repertoire at a later date: from the second half of the century onwards, a “rustic room” and a “sea view” were added to the inventory lists,<sup>23</sup> as were various paper scenes by a painter from Feltre and assorted accessories (statues, flower vases, bushes, fireplaces, doors, etc.).<sup>24</sup>

However, some caution is required when drawing information from these documents. They tell us nothing about restorations and transformations that the decor might have undergone over the course of the century. For example, there is no mention of the intervention of Tranquillo Orsi in 1842. Furthermore, such lists depend on the precision and knowledge of the person who compiled them. As we have seen, different terms are sometimes used to define the same scenery. This variability reminds us of how the scenic locations represented by these sets could be subject to flexibility of interpretation. Such multiple possibilities are sometimes

<sup>20</sup> In addition to the abovementioned contract of 1810, the town archives also include theatre inventories dated 1831, 1853 and 1879–1889. See ASCF, Serie A, *Carteggio generale della categoria V*, classe 10, b. 21, *Inventario del Teatro*, 1831; ASCF, Serie A, *Carteggio generale della categoria V*, classe 10, b. 21, *Inventario dei mobili esistenti in Teatro di Feltre*, 1853; ASCF, Serie A, *Carteggio generale della categoria V*, classe 10, b. 21, *Teatro 1879*; ASCF, Serie A, *Carteggio generale della categoria V*, classe 10, b. 21, *Inventario del Teatro 1880*; ASCF, Serie A, *Carteggio generale della categoria V*, classe 10, b. 21, *Inventario del Teatro 1883-1889*. There is also a bill for the cost of scenery from the early nineteenth century: PBF, Fondo Storico, G VI 90 bis, *Nota di spese, e fattura degli seguenti Senari occorrenti pel compimento del Teatro*, undated [1811].

<sup>21</sup> “camera”, ASCF, Serie A, *Carteggio generale della categoria V*, classe 10, b. 21, *Inventario del Teatro*, 1831, and “gabinetto”, ASCF, Serie A, *Carteggio generale della categoria V*, classe 10, b. 21, *Inventario dei mobili esistenti in Teatro di Feltre*, 1853.

<sup>22</sup> “l'interno d'un tempio” PBF, Fondo Storico, G VI 90 bis, *Nota di spese, e fattura degli seguenti Senari occorrenti pel compimento del Teatro*, undated [1811], and “atrio” ASCF, Serie A, *Carteggio generale della categoria V*, classe 10, b. 21, *Inventario dei mobili esistenti in Teatro di Feltre*, 1853. “prigione”, PBF, Fondo Storico, G VI 90 bis, *Il progetto di proseguire i lavori, e stabilir interamente questo Teatro in modo servibile a qualunque rappresentazione*, 19 February 1811, and “sotterraneo” ASCF, Serie A, *Carteggio generale della categoria V*, classe 10, b. 21, *Inventario del Teatro 1879*.

<sup>23</sup> “camera rustica” and “porto di mare”, ASCF, Serie A, *Carteggio generale della categoria V*, classe 10, b. 21, *Inventario dei mobili esistenti in Teatro di Feltre*, 1853.

<sup>24</sup> The inventories mention the name ‘Tonelli’ (ASCF, Serie A, *Carteggio generale della categoria V*, classe 10, b. 21, *Inventario dei mobili esistenti in Teatro di Feltre*, 1853). This was the landscape painter and scenographer Mosè Tonelli, who trained with Tranquillo Orsi and Francesco Bagnara at the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice. See Antonio Vecellio, *I pittori feltrini*, Feltre 1894, pp. 256f.

even made explicit, as in an undated invoice stating that the “prison” can also be used as a “subterranean space”, while a “forest” can also be used as “countryside”.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, these documents testify to the persistence of certain scenic locations constituting the core of Feltre’s scenic repertoire throughout the nineteenth century. They can be listed as follows: palace, cabinet, noble room, simple room, square, forest, vestibule, subterranean space, rustic room and maritime horizon.

### *The dissemination of stock scenery in Veneto*

If we consult the inventories of various theatres in the Veneto region dating from the mid-nineteenth century that were similar in size to Feltre, we can compare their repertoire of stock scenery with that of Feltre (Table 1).<sup>26</sup> However, such comparisons call for caution. As mentioned earlier, these lists offer only a partial view of the stock scenery extant in the provinces, and there is a certain lexical instability when we try to identify each scene. Nevertheless, it is possible to consider these scene designations not as descriptions of specific spaces, but rather as “stage conventions”<sup>27</sup> or, as Erika Fischer-Lichte puts it, a type of space that the spectator can clearly identify and that refers to archetypal narrative plots.<sup>28</sup> It then becomes possible to compare these scenic locations not for their materiality or for the more or less mimetic space that they depict,<sup>29</sup> but rather for their dramatic function within the performance and the space that they symbolise.

The inventories of these different theatres reveal clear similarities. They have a comparable number of stock scenes (between nine and eleven) and the same categories of scenic location as in Feltre. The Castelfranco inventory is particularly interesting. When this theatre re-opened in 1858, the sets realised by Giuseppe Bertoja are assessed by stage designer Francesco Bagnara as “complete and modern stage equipment”.<sup>30</sup> Such a repertoire of stock scenes thus seems to have been

<sup>25</sup> “Una prigione forzata che servir possa da sotterraneo [...]. Un Bosco forzato che servir possa da Campagna boscarecia”. PBF, *Fondo Storico*, G VI 90 bis, *Nota di spese, e fattura delli seguenti Senari occorrenti pel compimento del Teatro*, undated [1811].

<sup>26</sup> For Schio, see Mancini/Muraro/Povoledo, *I teatri del Veneto*, Vol. 2: *Verona, Vicenza, Belluno e il loro territorio*, Venice 1985, p. 326; for Legnago, see *ibid.*, p. 154; for Castelfranco, see Mancini/Muraro/Povoledo, *I teatri del Veneto*, Vol. 4: *Treviso e la marca Trivigiana*, Venice 1994, p. 152.

<sup>27</sup> See Martine De Rougemeont, *La vie théâtrale en France au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris 2001, p. 60 as well as Paul Stefanek, Remarks on the Aesthetics and Sociology of Drama, in *Maske und Kothurn* 25, 1979, pp. 139–144.

<sup>28</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Semiotik des Theaters*, Vol. 2: *Vom “künstlichen” zum “natürlichen” Zeichen. Theater des Barock und der Aufklärung*, Tübingen 1988, p. 76.

<sup>29</sup> For the different notions of theatre space, see Anne Ubersfeld, *Les termes clés de l’analyse du théâtre*, Paris 2015, p. 45. For the nineteenth century in particular, see also Anne Ubersfeld, *L’espace du drame romantique*, in *Le spectaculaire dans les arts de la scène: du romantisme à la Belle Époque*, ed. by Isabelle Moindrot, Paris 2006, pp. 24–32.

<sup>30</sup> See Mancini/Muraro/Povoledo, *I teatri del Veneto*, Vol. 4: *Treviso e la marca Trivigiana*, p. 152. Francesco Bagnara was at that time one of the most renowned scenographers in Veneto. See Maria Ida Biggi, *Francesco Bagnara. Scenografo alla Fenice. 1820–1839*, Venice 1996.

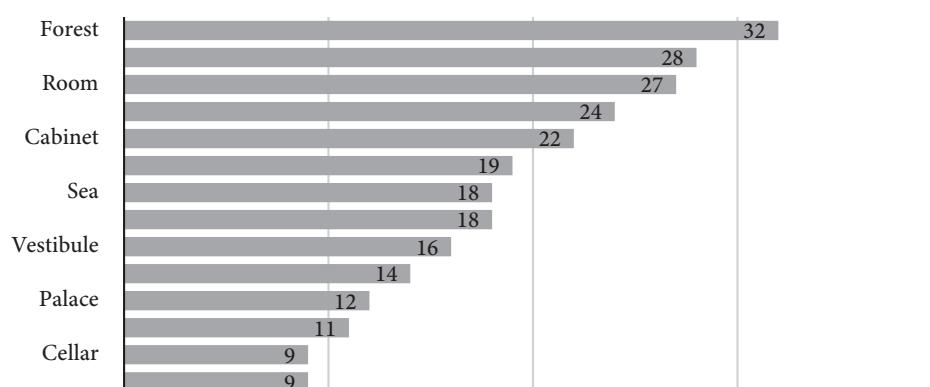
Table 1: Examples of stock scenery in provincial theatres in Veneto

Feltre, 1810–1889	Schio, 1856	Castelfranco, 1858	Legnano, ca 1840
Palace	Palace	Gallery	Palace
Cabinet	Hall with large door	Cabinet	Cabinet
Noble room	Room	Room	Noble room
Simple room	Room	-	-
Square	Square	Square	Square
Forest	Forest	Forest	Forest
Horizon	Mountain	Horizon	-
Vestibule	Temple	-	Vestibule
Subterranean space	Subterranean space	Prison	Subterranean space
Rustic room	Rustic room	Rustic room	Rustic room
-	Pavilion	Garden	Garden

deemed appropriate into the second half of the nineteenth century, and continued to reflect the idea of modernity as expressed in Feltre at the beginning of the century.

Taking as our basis the remarkable work in identifying theatres in Veneto that was carried out some thirty years ago by Mancini, Muraro and Povoledo, we have been able to use various archival documents from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries to collate the repertoire of stock scenery of 54 theatres in this region. We have drawn up a diagram showing the most frequent scenery names occurring in these sources (Table 2).

Table 2: Occurrences of Stock Scenes in the Veneto Theatre Archives



Sources: These data are taken from 153 archival documents in the various volumes of Franco Mancini/Maria Teresa Muraro/Elena Povoledo, *I teatri del Veneto*, published between 1985 and 1996.

Once again, the uncertain reliability of the sources on which this analysis is based means we should not draw any hasty conclusions. Nevertheless, it is significant to observe that Feltre's stock scenes correspond to the most frequently cited scenic locations in the archival documents. Provincial theatres in the Veneto thus seem to have had a relatively constant, established repertoire of stock scenery.

The fact that we have original scenic materials at our disposal in Feltre means we can extend our investigation into iconography, especially in correlation with the wide circulation of theatrical images in the nineteenth century. As Viale Ferrero has explained, technical progress in the reproduction of images since the end of the eighteenth century, and especially in the nineteenth century, favoured the diffusion of general typological models of scenography that were linked to the most frequently performed operas. These were then reflected in the stock scenery of the theatres.<sup>31</sup> We are thus in a position to cross-reference different iconographic sources to try and identify common characteristics and observe correlations between the Feltre scenery and images otherwise in circulation. However, the scarcity of original scenic materials and the very varied nature of the sources (including sketches and engravings) mean that we cannot jump to any conclusions.

Let us take as an example an emblematic scene of the repertoire: the 'reggia' – the palace scene. There were many iconographic adaptations of these scenes. We here offer three examples of 'regge' that were intended to be used as stock scenes. The first is an engraving taken from a treatise published in 1785 by Baldassare Orsini, illustrating the palace scene planned for the theatre in Perugia (Fig. 1). The second is a sketch for an amateur theatre in Milan by Alessandro Sanquirico – one of the more important stage designers of the first half of the nineteenth century (Fig. 2). The third is a sketch by Francesco Bagnara for the stock scenery of the Belluno Teatro Sociale, realised in 1834 (Fig. 3).<sup>32</sup> These three examples were explicitly identified as stock scenes, and we can add one more: an engraving by Sanquirico illustrating a 'camera nella Reggia di Tito' for Mozart's opera *La Clemenza di Tito*, published by Ricordi in 1832 in one of his "collections of theatrical scenes" that were widely distributed throughout Italy and also in the rest of Europe (Fig. 4).<sup>33</sup> And finally, we have a sketch by Tranquillo Orsi himself that was found in one of his sketchbooks held by the Museo Correr in Venice (Fig. 5).

<sup>31</sup> Mercedes Viale Ferrero, L'invenzione replicabile, in *Alessandro Sanquirico. Il Rossini della pittura scenica*, ed. by Maria Ida Biggi/Maria Rosaria Corchia/Mercedes Viale Ferrero, Pesaro 2007, pp. XXIX–LIV, here pp. XXXIII–XXXV.

<sup>32</sup> Francesco Bagnara writes at the bottom of the sketch: "Teatro di Belluno. Per Dotte".

<sup>33</sup> Alessandro Sanquirico, *Raccolta di varie decorazioni sceniche inventate ed eseguite per il R. Teatro alla Scala di Milano*, Milan 1832. On this topic, see Mercedes Viale Ferrero, Luogo teatrale e spazio scenico, in *Storia dell'opera italiana*, Vol. 5: *La spettacolarità*, ed. by Lorenzo Bianconi/Giorgio Pestelli, Turin 1988, pp. 1–122, here pp. 87f.

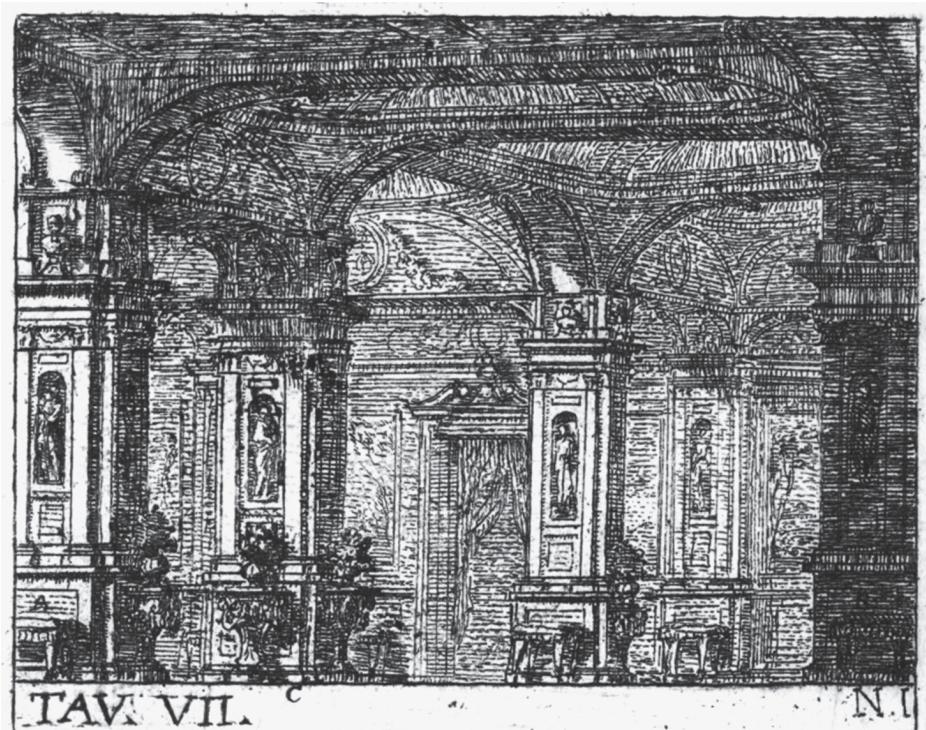


Fig. 1: Baldassarre Orsini, camera Regia, table 7 in *Le scene del nuovo Teatro del Verzaro di Perugia*, Perugia 1785 © Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (92-B21614)

Despite apparent differences at first sight, it is possible to observe that these different examples of palace scenes share similar characteristics, a similar composition and architectural structure, a similar treatment of perspective *per angolo*, a comparable arrangement of light and shadow areas, and the use of a decorative lexicon referring to Antiquity. These examples would seem to corroborate the existence of typological models. Now that we have the opportunity to inspect original palace scenery, we can extend this hypothesis to the scenic elements of the Feltre Theatre. Only the wings of the palace have been preserved. On the back of these are precise indications for their position on the stage, allowing us to set them up virtually (Fig. 6). We then tried to replace the missing backdrop with another backdrop painted by Alessandro Sanquirico for the stock scenery of the Teatro dell'Aquila in Fermo in the Marche region (Fig. 7). The result of this montage is significant: the Feltre wings and the Fermo backdrop complement each other and constitute a palace scene close to the iconographic model that we have traced through the abovementioned sketches and engravings. It is surprising how elements from such distant theatres can be combined. However, it would be premature to draw any concrete conclusions from such similarities, as we would have to extend our corpus of images to other scenographers and to stock scenery from other theatres. We would also have to endeavour to collect

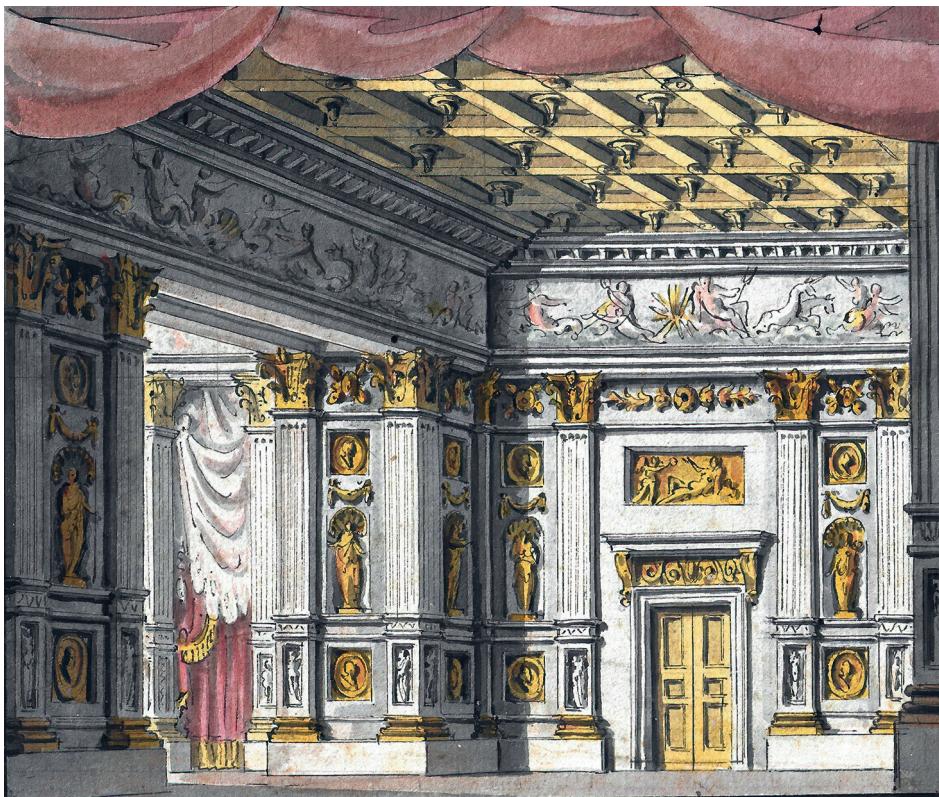


Fig. 2: Alessandro Sanquirico, classical room, sketch of scenery, drawing and watercolour. © Accademia Filodrammatici, Milan

more original materials. All the same, these initial observations support the idea that stock scenes were based on relatively established, consistent iconographic patterns, supported by the circulation of engravings and theatrical images that flourished in the early nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

### *Scenic locations in the theatrical repertoire*

By comparing Feltre's repertory of stock scenery with the dramatic repertoire performed on the theatre stage, it is possible to investigate the function and use of these sets in the provinces. However, it is first necessary to examine the scenic locations required by these theatrical works. Feltre's dramatic repertoire was very diverse and encompassed a plurality of performance forms (operas, ballets, pantomimes, melodramas, comedies, vaudevilles, etc.) with very different staging

<sup>34</sup> Cfr. Viale Ferrero, *Luogo teatrale e spazio scenico*, pp. 87f.

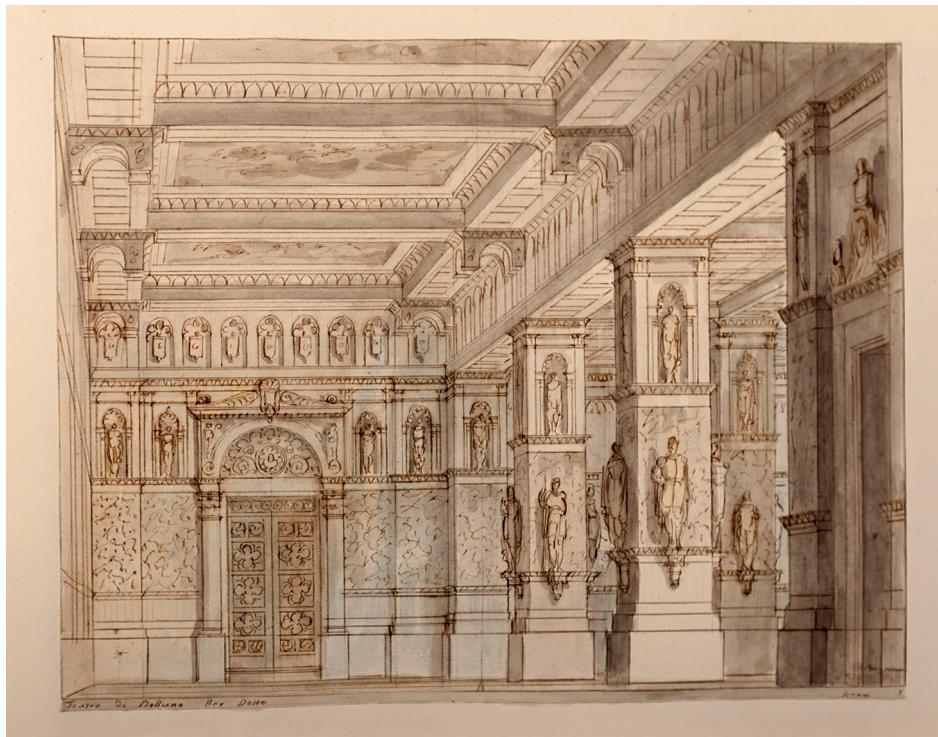


Fig. 3: Francesco Bagnara, *Teatro di Belluno. Per Dotte*, drawing and watercolour, Ca' Rezzonico – Museo del Settecento Veneziano, Venice. © Archivio Fotografico – Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia (inv. Classe III 5987)

requirements.<sup>35</sup> The stage directions printed in the booklets for the lighter repertoire (such as comedies, farces and suchlike) offer succinct, generic stage indications that could be met by the stock sets.<sup>36</sup> But in historical dramas and lyrical tragedies, the stage descriptions are full of details indicating the location and the historical period of the required sets as well as the lighting, the atmosphere to be created, and technical specifics related to the action.<sup>37</sup> Viale Ferrero notes such a difference in musical theatre, which she links to a distinction in genre typology

<sup>35</sup> For a detailed study of the repertoire performed at the Feltre theatre in the nineteenth century, see Annette Kappeler's essay in this volume, pp. 273–291.

<sup>36</sup> This is the case, for example, for Goldoni's play *I rusteghi*, presented in Feltre in 1866, which only requires as its setting a room of undefined character: "Camera in Casa di Lunardo". Carlo Goldoni, *I rusteghi*, Lucca 1810 (Collezione completa delle commedie del signor Carlo Goldoni, Vol. 17), p. 202.

<sup>37</sup> For example, in the second act of Verdi's opera *Nabucco*, presented in Feltre in 1845: "Sala nella reggia che risponde nel fondo ad altre sale; a destra una porta che conduce ad una galleria, a sinistra un'altra porta che comunica cogli appartamenti della Reggente. È la sera. La sala è illuminata da una lampada; [...] rumoreggia il tuono, un fulmine scoppia sulla corona del Re. Nabucodonosor atterrito sente strapparsi la corona da una forza soprannaturale". Temistocle Solera, *Nabucodonosor. Dramma lirico in quattro parti*, Milan 1842, pp. 17 and 20.



Fig. 4: Alessandro Sanquirico, Camera nella reggia di Tito, hand-coloured aquatint in *Raccolta di varie decorazioni sceniche inventate ed eseguite per il R. Teatro alla Scala di Milano*, Milan 1832. © Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (93-B15110)

already established in the early eighteenth century: on the one hand there were the 'opere giocose' whose basic requirements could be met by stock sets representing general subjects. On the other hand, there were the 'opere serie' that required specific sets that reinforced the concept of the 'verisimilitude' of the staging – in other words, the concordance between the sets and the dramatic action.<sup>38</sup> In the nineteenth century, this verisimilitude became central with the rise of both musical and non-musical dramas based on historical topics, which led to an increased demand for historical and geographical accuracy on the part of scenographers.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Viale Ferrero, *Luogo teatrale e spazio scenico*, pp. 4–7. On the 'disjunction' between these different genres, see also Pierre Frantz, *L'esthétique du tableau dans le théâtre du XVIIIe siècle*, Paris 1998, pp. 83f. On the concept of 'verisimilitude', see Ubersfeld, *Les termes clés de l'analyse du théâtre*, p. 100.

<sup>39</sup> The concept of 'verisimilitude' had thus changed in relation to previous centuries. Whereas in the nineteenth century it expressed an idea of historical and geographical accuracy, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it instead described internal coherence within a play. See Annette Kappeler, *L'Œil du Prince. Auftrittsformen in der Oper des Ancien Régime*, Paderborn 2016, pp. 38–40.



Fig. 5: Tranquillo Orsi, sketch of scenery, drawing and watercolour, Ca' Rezzonico – Museo del Settecento Veneziano, Venise. © Archivio Fotografico – Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia (inv. Classe III 6001)

This created not only a discrepancy between these dramas and the rest of the repertoire (comic opera, certain forms of spoken theatre, etc.) but also a gap between provincial-theatre practice with generic stock scenes and this new type of repertoire requiring historical and ethnographic accuracy and specific sets for each production.

In order to explain this discrepancy in the scenic repertoires required, it is necessary to take into account the socio-cultural and economic reality of provincial Italian theatres. They had access to far more modest economic resources than theatres in the larger cities. Provincial theatres were generally dependent on the endowment provided each year by their box owners. In the smaller provincial theatres, this fund was barely enough to cover running costs (staff salaries, lighting, maintaining the equipment, etc.).<sup>40</sup> Creating new sets incurred extraordinary expenses, as did renovating a theatre's interior ornamentation, such as was the case in Feltre, for example. For these small theatres, their sets represented

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, the various account books of the Feltre theatre; ASCF, *Serie A, Carteggio generale della categoria V*, classe 10, b. 21, *Inventario del Teatro 1879*; ASCF, *Serie A, Carteggio generale della categoria V*, classe 10, b. 21, *Inventario del Teatro 1880*; ASCF, *Serie A, Carteggio generale della categoria V*, classe 10, b. 21, *Inventario del Teatro 1883-1889*.



Fig. 6: Virtual reconstruction: position of the wings of the palace scene on Feltre's stage. Made by the author.



Fig. 7: Virtual reconstruction: the wings of Feltre's palace scene with the backdrop of Fermo's palace scene in the background. Made by the author.

a significant investment and were preserved, reused and restored when necessary. The stock sets in use in the provinces were thus dependent on the limited financial means available and were essentially a result of practical and economic necessity.<sup>41</sup>

However, amateur theatrical practices experienced considerable development from the eighteenth century onwards, and especially in the nineteenth century. Amateurs were particularly active in provincial theatres<sup>42</sup> and their productions were generally confined to a relatively stable, well-defined repertoire of plays. This led the scenographers hired by amateur companies to orient their sets according to recurring typologies and a clearly codified set of scenic images.<sup>43</sup>

By contrast, operas with their historical scenery became increasingly popular in the nineteenth century. They gradually formed the core of the professional repertoire and made their way onto provincial stages.<sup>44</sup> The concept of visual verisimilitude that they conveyed is supported by a wide distribution of engravings and lithographs depicting characteristic scenes from these plays.<sup>45</sup> These images stand out as representative of the performances presented on the great stages of the major cities, and in this sense have some claim to a certain artistic and historical reliability. They thus assume the function of a 'model' or guide to be consulted when staging the historical dramas they illustrate.<sup>46</sup>

### *The function and use of stock scenes*

Despite the special demands they made, the Feltre Theatre Society regularly staged operas requiring very specific historical locations and periods. These included, for example, fifteenth-century Milan for Bellini's *Beatrice di Tenda*, presented in 1841,<sup>47</sup> and Ancient Mesopotamia for Verdi's *Nabucco* in 1845.<sup>48</sup> Their scenic requirements raise questions about how a provincial theatre dealt with the

<sup>41</sup> Rosenfeld depicts a very similar situation in England at the same time. See Sybil Rosenfeld, *Georgian Scene Painters and Scene Painting*, Cambridge 1981, p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> There are traces of amateur groups active in Feltre throughout the nineteenth century, such as when the "dilettanti di Feltre" presented the comedy *Il Barbiere di Gheldria* by Luigi Velli in 1839, with music by Bellio (PBF, *Fondo Storico*, F II 50, *Il Barbiere di Gheldria nel Teatro sociale di Feltre il 25-08-1839*, p. 45); in 1867, the Società filodrammatica presented *Francesca da Rimini* by Silvio Pellico (PBF, *Fondo Storico*, G VI 90 bis, *I Quattro Rusteghi*, 23 June 1867); and in 1845, an opera was even composed by Luigi Jarosch for the "dilettanti feltresi" (Luigi Jarosch: *L'avaro. Opera in due atti. Scritta per i dilettanti feltresi*, Feltre 1844).

<sup>43</sup> Viale Ferrero, *Luogo teatrale e spazio scenico*, pp. 77–80.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 9f.

<sup>45</sup> A journalist even speaks of a "torrent of lithographs" ("torrente di litografie"), [Anon.], Dell'arte prospettica, e principalmente della pittura scenica in Lombardia, in *Il Politecnico* 1/2, 1839, pp. 158–167, here p. 164.

<sup>46</sup> Viale Ferrero, *Luogo teatrale e spazio scenico*, p. 88.

<sup>47</sup> [Anon.], I teatri. Feltre, in *La Moda. Giornale dedicato al bel sesso* 6/80, 7 ottobre 1841, p. 322 [recte 320].

<sup>48</sup> [Anon.], Teatri. Feltre, in *Bazar di Novità Artistiche, Letterarie e Teatrali* 5/82, 11 ottobre 1845, p. 342.

new stage requirements of verisimilitude in this type of repertoire. Although Feltre's sources do not allow us to develop any real hypotheses for this subject, periodicals and various treatises on theatre management published in the first half of the nineteenth century allow us to identify factors that determined stage practices in the smaller centres.

In his *Consigli sull'arte di dirigere gli spettacoli* ("Advice on the Art of Directing Performances") of 1825, addressed to a hypothetical provincial theatre director ironically named "Filosceno", Carlo Ritorni states that stock scenery is primarily intended for use in opera buffa and the spoken theatre. The biggest spectacles, by contrast, had to be staged in a special way.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, even the scenes of the most complex dramas performed in Feltre could be associated with one of the categories of location among its stock scenery. In Verdi's opera *Nabucco*, for example, the libretto requires a temple interior, a palace hall, a garden and a royal apartment.<sup>50</sup> The generic nature of stock scenes, however, compels us to set aside any notions of historical or geographical verisimilitude. In fact, the places represented by these sets are less significant for their mimetic, illustrative function than for their function in the drama. As Southern has suggested, they embody the places required by the staging by means of their intrinsic qualities, not through their correspondence to the subject being depicted.<sup>51</sup>

In this respect, the degree to which the scenery matched the subject matter seems to have differed in the provinces and the major centres. This is particularly reflected in reviews of performances. In reviews on productions in the big cities, the pretext of respecting (or not respecting) historical and geographical verisimilitude is often stated as a determining criterion for judging the quality of the sets. For example, a journalist of the *Bazar di Novità Artistiche, Letterarie e Teatrali* in 1846 praised the scenery of a production at the Teatro Apollo in Venice for its "decency, luxury and respect for customs".<sup>52</sup> As Viale Ferrero notes, criticism of scenography in the nineteenth century was highly codified.<sup>53</sup> Reviewers generally used normative arguments based on a few fixed criteria that were repeated over and over again: beauty, decency and verisimilitude. However, the criterion of verisimilitude for scenery does not appear in reviews or reports of performances in the smaller centres. For example, at the Teatro Sociale in Schio in 1835, the reviewer

<sup>49</sup> "Altro è lo scenario che si allestisce appositamente per un grande spettacolo, altro è quello che deve rimanere sempre in dote al teatro per i drammi ordinarii ad uso de' comici, e delle Opere Buffe". N. N. [Carlo Ritorni], *Consigli sull'arte di dirigere gli spettacoli. A Filosceno direttore degli spettacoli della città di L...*, Bologna 1825, p. 60.

<sup>50</sup> Solera, *Nabucodonosor*, p. 7, 14, 20, 25.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Southern, *Changeable Scenery. Its Origin and Development in the British Theatre*, London 1952, p. 358.

<sup>52</sup> "In generale la drammatica Compagnia Lombarda merita lode per la osservanza de' costumi e per la decenza anzi il lusso delle decorazioni." [Anon.], Venezia. Teatro Apollo, in *Bazar di Novità Artistiche, Letterarie e Teatrali* 6/35, 2 May 1846, pp. 143f, here p. 144.

<sup>53</sup> Mercedes Viale Ferrero, *La scenografia. Dalle origini al 1936*, Torino 1980 (Storia del Teatro Regio di Torino, Vol. 3), p. 361.

simply refers to the magnificence of the set, “which is not provincial”.<sup>54</sup> In the provinces, these reviews were mainly aimed at promoting the theatre company and presenting the town in question as a leading cultural centre in the region. In his essay on the economics of theatres, Giuseppe Rossi-Gallieno recommends that theatre directors should not rely on reports in periodicals, which were often written in line with the purely personal interests of their editors.<sup>55</sup> A certain tolerance of dramatic verisimilitude seems to have been commonly accepted in the provincial theatres. Even a particularly demanding theatre critic in matters of scenography such as Giuseppe Grassi was prepared to accept anachronism when it was necessitated by economic reasons.<sup>56</sup> The relevance of the scenery to the dramatic situation was therefore primarily dependent on the means available to the theatre in question.

In addition to the issue of verisimilitude, countless reviews refer to the sets presented by visiting troupes on the provincial stages.<sup>57</sup> The generally laudatory tone of these articles suggests that they were intended as an advertising strategy to promote a production, as at the Teatro Sociale in Belluno, where the sets for a production of the opera *Roberto Devereux* in 1842 were judged “worthy of [the impresario] Cattinari”.<sup>58</sup> Travelling troupes are a determining factor in understanding how provincial theatres in nineteenth-century Italy functioned. As Meldolesi and Taviani have pointed out, the Italian theatres were organised differently from those in other European countries,<sup>59</sup> for it was deemed of greater importance to participate in major tours by travelling companies than merely to perform in the metropolitan centres. There also seems to have been a correlation between a theatre’s perceived ‘value’ and the reputation of the troupes that performed there. In his 1839 treatise, Rossi-Gallieno explained to directors that a theatre’s value was proportional to the quality and taste of the artists they would be able to hire.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>54</sup> “[...] si è aperto quel grazioso ed elegante teatro: le decorazioni, le scene, il vestiario spiravano una magnificenza non da provincia.” [Anon.], Teatri. Schio – Apertura del teatro, in *Il Pirata. Giornale di letteratura, belle arti, mestieri, mode, teatri e varietà* 1/35, 30 October 1835, pp. 139f., here p. 140.

<sup>55</sup> “Generalmente parlando le compilate relazioni de’ giornali sono dettate a seconda delle affezioni e degli interessi degli estensori. Se alla verità sacrificassero, e gli uni e le altre, rimarrebbero ad esso loro ben pochi associati. Il poco nè si desidera, nè tanto meno si vuole, il molto in ogni modo si cerca ottenere.” Giuseppe Rossi-Gallieno, *Saggio di economia teatrale dedicato alle melodrammatiche scene italiane*, Milan 1839, p. 16.

<sup>56</sup> As Viale Ferrero has observed, the columnist Giuseppe Grassi stands out for the precision and richness of his observations on scenography. See Viale Ferrero, *La scenografia*, p. 345.

<sup>57</sup> Regarding the sets of touring companies in the provinces, see Cyril Triolaire, *Le Théâtre en province pendant le Consulat et l’Empire*, Clermont-Ferrand 2012, pp. 230–235; Max Fuchs, *La vie théâtrale en province au XVIIIe siècle. Personnel et répertoire*, Paris 1986, p. 94, and Rosenfeld, *Georgian Scene Painters and Scene Painting*, pp. 23–29.

<sup>58</sup> “A Belluno il *Roberto Devereux* alle stelle. [...] Le decorazioni e il vestiario sono degni del Cattinari.” F. R., Un po’ di tutto, in *Il Pirata. Giornale di letteratura, varietà e teatri* 8/18, 2 September 1842, p. 76.

<sup>59</sup> Claudio Meldolesi/Ferdinando Taviani, *Teatro e spettacolo nel primo Ottocento*, Rome 2010, pp. 136f.

<sup>60</sup> Rossi-Gallieno, *Saggio di economia teatrale*, p. 15.

The further up their theatre was in the hierarchy, the better their prospects of hosting well-known artists. This kind of virtuous circle also had an effect on a theatre's stock of scenery. Ritorni stated that it was the director's responsibility to ensure that his scenery was well painted, "because in theatres of the second rank that are parsimonious and the scenery is of mediocre beauty, they cannot have any claims to better quality [productions]."<sup>61</sup>

### Conclusion

Let us sum up. The Italian provincial theatres of the first half of the nineteenth century had a relatively well-defined established body of stock scenery. This situation was determined by the socio-cultural and economic specificities of these theatres (their limited financial means, and having a single stage available for all performances, whether professional or amateur). In addition, the various aspects of the sets in a theatre could enhance its reputation (if it had a complete stock of scenic repertoire, modern stage machinery and well-made sets by a renowned painter). The scenery was therefore one means of establishing a theatre's standing within the Italian theatrical hierarchy, and could help it to enter into the touring programmes of the best travelling companies. These troupes were then likely to bring better quality sets with them.

These theatrical troupes, for their part, could count on a relatively constant stock of scenery in the provincial theatres where they performed. We may therefore suppose that the *capocomici* or *impresari* responsible for the performances arranged for the manufacture of the extra scenic elements they would need, according to the specific needs of the works presented. The quality of these sets probably depended on the financial means at their disposal. Indeed, it seems that the painters were particularly subject to the financial pressures of the impresarios. As Seragnoli has observed, the work of the theatrical painter was a mercantile object, and this fact had an inevitable impact on the quality of the end product.<sup>62</sup> In this regard, Ritorni remarks that "to paint theatrically means to paint [...] with an eye towards the light technician's oil and the impresario's purse".<sup>63</sup> However, the creation of sets by a renowned scenographer could also be exploited commercially, as in the advertisement for a production of *Il ritorno di Pietro il Grande Czar* presented in Feltre in 1825, which stated that "the large square scene has

<sup>61</sup> "Però ne' teatri secondarii, dove vuolsi procedere con parsimonia, quando le scene siano di mediocre bellezza non si pretenda di più." N. N. [Carlo Ritorni], *Consigli sull'arte di dirigere gli spettacoli*, pp. 59f.

<sup>62</sup> Daniele Seragnoli: La materialità e l'idea. Il tema della scenografia nella riflessione critica di Carlo Ritorni, in *Informa di festa. Apparatori, decoratori, scenografi, impresari in Reggio Emilia dal 1600 al 1857*, ed. by Marinella Pigozzi, Reggio Emilia 1985, pp. 189–199, here p. 192.

<sup>63</sup> "E dodici anni dopo viene posto il quesito 'se in teatro sia meglio dipinger bene o teatralmente. Cioè secondo il gusto pittorico o con occhio 'caritativole verso l'olio e la borsa dell'illuminatore e dell'impresario'". Ibid., quoting Carlo Ritorni, *Annali del teatro della città di Reggio. Istoria critica*, Bologna 1837, pp. 41f.

been created by Francesco Bagnara".<sup>64</sup> Companies thus took their own sets on their long tours, despite all the difficulties involved in transporting bulky equipment, not to mention the complications of having to keep adapting their scenic elements to different stages.

Stock scenery has been little studied thus far, but it offers us the example of a common, widespread practice that was constitutive of the reality of most provincial theatres in Italy at the time. It can reveal to us the expectations of the various protagonists involved in provincial Italian theatre in the first half of the nineteenth century. The members of the theatrical societies, impresarios, actors, musicians, painters and spectators all had a clearly defined relationship with these scenic elements that reflected their own function within the Italian theatrical system. In this way, the scenery allows us to observe a complex socio-cultural fabric in a new light.

Considering the relationship of the spectators to these elements in particular can open up a space for reflection on their reception and remind us not to lose sight of the main purpose of the sets: the performance itself. There was a multitude of factors that impinged on the spectators' theatrical experience in the nineteenth century. For example, we must bear in mind that the lights in the auditorium remained on during a performance, and that the spectators might have been at least as attentive to what was happening in the auditorium as to what was being played out on the stage.<sup>65</sup> If we are to understand the real impact of the scenery, it is essential to consider it as one component of an entire theatrical experience and investigate its function within the overall performance.

<sup>64</sup> "Vi sarà pure la gran Scena rappresentante una Piazza popolata illuminata a giorno del Sig. Bagnara". PBF, Fondo Storico, G VI 90 bis, Affiche n. 10, *Il ritorno di Pietro il Grande Czar di tutte le Russie in Mosca ossia La gran congiura de Strelitz*, 13 September 1825.

<sup>65</sup> See Meldolesi/Taviani, *Teatro e spettacolo nel primo Ottocento*, p. 123.

