

DE GRUYTER

# THEATERMANIA IN EIGHTEENTH- CENTURY EUROPE

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY AND CONTEXTUAL  
APPROACH TO THE HISTORY OF THEATER

*Edited by Sonia Bellavia*

THEATERMANIA IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY EUROPE  
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The group volume distinguishes itself by its multidisciplinary, comparative approach and by the network of relationships it weaves between the various European languages and cultures. The study takes shape from its different viewpoints and in its diverse contexts, to chart a detailed historical-conceptual map of the basic role theater played in forging the modern European consciousness. The thematic core of 'theatermania' lay in the authentic theatrical passion that manifested itself in different ways from one country to another throughout the 18th century. While the aesthetic, social and political value of theater took a variety of forms, its central feature was the privileged place it gave to collective and individual social revolutions, phenomena that could be defined as upheavals of the collective imagination, which found in theater a source of nourishment, mediation or control. The volume offers not just a series of historical-theatrical studies, but a view of history that foregrounds the passions that were regularly sparked by theater. It adds an essential feature to the profile of the century that redefined the role and importance of theater, and that led to its full re-evaluation in the Romantic age.



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## Theatermania in Eighteenth-Century Europe



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## Venetian Theatermanias

We will certainly have to talk about Theatermania in the plural form, given the specificity of its Venetian variety.

Its first epiphany – which came about in a time span not containable within the confines of a single century, even if, as we shall see, it would only manifest its full force in the eighteenth-century – evolved from the endogenous character of Venetian civilization, due to its primarily urban morphology, which by its very nature led to distinct anthropological developments. Venice – unlike any other city – evolved its particular polymorphic, polycentric image in an uninterrupted continuity that rejected the isolated perception of single architectural and pictorial motifs, thus making it impossible to fix its physiognomy in a single, all-encompassing scenography.

More than from the impression of a city that based its power on the mobility of water; the stunned admiration of foreign travelers who surrendered to this “magnet of Europe” – significantly, the title of a popular late seventeenth-century guidebook – were bowled over by the experience of an open urban space, inexplicably unwallled, which, in a flurry of images, vaunted one of the most ample architectural languages in structural contrasts and complexities. A plural city – and the toponym *Venetie* was by no accident plural, long reflecting the nature of a place made up of aggregates, a paradigmatic urban embodiment of experimentation, encounter and exchange – a city whose stage did not allow itself to be summed up by the abstractions of a *perspectiva artificialis* and founded the structural idea, which became so essential to modernity, that theater could and must take place everywhere, in a space that could only be perceived if explored and traversed. It was again Venice – its very special urban and architectural configuration whose structure seemed to place those who passed through it in a permanent condition of actors/spectators – that founded the equally disruptive idea of that *spectator in scaena* which Goethe could still describe memorably in his *Italianische Reise*. Among its many possible passages, let us consider this one:

Gestern war ich in der Komödie, Theater St. Lucas, die mir viel Freude gemacht hat; ich sah ein extemporirtes Stück in Masken, mit viel Naturell, Energie und Bravour aufgeführt. Freilich sind sie nicht alle gleich; der Pantalon sehr brav, die eine Frau stark und wohlgebaut, keine außerordentliche Schauspielerin, spricht excellent und weiß sich zu betragen. Ein tolles Sujet, demjenigen ähnlich, das bei uns unter dem Titel *Der Verschlag* behandelt ist. Mit unglaublicher Abwechslung unterhielt es mehr als drei Stunden. Doch ist auch hier das Volk wieder die Base, worauf dieß alles ruht, die Zuschauer spielen mit, und die Menge verschmilzt mit dem Theater in ein Ganzes. Den Tag über auf dem Platz und am Ufer; auf den Gondeln und im Palast, der



Käufer und Verkäufer; der Bettler; der Schiffer; die Nachbarin, der Advocat und sein Gegner; alles lebt und treibt und läßt sich es angelegen sein, spricht und betheuert, schreit und bietet aus, singt und spielt, flucht und lärmt. Und Abends gehen sie in's Theater und sehen und hören das Leben ihres Tages, künstlich zusammengestellt, artiger aufgestutzt, mit Märchen durchflochten, durch Masken von der Wirklichkeit abgerückt, durch Sitten genähert. Hierüber freuen sie sich kindisch, schreien wieder, klatschen und lärmen. Von Tag zu Nacht, ja von Mitternacht zu Mitternacht ist immer alles ebendasselbe.<sup>1</sup> (WA I 30, 118–119)

In short, Venetian society was constantly engaged in displaying itself on the urban stage, eager to see itself reflected each day in a second theater stage spectacle.

Intimately connected to this was a second form of Venetian Theatermania, one whose theatrical performances in the strict sense it cultivated – as far back as the late fifteenth-century – in the precocious and flourishing forms – given its particular social and political structure – of a spontaneous decentralization. The performances were not limited solely to the court but were staged in the palaces of the major patrician families – Morosini, Bragadin, Pesaro, Foscari, Contarini – and even in the monasteries, capable of hosting the most original and daringly profane repertoires – deservedly famous was the staging, in one of the Crociferi halls in Cannaregio, in 1522, of Niccolò Machiavelli's disquieting theatrical masterpiece the *Mandragola* –.

Nor is it surprising, in this context, that the birth of theater in the modern sense of the term took place in Venice, through the construction of public pay theaters – the first, intended for opera production in 1637 in San Cassiano; but public performances for pay were recorded from the very early years of the sixteenth-century, as was the certain existence prior to 1581 of two theaters intended for drama performances. However, in evaluating the phenomenon we must bear in mind that the influence of Venice's urban morphology, or the anthropological profile of its inhabitants, was part and parcel of the entrepreneurial ability of a ruling class able to find in the entertainment industry an effective compensation for the

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1 ["Yesterday I saw a play at the S. Luca theater, which greatly amused me. It was an impromptu performance of masks, full of spontaneity, energy and skill. [...] But here too, once again, the people are the foundation on which everything rests. The audience participates in the show and the crowd merges into a whole with the performance. Throughout the day, in the squares and on the banks, in the gondolas and in the palace, buyers and sellers, beggars, boatmen, gossips, lawyers and their adversaries, everyone does nothing but move, trade, tinker: they talk and jabber, shout and offer wares, they sing and play, swear and make noise; and in the evening they go to the theater and listen to their very experiences of the day, artificially reconstructed, reproduced in a more seductive guise, enriched with inventions, alienated from life by means of masks, similar to life in uses and customs. And they enjoy it in a childlike way, shout back, applaud and jeer: From morning till night, indeed from midnight to midnight, it is always the same"]. Date of Goethe's travelogue: 4 October 1786.

political decline that the Serenissima faced on the international stage already from the last decades of the sixteenth-century.

In other words, it was also thanks to the incidence of well-considered economic interests that over a few decades a theatrical network unique in all of Europe developed in Venice – a total of twenty theaters opened in the seventeenth-century, and fifteen in the eighteenth-century, many of which engaged in simultaneous and competitive activity, in seasons that enlivened urban life for about five months a year –, thereby nurturing both the professionalization of the various arts to participate in augmenting the entertainment offering –, from scenography to entrepreneurship, as well as codifying new genres – besides, of course, the development over about two centuries of an imposing lyrical and dramatic repertory, and the aesthetic evolution of an audience already imbued with theatricality.

But let us focus on the century of our primary interest, when Venice's Theatermania took hold with previously unheard of vigor and variety. The phenomenon – no surprise – especially concerned spoken theater, which in its consummate musical form could excite and gratify cognitive and hedonistic impulses that increasingly pervaded the society as the century progressed. This is what Carlo Gozzi, an aristocrat who, as a stalwart historical materialist, in 1772 analyzed as the theater *factory*:

La perniziosa inclinazione del nostro secolo al lusso, e alla voluttà, fece divenire la materia Teatrale, materia di conseguenza nell'opinione. Si eressero nuovi Teatri, si abbellirono i vecchi. In Venezia, dove non si aprivano, che due Teatri di Commedia, nel giro di venticinqu'anni se ne sono aperti quattro, e spesso se ne aprono cinque.<sup>2</sup> (Gozzi 2013, 370)

Let us skip over what the opening of the quote suggests, easily attributable to the misonicist moralist mask that Gozzi sometimes likes to put on for tactical reasons of self-representation. Let it suffice to point out that in a passage of the same text he remarks how: “Infiniti son quelli che hanno stabilite le campagne loro, per aver sussistenza, sulle passioni degli uomini. [...] tra questi agricoltori si devono certamente registrare i Comici; schiera, che si rende tanto più grande, quanto più si dilata la voluttà” (Gozzi 2013, 359).<sup>3</sup>

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2 [“The pernicious inclination of our century to luxury and pleasure has made theatrical matter a matter of consequence in the public's eye. New theaters have been built and old ones embellished. In Venice, where once there were only two Drama Theaters, in the space of twenty-five years four have opened, and at present often five open”], quote taken from *Ragionamento ingenuo*, 1772. All translations into English, unless otherwise indicated, are mine.

3 [“Infinite are those who have hoed their plots, for subsistence, upon the passions of men. [...] Among these farmers the Comedians must certainly be noted; a host that swells all the more as hedonism gains ground”].

Where the term *hedonism*, hinging on *human passions* and the need to portray and criticize them, loses all negative connotations, and rather seems to allude to a sort of *voluptas noscendi*.

In any case, the most important points of the previous quote undoubtedly concern the multiplication of Venetian theater halls around mid-century, to keep pace with the surge in demand in a supply sector that until then had been marginalized by the imperious hegemony of musical theater:

The phenomenon is easily ascribable to the “neither sudden nor rapid” (Zorzi 1977, 266) appearance on the Venetian stage of Carlo Goldoni, and to the Copernican revolution<sup>4</sup> that in the repertoires of theater companies produced his prodigious experimentalism, nourished by the Books about the World and about Theater: Goldoni, very attentive – on the model of Lope de Vega, to whom he explicitly declared himself indebted – to his audiences’ expectations, was able to intercept and at the same time nurture a new sensitivity. The success of his operation of increasing demand, resulting in the proliferation of new theater writers, among them Pietro Chiari, his antagonist par excellence, was just the tip of the iceberg.

On the other hand, the multiplication of authors went hand in hand or was to some extent concomitant with the multiplication of actors. In this too Carlo Gozzi offers a precious testimony:

Infiniti uomini stanchi delle professioni, nelle quali i padri loro gli avevano allevati; infinite femmine annoiate della soggezione famigliare, affidando in quelle tante rappresentazioni scritte, che correvano per i Teatri dell’Italia, alla loro memoria, al loro coraggio, o ad altro, si abbandonarono al mestiere dell’arte Comica. Divennero innumerabili tra noi le Comiche truppe con un tale fondamento.<sup>5</sup> (Gozzi 2013, 370)

In fact, during the eighteenth-century, in addition to the increase in the *Comic troops*, there was also a somewhat contrary phenomenon to what can be called the *âge d’or* of the Italian acting tradition. While great talents of the stage such as Flaminio Scala, Tristano Martinelli and Pier Maria Cecchini tried to anchor if not finalize the theatrical profession in other kinds of work, later there was a growing number who did not take up the art of acting automatically by being born into a family of professionals, but individuals who purposely abandoned, ac-

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<sup>4</sup> Oh Galileian, to say it with De Sanctis, who acutely defined the Venetian Goldoni as the “Galileo of our new literature” (De Sanctis 1970, 795).

<sup>5</sup> [“An infinite number of men, weary of the professions in which their fathers had raised them; and an endless number of women, bored with family duties, confiding in those many written representations that filled Italy’s theater stages, by memory, courage or whatever, threw themselves into the vocation of writing plays. The theatrical troops of such foundation became legion among us”].

ording to Gozzi, a previous activity and as amateurs attempted to join the professional troupes – many examples could be adduced precisely by analyzing the composition of the companies active in Venice in the second half of the eighteenth-century.

From Gozzi's viewpoint, the increase in authors and the consequent prevalence of a slack dramaturgy, contributed significantly to the increase in actors, especially actors untrained in the exacting artistic tradition, precisely because they confided in the widespread accessibility to a vast ready-made repertory, such that it sufficed for them to have the *memory* and *courage* to succeed in a profession that actually required the much more complex interpretive virtues of improvisation.

It seems quite evident that, while this interpretive line – even in its bias – contained an undoubted kernel of verisimilitude, it was nonetheless insufficient to explain the breadth and complexity of the phenomenon, which was at least largely traceable to that idea of theater as a privileged means of acquiring self-awareness, as Lessing had theorized as far back as 1742,<sup>6</sup> and which in later decades found a paradigmatic expression in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister theatralische Sendung* (1777–1785) or in Karl Philipp Moritz's *Anton Reiser* (1785–1790). And while in Italy there were no such works and no explicit equation between acting and poetry, the idea of the actor-artist creator of a second reality, which in the German area had found expression since 1750, for example in Lessing and Christob Mylius,<sup>7</sup> the appearance in 1782 of the *Notizie istoriche de 'Comici italiani*, “an erudite, curious, pleasant and certainly completely new work” (Bartoli 1782, III) in the words of the author Francesco Bartoli, Bolognese by birth but Venetian by theatrical training, a former actor in Antonio Sacco's company: “certainly completely new”, and perhaps unique in the European panorama, the work, although mainly aimed at “Theater Amateurs” and in particular at the “Professors of the Dramatic Art”<sup>8</sup>, “institutionalized” the cultural and artistic profile of actors, placing them resolutely in the ranks of “Men of Letters” by virtue of their – at least theoretically necessary –

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6 See Lessing's letter to Justina Salome of January 20, 1742 (Bellavia 2020, 92).

7 Thus in an article by Mylius that appeared in the first monthly edition entirely devoted to theater, *Beyträge zur Theorie und Aufnahme des Theaters*, which Lessing founded (Bellavia 2020, 96).

8 Recurrent declarations in the work's programmatic manifesto: *A pamphlet by the actor Francesco Bartoli, addressed to the Amateurs of the Theater and to the Italian Play Companies, besides being a curious in itself in the context of serving as a Prospectus for a Work to be published in print, entitled: Notizie Istoriche de' Comici più rinomati italiani, che fiorirono intorno all'Anno MDL fino ai giorni presenti*, Piacenza: Stamperia Regio-Ducale di Andrea Bellici Salvoni, s.d., p. 5.

dramaturgical prerequisites, and portraying the “Comedian worthy of admiration” on the basis of his creative and not merely performative abilities.<sup>9</sup>

The *emulator competitions*, the *stage harangues* that Bartoli inevitably often refers to in tracing the life stories of eighteenth-century actors, introduce us to the latest form of Venetian Theatermania. This was the collective fanaticism, of unusual offerings that characterized Venetian theater audiences in the second half of the eighteenth-century – audiences, it should be noted that were socially transversal, because of the decidedly lower ticket costs that compared to other European contexts, which was the norm in the Italian theater market, as Riccoboni, Goldoni and Carlo Gozzi well attest. Various documents register this fanaticism – such as the famous *Cicogna codex*, preserved in Venice’s Correr Museum Library and containing about ninety writings on the Chiari-Goldoni rivalry in the 1753–1756 seasons – or the numerous meta-theatrical comedies reflecting the public’s assiduous and enthusiastic participation in the theatrical offerings, such as to make the public itself the subject of theatricalization – starting with what was perhaps Carlo Gozzi’s first work, which remained in the drawer and is significantly entitled *Le gare teatrali*.<sup>10</sup>

However, I prefer to focus on two lesser known, but perhaps more eloquent, testimonies.

The first is that of Antonio Piazza, a novelist and subsequently a successful journalist, but also an intimate of the theatrical world and himself a playwright. It is taken from a novel published in Venice in 1770, *La virtuosa ovvero la cantatrice fiamminga*:

La mia Nazione [Venezia] è tutta in due partiti divisa e ci sono pochi neutrali. [...] Questo fanatismo accese delle guerre civili nelle Famiglie; convertì le Tavole de’ Caffè in tante Cattedre di Poesia comica, e destò anche i Legnajuoli e i Fabbri ferrai a parlare di Commedie, di Tragedie, e di Drammi. Sino le garrule Artigianelle vogliono decidere del bello poetico. Ciascuna ha il suo genio e ciascuna ingegnasi di mostrarlo ragionevole e buono. Chi porta Tizio alle stelle, chi lo profonda negli abissi. Chi dice che Sempronio non è al Mondo l’eguale, e chi lo deride come come un verseggiatore da Colascione. Tutto tocca l’estremo e non ci sono strade di mezzo. Si comincia a parlare d’una commedia un mese prima che vadi in iscena, e la si vuole da chi buona e da chi cattiva, avanti d’averla veduta. Si concorre in folla alle prime Recite, si fa cadere dagli applausi il Teatro, si decide in Piazza nelle mattine seguenti, si quistiona, si disputa, si strapazza, e intanto i due Emoli fortunati s’approfittano di queste gare senza le quali, qualunque sia il loro merito, non ricaverebbero certamente un così grosso

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9 “An actor (...) who plays his role with a truthfulness and naturalness necessary for the character he is playing, who invests himself in passions, who clearly expresses his feelings, who knows how to paint the inner movements of the soul (...) will always be an actor worthy of admiration, and will be able to attract the applause of the entire audience” (*Ibid.* 4).

10 Unpublished work. Hypothetical date of composition: early 1750s.

guadagno. I Torchii non si logorano che sull'Opere loro, i Libraj non fanno altro commercio che quello delle medesime, non si vuol leggere che le cose uscite della penna d'uno o dell'altro, e tutto risuona del loro nome glorioso.<sup>11</sup> ([Piazza] 1770, 67–68)

Beyond the retrospective reference to the legendary and by now chronologically distant supporters linked to the names of Chiari and Goldoni, and beyond the contemptuous air with which some participants in the disputes are branded – carpenters, blacksmiths, craftsmen and plebeian scum who dare to dispute on poetic beauty – , the picture we get, once stripped of its topical satirical coloring, shows a socially transversal, feverish ferment over what theater could offer and what could be demanded of theater, such as a place par excellence where one could question the plurality of destinies contained in each individual, and where it was possible to experience shared processes of formation and sociality.

The second testimony is contained in a letter that the exuberant and fascinating Elisabetta Caminer, journalist and avant-garde theater writer, wrote on February 1, 1772, to Giuseppe Pelli Bencivenni, the authoritative director of Florence's *Novelle letterarie*. She gives an extremely lively description of the city's theatrical life – the carnival season is underway –, which she experienced with intense and assiduous participation:

vò tutte le sere al Teatro per cui ho una vera passione ... Tutti questi teatri fanno a gara per divertire il Pubblico, quindi le cose nuove s'hanno a furia, e tradotte dal francese, e italiane, e tratte dallo spagnuolo, e di mille altri generi. Fra queste ve ne son molte di cattive, ma ve ne son anche di buone. Non vi parlo delle gare fra' Comici, delle rivalità tra gli autori, de' partiti fra il Popolo; questo è il più bel divertimento del mondo. E chi scrive, e chi strilla, e chi decide, e chi dà legge; e chi critica, e chi sotto al manto della verità copre il fanatismo che scappa fuori dopo una lunga diceria: io per me ho date al teatro cinque cose tradotte e accomodate, e

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11 ["My nation [Venice] is entirely split into two parties and there are few neutrals. (...) This fanaticism has ignited civil wars in families; it has converted café tables into so many Professorships of Dramatic Poetry, and also roused the carpenters and blacksmiths to discourse on comedies, tragedies and dramas. Even garrulous scullery maids want to have their say on poetic beauty. Each has his or her own genius and each claims to be reasonable and just. One praises Tom to the stars while another casts him into a ditch. One declares that Harry has no parallel in the world while another taunts him like a Colascione rhymester. Everything touches the extreme and there is no middle way. We start talking about a play a month before its debut, and we already know who is good and who is bad even before we've seen it. You push your way through the crowd at the premiere, the applause brings down the House, you decide in the square the mornings after, you question, dispute, scramble, and meantime two lucky imitators take advantage of these competitions without which, whatever their merits, they would certainly not make such handsome profits. The printers only sweat over their own works, the booksellers sell nothing but themselves, one will only read what issues from this or that one's pen, and everything resounds with their own glorious name"].

ne darò un'altra. Tutte hanno avuto un esito fortunato ed io contenta di non essermi ingannata nella scelta, me ne sto tranquilla a vedere le cose altrui e a ridere di chi vuol mordere pazzamente.<sup>12</sup>

It is a testimony that sheds a very different light from what we usually imagine on the virulence of theatrical competitions in eighteenth-century Venice, here presented to us in its contemporary terms of exciting *amusement*, a sort of second spectacle that increased the enjoyment of theatrical performances proper; and almost replaced them.

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12 ["every evening I go to the theater, for which I have a real passion (...) All these theaters compete to entertain the public, so new things are rife, translated from the French, as well as Italian, and taken from the Spanish, and a thousand other kinds. Among these there are many awful ones, but there are also good ones. I'm not talking about the contests between comedians, the rivalries between authors, the wrangling among the common folk; this is the best entertainment in the world. Those who write, and those who scream, and those who decide, and those who lay down the law; and those who criticize, and those who under the mantle of truth defend the fanaticism that escapes from a big lie. As for me, I've given the theater five translated and reworked things, and will give more. All have had a fortunate outcome and I'm pleased not to have made the wrong choices. I calmly observe the works of others and laugh at those who want to bite like rabid dogs"]. From: Florence State Archive, Lettere a Giuseppe Pelli Bencivenni, f. XVII, n° 4057.