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The Profession of the "Scenographer" in Early 18th-Century Venice: A New Document

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The discovery of one of the rare early eighteenth-century Venetian contracts between a scenographer and an impresario allows us to enter the workshop of the stage designer of the public musical theatres of the time. This document (fig. 1) is conserved in the State Archives in Venice, among the records of notary Francesco Maria Bonaldi.[1] It is dated 24 January 1724 and is co-signed by the impresario Antonio Madonis, a violinist by trade,[2] and by the painter Innocente Bellavite.[3] It should be made clear that at this time the profession of the "scenographer" did not exist as we understand it today, but rather it was the painters who among their many activities also carried out that of scenographer, such that they were more properly referred to as stage designers. Furthermore, a distinction must be made between stage designers, who are precisely those professionals who are particularly concerned with painting the wings, and stage engineers, who are specialists in theatrical machinery. Often these two specialisations required different professionals; in other cases, as in the case, for example, of Bernardo Canal, Canaletto's father,[4] they were combined in a single individual.

According to the contract in question, Bellavite was called upon to realise the sets for the operas to be produced in the 1724-1725 season at the Teatro Sant'Angelo, one of the most important theatres of the period.[5] He was to take care of both the painting of the sets and the machines. The date of the contract – 24 January 1724 – is indicative. The scenographer was hired well in advance of the beginning of the autumn season so that he would have plenty of time to do the required work. We must consider that it took a few months to make new scenes or renovate old ones.

What kind of scenographer was Bellavite? We know his lost sketches for the opera *Lucio Papirio* staged at the Teatro San Giovanni Grisostomo in 1720-1721, in collaboration with the stage engineer Giuseppe Mauro.[6] Unlike the 17th century perspective that was entirely based on machinery, as well as the sophisticated perspective calculations and visual axes of the Bibiena, here there is more creative freedom. The various elements are not subordinated to an overall viewpoint. On the one hand there is less depth given by the strict application of the rules of perspective; on the other hand, pictorial solutions are preferred, such as relying on the combination of the strong chiaroscuro contrast of the wings in the foreground and the *sfumato* in the background (fig. 2) for the effect of depth. Pictorial taste decisively characterises another sketch by Bellavite (fig. 3), in which the stage designer prefigures the so-called *scena quadro*. This is a new type of scenography, already developed by Juvarra and

[Fig. 1](#)

[Fig. 2](#)

[Fig. 3](#)

[Fig. 4](#)

[Fig. 5](#)

[Fig. 6](#)

[Fig. 7](#)

[Fig. 8](#)

vedi anche, nello stesso panel:

[Caterina Pagnini, *The practice of stage reuse in 18th century theatrical enterprise: the case of the Teatro del Cocomero in Florence*](#)

[Lorena Vallieri, *The "Festa della Porchetta" in Bologna: stage design, machinery and popular attractions*](#)

destined to triumph with the Galliari brothers, according to which the stage loses its spatial unity with the auditorium and acquires the value of a separate "picture", of a world detached from the spectator's space.

When the 33-year-old Bellavite was put under contract at the Sant'Angelo, his experience as a stage designer was mature. He was entrusted with the complete coordination of the theatre's stage operations. In the contract it says that it was his duty to pay for the team of painters and carpenters at his service, as well as the materials used. The impresario offered him 18 ducats per scene and provided him with the theatre equipment.[7] Every theatre had its own *dotazione*, [8] that is a deposit of scenes and scenic materials that could be reused if necessary with intelligent, skilful adaptations. In fact, in public theatres, but also in court theatres, it was almost always necessary to aim for savings, obtaining the maximum artistic result with the minimum effort of budget. It is interesting to see the list of the equipment, what was known in the slang as *le robbe*, provided to Bellavite as an annex to the contract.

It begins with the *telleri da carretto* (fig. 4), already in use in the 17th century, [9] central elements of a system of scenery changes would be viewed by audiences and that continued to be adopted throughout the following century and beyond, finding an exemplary analytical illustration in the plates of the *Encyclopédie* (fig. 5). [10] This system, also known as *à coulisses*, consisted in the simultaneous movement of pairs of flat wings covered with painted canvas or other materials that ran in "cuts" made in the stage by means of trolleys located in the under-stage area. These were wooden carts equipped with wheels that run in special guides, the *gargami*, fitted with a pair of support rods, the *anime*, to which the wings, the *telari*, were secured. As is well known, ever since Giacomo Torelli's first inventions at the Teatro Novissimo in Venice, all pairs of wooden carts were connected by ropes to a single central winch whose manoeuvre, made possible by the use of counterweights, allowed the scenes to disappear and reappear simultaneously with rapid movement.

The equipment of the Sant'Angelo also included a certain number of *prospetti*, that is intermediate backdrops, [11] and a "horizon", or better the last backdrop, that is the painted canvas placed at the conclusion of the perspective. [12] For the decoration of the scenes in the upper part, "ceilings" or so-called *cielli* could be used, meaning those painted elements, each composed of horizontally running strips of canvas, paper or plywood, that connect pairs of wings at the top. [13]

Rompimenti is the Spanish variant for *principale*, a term that indicates a perforated canvas composed of a single large backdrop or divided into three elements, whose openings were practicable or in any case such as to allow visibility of what was behind. [14] The list of structural elements ended with the *lontani*, the pairs of smaller wings with "ceilings" that made up the final part of the perspective, where the wings were very close together. [15]

For the lighting system, the storage offered differentiated solutions. There were *lumiere*, that is, chandeliers to light the stage; [16] *lumoni di lata*, meaning candles lined with tin so as to limit the risk of fire [17] and prevent the wax from dripping to the ground; [18] and *lumaze*, large iron vessels containing lamps fuelled with animal fat, perhaps for external use. [19] Lighting was so important that a separate chapter of the contract is dedicated to it. [20] The lighting requirements at Sant'Angelo involved the stage, the entrance, the corridors and walkways, the box office, and the outside of the building. The high cost of oil lamps (fig. 6) and, above all, of candles of white wax [21] (fig. 7) forced impresarios and scenographers to save money, often leaving the scene in semi-darkness and entrusting metal surfaces and other devices and stage tricks with the task of refracting the scarce available light. We do not know where the light sources were placed on the stage. We must assume that lumens and candles were arranged in lamp holders of different shapes positioned according to the custom of the main Venetian theatres of the time. [22] In part, such lamp holders were arranged behind the stage or on the outer line of the proscenium, specially screened; in part, they were fixed with a hook behind the wings or placed on the shelves fixed to round, revolving rods.

Skilled workers were in charge of switching the lights on and off, as well as changing the lighting between scenes. Hidden in the under-stage, they manoeuvred the pairs of wings by means of a system of winches, pulls and counterweights with a central rotating shaft, based on the Torelli model;[23] while they pushed the wings further away by hand. From the walkways of the attic they operated the machines and moved the "ceilings" vertically, in order to frame the perspective picture and, at the same time, conceal the wooden trusses above (the so-called *sforo*).[24]

The contract speaks about long and short scenes,[25] depending on their depth. We know that the shallow stage of the Sant'Angelo was arranged with five pairs of wings oblique to the proscenium line, as shown in a well-known drawing by the Swedish architect Nicodemus Tessin (1688) (fig. 8).[26] Between the third and the fourth pair ran a cut parallel to the proscenium line in which a kind of small backdrop concluded the short scenes. Thus, the long scenes were much more demanding as they required the stage designer and his team to create four more wings than the short scenes, in addition to the provision of additional scenic elements that the greater depth of the stage requires.

What kind of scenes? It is not specified in the contract, but they were certainly standard. The need to save money advised a preference for generic subjects that could be adapted to many operas and many settings: the port, the palace atrium, the garden or the *deliziosa*, the wood, the prison, the military camp. For all these settings, an abundance of props was needed, also indicated among the *robbe* of the contract:[27] the *careghe*, that is, the common chairs, as well as tables, thrones, chariots (for the "triumphs"). This small store of stage materials had to cover the expenses incurred by Bellavite: expenses by no means insignificant.

The librettist provided the scenographer with a complete list of the rooms to be reconstructed. The contract specified that this list had to be received by Bellavite two months before the beginning of the performances:[28] a period, apparently, believed to be more than sufficient. Moreover, the scenographer's work began well before then, as the impresario was able to provide him with the drafts drawn up by the poet, including the subject of the drama and the approximate number and duration of the actions.[29] There was also the sewing and priming of the canvases, the finishing of the wooden parts and everything needed to operate the stage and lighting equipment. It should also not be forgotten that the opera was a collective effort, the production of which was open to continuous modification and adjustment, even after performances had begun, and whose testing took place close to the debut.

A reference to the opera finale, to which a separate clause is due, was essential to the contract.[30] The fact that a surplus of stagecraft was required in opera finals is easily understood by anyone who is even a little involved in the performing arts. In his famous satire *Il teatro alla moda*, the composer Benedetto Marcello criticised the usage among stage designers of giving excessive importance to the last decoration.[31] Indeed, it seems that in Venice there was a habit of admitting the audience to the theatre for free in the final part of the performance. Thus, according to Marcello's satire, the scenographer was inclined to overload the last scene of the opera with stagecraft, special effects, and tricks to get the applause of the so-called multitude. Whether Marcello is telling the truth or not, it is certain that this document attests to the scenographer's aptitude for displaying his best repertoire in order to grab the farewell applause. The contract states that in the finale abundant use should be made of "transparencies", which are those scenic elements made of fabric, very thin cloth, gauze, semi-transparent paper or other, often with painted applications, which superimposed on the scene generate beautiful chiaroscuro and suggestive optical-illusionistic effects.[32] It is also prescribed that the scene was studded with gold and silver surfaces, which also helped refract light and make the scene shine. Lastly, the use of machines and "triumphant chariots" is recommended, meaning, in other words, those legacies of seventeenth-century scenic culture that had evidently never disappeared and that at this time had been used especially in the grand finale.

This contract was private, like all Venetian theatre contracts of the time. It was filed with a public notary because someone did not respect the agreements, so it was challenged. The one who didn't respect the contract was Bellavite. Called to be a stage designer in Bohemia, he walked out on the impresario Madonis and abandoned Venice. Bellavite would never be the stage designer at the Sant'Angelo.^[33] But it is thanks to his non-compliance that the contract has survived. Thanks to Bellavite, we know what the rights and duties, customs and practices of a scenographer in early 18th century Venetian theatres were. If all had gone well, this precious document would have disappeared forever.

[1] Venice, State Archives, *Notarile. Atti*, busta 1912, ff. n.n., 24th January 1724 *more veneto* (= 1724). The document (henceforth: *Contratto*) is published in G. STEFANI, *Uno scenografo e un impresario: il contratto Madonis-Bellavite al teatro Sant'Angelo di Venezia (1724)*, in «Drammaturgia», XVIII / n.s. 8, 2021, pp. 435-461. Refer to the latter contribution for further details on what is treated here.

[2] Antonio Madonis was born in Venice around 1694. A virtuoso of the violin, as well as a skilful player of *viola d'amore* and horn, he belonged to a *famiglia d'arte*. On 15th December 1720, he joined the orchestra of St Mark's Chapel. Between the 1710s and 1920s, he worked at the Teatro Sant'Angelo. See G. STEFANI, *Sebastiano Ricci impresario in angustie a Venezia: i guai della stagione 1718-1719 al Sant'Angelo*, in «Drammaturgia», XII / n.s. 2, 2015, pp. 263-289; E. SELFRIDGE-FIELD, *The Teatro Sant'Angelo: Cradle of Fledgling Opera Troupes*, in «Musicologica Brunensia», *Supplementum*, LIII, 2018, pp. 158-170: 163.

[3] Born in Verona on 20 December 1691, he was educated in painting and set design by Simone Brentana and Alessandro Mauro. As a stage designer, he worked at the Teatro San Giovanni Grisostomo in the early 1720s. He realised the pictorial decoration of the Teatro Filarmonico in Verona (see P. RIGOLI, *Tre nuovi documenti sul primo teatro Filarmonico*, in «Civiltà veronese», n.s., 1990, 7-8, pp. 9-22, now in ID., *Scritti sull'accademia Filarmonica e il suo teatro*, edited by M. MAGNABOSCO and L. OCH, Verona, Accademia Filarmonica di Verona, 2013, pp. 77-81). For Bellavite's *curriculum vitae* see the one written by his own hand published by P. RIGOLI, *Lettere di Innocente Bellavite e di altri scenografi per il Teatro di Brescia (1745)*, in «Atti e memorie della Accademia di agricoltura scienze e lettere di Verona», XXXVII / s. VI, 1985-1986, pp. 167-206.

[4] See E. SELFRIDGE-FIELD, *Bernardo Canal and Antonio Vivaldi: A Brief Awakening at the Teatro Sant'Angelo*, in *Venezia città della musica (1600-1750). Stato delle ricerche e prospettive*. Proceedings of the Study Day (Venice, 29 June 2012), http://www.vcbm.it/public/research_attachments/Venezia_citta_della_musica_-_Atti_della_giornata_di_studio_-_2012_1.pdf (last access: 17 August 2022).

[5] About this theatre: R. GIAZOTTO, *La guerra dei palchi (seconda serie)*, in «Nuova rivista musicale italiana», I, 1967, 3, pp. 465-508: 476-491; *I teatri pubblici di Venezia (secoli XVII-XVIII)*, documentary exhibition and catalogue edited by L. ZORZI *et al.* (Venice, 22 settembre-11 ottobre 1971), Venezia, La Biennale di Venezia, 1971, *passim*; N. MANGINI, *I teatri di Venezia*, Milano, Mursia, 1974, pp. 73-76 e 132-139; F. MANCINI-M.T. MURARO-E. POVOLEDO, *I teatri del Veneto*, I. to. II. *Venezia e il suo territorio. Imprese private e teatri sociali*, Venezia, Regione del Veneto, Giunta regionale-Corbo e Fiore, 1996, pp. 3-62; M. TALBOT, *A Venetian Operatic Contract of 1714*, in *The Business of Music*, a cura di M. T., Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2002, pp. 10-61; E. SELFRIDGE-FIELD, *A New Chronology of Venetian Opera and Related Genres, 1660-1760*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007, *passim*; G. STEFANI, *Sebastiano Ricci impresario d'opera a Venezia nel primo Settecento*, Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2015, in *partic.* pp. 97-116.

[6] *Lucio Papirio dittatore*, Venezia, Marino Rossetti, 1721. See M. VIALE, *Disegni inediti dello scenografo Innocente Bellavite*, in «Società piemontese di archeologia e di belle arti», n.s., VI-VII, 1952-1953, pp. 183-198.

[7] See point 1 of the *Contratto*.

[8] On the concept of *dotazione* see, in partic., the related entry of E. POVOLEDO in *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, Roma, Le Maschere, 1957, vol. IV, coll. 911-912.

[9] As illustrated in F. CARINI MOTTA, *Costruzione de' teatri e machine teatrali*, in *Scenotecnica barocca. "Costruzione de' teatri e machine teatrali" di Fabrizio Carini Motta (1688) e "Pratica delle machine de' teatri" di Romano Carapecchia (1689-91)*, an introductory essay by E. TAMBURINI, Roma, E & A editori associati, 1994, pp. 18-22.

[10] See in partic. the *machines des théâtres* illustrated in the *planches* XIII-XV and XIX, available in the Italian edition of the *Encyclopédie* edited by F. MASTROPASQUA (*Il teatro*, Milano, Mazzotta, 1981, pp. 138-139, 142-145, 154). See also M. VIALE FERRERO, *Scenotecnica e macchine al tempo di Alessandro Scarlatti. I mezzi in uso e i fini da conseguire*, in *Alessandro Scarlatti und seine Zeit*, edited by M. LÜTOLF, Bern-Stuttgart-Wien, Paul Haupt, 1995, pp. 55-77: 55-57.

[11] See M.T. MURARO, *Teatro, scena, messinscena, il lessico degli addetti ai lavori*, in *Scena e messinscena. Scritti teatrali 1960-1998*, edited by M.I. BIGGI, with a foreword by P. PETROBELLI and M. VIALE FERRERO, Venezia, Marsilio, 2004, pp. 135-143: 137.

[12] See the related entry of the *Glossario* in *Scenotecnica barocca*, cit., p. 152.

[13] See the entry "cielo", *ivi*, p. 146.

[14] See G. POLIDORI, *Principale*, in *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, cit., vol. VIII, col. 488. On the definition of *principale* see also MURARO, *Teatro, scena, messinscena*, cit., p. 138.

[15] See *ibid.*

[16] See *ivi*, p. 139.

[17] See the advice of Carini Motta in *Costruzione de' teatri e machine teatrali*, cit., p. 25.

[18] See N. SABBATINI, *Pratica di fabricar scene e machine ne' teatri* (1638), edited by E. POVOLEDO, Roma, Carlo Bestetti, 1955, p. 54.

[19] See G. BOERIO, *Dizionario del dialetto veneziano* (1829), Venezia, Cecchini, 1867³, p. 377, entry "lumazza".

[20] See point 4 of the *Contratto*. On Baroque lighting, see the valuable practical advice by Sabbatini (*Pratica di fabricar scene e machine ne' teatri*, cit., pp. 53-57) and by Carini Motta (*Costruzione de' teatri e machine teatrali*, cit., pp. 22-26). See also E. POVOLEDO, *Illuminotecnica*, in *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, cit., vol. VI (1959), coll. 493-501, as well as G.M. BERGMAN, *Lighting in the Theatre*, Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell, 1977, pp. 89-116.

[21] See SABBATINI, *Pratica di fabricar scene*, cit., p. 53.

[22] See POVOLEDO, *Illuminotecnica*, cit., col. 499.

[23] See VIALE FERRERO, *Scenotecnica e macchine al tempo di Alessandro Scarlatti*, cit., p. 56.

[24] On the function of the attic: CARINI MOTTA, *Costruzione de' teatri e machine teatrali*, cit., pp. 46-52, 60-63, 69-74.

[25] See point 1 of the *Contratto*.

[26] See N. TESSIN THE YOUNGER, *Travel Notes 1673-77 and 1687-88*, edited by M. LAINE and B. MAGNUSSON, Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, 2002, p. 364.

[27] See the Annex to the *Contratto*.

[28] See point 1 of the *Contratto*.

[29] See E. POVOLEDO, *Spazio scenico, prospettiva e azione drammatica nel teatro barocco italiano*, in *La scenografia barocca*. Proceedings of the 24th Congress C.I.H.A. (Bologna, 10-18 September 1979), edited by A. SCHNAPPER, Bologna, Clueb, 1982, pp. 5-17: 9.

[30] See point 2 of the *Contratto*.

[31] B. MARCELLO, *Il teatro alla moda* (1720), edited by M. GEREMIA, Treviso, Diastema, 2015, p. 53.

[32] See E. POVOLEDO, *Cenno storico* of the entry *Trasparente*, in *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, cit., vol. IX (1962), coll. 1095-96.

[33] See STEFANI, *Uno scenografo e un impresario*, cit.

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