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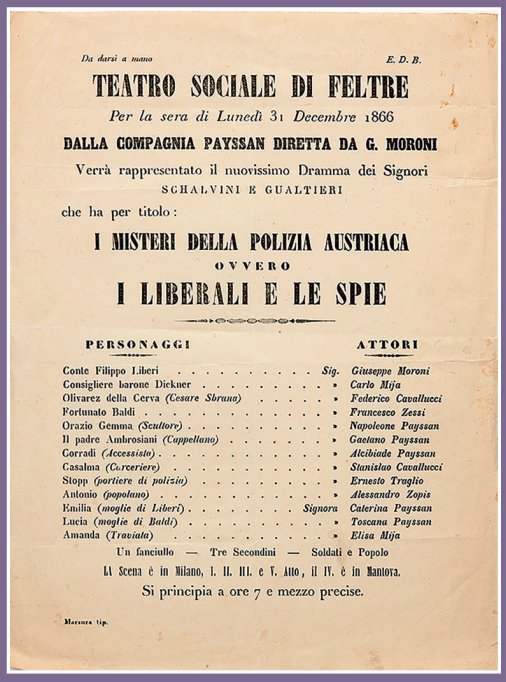
Interdisziplinäre Studien zur historischen Theaterkultur
3

Giulia Brunello – Annette Kappeler (Eds.)

Places of Cohesion and Debate

Socio-Political Roles of Provincial Theatres during the Nineteenth Century



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Daniel Allenbach,
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Table of Contents

Foreword

This volume is based on the results of a 2023 conference organised by the Bern Academy of the Arts HKB, namely by its research Institute Interpretation and the group members of the project "Italian Provincial Theatre and the Risorgimento", funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. The project (2020–2024) focused on provincial theatres in what is today Northern Italy during the nineteenth century and had three research focuses: the administration of these theatres, their scenic design, and their repertoire.

This book is the third in a series of project-related publications, the first centring on the activity of provincial theatres on the Italian peninsula and in the Habsburg Empire during the nineteenth century and the second focusing on the architecture and scenic design of European provincial theatres. The third publication unites contributions of international scholars on the provincial theatres as places of social cohesion and socio-political debate, mainly in Europe but also in India.

We are aware that the following contributions on theatre performances in European regions and in India cannot give a comprehensive image of provincial theatres' personnel and programming. Still, we believe that it is essential to study a variety of theatre cultures outside of metropolises in order to explore the relationship between their global connectedness and their local rootedness. The following contributions are therefore a few starting points in this direction.

Our special thanks go to Daniel Allenbach and Holger Schumacher, who have made this publication possible, to Dalyn Cook for her very profound English proofreading and last but not least to the SNSF, funding this publication.

Giulia Brunello, Annette Kappeler

I. Methods and state of research

Provincial Theatres as Places of Social Cohesion and Socio-Political Debate

Giulia Brunello / Annette Kappeler

Provincial theatres have long escaped the attention of researchers. Our current image of nineteenth-century theatres is shaped by historical evidence related to playhouses in European metropolises with vast auditoriums, large stages and big staffs, playing a highly canonised repertoire and accessible only to a tiny elite. Theatre on a smaller scale – especially when pieces are only orally transmitted – is still all too often considered not worth studying.[1] The vast majority of historical theatre practices is still unknown to scholars of theatre studies.[2]

According to Robinson, "neglected local histories" of theatres should be considered in order to broaden our perspective of theatre forms and to understand how different performing cultures were and still are interconnected.[3] The exploration of local theatre cultures, according to Robinson, is a first step towards a perspective on theatre cultures that combines the particularities of local practices with a focus on their global interconnections.

In putting provincial theatres and their significance for local communities at the heart of our research, we try to avoid advancing an idea of interconnectedness that imposes a 'Western' perspective on theatre practices and blurs differences between local cultures.[4] The close study of provincial-theatre forms and their importance for local populations must be the starting point for the study of interconnections, because only in taking a closer look at regional forms of theatre, the interdependence of different forms can be acknowledged. We also try to avoid what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls "asymmetric ignorance" – the idea that historians of European theatre often feel no need to refer to other parts of the world while historians from the global south are thought ignorant if they do not refer to European research.[5] In this volume, we extend our field of research beyond Europe

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This Introduction is a collective effort. The writing of the text was divided as follows: Annette Kappeler primarily contributed to the chapters "State of research" and "Topical subjects in provincial theatres", while Giulia Brunello especially focused on "The importance of provincial theatre" and "The characteristics of provincial theatre".

1 Khalid Amine, Decolonizing Theatre History in the Arab World (The Case of the Maghreb), in *The Methuen Drama Handbook of Theatre History and Historiography,* ed. by Claire Cochrane/Jo Robinson, London/New York 2020, pp. 236–246, here p. 240.

2 See e.g. Claire Cochrane/Jo Robinson, Introduction, in *The Methuen Drama Handbook*, ed. by Claire Cochrane/Jo Robinson, London/New York 2020, pp. 1–20, here p. 2.

3 Jo Robinson, Becoming More Provincial? The Global and the Local in Theatre History, in *New Theatre Quarterly* 23/3, 2007, pp. 229–240, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X07000139, here p. 229.

4 Ibid., p. 237.

5 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference,* Princeton 2009, p. 28. See also Cochrane/Robinson, Introduction, p. 11.

and also consider theatre practices in the Indian region of Kerala. As this volume covers theatre practices in Europe (particularly Italy) and India, this introduction is also primarily dedicated to these regions of the world.

Our focus on provincial theatres does not mean that we regard local theatre practices as isolated phenomena. On the contrary, theatre cultures were globally connected during the nineteenth century. Theatre traditions of various regions became known in far distant places and were often incorporated into local practices.[6] For example, provincial theatres in colonised regions received and appropriated European theatre forms from metropolises in a critical manner, and theatre traditions of colonised areas were influential for a multitude of European traditions.[7] That does not mean that we can speak of symmetric relationships in this context; all too often, the colonisers imposed forms of theatre-making onto a local population.[8] The idea of global interconnection means that provincial theatre cultures were often aware of international developments, but it does not in any way erase differences between local cultures or diminish their importance for provincial communities or their experience of colonialist violence.[9]

The provincial theatres studied in this volume were – even more than major venues – a socio-cultural space where the population of a region could meet and exchange ideas, where information was sought, and public opinion formed. The regional population often participated in on- and offstage activities of 'their' theatre, and they debated its performances. Nineteenth-century provincial theatres shaped the ideas and social networks of big parts of the population, and performances in provincial theatres reflected ongoing debates and developments. We are thus especially interested in the "conditions of theatre-making" in local communities, and we understand the performances we study as forms of socialising that are "reflective of wider social conditions".[10] This volume is the third and last in a series edited by the project group working on "Italian Provincial Theatre and the Risorgimento", opening with *Feltre's Teatro Sociale and the Role of Provincial Theatres in Italy and the Habsburg Empire during the Nineteenth Century* (2023) and continuing with *Architecture et scénographie dans les théâtres mineurs 1750–1850* (2025).

6 David Mason/Syed Jamil Ahmed/Carol C. Davis/Kanchuka Dharmasiri, Modern Theatre in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, in *Routledge Handbook of Asian Theatre*, ed. by Siyuan Liu, London 2016, pp. 268–289, here p. 275.

7 Ananda Lal, Interculturalism, in *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, ed. by Ananda Lal, Oxford 2004, pp. 164–167, here p. 164; Julia Prest, *Public Theatre and the Enslaved People of Colonial Saint-Domingue*, Cham 2023, pp. 64ff.

8 Amine, Decolonizing Theatre History in the Arab World, p. 239.

9 Robinson, Becoming More Provincial?, p. 231.

10 Cochrane/Robinson, Introduction, p. 12.

State of research

Studies on nineteenth-century theatre have long concentrated on major venues in metropolitan areas whilst largely overlooking small theatres in provincial towns, with some notable exceptions. We do not pretend to give an exhaustive list of studies on provincial theatres here; rather, we bring a few examples of exceptional publications to the attention of the reader.

The lack of research on provincial theatres is even more conspicuous for regions outside of Europe where theatre studies are sometimes still in their infancy. For the Indian subcontinent, for example, research tools such as bibliographies or periodical indexes are often not available even for well-known historical theatre cultures. Thus, major undertakings in this field are all the more compelling, such as the *Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, Ananda Lal's *Companion to Theatres of India*, which includes both rural and urban forms of Indian theatre, or David Kerr's *African Popular Theatre*, which gives an impressive amount of information about provincial theatre practices.[11] The annotated bibliography in the *Methuen Handbook of Theatre History and Historiography* is of great help for research on theatre cultures in manifold regions.[12]

For French-speaking regions, Max Fuchs's work set milestones for the study of the circuits of theatre companies that performed in the provinces as well as the tastes of small-town audiences.[13] Romuald Féret's research on provincial theatre focuses on its socio-political role.[14] Christine Carrère-Saucède's publications on provincial theatres give an impressive overview of theatre halls, theatre administration and programming.[15] John McCormick's *Popular Theatres of Nineteenth Century France* studies popular theatres, including those in provincial towns, and focuses on the social and economic context of their performances as well as spectacular performance forms such as acrobatics.[16] Michael R. Booth's *Theatre in the Victorian Age* includes a chapter on provincial theatres and their forms of organisation.[17] Sophie Horrocks is currently researching the working practices of travelling opera and theatre performers across provincial France in the period from 1824 to 1864.[18]

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11 *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, ed. by Ananda Lal, Oxford 2004; *Theatres of India. A Concise Companion*, ed. by Ananda Lal, Oxford 2009; David Kerr, *African Popular Theatre from Pre-Colonial Times to the Present Day*, London 1995.

12 Cochrane/Robinson, Introduction, p. 12.

13 Max Fuchs, *La vie théâtrale en province au XVIIIe siècle. Personnel et répertoire*, Paris 1986.

14 See, for example, Romuald Féret, Le théâtre de province au XIX^{e} siècle. Entre révolutions et conservatisme, in *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 367, 2012, pp. 119–143.

15 See Christine Carrère-Saucède, *Recensement des salles de spectacle et Bibliographie de la vie théâtrale en province au XIXe siècle,* see https://publis-shs.univ-rouen.fr/ceredi/689.html (last consulted 30 July 2025).

16 John McCormick, *Popular Theatres of Nineteenth Century France*, London/New York 2003.

17 Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, Cambridge 1991, pp. 16–18.

18 See Sophie Horrocks, *Performing for the Provinces. Touring Theatre Troupes and the French Political Imaginary, 1824–64,* PhD thesis, Durham University, 2023, and her contribution in this volume, pp. 47–59.

For German-speaking regions, Katharina Wessely's publications are worth mentioning. They concentrate on theatres in the Habsburg Empire and investigate questions of national identity.[19] Jiří Kopecký and Lenka Křupková's *Provincial Theater and Its Opera (1770–1920)* focuses on the German-language theatre in nineteenth-century Olomouc and traces the social history of the theatre as a cultural institution for its citizens.[20]

For the British Empire, Kathleen Barker's 1982 thesis about the performing arts in several provincial towns is still an impressive example of an in-depth study of regional theatre cultures.[21] There are also several publications about single provincial theatres worth mentioning, such as Douglas A. Reid's "Popular Theatre in Victorian Birmingham", which studies provincial audiences;[22] Katherine Newey's "Early Nineteenth-Century Theatre in Manchester";[23] and the study of the Theatre Royal in Nottingham, realised within a citizen-science project.[24] Frederick Burwick's volume on provincial theatres during the Industrial Revolution includes theatres in labour-class environments in provincial areas,[25] and Jill A. Sullivan's *The Politics of the Pantomime* gives an overview about the regional context of pantomime productions in several provincial towns and their often topical themes.[26]

Regarding Italy, several publications give an overview of provincial theatres for various regions, providing information not only about their history, organisation, repertoire, and scenic material that is still preserved but also about the state of sources available for study. Such works can be found especially for the regions of Veneto, Tuscany, and Emilia Romagna.[27] Information about Italian provincial theatres and their organisation can also be gleaned from outstanding studies that

19 Katharina Wessely, Die deutschsprachigen Provinztheater Böhmens und Mährens zwischen lokaler, regionaler und nationaler Identität, in *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 59/2, 2010, pp. 208–226.

20 Jiří Kopecký/Lenka Křupková, *Provincial Theater and Its Opera (1770–1920)*, Olomouc 2015.

21 Kathleen Barker, *The Performing Arts in Five Provincial Towns 1840–1870*, PhD thesis, Leicester, 1982.

22 Douglas A. Reid, Popular Theatre in Victorian Birmingham, in *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama. Aspects of Popular Entertainment in Theatre, Film and Television 1800–1976*, ed. by David Bradby/Louis James/Bernard Sharatt, Cambridge 1980, pp. 65–90.

23 Katherine Newey, Early Nineteenth-Century Theatre in Manchester, in *Manchester Regional History Review* 17/2, 2006, pp. 1–19.

24 Jo Robinson/Laura Carletti, Our Theatre Royal Nottingham. Co-Creation and Co-Curation of a Digital Performance Collection with Citizen Scholars, in *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 15/2, 2019, pp. 128–148.

25 Frederick Burwick, *British Drama of the Industrial Revolution*, Cambridge 2015.

26 Jill A. Sullivan, *The Politics of the Pantomime. Regional Identity in the Theatre 1860–1900*, Hertfordshire 2011.

27 For the Veneto region see Franco Mancini/Maria Teresa Muraro/Elena Povoledo, *I teatri del Veneto*, 4 vol., Venezia 1985–1994; for Tuscany see Elvira Garbero Zorzi, *I teatri storici della Toscana. Censimento documentario e architettonico*, Firenze 1990; for Emilia Romagna see Simonetta Bondoni, *Teatri storici in Emilia Romagna*, Casalecchio di Reno 1982.

analyse the life of itinerant troupes, especially through artists' memories[28] or the activities of theatrical agents and impresarios.[29]

The importance of provincial theatre

In-depth studies of provincial theatres that consider their personnel, their repertoire and its socio-political significance are still rare. A lack of research on provincial theatres persists despite the fact that few people lived in large metropolitan areas during the nineteenth century, and even fewer could afford going to the theatre in these metropolitan areas. The share of the world urban population doubled from 6.6 percent in 1800 to still only 12 percent in 1900. In many areas of the world, urbanisation was mostly a phenomenon of the twentieth century. In Europe, the urban population went from 10 percent in the beginning of the century to 30 percent in 1900.[30] In 1870, Europe was still a predominantly rural society, with three fifths of the population living in the countryside. But cities began to play a role in attracting a growing mass of agricultural workers. Those who migrated to the cities were often people who could no longer make a living in the countryside and were looking for employment in the growing industrial centres.[31] These migrants, though, were not typically the ones going to the opera in cities such as Milan. The city theatres, which research has focused on for so long, were only accessible for a small part of the population.

The vast majority of the world population lived in smaller towns or in the countryside during the nineteenth century. And those who could afford it went to theatres in local centres, some of which could be quite small, such as a barn on a local farm that doubled as a performance venue.[32] Most theatre workers and -goers attended performances in small theatres with approximately 100–600 seats, not in big halls in major metropolitan areas. The reality of theatre events, for many people, was one of small scale: of small halls, often built for other purposes and adapted to the needs of a theatre performance, or of outdoor scenes; of amateur players instead of actors who made a living out of their performances; of a handful

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28 Davide Seragnoli, *Carlo Ritorni e lo spettacolo a Reggio Emilia nell'Ottocento*, Bologna 1987; Sandra Pietrini, *Fuori scena. Il Teatro dietro le quinte nell'Ottocento*, Roma 2004; Antonio Colomberti, *Memorie di un artista drammatico*, a cura di Alberto Bentoglio, Roma 2004.

29 Livia Cavaglieri, *Tra arte e mercato. Agenti e agenzie teatrali nel XIX secolo*, Roma 2006.

30 Julia Zinkina/Ilya Ilyin/Andrey Korotayev, The Nineteenth-Century Urbanization Transition in the First World, in *Global Evolution, Historical Globalistics and Globalization Studies*, ed. by Leonid E. Grinin/Ilya V. Ilyin/Peter Herrmann/Andrey V. Korotayev, Volgograd 2017 (Globalistics and Globalization Studies, Vol. 6), pp. 164–172, here pp. 165f.

31 Massimo Livi Bacci, *La trasformazione demografica delle società europee*, Torino 1977, pp. 31–53; Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital 1848–1875*, New York 1975, pp. 228–269 (chapters XI and XII).

32 Marco Fincardi, Dal palchetto alla stalla, in *L'Almanacco* 5, 1986/87, pp. 45–67; Roberto Leydi, The Dissemination and Popularization of Opera, in *Opera in Theory and Practice, Image and Myth. Part II: Systems*, ed. by Lorenzo Bianconi/Giorgio Pestelli, Chicago/London 1988, pp. 287–376.

of musicians, singers, actors, or dancers rather than big orchestras or ensembles; and one of very limited financial means. For example, the theatre of Olomouc had a stable orchestra, which could have as few as twenty-two players for opera productions.[33] Despite these limitations, the quality of performances and the beauty of decorations – on scene and in the auditorium – was of real concern to many of the local communities we have studied.[34]

A lack of research on nineteenth-century provincial theatre is also persisting despite the importance of local theatres as socio-cultural venues and vital places of socio-political debate in a time of rapid political and social change. During the nineteenth century, European empires such as the Habsburg or Napoleonic empire controlled vast, multilingual territories but did not allow much liberty of assembly or expression. Printed documents were censored, and assemblies in public places were mostly forbidden.[35] Locals were often allowed to gather in provincial theatres, but theatres were also seen as spaces easily surveilled.[36] In nineteenth-century India, for example, colonial authorities realised quickly that the public stage could be a place of rebellion. From 1876 on, the *Dramatic Performance Act* enabled authorities to prohibit plays that were seen as dangerous for the public order. Dramatic performances had to receive a licence, and scripts had to be deposited in advance. Thus, as was similarly done on the Italian peninsula, Indian authors set stories of subjugation, rebellion, and nationalism in

33 Kopecký/Křupková, *Provincial Theater and Its Opera*, p. 34. In colonial regions such as today's Haiti, the opera orchestra often had even fewer members, e. g. in Port-au-Prince only eleven regular musicians. See Prest, *Public Theatre and the Enslaved People*, p. 156.

34 This is confirmed by the statutes of the theatre societies of Cittadella, Castelfranco, Belluno, and Feltre and by documentation attesting to the circuits of renowned artists who worked at the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice and were called by the towns to embellish their theatre. To give but a few examples, Giuseppe Bertoja released the sets in Castelfranco Veneto in 1858, see Mancini/Muraro/Povoledo, *I teatri del Veneto*, Vol. 4: *Treviso e la marca Trivigiana*, p. 152; Francesco Bagnara painted stock scenery for Feltre's Teatro Sociale in 1825, see PBF, *Fondo Storico*, G VI 90 bis, Affiche n. 10, *Il ritorno di Pietro il Grande Czar di tutte le Russie in Mosca*, 13 September 1825; Francesco Bagnara worked for Belluno's Teatro Sociale in 1835, see Francesco Bagnara, *Teatro di Belluno. Per Dotte*, drawing and watercolour, Ca' Rezzonico – Museo del Settecento Veneziano, Venezia (inv. Classe III 5987). He also worked in Cittadella in 1831 and 1832, see Archivio Storico comunale di Cittadella (AsCC), *Serie Teatro Sociale*, b. 1 bis, *Corrispondenza varia dal 1831 al 1837*. Tranquillo Orsi painted the new curtain in Feltre in 1843, see Maria Ida Biggi, Tranquillo Orsi, in *Venezia arti* 6, 1997, pp. 153–158, here p. 158.

35 Nicola Mangini, Sulla politica teatrale dell'Austria nel Lombardo-Veneto, in Nicola Magnini, *Drammaturgia e spettacolo tra Settecento e Ottocento. Studi e ricerche*, Padova 1979, pp. 67–73; Maria Iolanda Palazzolo, *I libri, il trono, l'altare. La censura nell'Italia della Restaurazione*, Milano 2003. About the censorship of comic operas see Francesco Izzo, *Laughter between Two Revolutions. Opera Buffa in Italy, 1831–1848*, Rochester 2013; for the period after the unification of Italy see Maria Teresa Morelli, *L'unità d'Italia nel teatro. Istituzioni politiche, identità nazionale e questione sociale*, Roma 2012, pp. 201–220; about censorship questions in Europe see Robert Justin Goldstein, *Political Censorship of the Arts and the Press in Nineteenth-Century Europe,* New York 1989.

36 Fabian A. Stallknecht, *Dramenmodell und ideologische Entwicklung der italienischen Oper im frühen Ottocento*, Stuttgart 2001, p. 139.

mythologically or historically distant realms in order to be able to perform their pieces.[37]

Literacy rates were still low in Europe and India during the nineteenth century; in some places eighty percent of the population could neither read nor write, with huge differences among periods, geographical areas, gender, age, and social class.[38] The Indian writer of social drama Gurazada Venkata Appa Rao (1862–1915) felt that "until reading habits prevail among the masses, one must look only to the stage" for trying to inform local populations on topics of social reform.[39] Theatre performances were, in many places, one of the only ways for a local population to entertain themselves, to gather, to socialise, to keep informed, to exchange views on society, and to discuss ways of improving living conditions or political systems.

In some geographical areas such as the Italian peninsula, provincial theatres could also be one of the ways in which a municipal competition, typical for this period, was played out. Each provincial theatre had a symbolic function for its town and gave it a certain reputation, especially in relation to neighbouring ones. Towns tried to outdo their neighbours through building a beautiful theatre and planning impressive programming. Performances reflected the 'good taste' of the administrators and enhanced the good name of the town. Driven by a love of their artistic and cultural heritage and a desire to enhance and promote it, administrators of local theatres devoted energy and space to building or renovating civic theatres and to planning an adequate program.[40] This aspect is particularly important in what is today Northern Italy, if we consider that in pre-unified Italy, and especially in the Lombardo-Veneto region, municipal pride and local patriotism permeated – and built – Italian nationalism. Monza, for example, a small town very close to the much bigger and more important city of Milan, promoted a strong local pride and supported its theatrical life.[41] When the Lombardo-Veneto was annexed to Italy between 1859 and 1866, a new municipal identity was built

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37 Ananda Lal, Dramatic Performance Act, in *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, ed. by Ananda Lal, Oxford 2004, pp. 110–112, here p. 111. Concerning Italian opera, see e.g. Philip Gossett/Daniela Macchione, Le "Edizioni distrutte" e il significato dei cori operistici nel Risorgimento, in *Il Saggiatore musicale* 12/2, 2005, pp. 339–387, here pp. 355–357; Jeremy Commons, Donizetti e la censura napoletana, in *Atti del primo convegno di studi donizettiani, 22-28 settembre 1975*, Bergamo 1983, pp. 1–52; Piero Weiss, Sacri bronzi. Note in calce a un noto saggio di Dallapiccola, in *Opera e libretto,* Vol. 1, ed. by Gianfranco Folena/Teresa Muraro/Giovanni Morelli, Firenze 1990, pp. 149–163.

38 Carlo M. Cipolla, *Istruzione e sviluppo. Il declino dell'analfabetismo nel mondo occidentale,* Torino 1971, pp. 68f. (originally published in English in 1969, translated into Italian by Franca Zennaro). For the region of Lombardo-Veneto see Claudia Salmini, L'istruzione pubblica dal regno italico all'Unità, in *Storia della cultura veneta*, Vol. 6: *Dall'età napoleonica alla prima guerra mondiale*, Vicenza 1986, pp. 59–79. In India, literacy was low until the twentieth century with huge literacy movements only from the 1930s on. See Mookkiah Soundarapandian, *Literacy Campaign in India*, New Delhi 2000, p. 10.

39 M. Nagabushana Sarma, Appa Rao, Gurazada Venkata, in *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, ed. by Ananda Lal, Oxford 2004, p. 15.

40 Carlotta Sorba, *Teatri. L'Italia del melodramma nell'età del Risorgimento*, Bologna 2001, p. 101.

41 See Alessandra Palidda's article in this volume, pp. 173–189.

inside a new national identity, and all municipal glories became national ones.[42] Municipal competition also played an important role for France's provinces, as can be seen in Sophie Horrocks's article in this volume.[43]

The characteristics of provincial theatre

Differently than in big cities, where attending the theatre was too expensive for the majority of the population, smaller provincial or rural theatres often had lower or no admission fees and attracted a wide range of social strata of the local society. On the Indian subcontinent, many theatres in rural areas mounted a variety of theatrical forms that were attended by semi-literate or illiterate farm workers.[44] In many rural theatres in Britain, a big proportion of the public probably came from the industrial working and agricultural labouring classes.[45] For the Italian peninsula, we know that prices for the space in the middle of the auditorium (without seats) were kept quite low and that artisans of different sorts could be seen in the theatre.[46] Agricultural or factory workers could probably neither afford the clothing nor the travel expenses for going to the theatre, even in provincial centres. Nineteenth-century provincial theatres also served as a gathering place for different linguistic groups, who met for debates about the dominances of languages and ideas of nationhood.[47]

The local population often actively participated in the organisation and artistic activities of provincial theatres as amateur actors, singers, musicians, dancers, or artisans, among other roles. In many Indian provincial theatre traditions, performers worked in other professions, only appearing on stage during a theatre

42 On national and local identities see Carlotta Sorba, Identità locali, in *Contemporanea* 1/1, 1998, pp. 157–170; and Ilaria Porciani, Identità locale/identità nazionale. La costruzione di una doppia appartenenza, in *Centralismo e federalismo tra Otto e Novecento. Italia e Germania a confronto*, ed. by Oliver Janz/Pierangelo Schiera/Hannes Siegrist, Bologna 1997, pp. 141–182. For Feltre's municipal pride see Donatella Bartolini/Ugo Pistoia, Erudizione e storia locale a Feltre nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento. Antonio Vecellio, in *Erudizione e fonti documentarie. Archivi e ricerca storica nell'Ottocento italiano (1840-1880)*, ed. by Andrea Giorgi/Stefano Moscadelli/Gianmaria Varanini/Stefano Vitali, Firenze 2019, https://doi.org/10.36253/978-88-6453-840-2, Vol. 1, pp. 529–554, here p. 536.

43 See Sophie Horrocks's article in this volume, pp. 47–59.

44 Kirti Jain, Nacha, in *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, ed. by Ananda Lal, Oxford 2004, p. 290.

45 Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, p. 17.

46 In most provincial theatres on the Italian peninsula, a ticket for a prose performance for a seat in the stalls cost between 40 and 60 lira cents during the 1870s and 1880s. This figure corresponds to the daily wage of a worker of the low/middle class. See Raphaël Bortolotti/Giulia Brunello/Annette Kappeler, In the Wings. Offstage Labour in a Provincial Theatre, in *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 102/1, 2022, pp. 333–359. See also Michele Nani's article in this volume, pp. 97–110.

47 Provincial theatres in Europe's colonies could be places in which, surprisingly, much-exploited people of colour and white plantation owners could meet. This seems to have happened e.g. in Haiti, see Prest, *Public Theatre and the Enslaved People*, pp. 35ff. See also Lenka Křupková's article in this volume, pp. 61–77.

festival period.[48] The theatre of Feltre performed spoken theatre and opera with the help of local amateur players.[49] Amateur artists in theatre troupes, orchestras, and civic bands were often quite important for a town's cultural life and were linked to other civic organisations.[50]

The performers in provincial theatres were not only local amateur artists: these theatres were also visited by travelling professional troupes. In France, for example, travelling actors toured the provincial towns of certain regions and shaped the repertoire of the theatres they visited.[51] Provincial theatres could also have close connections to major theatres in cities, as can be seen in the close relationship between Milan and Monza.[52] In Europe, smaller theatres often acted as stepping stones for more important ones: actors or opera troupes could work their way up to major theatre stages in many regions.[53] Many provincial theatres maintained ties to famous artists with a link to their town, too. Local composers could thus have a great influence on the programming of a provincial theatre.[54]

Locals could also shape the whole administration of a provincial theatre. They could be involved in nearly any organisational activity of 'their' theatre, acting as an actor, a journalist or the director of a theatre.[55] Forms of theatre organisation could, of course, vary considerably from one region to another. For example, most provincial theatres on the Italian peninsula did not have professional theatre managers but had instead theatre societies consisting of a town's 'elite' who were responsible for financial and programming matters. Theatres were mostly not owned by a public institution but by private individuals who bought or hired boxes in their local theatre and chose a theatre council by vote. Municipalities often made an annual contribution to theatres: they contributed to municipal theatres and made a contribution to theatres run by societies, too.[56] In Schio (Vicenza), a theatre for workers was built up as a philanthropic initiative, opened inside a worker village

48 Jain, Nacha, p. 290.

49 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 Giovanni Bellio (PBF, *Fondo Storico*, F II 50, *Il Barbiere di Gheldria* nel Teatro sociale di Feltre il 25-08-1839, p. 45); in 1844, an opera was composed by Luigi Jarosch for the "dilettanti feltresi" (Luigi Jarosch: *L'Avaro. Opera in due atti. Scritta per i dilettanti feltresi*, Feltre 1844); during the 1860s and 1870s, several amateur actors from Feltre performed pieces together with the company Moroni (PBF, *Fondo Storico*, playbills n. 13, 14, 23, 53, 63, 64, 66).

50 On the importance of civic bands and philharmonic societies see Antonio Carlini, Società filarmoniche e bande, in *Musica nel Veneto. I beni di cultura*, ed. by Paolo Fabbri, Milano 2000, pp. 106–129; about the city of Belluno see Francesco Praloran, *Storia della musica bellunese*, Belluno 1885.

51 See Sophie Horrocks's article in this volume, pp. 47–59.

52 See Alessandra Palidda's article in this volume, pp. 173–189.

53 Katharina Wessely, Between Back Province and Metropolis. Actor Autobiographies as Sources to Trace Cultural Mobility, in *The Methuen Drama Handbook of Theatre History and Historiography,* ed. by Claire Cochrane/Jo Robinson, London/New York 2020, pp. 139–148, here p. 141.

54 See Cecilia Nicolò's article in this volume, pp. 157–172.

55 See Anna G. Piotrowska's article in this volume, pp. 33–46.

56 Sorba, *Teatri*, p. 81.

under the patronage of the Rossi family.[57] French provincial theatres of the nineteenth century were organised in quite a different manner: the provinces were divided in 'arrondissements', and each one was controlled by a licence-holder who was the director of one or more theatres.[58] British provincial theatres were organised around so-called Theatres Royal who operated under licences granted by the Crown or the Lord Chamberlain. Other theatres were visited by companies moving in a certain region, or strolling companies performing in villages and small towns.[59] The most common organisation forms of European provincial theatres were thus theatre societies, private businesses, and local public administration.[60]

Locals were also involved in other theatre work researchers still do not write about much: backstage work. This could include preparing theatre material such as outfits, lighting, scenic designs and so forth; selling tickets; or clearing up after a performance. One of the most important theatre workers of this kind was often the custodian. What we know about the custodian of Feltre's Teatro Sociale illuminates some characteristics of backstage work.[61] We suppose that he lived next to the theatre and that he needed to be a professional carpenter. For the running of the theatre, he had many different tasks: solving urgent problems, carrying out daily maintenance work, storing all sorts of objects, attending rehearsals, operating the lights during performances, and finally, once the performance was over, cleaning and checking all the spaces in the theatre. This Feltre local had to know the theatre intimately and must have been present at nearly all times when a performance was prepared or held.[62]

Provincial theatres were thus often places of permeable boundaries between the stage and the auditorium, between actors and the public. In many contexts, the local population was involved in nearly all the theatre work: acting and organising, building and renovating, washing and sweeping, and sometimes also in struggles for better working conditions.[63] Locals often had a say in choosing the repertoire and in staging performances for 'their' theatre.[64] That led to a situation where spectacles were often topical and involved themes debated by their audience.

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57 See Andrew Holden's article in this volume, pp. 79–96.
58 McCormick, *Popular Theatres*, p. 53. See Sophie Horrocks's article in this volume, pp. 47–59.
59 Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, pp. 16f.
60 See Michele Nani's article in this volume, pp. 97–110.
61 Bortolotti/Brunello/Kappeler, In the Wings, pp. 333–359.
62 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, G VI 90 bis, *Piano disciplinare del Teatro Sociale di Feltre*, 1813 (approved in 1829), art. 22.
63 See Michele Nani's article in this volume, pp. 97–110.
64 For Feltre see, e.g., the letters in the *Gazzetta privilegiata di Venezia* written by Angelo Bilesimo in 1832 and 1833: A. B., Appendice di letteratura, teatri e varietà, in *Gazzetta privilegiata di Venezia* 17/223, 29 September 1832, pp. [1]f.; A. B., Appendice di letteratura, teatri e varietà, in *Gazzetta privilegiata di Venezia* 18/196, 31 August 1833, pp. [1]f. See also Giulia Brunello's article in this volume, pp. 191–206.

Topical subjects in provincial theatres

Differently than metropolitan theatres, which often specialised in a particular theatre genre, provincial theatres often offered a varied programme, including spoken theatre, music and dance theatre, pantomime, marionette or puppet theatre, instrumental music, acrobatics and magician's shows, or shows of exotic animals.[65] In Northern Italy, for example, we only know of a few theatres that forbade such spectacular performances.[66] Many theatre productions combined various art forms. In nineteenth-century India, theatre performances often merged different art forms such as dance, acrobatics, or puppetry.[67] Naturally, theatre in this region was so varied that we cannot generalise about its performance styles, but theatre forms in various provinces seem to have been characterised by a "flexibility of form and the easy shift across genre",[68] as it was in nineteenth-century European provincial theatres.[69]

While genres such as acrobatic shows or marionette theatre have been neglected by researchers until quite recently, these were a significant part of the theatrical experience for the vast majority of theatregoers during the nineteenth century.[70] Italian opera became known to a big part of the population through 'minor' forms that borrowed their themes and music from the famous operas of the time.[71] Lately, considering more popular, non-literary theatre forms has become more acceptable to theatre scholars.[72] We believe that we should move away from elitist definitions of theatre performances, and we should not dismiss performances such as acrobatics, marionette theatre or magician's shows as spectacles for the masses that have no place in theatre historiography. They are both worth being studied as artworks and as a means of staging and thereby introducing current topics to a wide audience.

The varied programme of provincial theatres often thematised ongoing local debates that were of interest to their audiences. Being one of the only nearby places of assembly, information exchange, socio-political negotiation, and the formation of public opinion, nineteenth-century provincial theatres were often engaged with a local reality. Their focus could be political events, social change, roles of particular social groups, scientific inventions, or medical debates. Sullivan's study of

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65 In the city of Medicina, near Bologna, e.g., there were shows of exotic animals, see Luigi Samoggia, *Il teatro di Medicina. Dal Seicento al Novecento. Vicende, personaggi, attivitá*, Medicina 1983, p. 22.

66 See for example Archivio Storico comunale di Castelfranco Veneto (ASCCV), *Fondo Teatro Accademico*, Serie 3 Delibere, statuto e regolamenti 1778–1966, *Regolamento del Teatro Accademico di Castelfranco Veneto*, 1844.

67 Birendranath Datta, Dhuliya, in *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, ed. by Ananda Lal, Oxford 2004, p. 108.

68 Ralph Yarrow, *Indian Theatre. Theatre of Origin, Theatre of Freedom*, Richmond 2001, p. 13.

69 See e.g. McCormick, *Popular Theatres*, p. 148.

70 Robinson, Becoming More Provincial?, p. 230.

71 See Maria Teresa Morelli's article in this volume, pp. 113–126.

72 Robinson, Becoming More Provincial?, p. 237.