

Analogy between Ancient Techniques of Theatrical Scenography and Shipbuilding Research Project: Iter Teatro - A Nautical, Nomadic Stage Using Water as Dramaturgical Element

*By Ottavio Anania**

The paper outlines the initial idea behind this project, i.e., the similarity between theatrical dynamics, particularly on stage, and the building of wooden vessels, which during years of research, from 2004 till today, have led to the production of eight different versions of movable and floating stages. Historical sources provide evidence of how theatre stagehands and sailors shared very similar skills since the times of ancient Rome, and how some of the rituals typical of fishing villages, like the tuna fisheries in Sicily, consists of highly dramatized behaviours and methods, in a unique mixture of spirituality and engineering, which was applied by seamen spontaneously. During the years of development of this project, the element of water has always had the greatest importance, and consequently it represents the main performative element. Another key element is the journey, or Iter (in Latin). The concept of mobility has been translated into a stagecraft design which can be very easily moved from town to town, or from one country to another. The second part of the presentation will focus on concept-theatre and its latest developments, highlighting its main characteristics, structural details, purposes and prospects. The conclusion will argue the specific reasons why this project – which has long been teetering between dream and reality – should now be realized, considering, in particular, the ethical and social values pertaining to scenic arts, which since the Greek theatre have always been a powerful medium for telling the story and life of the people, and for renewing their cultural heritage.

Introduction

This paper is part of a study on mobile theatres that began in 2004. It is divided into two sections: the research and the consequent concept design, which was developed into the project of a theatrical equipment.

The analysis is focused on the similarities that have been found between theatre¹ and marine architecture.² There seems to be a specific parallelism in relation to these two sectors.

To begin with, the subdivision of spaces in height: in the theatre there is the substage, in a ship the hold; the theatre stage is the meeting place of all the workers, just like the deck of a ship. Even the equipment used in a theatre shows

*Professor, Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera & Accademia di Belle Arti di Agrigento, Italy.

1. Giuliana Ricci, *Teatri d'Italia* (Milano: Bramante Editore, 1971).

2. Maurizio Elvetico, *Navigare, Dizionario Enciclopedico della Nautica* (Roma: Nutrimenti, 2012).

many similarities with that of marine environments.

More significant than these technical/aesthetical affinities is the attitude that characterized the workers in both fields, and specifically a widespread devotional respect.³ Just like theatre workers in ancient times - who considered the stage a mystical place, where man could come into contact with the word of the gods - sailors too regarded their boats, and especially the sea, as elements of spiritual nature.⁴ In both cases, man's relationship with the environment was deemed sacred.

These affinities, as simple as they may seem, are worthy of further analysis. The next step of our investigation was to look for tangible traces of cooperation between theatrical and maritime craftsmen, to find out whether they had ever met for a common purpose. Specific similarities have emerged on various occasions during these years of study, such as the way full-scale technical drawings are made: set designers,⁵ who build the sets in the theatre workshop,⁶ and shipbuilders actually use a very similar method,⁷ so much so that they both create their drawings standing upright on sheets of paper tens of meters long laid on the floor.

Historical examples of such collaborative encounters have been found at different times, and in different places, from the theatres of Italian port cities, like Palermo,⁸ Genoa, and Venice, to the coasts of the former Maritime Republics. We have also been looking abroad, in regions in close contact with water, in countries like Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands, as far as the Far East.⁹

However, what we were looking for was right in the centre of the Mediterranean, in Rome, in the most famous place of spectacle ever: the Colosseum.

The Flavian amphitheatre, built at the time of the emperor Vespasian, was a revolutionary work, because new technological models were developed for its construction,¹⁰ and today it is still regarded as a source of inspiration for contemporary entertainment architecture. The stage machinery of the arena represents a great example of theatrical engineering, and it is in this context that we have found evidence of cooperation between theatre workers and sea workers.

3. Luigi Lunari, *Breve Storia del Teatro* (Milano: Bompiani, 2007).

4. Vincenzo Consolo, *La Pesca del Tonno in Sicilia* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2008).

5. Renato Lori, *Scenografia e Scenotecnica per il Teatro* (Roma: Gremese, 2014).

6. Gianni Berengo Gardin, *La Fabbrica Scala all'Ansaldo* (Milano: Edizioni del Teatro alla Scala, 2004).

7. Pasquale Frascione, "Due Esperienze nella Cantieristica Navale Anconetana. Lo Stabilimento Fincantieri e la Cooperativa Tommasi (1974-1997)," *PRISMA Economia - Società - Lavoro*, no. 3 (2011): 123-139.

8. Giuseppe Bellafiore, *Palermo, Guida della Città e Dintorni* (Palermo: Mondadori Retail, 2009).

9. Guillame De Laubier, Antoine Pecqueur and James Levine, *The Most Beautiful Opera House in the World* (New York: Abrams, 2013).

10. Marialuisa Angiolillo, *L'Allestimento Scenico, lo Spettacolo nell'Età Classica* (Catanzaro: Framasud, 1979).

About a thousand sailors, due to their skills in the use of ropes and sails, were in charge of manoeuvring the awning covering the arena, called *velarium*, an enormous adjustable shade which sheltered the public from the sun during the games and was controlled by means of a series of winches,¹¹ which were quite similar to those that will be used in 18th century theatres.

It should also be noted that one of the most complex shows in Roman arenas involved the use of water, the so-called *naumachias*¹² (Figure 1), spectacular historical re-enactments of naval battles, created by flooding the stage where stage boats had previously been mounted.

Another area of investigation that has given great impulse to this research has certainly been the *tonnare*,¹³ the tuna-fishing structures and facilities located in the province of Trapani, in Sicily.

There, in the vicinity of Greek or Roman theatres, religious temples were often found, and also inside the *tonnare* there were religious spaces, small Christian churches where people prayed for protection against bad weather and for a good catch of tuna.

Like in the ancient theatre, rituality was a major behavioural pattern of the life in the *tonnare*. The chorus songs carried out a social function in the Greek theatre, as an attempt to investigate both divine and earthly events; in tuna fisheries, songs were used to accompany the hard manual work that required sustained efforts.

Fishermen's testimonies state that religious figures were often present during the fishing ritual, like the monks who were in charge of blessing the nets, and the fishing season was not considered to have begun without these blessings. In both cases, therefore, men resorted to rituals, particularly religious ones, and the concept of the sacred took the form of a ceremony, of a spiritual dialogue.

11. Eugenio D'Anna and Pier Gabriele Molari, *Il Velarium del Colosseo: una Nuova Interpretazione* (AMSActa Institutional Research Repository by AlmaDL University of Bologna Digital Library, Preprint 2020).

12. Dario Aureli, "L'acqua del Colosseo" *Giardini e Parchi Storici, Elementi 'Portanti' del Paesaggio Culturale. Pluralità di Aspetti e Connotazioni. Scuola di Specializzazione in Beni Architettonici e del Paesaggio "Sapienza" – University of Rome* (Roma: Bristol, L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2021), 135-140.

13. Consolo, *La Pesca del Tonno in Sicilia*, 2008.



Figure 1. Flavio Bolla, *Naumachia*, Illustration, 2013

Source: <https://www.deviantart.com/flaviobolla/art/Naumachia-372111100>.

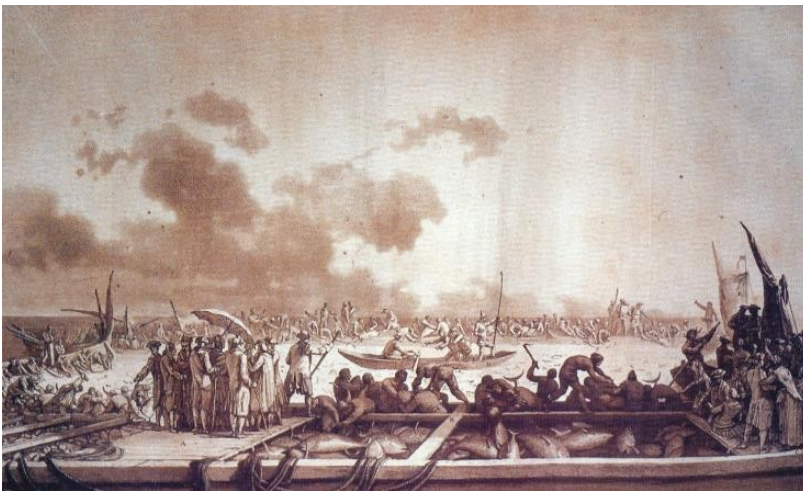


Figure 2. Jean-Pierre Houël, *The Mattanza in Sicily*, Etching, 1782

Source: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mattanza#/media/File:La_pesca_del_tonno,_acquafort_e_di_Jean-Pierre_Hou%C3%ABl.jpg.

Between the 1800s and the 1900s, the owners of the *tonnare*¹⁴ often asked their fishermen (*tonnaroti*) to be able to attend the last fishing phase. Wooden structures, scaffolds and grandstands were then mounted to allow the aristocrats to watch the *mattanza* (Figure 2), or the 'slaughter', a truly spectacular representation,¹⁵ a violent act between man and nature reminiscent of the games between gladiators and beasts in Roman arenas.

Nowadays, this practice has ceased, and the buildings where tuna fisheries used to be are now abandoned examples of industrial archaeology, or they are used for other purposes. The last instances of ritual tuna fishing in southern Italy date back to the '80s and '90s, except for a few staged events, mostly for tourists, events that are far removed from the ancient tradition that was so important for the whole Mediterranean, and that in Italy has now been lost because of the destructive practices of the big fishing companies, which led to the extinction of a centuries-old ritual, rich in meaning.

The Attitude of the Theatrical Spectator in the Consumer Society

The concept of the theatre as a building is now changing: in the past it was regarded as a sacred place, but this sacredness has apparently diminished over the centuries.¹⁶ It remains something to be respected as a cultural venue, but its sacred aspect is in decline; in fact, it is often considered by the masses as nothing more than a place of entertainment. This process may not be ascribed to thematic content alone, because the public interests have changed and so has its attention span, but there could also be economical as well as political reasons.

Over the centuries, the function of theatre buildings has significantly contributed to the political and cultural changes of society, due to the complex dynamics that took place within and around them, at least until the late Romantic Age.¹⁷ Now, it seems that these changes are taking place elsewhere: a greater number of venues and facilities have replaced the foyers of the great European

14. A clarification must be made: in Italian, the term *tonnara* (or *tonnare* in the plural form) refers to two related but distinct items: the buildings and the fishing nets and traps. The first are the architectural structures, i.e., the complex of constructions on land used for processing the tuna and storing boats and fishing equipment. The second is the trap of nets that was stretched out in the sea for hundreds of metres, forming a labyrinth that "deceived" the tuna; this structure is technically called the "body" of the *tonnara*.

15. Istituto Nazionale Luce. *La Pesca del Tonno*. 1924-1931, 31 min., 35 sec. <https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL3000051401/1/la-pesca-del-tonno.html?startPage=0>.

16. Franco Mancini, *L'Evoluzione dello Spazio Scenico dal Naturalismo al Teatro Epico* (Bari: Dedalo, 1993).

17. Nazzareno Luigi Todarello, *Le Arti della Scena* (Novi Ligure: Latorre Editore Teatro e Università, 2006).

opera houses of the XIX and XX centuries.¹⁸

One of the keys to understanding this change may perhaps be found in the revolution brought about by the consumer society. Around the middle of the last century, the shopping ritual was invented, a celebration of the possession of objects made even more widespread by the mass media, and grown exponentially today, with the Internet and the e-commerce giants, which made the ritual faster and more remote. This trend is causing increasing environmental issues. In spite of the many green movements around the world proposing alternative solutions, the phenomenon is on the increase, greatly strengthened by industrial automation.¹⁹ The circumstances that have generated this phenomenology in the West, and for some decades in the East as well, seem to have taken a dogmatic character: acquired comforts and wealth must not be put at risk, like it was in the post-war years when the middle and lower middle classes achieved some prosperity.²⁰

Greek or Roman audiences attended the theatre to satisfy a social need, to take part in a ritual that began with taking care of their aspect, selecting the clothes to wear, and meeting other people to discuss the value of the play or tragedy; today's men and women, in a tendentially greater percentage, no longer feel the same, because their needs can be satisfied from a wider variety of sources, even from a vocal command on a mobile phone, without having to move from their homes. This is true not only for the theatre, but also for the cinema, which faces similar consequences as a result of streaming or pay TV platforms, or libraries, because of web encyclopaedias, etc.

Greeks and Latins handed down plays from memory, people in the Middle Ages copied them down; later, with the invention of the printing press, theatre scripts began circulating the world in a pocket-size format, and then moved faster when they were typewritten, and faster still when stored on USB drives; today they can be archived on the Cloud: all it takes is a device, and the large part of the world's theatrical literature is made available to the user in a split second.²¹

To guarantee this extraordinary achievement though, we need to use an unprecedented flow of resources, infinite resources in a world that possesses finite ones, in an accumulation of data that has proceeded unabated since the age of the industrial revolutions.

In the current age of consequences,²² we are faced with unprecedented challenges, and all the social and intellectual forces should work together and take

18. Roberta Baldassarre, *Metamorfosi delle Architetture Teatrali* (Roma: Gangemi Editore, 2006).

19. Luca De Biase, *Homo Pluralis, Essere Umani nell'Era Tecnologica*. Torino: Codice Edizioni, 2016.

20. Carmelo Bene and Giancarlo Dotto, *Vita di Carmelo Bene* (Milano: Tascabili Bompiani, 2006).

21. A. Donald Norman, *The Design of Future Things* (Basic Books, 2007).

22. Umberto Galimberti, *L'Età della Tecnica e la Fine della Storia* (Salerno: Orthotes, 2021).

action.²³ The theatre and all the Arts, which have always promoted the development of man and society at large, prove to be more necessary than ever.

In the pandemic period of 2020, it became evident that technology saved the integrity of our society, computer engineering made it possible to deliver urgent information instantly, and the Internet guaranteed the right to education and so much more, in many areas. However, the proposal to do theatre work online appears questionable. Unlike cinema, the theatre still lives and breathes through the age-old ritual of being together; for a performance to be successful, actors and audiences must face each other, and must look at each other.

If in the '60s and '70s one of the main goals of western economies was the improvement of the conditions of the middle class, in a confrontation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat that was passionate, violent and deeply felt, today, the new objectives seem to be less clear, except for a relentless economic growth and the defence of profits at all costs, even if the economic model to which all this should refer to seems quite elusive. This is a relevant question because every form of art, including the theatre, can never assert itself without a flourishing economy.

Personal Reasons Related to the Concept

I grew up in Sicily where I lived until the age of twenty. Then I began to travel on a regular basis, visiting many different countries, and the theme of the journey became an integral part of my research. The city where I belong is Palermo, which the Greeks called *Panormo* "the all-harbour city", and water is another element I have always been interested in, probably because I am an islander.

In the eighties and nineties, I used to spend the summer in my mother's hometown, Castellammare del Golfo. It is a fishing village in the province of Trapani that has its own architectural icon, a castle overlooking the sea. For fifteen years now, I have been based in Milan, a city where waterways have been particularly important.

These regular movements, from the city to the countryside, and from the south to the north of Italy, have always been a source of inspiration. I think that living in Palermo is like watching an endless theatrical performance while being part of it at the same time: works of art are everywhere, and everything in the city, even the mere sale of fish in the local market, becomes a performance, visually framed in a melting pot of iconographic stratifications. So, the theatre, the journey, and water are the connecting elements that have characterized this

23. Galimberti, "La Tecnica e l'Impotenza dell'Etica," in *Etica del Plurale: Giustizia, Riconoscimento, Responsabilità*. (Milano: Vita e Pensiero Pubblicazioni dell'Università Cattolica, 2004).

project and my previous ones.

Today, in the era of technological changes²⁴ and virtual rooms, people are no longer used to staying after the show to talk about it. Everybody just goes away, as though the theatre was a go-through area. My reflections are directed towards a theatre that lives 24 hours a day, that is always accessible and multifunctional, where at five in the morning a new event begins, taking advantage of the intimate atmosphere of the night; a theatre that breaks free from the nineteenth century austerity to become flexible, dynamic, moving from town to town, and using port areas as dramatic environments of encounter, because the theatre can live between land and water, like an amphibious creature.

Design Rationale

The research has focused on the facilities that host the performances - today as in the past - and particularly on theatrical architectures,²⁵ especially movable ones, like those used in the “ephemeral theatre”.²⁶

I have always been fascinated by the works of art that are centred on environmental contrasts, such as James Turrell’s *Skyspaces*, Edoardo Tresoldi’s sculptures, or the many, exciting projects of utopian architecture, like the *Arcosanti* city by Paolo Soleri,²⁷ or the Earthships; the unfulfilled ideals of social experimentation, such as the Venus project by Joseph Fresco,²⁸ or the studies of Lebbeus Woods, Carlo Scarpa, the *Walking city* by Archigram,²⁹ and the urban works of social criticism by Banksy. These ideas or ideologies actively challenge the consumerist logic, which in the last century has practically transformed the purpose of every human action, including artworks.

In the essay *Vers une Architecture*, Le Corbusier³⁰ said that the house, in the early twentieth century, was no longer the mere self-representation of its owners, but it had to adjust to the new functional parameters requested by a time that had just taken a giant step forward, separating itself from centuries of mannerism. The house then became a “machine”, and it was compared to a steamship that refused to comply to traditions and only obeyed to the forces of nature, heading towards a world organized according to the “new spirit”. Just like the house had

24. Ibid.

25. Mario Panizza, *Edifici per lo Spettacolo* (Bari: Laterza 1996).

26. Maurizio Dell’Arco Fagiolo and Silvia Carandini, *L’Effimero Barocco* (Roma: Ed. Bulzoni BSA, 1978).

27. Paolo Soleri, *Conversations with Paolo Soleri* (New York: Lissa McCulloch, Princeton Architectural Press, 2012).

28. Jacque Fresco, *The Venus Project: The Redesign of a Culture* (Global Cyber Visions, 1995).

29. Valeria Menchetelli, “A Walking City by Archigram Group: on the Utopian Dimension of Drawing” *Diségno*, no. 9 (2021): 17-20.

30. Le Corbusier, *Verso un Architettura* (Milano: Longanesi, 1973).

to respond to new needs, so did theatre spaces, and a long period of avant-garde began, culminated in the age of “the theatre outside the theatre”.³¹ For this reason, the installation should be at the service of the designated outer space and its environment, without reducing theatrical aesthetics to mere functionality, as it happened with the mobile side vans of propaganda shows in the twenties,³² or the theatres on British trucks in the sixties, like the *Century Theatre* or *Blue Box*.³³

Since 2004 I have designed several structures in different versions, but the elements that characterized them have often been the same.

I was greatly inspired by Alberto Martini’s studies for the *Tetiteatro*,³⁴ by the brilliant reasoning of Gropius and Piscator around the Total Theatre.³⁵ I have always found Aldo Rossi’s *Theatre of the World*³⁶ particularly poetic, just like the spectacular performance of the *Ulysses and the White Whale* at Renzo Piano’s Bigo in Genoa,³⁷ which was staged during the celebrations for the 500th anniversary of Columbus’ discovery of the Americas.

What has clearly characterized my projects so far, with respect to their construction, has been the close relationship that I have always observed between techniques of marine construction³⁸ and theatrical techniques. In the navy there are the sails and in the theatre the backdrops, on ships there are yards and shrouds, and on the stage battens and pin rails, the hold and the substage, lines and strops.³⁹

I found another important confirmation about ten years ago, when I had the chance to do a show at the Drottningholms Slottsteater,⁴⁰ the court theatre at Drottningholm Castle in Stockholm, where the theatrical machinery is still working after three hundred years. On that occasion, we used every kind of machine available, from traps to elevators, from wave machines (*burloni* in Italian) to all the special effects of the baroque theatre.⁴¹ It was in Stockholm that I was finally convinced that stage manoeuvres have undoubtedly many similarities with the

31. Silvia Cattiodoro, *Architettura Scenica e Teatro Urbano* (Milano: Francoangeli, 2007), 29-35.

32. Carlo Fanelli, “Vincenzo Tieri (1895-1970). Militanza Teatrale e Attivismo Politico,” *Rivista Calabrese di Storia del 900*, no. 1 (2021): 42-69.

33. Alan Hankinson, *The Story of the Century Theatre 1947-1983 Blue Box* (Bookcase, 2009).

34. Alberto Martini, *Il Tetiteatro* (Milano: Electa, 1990).

35. Nerdinger Winfried, *Walter Gropius 1883 – 1969* (Milano: Electa, 1988).

36. Alberto Ferlenga, *Aldo Rossi, Tutte le Opere* (Milano: Electa, 1999).

37. Peter Buchanan, *Renzo Piano Building Workshop* (London: Ed. Phaidon, 2003).

38. Elvetico, *Navigare, Dizionario Enciclopedico della Nautica*, 2012.

39. Ibid.

40. Ove Hidermark, Per Edström and Brigitta Schyberg, *Drottningholms Slottsteater Dess Tillkomst, oden och Beverande* (Stockholm: Baggforlaget, 1993), 74-113 .

41. Giuseppe Galli Bibiena, *Architectural and Perspective Designs* (New York, Dover Publications, 1964).

work of seamen, from the spaces used to the dynamics that develop in both contexts.

I decided to focus my study on a nomadic device that could satisfy - like other devices did before, starting with the legendary *Thespis's wagon* - one of the basic postulates of human nature: the need to keep telling stories.

Iter Teatro

By taking a syncretic approach that mixes technique and spirituality, both connected to movement and water, a mobile equipment was designed that could be quickly installed in specific locations. Its name is *Iter*, because it is part of an "itinerary" of continuous research (Figures 3-4).

The function of this equipment is essentially that of a multi-purpose container, a physical vehicle for the dissemination of cultural information, from drama to academic and scientific conferences.

The operation of this structure has been inspired by various historical examples, starting from Thespis' wagon, to Renaissance and Baroque stage machines,⁴² always adding water as a structural and dramaturgical element.⁴³

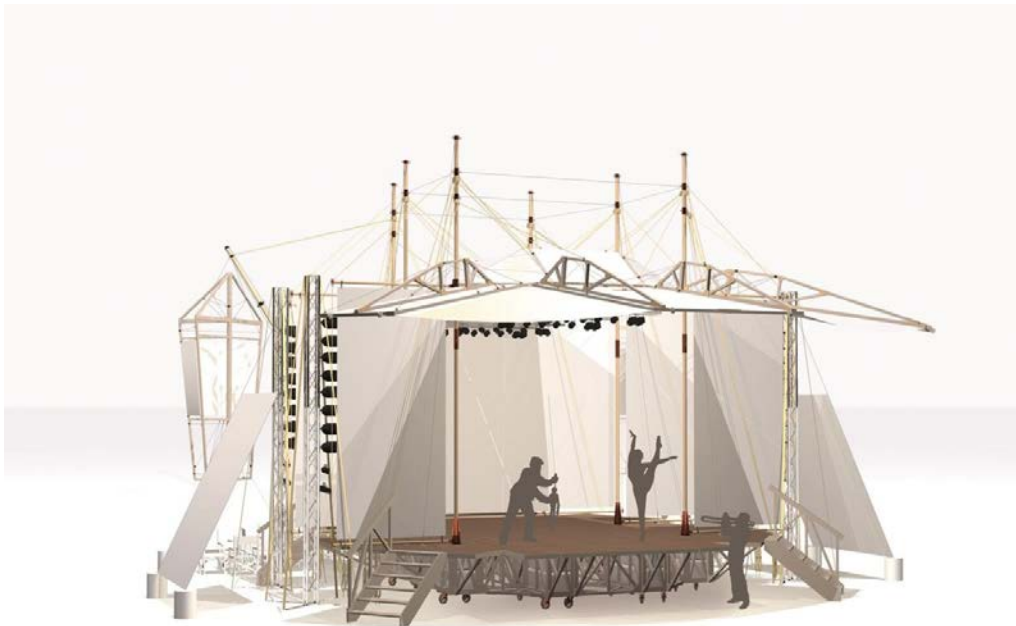


Figure 3. *Iter Teatro, Front View, Rendering*

42. Hidermark, Edström, Schyberg, *Drottningholms Slottsteater Dess Tillkomst, oden och Beverande*, 1993.

43. Martini, *Il Tetiteatro*, 1990.

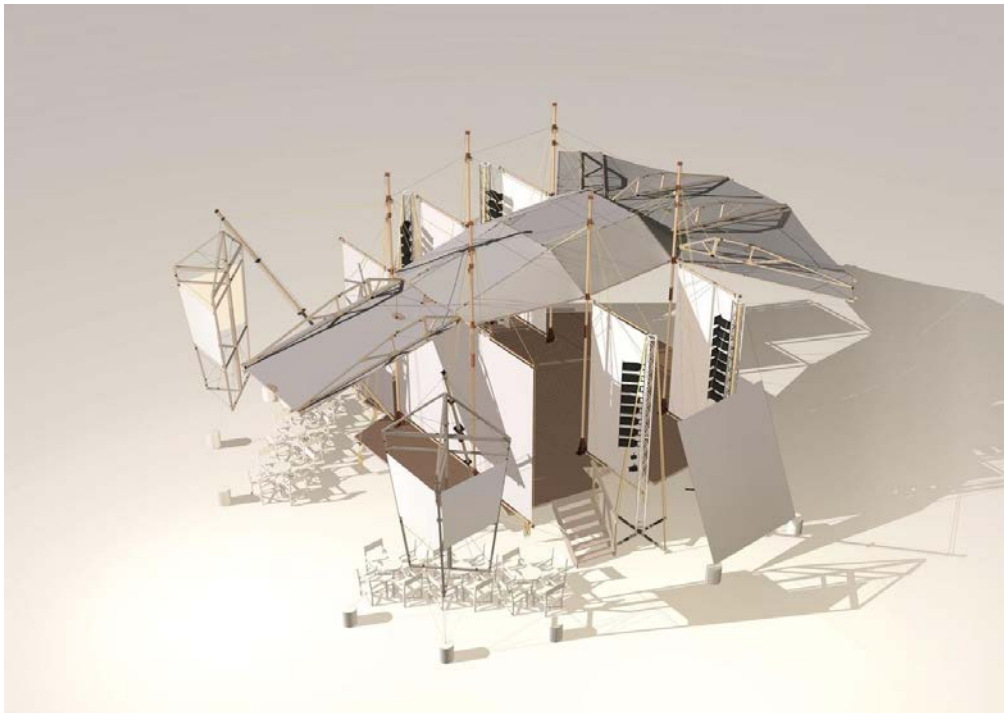


Figure 4. *Iter Teatro*, Axonometric View, Rendering

Iter Teatro may seem ephemeral, being installed in pre-established locations for a fixed period of time, but once in place it becomes a meeting point open 24 hours a day, because, ideally, access to proven cultural, artistic, and scientific contents, should be available to all in an egalitarian society, a resource for everybody and not a service to be commodified, nor a luxury for the rich few.

Technical Specifications

The structure is mainly built with parts made of wood, fabric, and ropes, as it has been for centuries for the construction of boats. Wood, a solid and durable material,⁴⁴ is the base on which contemporary components are attached, like wheels of solid rubber to absorb the loads. For buoyancy, approved modular floats have been chosen, with an inner lighting system to obtain an evocative lighting effect⁴⁵ when the structure is set on land, and especially when it is on water.

The fabrics for the roofs are of a synthetic yarn that can filter air currents and shield from UV rays. Rigging and strops are of different types, depending on their function: from hemp and nylon, up to steel rods. Bollards, cleats, pulleys

44. Bruno Mello, *Trattato di Scenotecnica* (Novara: De Agostini, 2003).

45. Liliana Iadeluca, *Light Painting. Tecniche di Base per Dipingere con la Luce* (Roma: Audinio, Collana Manuali, no. 254, 2021).

and other metal parts are made of steel, aluminium, and copper. The water-loaded ballasts are made of PVC (Figure 5).



Figure 5. *Iter Teatro, Overview, Rendering*

Stage Specification

As it happened in Roman amphitheatres, where the famous *naumachias* were staged with prepared boats, or sea legends were told, an equally ancient ritual was performed in the *tonnare* of the Mediterranean. The body of the *tonnara* (Figure 6), but above all the death chamber, formed a sort of aquatic stage (Figures 7-8) where, season after season, a ceremony rich in functions and meanings was repeated.

The architecture of the Sicilian *tonnare*⁴⁶ has had a decisive influence on the dramaturgical use of water. The unique social dynamics that developed in this environment, which survived until the '80s, tell us the story of behavioural patterns that are still of great interest: from the way in which people worked, with enormous efforts and an almost religious devotion, to the hierarchies that were created inside the workplace; from the tales of the *tonnaroti* in the *vicaria*, the common space where workers lived, to the famous *cialome*, not just songs but an alternative code of communication that was used only at sea. Syllogisms of this kind also apply to the Vietnamese theatre, that originated from the efforts of the peasants immersed in the rice fields, or to black music that was born in the plantations of the southern states of America.

46. Cesare Sposito, *Le Tonnare Storia e Architettura*. Istituzionale Research Archive of the University of Palermo (Palermo: Dario Flaccovio Editore, 2007).

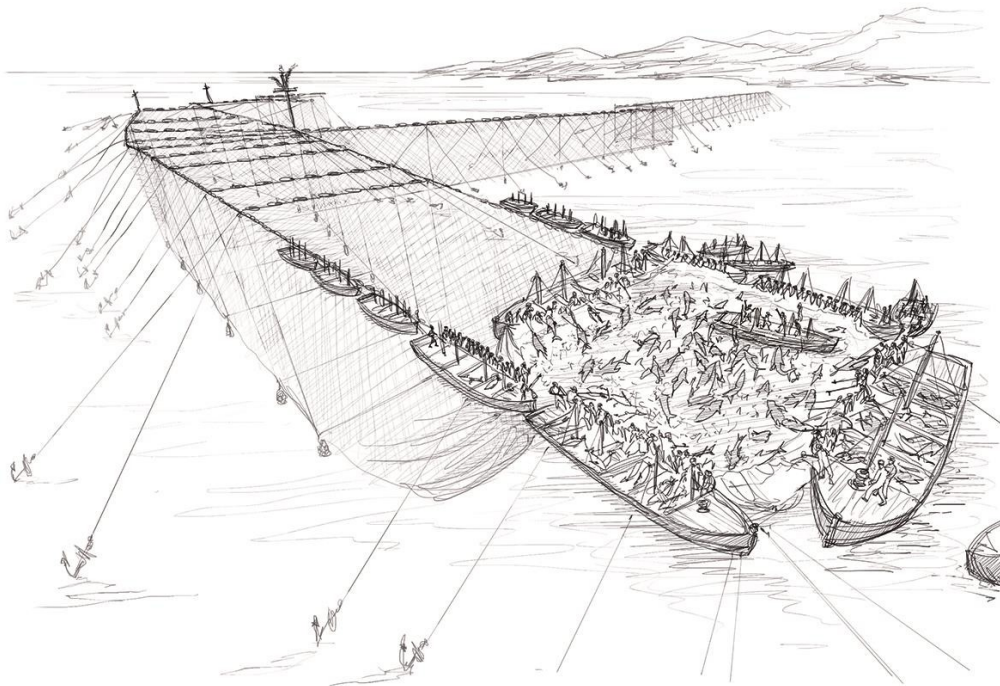


Figure 6. *The Body of a Tonnara*

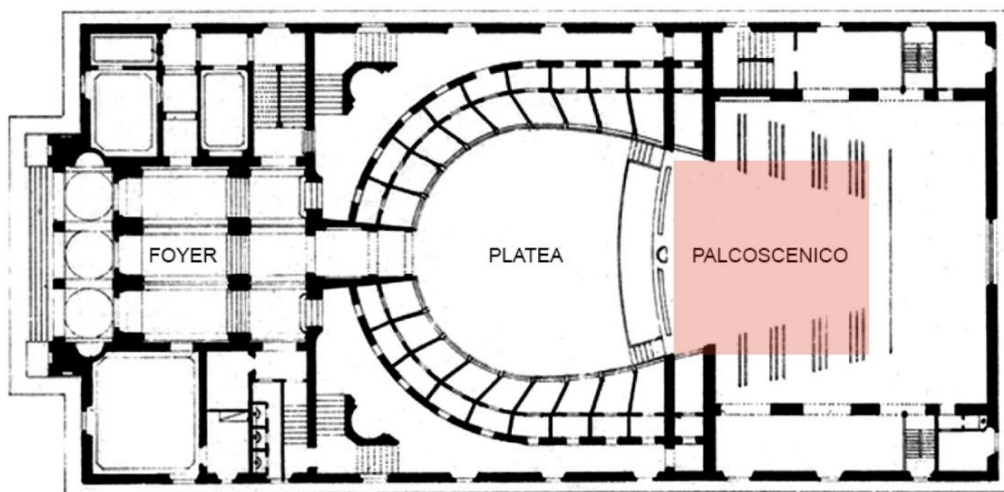


Figure 7. *Plan of an Italian Theatre*

Source: <https://spazioscenico.altervista.org/#ottocentesco>.

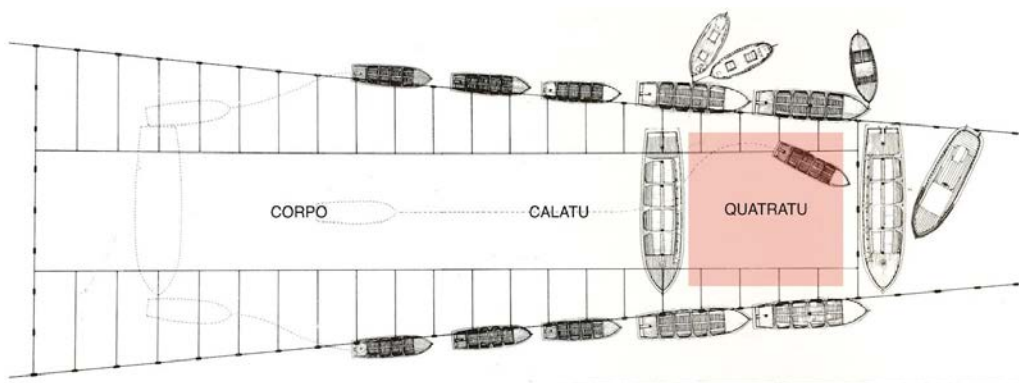


Figure 8. *Tonnara of Favignana, the Quatrato Enclosure*

Source: Adapted from Consolo, Vincenzo. *La Pesca del Tonno in Sicilia*. Palermo: Sellerio, 2008.

Theatre on Water

The whole installation can be transformed into a docking place (Figure 9), where the boats function as the boxes of an Italian-style theatre, creating an immersive relationship between the spectators and the environment around them, whether an artificial lake or a harbour.



Figure 9. *Iter Teatro, Illustration of a Performance on Water*

In addition, when the installation is on the ground, water can be used as a dramaturgical element by taking it from a hollow space under the stage, after raising the central modules of the planking. In this way, it is possible to insert a PVC net tank, reinforced with aluminium frames. The design of this structure philologically recalls the “death chamber” of the *tonnara* (Figure 10).

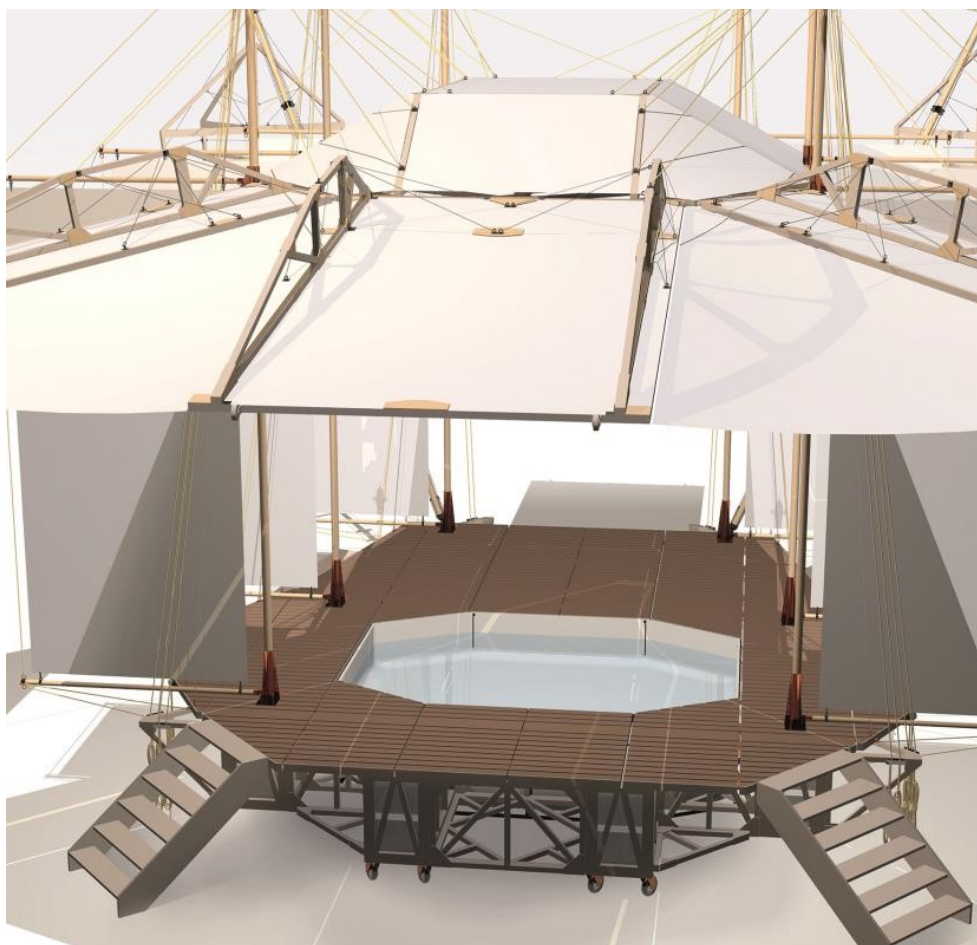


Figure 10. *Iter Teatro, The Waterlogged Stage*

Travel Theatre

In times of widespread nihilism, which stifles the enthusiasm of new generations in particular, for whom dedicated spaces are almost absent, this project would like to provide a temporary facility for cultural socialisation, with the goal of intercepting needs “on site”, highlighting and confronting the practical urgencies that threaten to get out of hand.

In this way, even an ephemeral outpost like a town square or any other meeting place can provide, for a few hours, an experience which is first-of-all physical, like it used to be, so that we can pause the devices that force us to fast relations, fast and ill-formed answers, and even faster and instinctive reactions. The intent is to create a momentary suspension of time, so that we can think about what Kant identified as the basic categories - space and time⁴⁷ - and question the goals of us all who live inside them; or we may simply stop for a moment, and allow our body and soul to breath some fresh air while listening to

47. Immanuel Kant, *Critica della Ragion Pura* (Torino: Einaudi, 1957).

a piece of music or the reading of a sonnet, without leaving our urban setting or having to enter a cinema or a museum.

Traveling Machine System

Iter Teatro represents the evolution of the many installations that have left a “moving” mark throughout history, from the baroque machines,⁴⁸ like Santa Rosalia’s wagon in Palermo, to the Sicilian carts,⁴⁹ real “travelling stories”; from the hawkers, who loaded goods on their vans in the most peculiar way, and created their own lingo by shouting out the goods for sale, to the travelling funfair companies who move from one territory to another.

The theatre arrives disassembled in a suitable peripheral area of a town, far from the public. A few stagehands quickly reassemble the components of the moving machine (Figure 11), which can easily travel through the city streets. The route, the *Iter*, is already a performance in itself, as the machine morphology becomes an advertisement in its own right. After the parade, the appointed location is reached, and it is there that the metamorphosis into a polyvalent scenic space takes place (Figure 12).

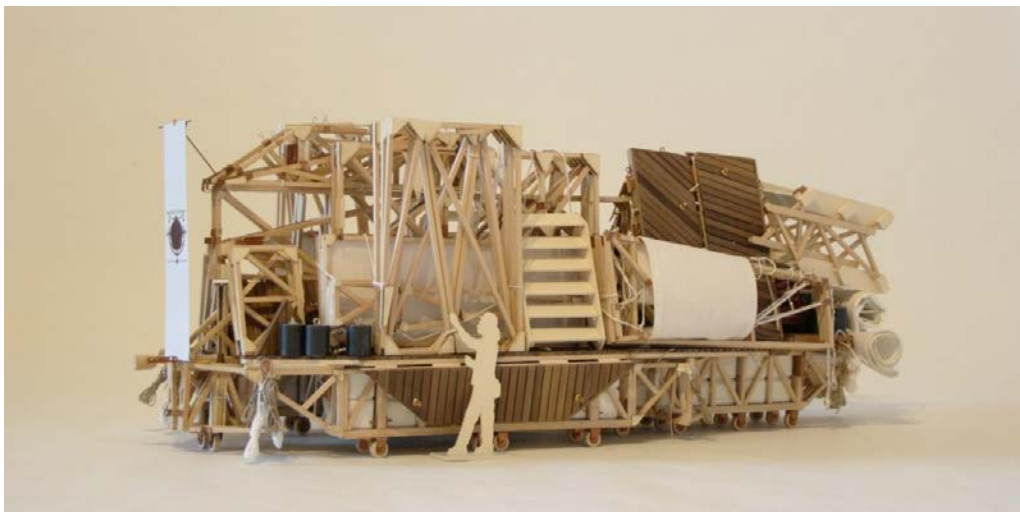


Figure 11. *Iter Teatro, Model of the Machinery Assembled like an Itinerant Machine*

48. Clelia Arlandi di Balme and Franca Varallo, *Feste Barocche, Cerimonie e Spettacoli alla Corte dei Savoia tra Cinque e Settecento* (Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2009).

49. Ubaldo Castrovinci and Mario Cuccia, *L'Architettura del Carretto Siciliano* (Bagheria: Plumelia Edizioni, 2012).

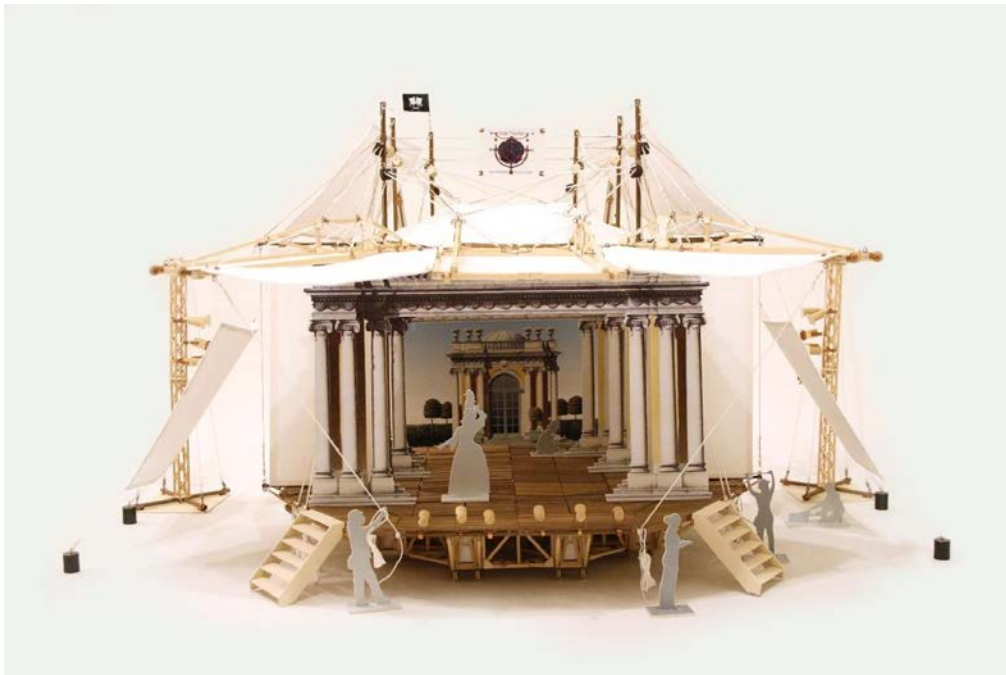


Figure 12. *Iter Teatro, Overall View, Model*

Covered Installation

When the structure is set outdoor and left unused for some time, it may be useful to protect the stage from sunlight, or make it inaccessible at night. For this reason, the entire structure can be folded on itself by means of mechanical elements in the shape of petals that are connected to the grid and work both as curtains and backdrop covers. These structures, together with the side awnings, protect the whole stage from the sun, act as dramaturgical elements, and when lowered, separate the platform from the outside, protecting the planking level of the stage. Around the platform there are bollards and cleats that work as locking rails to support scenes, lights and other elements that have to be connected to the grid.⁵⁰

Environmental Dialogues

Shopping centres are spaces that provide a clear reflection of our behavioural patterns. These modern non-places have taken on the function of places of worship. After all, if consumerism is celebrated so loudly by the advertisements that mark obsessively our daily lives, it is a predictable consequence to spend a lot of time in places where there is a huge quantity of goods on sale. We are clearly ignoring the cultural impact that this has on society.

50. Gino Copelli, *Manuale Pratico di Scenotecnica le Macchine Teatrali* (Bologna: Pàtron, 2006).

In the '70s, Pier Paolo Pasolini harshly warned us against the paradigmatic revolution that had taken place in the space of about ten years.⁵¹ Now that we are facing the dire consequences of this revolution, there does not seem to be any cultural strategy to address the phenomenon: proposals are being criticized, audacious ideas are rejected as utopistic, and international summits have proved ineffective.

Nonetheless, nature's messages speak clearly. Iter Teatro intends to promote a debate of thinkers and experts that can help us reconnect with green spaces, especially far from urban centres, so that we can find answers, and share proposals, ideas, and solutions (Figure 13); a momentary experience to think about an alternative way of living and acting, to ask ourselves useful questions, consider the differences between development and progress, and also reconsider our motives to attend a theatre, in search of a personal renovation.

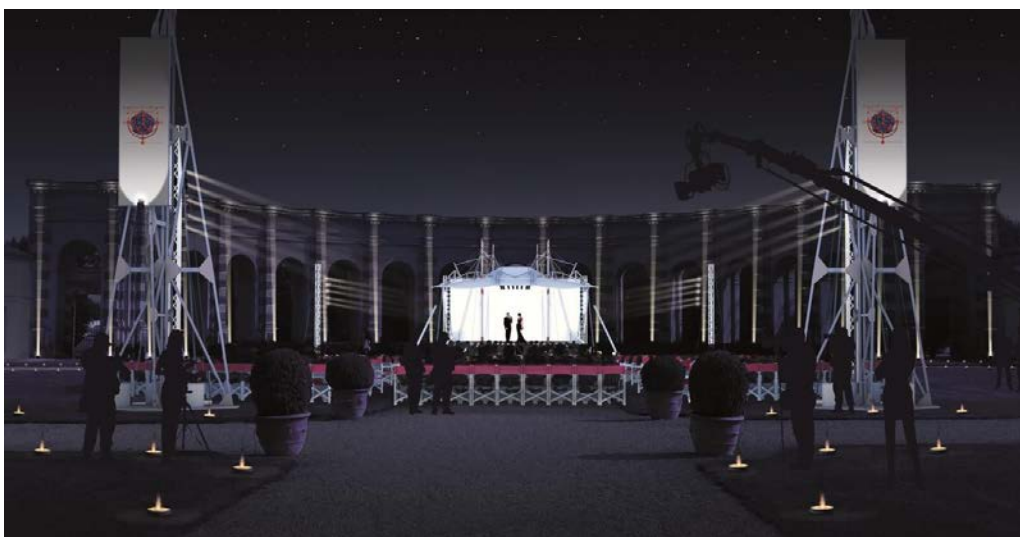


Figure 13. *Iter Teatro*, Illustration of an Event

Global warming is the most urgent challenge that mankind has to face. Since we are living in a time of global consequences, the whole world of entertainment has the moral duty to contribute to the fight against climate change, in terms of both artistic and technical contents, by taking advantage of the new energy technologies and giving its cultural contribution to the topic of energy transition.

An episode of the excellent Italian television drama of the '70s, *The Age of Cosimo de' Medici* by Roberto Rossellini, metaphorically describes a radical change of values: << [...] at this rate, we will all go mad >> says a philosophical old man about the ways of the world.⁵² In an era dominated by markets and profits, it is

51. Andrea Pera, "Borghesia, Rivoluzione, Potere: il '68 nel Teatro di Pier Paolo Pasolini," *UCLA Carte Italiane*, no. 2 (2008): 16-45.

52. Roberto Rossellini, "Potere di Cosimo," *L'Età di Cosimo de' Medici*, episode 2, RAI, 1972-1973, 124 min.

urgent to return to communicate with nature and listen to its clear messages, which science is translating into a call for action that cannot be postponed, as in the case of the dramatic consequences of plastic pollution in our oceans.

Thematic Content

The months between 2020 and 2021 have certainly put a strain on the emotional state of entire generations, from childhood to old age. More worrying than the pandemic, however, is the general condition of human intelligence.⁵³ One relevant example of how this is evolving is suggested by our relationship with today's web infrastructures. The more powerful the medium, the more the end user should be aware of the actions/reactions involved in its use. What is the current orientation of intelligence? Throughout history, theatres have been crucial places for such questions and investigations, thanks to the works of extraordinary intellectuals and masters of the art of storytelling. If what Victor Hugo said is true, "Who opens the door of a school closes a prison", then the same could probably be said of the theatre, because a single, simple idea can make a difference and remain with the audience after the show, and maybe contribute to their personal renewal, so that they can direct their gaze to higher social aims, reappropriate of public spaces through culture and not violence, take to the streets and use Internet platforms as means of organisation, not as means for reprogramming unified thoughts. The theatre can probably help to investigate the importance of human actions in this often-confusing time.

It took only two months of pandemic to send the world's stock markets plummeting, but nature immediately started to breath more freely, offering spectacular animal appearances, clear skies and rivers, and recording a positive drop in pollutants across the planet.

This is a lesson which, if read correctly, offers rich insights into the shift of paradigm that needs to be completed as soon as possible.

Conclusion

The research outlined in this paper allowed me to reach to various conclusions regarding the process of renewal that Italian theatres could undertake in their relationship with the audience, both in form and content, by proposing topics that can show how the classics of the international theatre are still relevant for the education of the individual and the society at large, particularly for the new generations that mostly live off purely esthetical contents.

If the available data show that young audience's attendance in the theatre is

53. Pino Aprile, *Elogio dell'Imbecille* (Milano: Piemme, 2010).

steadily declining, maybe the reason could be that contents are not sufficiently focused on young people.

For the current generations, theatres are no longer places of wonder and entertainment, as they were a century ago (Figure 14).

If most theatrical venues provide their offer without enticing or capturing the enthusiasm of the young generations, without seducing them, the future will see more and more people sitting on their sofas in front of a screen, sometimes talking to the same screen.



Figure 14. Alfred Eisenstaedt, *Children Watching the Story of "Saint George and the Dragon" at an Outdoor Puppet Theatre in Paris, 1963*

Source: <https://www.life.com/history/children-at-a-puppet-show-paris-1963/>.

In a globalized world, if young people attend the theatre less and less, it is the theatre that must be brought to them, not only by making it more accessible, but also by engaging young audiences actively, as the social networks do.

The design of the installation described in this paper is an answer to this challenge, aiming to stimulate an audience continuously distracted by too much information by focusing first and foremost on the new generations that are asking to be listened to, to be involved, especially in the climate change debate, though they seem unable to dictate the agenda of political institutions.

Once funded and built, how could this multi-purpose machine actually work?

Considering the information I have gathered, also during my teaching experience in various Italian art schools, I am persuaded that the first contribution to this project could come from Art Academies and Universities willing to create a theatre-workshop, a space that can successfully combine arts with science. It is for

this reason that the outer appearance of the Iter Teatro resembles the machines created by Leonardo Da Vinci, the very icon of the scientist-artist.

With the support of high education centres and institutions, the machine elements can be turned into a space where teachers and students can study and research. The installation can remain inside the university premises to be used as a “rehearsal site” not only for plays or shows, but also for discussions about art and humanities, with the advantage of having immediate feedback from the audience, as it happened in the “anatomical theatres” of the XIXth century (Figure 15).

The collected data or documents can be easily moved inside their “travelling container” towards a scientific university, where the information could be submitted to further analysis by using a scientific approach.



Figure 15. *The Anatomical Theatre in the Archiginnasio, Bologna, 1636-1638*

Source: <https://sma.unibo.it/it/visita/scuole/percorsi-didattici/i-luoghi-della-sanita-a-bologna-tra-il-xvii-e-il-xviii-secolo>.

In addition, by creating a synergy between different educational institutions, the installation could widen its scope (or its itinerary) through a network where these “experimental results” (shows, exhibitions, concerts, conferences, seminars, workshops, etc.) can be shared and enjoyed by a larger audience.

Given the reduced management costs, the installation could easily travel from an Italian university to a Greek or a French one etc., building cultural bridges and exchanging experiences.

This academic tour could provide the structure with some field test, in order to fix any technical issue and possibly obtain some sort of type-approval for the travelling installation, which should be managed by a professional theatre company. After that, the installation is ready to move out of educational institutions and meet the people, reach town squares, and then, if the special conditions mentioned in the technical chapters are satisfied, end its journey by reaching water, the very symbol of renewal.

If globalization has brought about a paradigmatic social change in which we are all virtually connected but physically removed from one another, then we could find inspiration in the attitude of the ancient Greek audiences, who took care of the problems of their *Polis*. At the time, this kind of intellectual development was also due to the wars of expansion that saw the import of slaves and freed the Athenians from the most physically demanding jobs, allowing them to use their spare time by practicing arts and philosophy. Theatre-goers were invited, at the end of the tragic contests, to take part in animated debates about the play they had just seen, becoming directly involved in the intellectual event.

Today, it is automation and the general technological progress that could give us the freedom to be involved in more noble activities, but this does not happen as largely as one would expect.

In my opinion, this is one of the challenges that our machine could tackle: raising awareness about the actual quality of our lives.

The initial research also demonstrated that the “immersive” factor is particularly relevant, in this respect. The spectator, whether young or old, should be temporarily transported into an artistic adventure.

The experience of going out for an event that takes place at a special venue that materializes itself in the city streets, like a parade float, must become not another social occasion but something unique, where the ultimate goal is the wonder, the magic of a stage effect, the dream-like, poetic moment that sparkles deep feelings and emotions.

After the last phase of this project is completed by actually building the installation in full scale, I think that the above results can only be obtained with a committed artistic direction. I also believe that only a unique scenic space can inspire artistic innovation, as the avant-garde theatre of the last century has proved.

In conclusion, I am confident that this theatre will help spread a message of resistance in this complicated time, a message inspired by the metaphor of water, that lends itself perfectly to become an iconographic element suggesting ideas of internationality and union.

It is important to use art, science and any other means at our disposal to put human intelligence back at the forefront, contributing to the necessary cultural change, fighting against what threatens a real progress, first and foremost climate change, which is the greatest challenge man has faced since it took its first steps on this planet.

It is therefore urgent to re-establish the idea of the sacred. In ancient times, the stage and the sea were places of devotion, and in the same way we should consider our planet, as something to respect and protect, something we are part of as active contributors and not as predators.

Nature must once again be perceived as a sacred entity in our everyday life, because our entire existence and our future depend on it. And if the theatre is basically a group of people who come together to listen to a story, a rite that has been performed for thousands of years, our travelling machine wants to celebrate the age-old relationship with what is our only *home*, so that we can realign ourselves with that delicate but extraordinary system that is planet earth, incredibly interconnected by a universal language that communicates with everything, from plants and animals to the stars, a language which, for thousands of years, has been telling life.

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