

## *The exegesis of Vitruvius and the creation of theatrical spaces in Renaissance Ferrara*

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The open-air staging of *Menechini*, a vernacular adaptation of Plautus' *Menaechmi* in 1486 inaugurated a long season of revival of classical Roman drama at the court of Ercole I d'Este (1471–1505) in Ferrara.<sup>1</sup> Between then and 1503, fifteen Plautine and two Terentian plays were performed at carnival festivities or official celebrations.<sup>2</sup>

The intense preparation that surrounded the revival is attested by documentary sources such as epistolary correspondence, contemporary chronicles, and official registers.<sup>3</sup> Duke Ercole was personally involved in every aspect of these productions; he assigned the translation of the original plays to various court intellectuals, who were pressured to turn them into vernacular Italian in a short time.<sup>4</sup> The duke's preoccupation extended also to the creation of functional theatrical spaces, first in the ducal *cortile* and gardens and then in the palace halls.

The planning of these temporary theatre buildings was underpinned by a close reading of the theories of Vitruvius, both in the original and in the re-elaboration by Leon Battista Alberti, as documented in a letter of 19

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<sup>1</sup> The artistic patronage of Ercole I d'Este is discussed by Werner Gundersheimer, 'The Patronage of Ercole d'Este', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 6 (1976), 1–18. See also Edmund G. Gardner, *Dukes & Poets in Ferrara: A Study in the Poetry, Religion and Politics of the Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), especially 468–92. On music patronage under Ercole I see Lewis Lockwood, *Music in Renaissance Ferrara 1400–1505: The Creation of a Musical Center in the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 133–234.

<sup>2</sup> Plautus' *Amphitruo* (1487, 1491), *Asinaria* (1500, 1502), *Aulularia* (1503), *Bacchides* (1502), *Casina* (1502), *Captivi* (1500, 1501), *Curculio* (1490?), *Epidicus* (1502), *Menaechmi* (1486, 1491, 1493, 1501 and 1503), *Mercator* (1500), *Miles Gloriosus* (1502), *Mostellaria* (1503), *Poenulus* (1499), *Pseudolus* (1501), *Trinummus* (1499), and Terence's *Andria* (1491) and *Eunuchus* (1499, 1500, 1503). No dramatic festivals took place in 1491–98, due to various family misfortunes and the threat of a French invasion.

<sup>3</sup> Select documentary sources are collected in Alessandro D'Ancona, *Le origini del teatro italiano*, Vol. 2 (Turin: Loescher, 1891), 127–37; Alessandro Luzio and Rodolfo Renier, 'Commedie classiche in Ferrara nel 1499', *Giornale di Studi Letterari*, 11 (1888), 177–89; Anna Maria Coppo, 'Spettacoli alla Corte di Ercole I', *Contributi dell'Istituto di Filologia Moderna, Serie di Storia del Teatro*, 1 (1968), 30–60.

<sup>4</sup> The intense epistolary exchange that concerns updates on translations is discussed by Clelia Falletti, 'Ercole I e la sperimentazione del teatro', *Teatro e Storia* 16 (1994), 133–4.

November 1485.<sup>5</sup> The letter was addressed to the duke by Pellegrino Prisciani (c. 1435–1510), a humanist intellectual who, among other things, was in charge of re-ordering the ducal library.<sup>6</sup> Prisciani encouraged Ercole I d'Este to recall some of the books he had lent, including 'la Architectura de quello de Alberti: de la qual più volte V.E. et mi avemo ragionato' (the work on architecture, that of Alberti, which Your Excellency and I had often discussed). The outcome of those learned conversations and Prisciani's own reasoning was the treatise *Spectacula*, which focuses on the Vitruvius passages from Book Five, relative to ancient theatre buildings, after tracing a brief history of ancient theatre in Greek and Roman times.

This essay investigates the features of the temporary theatre spaces that hosted the Ferrarese revival through a close reading of select passages of *Spectacula* in combination with the information that can be evinced from contemporary chronicles. Its aim is to gain a deeper understanding of humanist exegesis and appropriation of Vitruvius in the early Renaissance. As Ruffini contends, in the planning and execution of temporary theatre buildings, humanists did not apply Vitruvian principles *ad litteram*, but rather used them to suit their practical needs.<sup>7</sup>

This process of interpretation and adaptation also concerns iconography. Accordingly, the second part of this essay discusses the weight of the iconographic tradition that views the Colosseum as the theatre par excellence. The depiction of round buildings that hardly correspond to Vitruvian principles dominates humanist representation of ancient theatres. A case in point is the translation in vernacular Italian of *De architectura* written by Cesare Cesariano (1475–1543).<sup>8</sup> Cesariano assisted with and possibly got involved in the Ferrarese performances. His vernacular edition is of great interest as it not

<sup>5</sup> Giulio Bertoni, *La biblioteca estense e la coltura ferrarese ai tempi del duca Ercole I (1471–1505)* (Turin: Loescher, 1903), 66–7. In the same year, the duke purchased a printed edition of Donatus' *Commentary on Terence*, as first noted by *ibid.*, 97 n. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Pellegrino Prisciani, the son of court official Prisciano Prisciani, was entrusted by Duke Ercole I with various diplomatic offices. He was ambassador in Venice in 1481 and again in 1485, 1489, 1491–2, and 1496–8. In 1483–4 he was appointed as the Podestà of Reggio, and in 1501 as the ambassador to Rome. He wrote an extensive history of Ferrara, the *Historiae Ferrarienses*, which remains unpublished. Prisciani took an interest in astrology, painting and architecture. The fullest treatment of Pellegrino Prisciani's role at the court of Ercole I still remains Antonio Rotondò, 'Pellegrino Prisciani', *Rinascimento*, 9 (1960), 69–110. See also Pellegrino Prisciani, *Spectacula*, ed. Danilo Aguzzi Barbagli (Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini, 1992), 9–12.

<sup>7</sup> Franco Ruffini, *Teatri prima del teatro. Visioni dell'edificio e della scena tra umanesimo e rinascimento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1983), 58–9: 'l'invenzione umanistica del teatro non emargina Vitruvio, ma neanche lo applica: piuttosto lo usa; non emargina le memorie archeologiche ma neanche le copia, piuttosto le interpreta.'

<sup>8</sup> Ruffini, *Teatri prima del teatro*, 61–123. For a biographical note on architect, woodcut designer, and engineer Cesariano of Milan (1475–1543), see Cesare Cesariano, *Vitruvius. De Architectura (Como, 1521)*, ed. Carol Herselle Krinsky (Munich: W. Fink, 1969), 6–8. Cesariano's birth date of 1475, in contrast with the traditional 1483, appears in a biographic note in Ms 9/2790 Sección de Cortes della Real Academia de la Historia de Madrid, fol. 6r ('per Dio gratia perveni a la luce in anno 1475. . .'), as noted by Barbara Agosti, 'Riflessioni su un manoscritto di Cesare Cesariano', in Maria Luisa Gatti Perer and Alessandro Rovetta (eds.), *Cesare Cesariano e il classicismo di primo Cinquecento tra Milano e Como* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1996), 71.

only documents the humanist exegetical approach to Vitruvius, but could have potentially influenced the planning of the Ferrarese theatre spaces or been influenced by them.

#### THE EVOLUTION OF THE THEATRICAL SPACE

Any investigation of the temporary theatre buildings designed for the revival of classical theatre in Ferrara is hampered by the absence of visual reproductions of set designs.<sup>9</sup> This absence may be due to the ephemeral nature of the stage buildings: both the stage and the stepped seating for the audience were built specifically for each performance (or festival) and were dismantled at the end of it. Nevertheless, piecing together the testimony of contemporary diarists and various foreign dignitaries who attended the performances allows one to trace the steady evolution of the theatrical space, beginning with the staging of Plautus' *Menaechmi* in 1486 and culminating in 1504 with the building of the *Sala dale Comedie*, the first permanent purpose-built theatre in Italy.

For the first performance of Plautus' *Menaechmi* in 1486, the open-air theatre space was organized with a long and narrow stage and frontal tiered seats reserved for the duke and his courtiers. The ladies of the court watched the performance from the loggias of the palace (*pozoli*). The public stood in the large space between the two platforms and had to make way for a wheeled boat at the beginning of the first act.<sup>10</sup> Ferrarini thus reports:<sup>11</sup>

Erano in lo cortile ducale tribunali parechiati: uno primo dal lato dela capella ducale lungo da un capo a l'altro del cortile, supra il qual con banchete li sentò lo duca nostro, lo marchexe di Mantoa, altri nobili citadini, scholari, doctori e populani dela città di Ferrara; uoi altro ex oposito lato delo officio deli XII Savii et dela camera ducale. Tribunal era facto con casa facto sopra epso per habitacione de poter far Menechino. Madama con le done stava suso il pozolo li è in dicto cortille a vedere.

<sup>9</sup> Ludovico Zorzi, *Il teatro e la città* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1977). Zorzi's suggestion that the frescoes of the Salon of the Months at Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara reflect the set design of these performances was criticized by Marco Folini, 'Schede descrittive del registro inferiore degli affreschi di Palazzo Schifanoia', in Salvatore Settis and Walter Cupperi, (eds.), *Il Palazzo Schifanoia a Ferrara* (Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini, 2007), 212–356. Zorzi had nevertheless the merit of showing the interrelationship between painting and drama in the Italian Early Renaissance. On this topic see more recently Kristin Phillips-Court, *The Perfect Genre: Drama and Painting in Renaissance Italy* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> An anonymous diarist in the *Diario Ferrarese dell'anno 1409 sino 1502 di autori incerti*, ed. Giuseppe Pardi (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1928, fol. 236r) reports that ten people sat on the boat, which was wheeled across the cortile.

<sup>11</sup> Girolamo Ferrarini, *Memoriale estense 1476–1489: Girolamo Ferrarini*, ed. Primo Griguolo (Rovigo: Minelliana, 2006), fols. 184r–v; See also Ugo Caleffini, *Croniche 1471–1494*, ed. Franco Cazzola (Ferrara: Deputazione Provinciale Ferrarese di Storia Patria, 2006), fol. 230r; Bernardino Zambotti, *Diario ferrarese dall'anno 1476 sino al 1504*, ed. Giuseppe Pardi (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1937), fol. 173r: 'e lo duca e lo marchese con la duchessa, con li altri zintilhomini stavano a vedere suxo uno tribunal de verso la capella de la corte, perchè da l'altro lado herano i representanti'; Anon., fol. 255v.

[In the ducal courtyard, wooden platforms had been arranged, the first one on the side of the ducal chapel, extending from one side of the courtyard to the other, where on wooden bleachers sat our duke, the Marquis of Mantua, other noblemen, intellectuals, doctors, and distinguished personalities of the city of Ferrara; the other platform was erected on the side opposite the side of the office of the XII Savii and of the ducal chambers. The platform was made with a mansion to function as a house to stage the *Menaechmi*. Milady was with the other noblewomen on the loggia facing the already mentioned *cortile* to watch [the performance].]

In 1491 the staging of classical plays was transferred to the Sala Grande in the ducal palace.<sup>12</sup> Caleffini duly acknowledges this in his report on the 1491 production of *Menaechmi*, stating that bleachers ‘facti alla romana more antiquo’ (fashioned according to the Roman ancient practice) were built up specifically for the event.<sup>13</sup> Zambotti specifies that, for the first time, the wooden bleachers were arranged on the three sides of the hall (‘e ge era dintorno a la sala tribunali in foza de theatri’, fol. 225r).

In 1502 the duke organized lavish celebrations for the marriage of his son, Alfonso (1476–1534), to Lucrezia Borgia (1480–1519), which included the staging of Plautus’ *Epidicus*.<sup>14</sup> For the first time, at the conclusion of a ball in the Sala Grande, all guests were invited to move over a covered bridge to the adjacent Palazzo della Ragione to watch the performance.<sup>15</sup> As in the Sala Grande, the ten rows of audience seating (‘tribunali alti de dece gradi’) were arranged on the three sides of the hall.<sup>16</sup> From the detailed report of Nicolò Cagnolo, who was part of the retinue of the ambassador of the King of France,<sup>17</sup> we learn that for the first time chairs were arranged ‘in foza de teatro’ (in theatrical fashion), in a semicircle. This arrangement could indicate the duke’s desire to create a space dedicated solely to dramatic performances and, possibly, to single out the staging of Roman comedy as an event distinct from more mundane forms of entertainment, such as lavish banquets and balls. In 1503 the traditional Carnival performances did not take place, as Ercole accepted his son-in-law’s invitation to attend the drama festivals held in Mantua.<sup>18</sup>

Later that year, Ercole I ordered the construction of the first purpose-built theatre in Italy, known as *Sala dale Comedie* or *Sala nova dale Comedie*. As documented in the Munitione Register, which is our only source, the Sala was

<sup>12</sup> Caleffini, *Croniche 1471–1494*, fol. 265r; Zambotti, *Diario ferrarese*, fol. 222v; Anon., fol. 258r.

<sup>13</sup> Coppo, ‘Spettacoli alla Corte di Ercole I’, 51.

<sup>14</sup> Diane Y. Ghirardo, ‘Festive Bridal Entries in Renaissance Ferrara’, in Sarah Bonnemaïson and Christine Macy (eds.), *Festival Architecture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 43–73, provides an overview of triumphal entries of Este brides between 1473 and 1573.

<sup>15</sup> Zambotti, *Diario ferrarese*, fol. 363v; Fra Paolo da Legnago fol. 166v (quoted in Coppo, ‘Spettacoli alla Corte di Ercole I’, 58); Anon., fol. 347v.

<sup>16</sup> Zambotti, *Diario ferrarese*, fol. 363v.

<sup>17</sup> Filippo della Rocca Berti was the ambassador of King Louis XII of France (1462–1515).

<sup>18</sup> Zambotti, *Diario ferrarese*, fol. 399v. In 1504, contemporary diarists only recorded the staging of a *sacra rappresentazione*, *La vita de Joseph* in the cathedral.

contiguous with one of the shorter walls of the palace, with one of the long walls oriented toward the church of Santo Stefano.<sup>19</sup> At first twenty-five feet (ten metres) high, it was subsequently raised to an impressive forty-two feet (seventeen metres). The theatre remained uncompleted after the death of Ercole the following year, and it was never used by his successor, Alfonso d'Este.

VITRUVIUS, PRISCIANI AND CESARIANO

This brief overview clearly maps the gradual evolution of theatre space in Ferrara and indicates a painstaking search to provide more functional solutions. This steady process was accompanied by informed studies and discussions of Vitruvius' treatment of ancient theatre buildings that features in his work, *De architectura*.

Composed in the Augustan age, *De architectura* is the only surviving architectural work of classical antiquity. This work was widely known in Northern Europe throughout the Middle Ages. In Italy, however, the presence of Vitruvian manuscripts is not attested during this period in any library other than Montecassino.<sup>20</sup> It is only in the second half of the fourteenth century that manuscripts of Vitruvius started circulating among Petrarch, Boccaccio, and their circles of friends, and rapidly disseminated across Italy.<sup>21</sup> The transmitted text, however, was highly corrupted, with many passages difficult to interpret. Various Italian humanists engaged in the laborious task of interpreting Vitruvius prior to the first printed edition by Fra Giocondo in 1511.<sup>22</sup>

Particularly significant for the scope of this work is a short treatise, *Spectacula*,<sup>23</sup> which was written by Pellegrino Prisciani at the time of the revival of classical drama under the patronage of Ercole I d'Este. *Spectacula* survives only in one manuscript, the Ms  $\alpha$  X 1.6 (=Cod. Lat. 466) from the Biblioteca Universitaria Estense in Modena. The codex consists of forty-nine folios, and

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Tuohy, *Herculean Ferrara: Ercole d'Este (1471–1505) and the Invention of a Ducal Capital* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 117–19, 259, describes in detail the building of the *Sala dale Comedie* with extensive quotes from the Munitione Register.

<sup>20</sup> Manfredo Tafuri, 'Cesare Cesariano e gli studi vitruviani del quattrocento', in Arnaldo Bruschi *et al.* (eds.), *Scritti rinascimentali di architettura* (Milan: Il Polifilo, 1978), 390–91 and n. 1, briefly outlines the manuscript tradition of Vitruvius in the Middle Ages in France and Italy. Carol Herselle Krinsky, 'Seventy-Eight Vitruvian Manuscripts', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 30 (1967), 36, records the popularity of Vitruvian manuscripts in medieval libraries across Germany.

<sup>21</sup> On Vitruvius' manuscript tradition see Lucia Ciapponi, 'Vitruvius' in *Catalogus translationum et commentariorum*, Vol. 3, ed. Ferdinand E. Cranz (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1976), 399–409.

<sup>22</sup> Lucia Ciapponi, 'Fra Giocondo da Verona and his Edition of Vitruvius', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 47 (1984), 72–90.

<sup>23</sup> Parts of *Spectacula* appeared in Eugenio Battisti, 'Il manoscritto sugli *Spettacoli* di Pellegrino Prisciano', *Necropoli*, 8 (1970), 47–54, and Ferruccio Marotti, *Lo spettacolo dall' Umanesimo al Manierismo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974), 53–77. Beside the edition by Danilo Aguzzi Barbagli, a digital copy of the text, complete with the manuscript facsimile, was recently edited by Elisa Bastianello, 'Pellegrino Prisciani, *Spectacula*. Prima edizione elettronica del testo contenuto nel manoscritto della Biblioteca Estense di Modena, Ms. Lat. 466=alfa X.1.6, alle carte 17v–40r (numerazione moderna), *La Rivista di Engramma* 85 (2010), 12–108.

*Spectacula* runs from fol. 17v to fol. 40v. The text remains incomplete at folio 40v, folio 24 survives only in part, while folio 29 is missing entirely. This work interprets and elaborates Vitruvius' chapters from Book Five, relative to ancient theatre buildings. In his treatment, Prisciani also draws upon Leon Battista Alberti's discussion of this topic. His main resource for archeological and antiquarian information is the *De Roma instaurata* of Flavio Biondo.<sup>24</sup> Written between 1444 and 1446, *De Roma instaurata* remained for over a century the most authoritative study of ancient Roman monuments.<sup>25</sup> Prisciani, however, does not simply quote from Biondo's work, but often integrates archeological data with personal observation and experience. Thus, for instance, he acknowledges to have seen various amphitheatres, such as those in Verona and Pola, and states that he would refer particularly to the Colosseum because he had that measured and, in fact, includes a very accurate floor map of it (fol. 27v).

*Spectacula* is not the only vernacular work that draws upon Vitruvius' *De architectura*.<sup>26</sup> Prisciani's critical approach towards his sources, however, makes this treatise far more than a mere translation and a text worth further investigation. His aim is 'recherchare le antiche memorie de tal spectaculi de li ioci et de li edifici necessarij a ciò' (to research the ancient testimonies of such performances and of the games and of the buildings suited to this purpose, fol. 18v). This makes *Spectacula* an invaluable documentary source that reveals humanist views on ancient theatre buildings and the application of these principles to create contemporary theatre spaces. In this respect, Prisciani's attempt to illustrate the theories of Vitruvius through drawings is fundamental.

Corrupted passages in the Vitruvian manuscripts posed a challenge to humanists, but the omission of illustrations posed an even greater one. Illustrated manuscripts of Vitruvius are a rarity and, in most cases, illustrations are more decorative than functional and seem to have been inserted by a later hand. As Krinsky puts it, '[w]e must doubt that the archetype manuscript contained illustrations. If this conclusion is correct, nothing of the Roman

<sup>24</sup> Pellegrino Prisciani, *Spectacula*, 19–20. Claudio Greppi, 'Paesaggi archeologici: la *Roma instaurata* di Biondo Flavio', in Patrizia Castelli (ed.), *L'ideale classico a Ferrara e in Italia nel Rinascimento* (Florence: Olschki, 1998), 97–107.

<sup>25</sup> This work has been edited in recent years by Anne Raffarin, *Flavio Biondi. Rome restaurée/ Roma Instaurata*, Vols. I–III, (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2005–2012). Biondo voices the humanistic interest in antiquarianism, intended as a recognition of ancient Rome as a far more advanced civilization. On this topic, see Claudio Greppi, 'Paesaggi archeologici: la *Roma instaurata* di Biondo Flavio', 97–107. See also Aguzzi Barbagli's edition, Pellegrino Prisciani, *Spectacula*, 19–20, with bibliographical references.

<sup>26</sup> Besides that of Cesariano, there are three extant vernacular translations of Vitruvius' *De Architectura*. The translation of Senese humanist Francesco di Giorgio Martini has been edited by Marco Biffi: Francesco di Giorgio Martini, *La traduzione del De architectura di Vitruvio (dal ms II.I.141 della Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze)*, ed. Marco Biffi (Pisa: Scuola Normale Superiore, 2002). The translation by Fabio Calvo Ravennate has been preserved in two sixteenth-century manuscripts from the Staatsbibliothek in Munich (Cod. ital. 37 and 37a). It was edited by Vincenzo Fontana and Paolo Morachiello, *Vitruvio e Raffaello e il De Architectura di Vitruvio nella traduzione in edita di Fabio Calvo Ravennate* (Rome: Officina Edizioni, 1975). Lastly, an unpublished anonymous translation, contained in the Vatican Library, Ms Ottobonianus 1653, has been dated by Biffi to around 1515 (see Francesco di Giorgio Martini, *La traduzione del De architectura di Vitruvio*, 57).

illustrative tradition – if there ever was a tradition – survived past the early Carolingian period at the latest.<sup>27</sup> Prisciani's insertion of drawings is highly innovative, considering that illustrations are absent even from Alberti's monumental work and that the first illustrated edition of Vitruvius only appeared in 1511.<sup>28</sup>

As for the dating of *Spectacula*, the scholarship agrees that this work must have been written sometime between 1486, the year of the premiere of Plautus' *Menaechmi*, and 1504, in the golden era of the revival of classical theatre at the court of Ercole I.<sup>29</sup> The documentary evidence may provide us with a more specific dating, which has thus far been overlooked.

In 1491 Isabella d'Este wrote to her husband Francesco Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua (1466–1519), about her intellectual conversations with Pellegrino Prisciani, which included discussions of the works of Pliny, Vitruvius, and Homer. She remarked that she had found it particularly helpful that 'havendo veduto et examinato quelli disegni là, ho principiato ad imparare architectura' (having seen and examined those drawings, I began to learn architecture).<sup>30</sup> Since, as mentioned above, the first illustrated edition of Vitruvius only appeared in 1511, and very few of the extant Vitruvian manuscripts are complemented with drawings, none of which represents theatre plans, the *disegni* that Isabella mentions must be those of Prisciani. Considering Isabella's interest in the revival of Roman comedy and her eagerness to be kept up-to-date with the industrious staging preparations, it is possible to assume that when the letter was written, Prisciani had just compiled or was in the process of writing his *Spectacula*. Interestingly, it was in 1491 that classical plays began to be staged in the ducal palace. This change of venue would have undoubtedly required more careful planning as, among other things, the temporary wooden structures had to fit the enclosed space of a hall.

A crucial part of the planning of an indoor theatre space was likely to be the arrangement of seating for the audience. It is hardly surprising to find that

<sup>27</sup> Krinsky, 'Seventy-Eight Vitruvius Manuscripts', 36 (for an overview of the Vitruvian manuscript tradition, see 41–44). For a survey of printed editions of Vitruvius, from which some of the later manuscripts could have been copied, see Luigi Vagnetti and Laura Marcucci, *2000 anni di Vitruvio. Regesto cronologico e critico delle edizioni* (Florence: Cattedra di composizione architettonica A di Firenze, 1978).

<sup>28</sup> Claudio Sgarbi, *Vitruvio ferravese. De architectura. La prima edizione illustrata* (Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini, 2004), identified and edited a manuscript of Vitruvius, Biblioteca Ariostea di Ferrara, Classe II, n. 176, which was unknown to Krinsky. Sgarbi dated the manuscript to the end of the fifteenth/early sixteenth century. The fact that the illustrations have no correspondence to those in the edition by Fra' Giocondo made him argue that this manuscript must have been written before 1511 at the court of Ercole I and perhaps by Pellegrino Prisciani himself, as suggested by Anna Maria Remondini, 'Vitruvio M. Pollio Architectura', *Schifanoia* 3 (1987) 145–51. It must be noted that the drawings in this manuscript are far more elaborated than those that appear in *Spectacula*.

<sup>29</sup> Zorzi, *Il teatro e la città*, 13; Ferrari, 'Il manoscritto *Spectacula*', 441 n. 24, with an extensive bibliography; Prisciani, *Spectacula*, 13; Rotondò, 'Pellegrino Prisciani', 74, dates it more specifically to 1501. In that year, Prisciani was appointed ambassador to Rome, and resided in the city for some time. The treatise must have been written after 1490 if one follows Ferrari in taking the note in the dedication to Duke Ercole I as a reference to Prisciani's *Histories of Ferrara*, which he started writing that year.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted by Luzio and Renier, 'Commedie classiche in Ferrara', 257.

Prisciani, by his own admission, assigns greater importance to the configuration of the *cavea* than his sources do (*Spectacula* fol. 20r). Prisciani also stresses the importance of gangways to ensure that the entry and exit flows of spectators are smooth, an aspect that, as he remarks, is completely overlooked by Alberti:

Perché certamente altra partita non ha tanto bisogno de masticatione quanto quella, essendo che de le due parte principali del teatro una reputo esser questa, cioè el vodar et impire le gradatione de questi spectaculi senza che le persone se stringano, se urteno et se concalcheno, si como per l'altra el conservare de la voce, como doppo dirò. Baptista de Alberti se ne passò senza enucleatione alcuna. (*Spectacula*, fol. 21r)

[Since undoubtedly no other matter needs treatment as much as this, given that among the two principal elements of a theatre building, one I deem to be this, namely the clearing out and filling up of the stepped seats of these performances without the audience pressing against one another, colliding or crowding. The other matter is voice conservation, as I shall discuss later. Battista Alberti overlooked this aspect without providing any explanation.]

Prisciani takes literally Vitruvius' remark that in Roman theatre buildings, the orchestra functioned as additional seating reserved for senators and other distinguished guests, and he assumes the entire orchestral space to be dedicated to privileged seating.<sup>31</sup> In the theatre plan that illustrates this arrangement (*Spectacula*, fol. 22v, Fig. 1), he erroneously draws the orchestra as a rectangular area next to the stage. The actual orchestral space between the *cavea* and the stage, which is labelled as *cava del teatro*, is an empty area.

Prisciani uses the expression *area mediana* (middle area) to indicate this area (*Spectacula*, fol. 20v). The term *area mediana* is completely absent from Vitruvius. Prisciani most likely gleaned it from the work of Alberti himself, who refers to the 'area or open space in the middle', where seats for privileged spectators were erected. Technically, the *area mediana* coincides with the orchestra itself. Clearly, this is what Leon Battista Alberti intended when he specified in book eight of his *De re aedificatoria*:<sup>32</sup>

Sed theatra Graeca ab Latinis differebant ea re, quod illi choros et scaenicos saltatores *media in area* perducentes pulpito indigebant minore; nostri, quod totis ludionibus fabulam agerent in pulpito, id ea de re habere laxius voluere. (*De re aedificatoria*, 8.7, fol. 149v)

[But Greek theatres used to differ from Latin theatres, in this aspect, that the Greeks, who were bringing their actors and performers in the *middle area* needed a smaller stage; our ancestors, since they performed their plays on stage with all actors, for this reason wanted to make it larger.] (emphasis added)

<sup>31</sup> See Marotti, *Lo spettacolo dall' Umanesimo al Manierismo*, 62 n. 29.

<sup>32</sup> All citations from this work are based on Leon Battista Alberti, *De re aedificatoria*, ed. Giovanni Orlandi and Paolo Portoghesi (Milan: Il Polifilo, 1966).



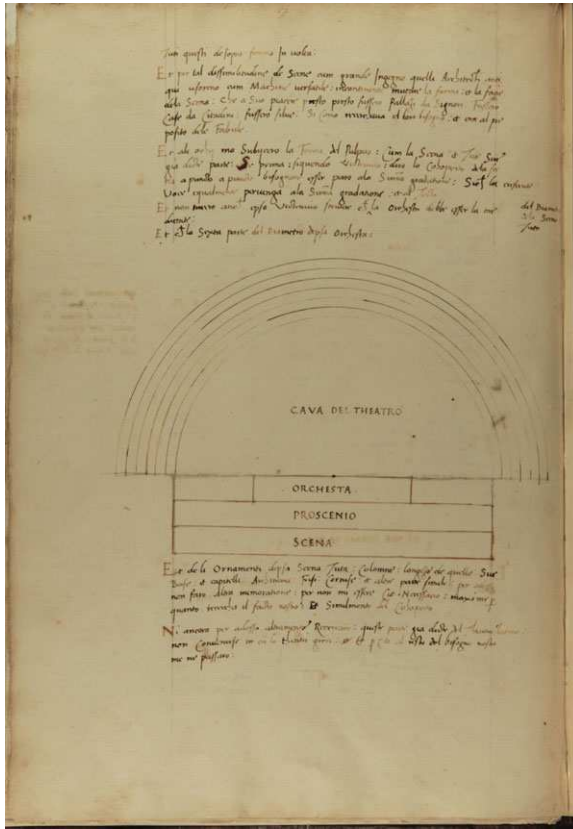


Fig. 1 Pellegrino Prisciani, *Spectacula* (Biblioteca Estense Universitaria Ms Lat. 466=alfa.X.1.6), fol. 22v, by courtesy of the Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo

Prisciani distinguishes the *area mediana* from the orchestra, and he designates as *orchesta* the area right in front of the *proscenium*. This confusion can perhaps be explained by the Ferrarese theatre practice of the time. We know that wooden bleachers were arranged on the three sides of the stage, and that those parallel to the front of the stage, corresponding to the orchestra in Prisciani's view, would have been very close to the performance space, being effectively an extension of it.<sup>33</sup> The duke reserved these privileged seats for himself and some of his courtiers, but also, and more importantly, for powerful visitors.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> As already noted in Giulia Torello-Hill, 'Gli *Spectacula* di Pellegrino Prisciani e il revival del teatro classico a Ferrara', *La Rivista di Engramma* 85 (2010), 7.

<sup>34</sup> Thus, for instance, on the 29 January 1502 Isabella d'Este, writing to her husband Francesco Gonzaga about the preparation for the performances to be held on the occasion of the wedding of her brother Alfonso to Lucrezia Borgia in the hall at Palazzo della Ragione, remarks: 'Stimasi che vi starano circa cinque millia persone; ma prima li forestieri occuparano li gradi; se lo reterà, sera de li gentilhomeni ferraresi.'

It is only on the occasion of the 1502 performances that wooden bleachers were replaced by chairs arranged in semicircular rows in the fashion of ancient theatres.<sup>35</sup> We do not know what determined this arrangement and whether or not this was meant to be adopted in subsequent performances. By arranging the seating for the audience in semicircular rows, however, Prisciani would have consciously imitated the *cavea* of Roman theatres.

This arrangement reflects, for instance, the ancient theatre map that illustrates the translation of Vitruvius written by Cesare Cesariano.<sup>36</sup> Cesariano compiled a vernacular edition of *De architectura* complete with illustrations and an extended commentary. In a biographical note inserted in folio 91v, Cesariano recalls how he arrived in Ferrara under the protection of Antonio Visconti, ambassador of Ludovico il Moro. This prompted Ruffini to date his arrival to around 1499, since Ludovico il Moro was captured by the French in 1500.<sup>37</sup> His edition of Vitruvius had a gestation of over twenty years, and was published without the author's permission in 1521.<sup>38</sup> Cesariano remained at the Ferrarese court until 1503, and perhaps assisted with the 1499 festival, while certainly assisting with the 1502 performances held on the occasion of the wedding of Alfonso d'Este and Lucrezia Borgia. From Cesariano's brief mention of his stay at the Ferrara court, we learn that he gained experience in the staging of comic plays for Duke Ercole ('ivi in le Comedie per Duca Ercole mi exercitai'). The reflexive verb 'mi exercitai' seems to indicate that rather than being a passive spectator of these performances he was actively involved in them. To what extent and in what capacity he took part in the Ferrarese revival we cannot tell.

Cesariano's translation of the fifth book of Vitruvius is complemented with four illustrations that represent two Roman theatre plans (fols. 75v and 81v), one Greek theatre plan (fol. 84r), and the exterior of a theatre along with a theatre section and a plan of the *scaena* (fol. 82v, Fig. 2). While the first Roman theatre plan (fol. 75v) is quite schematic,<sup>39</sup> the second plan (81v) illustrates privileged seats and a view of the stairways, two key features in Prisciani's treatment of ancient theatre buildings in *Spectacula*. Furthermore, the woodcut of the Greek theatre plan (fol. 84r) includes arches that support rows of seats. This latter arrangement does not reflect Vitruvian principles, but it

<sup>35</sup> See the detailed report of Nicolò Cagnolo, *Lucrezia Borgia in Ferrara sposa a Don Alfonso d'Este. Memorie storiche estratte dalla cronaca ferrarese di Bernardino Zambotto dov'è inserita la relazione di Nicolò Cagnolo da Parma* (Ferrara: Domenico Taddei Tipografo Editore, 1867).

<sup>36</sup> A survey of the sources used by Cesariano, including Donatus' commentary on Terence and various lexica, such as Pollux's *Onomasticon* and Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*, is in Alessandro Rovetta, 'Note introduttive all'edizione moderna del primo libro del Vitruvio di Cesare Cesariano', in Maria Luisa Gatti Perer and Alessandro Rovetta (eds.), *Cesare Cesariano e il classicismo di primo Cinquecento tra Milano e Como* (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1996), 267–75.

<sup>37</sup> Ruffini, *Teatri prima del teatro*, 73 with n. 22.

<sup>38</sup> Cesariano accuses the editors of having stolen from him three complete copies of his work, as discussed by Agosti, 'Riflessioni su un manoscritto di Cesare Cesariano', 68.

<sup>39</sup> This first woodcut illustration is of much inferior quality to the others. This prompted Krinsky (Cesariano, *Vitruvius*, 22) to infer that it was not Cesariano's own design.

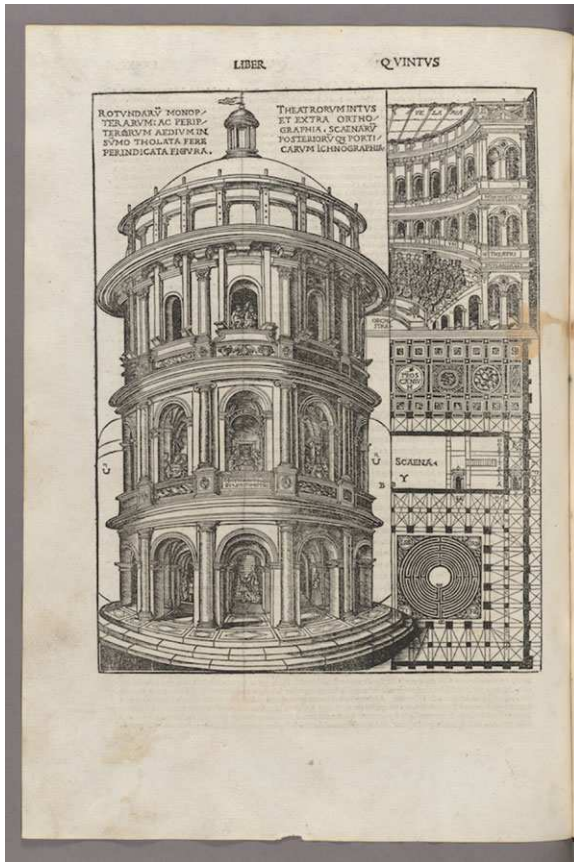


Fig. 2 Vitruvius Pollio, *De architectura* libri dece tr. de latino in vulgare, affigurati commentate et con mirando ordine insigniti da Cesare Cesariano (Como: G. da Ponte 1521), OLC V834 Ei521 (A), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

was common in open-air performances and thus could reflect theatre practice. It has been suggested that Cesariano may have utilized Prisciani as a source in his translation of the fifth book of Vitruvius.<sup>40</sup> Undeniably, his presence in Ferrara and his involvement in the theatrical practice of those years would have had an impact on his own work.

The woodcut illustration at fol. 82v (see Fig. 2) deserves a special mention. On the right-hand side, it represents a section of a Roman *cavea*, with a floor plan at the bottom. The left-hand side is occupied by a circular multi-tiered building that hardly resembles the exterior of a Roman theatre. As Krinsky noted, Cesariano's Vitruvian theatre recalls the Colosseum as it would have

<sup>40</sup> Tafuri, 'Cesare Cesariano e gli studi vitruviani nel Quattrocento', 429.

been known to him through contemporary iconography, rather than from personal experience.<sup>41</sup>

Vitruvius does not include amphitheatres in his treatment of theatre buildings. The only incidental reference to amphitheatres at *De architectura* 1.7.1 makes recommendations regarding the area in which temples dedicated to Hercules should be erected 'in those cities that have neither gymnasia nor amphitheatres' ('in quibus civitatibus non sunt gymnasia neque amphitheatra'). Conversely, Biondo,<sup>42</sup> Alberti, and Prisciani all include amphitheatres within their discussion of ancient theatre buildings. All three authors engage in a fairly extensive discussion of the variety of spectacles hosted in the Colosseum, including gladiatorial games and naumachies. Alberti's remarks on the structure and functionality of amphitheatres is otherwise rather brief. After pointing out that the length of the amphitheatre must be a certain proportion of its breadth, he concludes:

Caetera prosecuti sunt uti in theatris: nam circum quidem extrinseca porticus, et in suprema itidem gradatione porticus, quam eandem circumvallationem appellavimus, adhibita est. (*De re aedificatoria*, 8.8, fol. 153r)  
[In all other features they agree with theatres: indeed porticoes were built all around on the outside and one over the highest seat that we have called the circumvallation.]

Prisciani criticizes Alberti for this inaccurate treatment. He polemically remarks that theatres and amphitheatres present different features. A major difference lies in the fact that while in theatres the graded seats occupy up to two-thirds of the theatre's height, in amphitheatres graded seats are built all the way to the top ('... essendo che lo teatro, ancora maximo, al più al più per li dui terzi de sua alteza se impeva de gradi; Lo amphitheatro insino al sumo quasi . . .', 26v). He also explains that this is due to the fact that in amphitheatres there is no preoccupation with achieving good acoustics like in theatres, but only with viewing ('et fu rationabil non se havendo rispetto in lo amphitheatro ad conservazione alcuna de voce como nel teatro necessariamente, ma solum al vedere,' 26v) since, presumably, the focus of the *ioci* in ancient amphitheatres is on action rather than words. This clarification once again indicates Prisciani's understanding of theatrical architecture as well as his practical approach. Acoustics in theatre buildings is a paramount issue and one to which Prisciani, like Vitruvius, devotes an extensive treatment.

Vitruvius' explanation of the concept of a sound wave (5.3.6–7) is well known. His analogy between sound propagation and the spreading of waves on the surface of a pool when a stone is thrown into it is reproduced by

<sup>41</sup> Cesariano, *Vitruvius*, 23. Krinsky remarks that there is no record to indicate that Cesariano ever visited Rome. Both Krinsky and Tafuri, 'Cesare Cesariano e gli studi vitruviani nel Quattrocento', 414 note that various inaccuracies in his treatment of Roman antiquities suggest that Cesariano used literary sources rather than personal observation for his treatment of the Colosseum.

<sup>42</sup> Biondo Flavio, *Romae Instauratae libri tres*, 3.1–15.

Prisciani at folio 23r. Prisciani also draws from his personal experience when, adding to Vitruvius, he remarks that every time entertainers of various kind perform in a public square, the audience instinctively gathers around the performers in a circle:

. . . le brigate adunarseli atorno tuti in forma circolare senza, como ho dicto, che loro li ponano altra fantasia et consideratione. Et questo advene perché da sé stesso lo audito nostro non essendo impedito, se adapta al loco dal quale pilgi le parole del proferente . . . (*Spectacula*, fol. 23r)

[. . .The entire audience gathers around [the performers] in a circle, without them, as I said, having any other desire or consideration. And this happens because our hearing, of its own accord, without any hindrance, settles in a place where it can get the words of the utterer. . .]

Prisciani continues in his considerations, which have no correspondence in Alberti, remarking that ancient architects:

. . . sequendo et imitando le vestigie dela natura, fabriconno li gradi theatriali circolari et ascendenti, et per canonica ragione mathematicale et musicale cerchonno che qualunche voce che fusse nela scena pervenesse ale orecchie de spectatori più chiara et più suave che potesse. (*Spectacula*, fol. 23r)

[Imitating and following in the footsteps of nature, they built graded seats as circular and ascending, and through mathematical and musical principles they strived [to ensure] that whatever voice may have been on stage it would reach the audience's ears as clearly and suavely as possible.]

The dimension and arrangement of graded seats in theatre buildings is paramount in achieving good acoustics. This is why Prisciani deals with this topic in great detail. Another important element, which is disregarded by Alberti, is a consideration of the materials used to build the *cavea*. Prisciani recalls in folios 25r-v a passage of *De Architectura* 5.5.5 in which Vitruvius comments on how wooden theatre buildings facilitated the refraction of the actor's voice, acting as a resonance chamber. In permanent theatres where such a phenomenon does not occur, the Romans introduced resonating vases as a means to guarantee good acoustics in every part of the theatre. Vitruvius' discussion of the function of such vases, which were believed to act as resonators for specific cords, is far from exhaustive.<sup>43</sup> Alberti refers to the use of bronze vases only briefly, sceptically remarking that 'experts may know' how the resonating vases work in practice.<sup>44</sup>

Prisciani introduces the Vitruvian 'vasi de bronzo' at fol. 24v, but his treatment is partly lost to us due to the tearing out of the folio. The loss of over half of this folio does not allow us to ascertain whether the function of the

<sup>43</sup> An invaluable introduction to acoustics and music theory in Vitruvius is John G. Landels, 'Assisted Resonance in Ancient Theatres', *Greece & Rome* 14 (1967), 80–94.

<sup>44</sup> Alberti, *De re aedificatoria* 8.7, fol. 152r.

Vitruvian resonating vases was developed at any length. We can reasonably presume so, since in the following folio he follows up on this by quoting Vitruvius' statement on the acoustics in temporary wooden theatres and permanent ones, as discussed above.<sup>45</sup> Arguably, the principle of resonating vases could have been one of interest to Prisciani. While both the set design and the temporary seating for the audience were built of wood, a material that facilitates sound deflection, the theatre hall in Ferrara was a totally enclosed space. Moreover, the presence of part of the audience in the orchestra would have made it an area of sound absorption, thus changing the acoustics of the hall.<sup>46</sup>

According to Prisciani, the other major difference between theatres and amphitheatres concerns the way in which the audience enters and leaves the theatre. While in theatres, audiences make their way in and out through internal gangways and through the 'middle area', in amphitheatres they access and exit through porticoes and external staircases ('l'impire del teatro se fa da dentro et per la area mediana, quello delo amphitheatro per li portici exteriori', fol. 26v). Once again, Prisciani addresses a very important aspect in the planning of theatre buildings, and one that he would have considered carefully in the Ferrarese staging.

Prisciani's criticism of Alberti is unquestionably sound. Alberti's inaccuracies blur the differences between theatre and amphitheatre. Arguably, his deficiencies could be ascribed to the silence of Vitruvius on this point. Another reason for Alberti's stance could be found in the interest that humanists showed in the Colosseum. As the best-preserved example of an ancient amphitheatre, the Colosseum became gradually the theatre par excellence.

The Colosseum has been an endless source of fascination throughout the centuries and has been viewed as a centre of power, a temple and, in the Renaissance, as a theatre. In the Middle Ages it started to be represented as a circular building.<sup>47</sup> As Di Macco contends in her monograph study, the circular shape could be viewed as a symbol of celestial perfection in keeping with humanist philosophical and astrological beliefs.<sup>48</sup>

Besides the already discussed representation in Cesariano's edition of Vitruvius, another case in point of an inaccurate physical depiction of the Colosseum is the frontispiece of the illustrated edition of the plays of Terence, printed by Lazzaro de' Soardi in Venice in 1497 (Fig. 3). It depicts the section of a theatre, complete with actors (one onstage and the other entering the

<sup>45</sup> As suggested by Aguzzi Barbagli in Pellegrino Prisciani, *Spectacula*, 18.

<sup>46</sup> Paolo Portoghesi, 'Acoustics', in *Encyclopedia of World Art*, Vol. 1 (New York, Toronto and London: McGraw-Hill, 1959), 26.

<sup>47</sup> Michela Di Macco, *Il Colosseo. Funzione simbolica, storica e urbana* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1971) analyses extensively the historic and symbolic function of the Colosseum from late antiquity until the nineteenth century. See also Zorzi, *Il teatro e la città*, 314.

<sup>48</sup> Likewise, Filarete in his *Libro architettonico* (1460–1464) draws the plan of his ideal city, named Sforzinda after Francesco Sforza, Duke of Milan, within a circle. In the centre of Sforzinda towers a tall circular construction that resembles the Colosseum (Di Macco, *Il Colosseo*, 55).

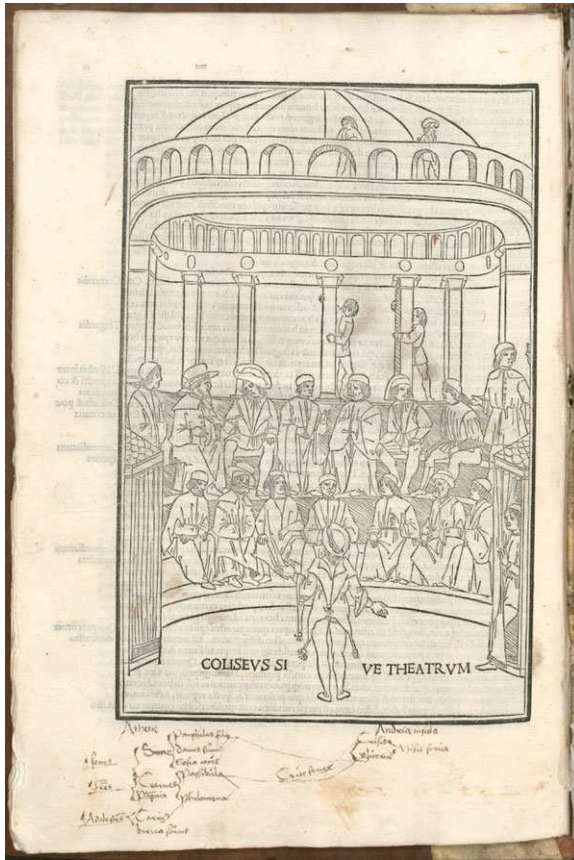


Fig. 3 Publius Terentius Afer, *Comoediae*. Comm: Donatus; Guido; Ascensius; and Calphurnius (in part). Ed: Ascensius. Add: Vita Terentii (Venice: Lazarus de Suardis, de Saviliano, 7 Nov. 1499), 2 Inc.c.a. 3548, fol. 6v, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München

stage from a side door) and audience; it is labelled as *Coliseus sive theatrum* (Colosseum or theatre). The majority of the audience is seated on two rows of bleachers. The roof of this circular theatre building contains a loggia from which two spectators watch the performance. This arrangement reminds us of the noblewomen watching the open-air performance of Plautus' *Menaechmi* from the loggias of the Palazzo. De' Soardi's representation of the Vitruvian theatre is a hybrid combination of Vitruvian principles, traditional iconography of the Colosseum, and modern theatre practice.

The frontispiece of the edition of Terence's *Comedies* by Jodocus Badius Ascensius (1482–1535), which was published by Trechsel in Lyon in 1493, is an interesting case. It features an elaborated theatre building with a hexagonal base surmounted by four columns that delimit the rectangular theatre space



Fig. 4 Publius Terentius Afer, *Comoediae*. Comm: Aelius Donatus; Guido Juvenalis. Ed: Jodocus Badius Ascensius, fol. 82v, frontispiece (© The British Library Board, IB 41903)

(Fig. 4). The departure from a circular building is notable, as it reflects the theatre space of the first indoor performances, such as those at the Sala Grande that Badius attended in person. Indeed, Badius (1462–1535) studied in Ferrara under Battista Guarino in the early 1480s. His visits to Ferrara extended until 1490 and allowed him to witness the first performances of Roman comedy there.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Max Herrmann, *Forschungen zur Deutschen Theatergeschichte des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Dresden: Verl. d. Kunst, 1954), 25, claims that he was in Ferrara between 1491 and 1492. Maurice Lebel, *Préfaces de Josse Bade, 1462–1535: humaniste, éditeur-imprimeur et préfacier* (Louvain: Peeters, 1988), 3, suggests that Badius' extended stay in Italy ended in 1488 and included a period of study at the University of Ferrara under Battista Guarino. Either dating indicates that he witnessed the revival of Roman comedy in Ferrara.



The orchestral space does not appear in the woodcut illustration of the Badius edition of Terence. The flute-player, who sits on the edge of the elevated *pulpitum*, is in close proximity to the spectators seated in the first row. This arrangement recalls that of the Ferrarese performances up until 1502, as discussed earlier. The rows of wooden bleachers are arranged directly facing the stage; there are no bleachers on the sides, although this may be due to the artist's intention to depict only a section of the theatre. Nonetheless, the arrangement of the rows of seats in a straight line is a distinctive departure from the semicircular *cavea* of ancient theatres. As for the acting space, the stage appears elevated and narrow, while the *proscenium* is made of three arched curtained doors. It is undeniable that this theatrical buildings share many similarities with the temporary theatre buildings of Ferrarese performances, such as the departure from a circular building in favour of a squared one, squared seating arrangements that are a far cry from the semicircular Vitruvian *cavea*, and lastly, a flat backdrop that bears some similarity to the so-called *città ferrarese* set design.<sup>50</sup>

#### TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN THE *CITTÀ FERRARESE* SET DESIGN

Various contemporary sources describe the set design of the performances staged in Ferrara as consisting of a practicable stage with five or six aligned houses.<sup>51</sup> The houses, at least in the 1499 staging of Terence's *Eunuch* in the Sala Grande, numbered five, and they were equipped with doors (*ussi*), which were used for character entrances and exits, and with windows (*fenestre*).<sup>52</sup>

This set design, named *città ferrarese*, has been viewed as a secularization of the medieval theatre set design of mansions (*luoghi deputati*) and a prelude to the Renaissance perspectival scene.<sup>53</sup> The assimilation of the set design of the *sacra rappresentazione* to the *città ferrarese* is, however, quite problematic. While in the staging of *sacre rappresentazioni*, different mansions hosted different scenes, the *città ferrarese* is a unitary ensemble. Likewise, this set design differs quite significantly from the Renaissance perspectival set. The *caxe dipinte* are simply houses with doors and windows whose façades are painted to make them look more realistic. The *città ferrarese* does not attempt in any way to

<sup>50</sup> Thomas E. Lawrenson and Helen Purkis, 'Les éditions illustrées de Térence dans l'histoire du théâtre', in Jean Jacquot (ed.), *Le lieu théâtral à la Renaissance* (Paris: Editions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1964), 1–23 deny any correspondence between Badius' illustrations and contemporary theatre practice.

<sup>51</sup> Zambotti, *Diario ferrarese*, fol. 173r, fol. 389v; Anon., fol. 255v; Ferrarini, *Memoriale estense*, fols. 184r–v; Caleffini, *Croniche 1471–1494*, fols. 230r–v.

<sup>52</sup> Zambotti, *Diario ferrarese*, fol. 327r.

<sup>53</sup> Elena Povoledo, 'La "città ferrarese"', in Nino Pirrotta (ed.), *Li Due Orfei. Da Poliziano a Monteverdi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), 395–409; *Id.*, 'La sala teatrale a Ferrara: da Pellegrino Prisciani a Ludovico Ariosto', *Bollettino del Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura Andrea Palladio* 16 (1974), 105–25. For details of the *sacre rappresentazioni* in Ferrara see Marina Vecchi Calore, 'Rappresentazioni sacre a Ferrara ai tempi di Ercole I', *Atti della Deputazione Ferrarese di Storia Patria*, 27 (1980), 157–85.

create a volumetric space; conversely, it deliberately rejects the depth of perspective.<sup>54</sup>

In the *città ferrarese* the focus of the audience is on the proscenium and the physical distance between acting space and audience space is reduced to a minimum. The duke always sits in a prominent position, being close to both the performers and the audience. At least twice, on the occasion of the staging of Plautus' *Amphitruo* in 1487, and for that of Terence's *Eunuchus* in 1499, the duke was seated on stage.<sup>55</sup> This physical closeness can be explained by the intended didactic function of the revival of classical theatre and by Ercole's role as the educator of his people, as outlined by Prisciani:

Non mancho nui dovemo laudare Vostra Celsitudine, la quale cum tanti et tanto ordinati spectaculi congregi questo suo fidissimo et dolce popolo, lo delecti, lo amaestri in questo suo mundano vivere, lo inviti al studio et al farsi docti homini ad honore et beneficio non mediocre de tuta la re publica. (*Spectacula*, fols. 18r-v)

[Likewise, we must praise Your Highness, who with so many and so well-organized spectacles gathers his faithful and docile people, he entertains them, educates them in their mundane life and prompts them to study and to become learned men to the honour and great benefit of the entire state.]<sup>56</sup>

Ercole I's virtues were not only immortalized in celebratory writings, such as Sabbadino degli Arienti's *De triumphis virtutitis*,<sup>57</sup> but also celebrated on stage. Notably, the staging of Plautus' *Amphitruo*, which was performed for the first time in 1487, included an *intermezzo* on Hercules' labours.<sup>58</sup> Thus Ercole I is not only the embodiment of virtue, but also becomes the embodiment of theatre itself. This correspondence is exemplified by the words that sixteenth-century Italian architect Giambattista Aleotti addressed to his patron

<sup>54</sup> I paraphrase Ruffini, *Teatri prima del teatro*, 169. Perspective was first introduced on the Ferrarese stage with Pellegrino da Udine's set design for Ariosto's *Cassaria*, which premiered in 1508. For a discussion of the breakthrough provoked by the introduction of perspectival set designs, see Fabio Finotti, 'Perspective and Stage Design, Fiction and Reality in the Italian Renaissance Theater of the Fifteenth Century', *Renaissance Drama* 36/37 (2010), 21–42.

<sup>55</sup> For *Amphitruo* see Ferrarini, *Cronica ferrarese*, fol. 206r: 'lo Duca . . . supra il tribunale dove se recitava stete a vedere'. For *Eunuchus* see the letter of Bernardino de' Prosperi to Isabella Gonzaga (quoted by Coppo, 'Spettacoli alla Corte di Ercole I', 53.)

<sup>56</sup> The role of Duke Ercole as the educator of his people through the revival of ancient plays is emphasized also in the prologue to a vernacular adaptation of Terence's *Phormio* contained in the Biblioteca Riccardiana, Ms Ricc. 1616 fols. 37r–v and first quoted by Luigina Stefani, 'Sui volgarizzamenti plautini a Ferrara e a Mantova nel tardo Quattrocento', *Paragone* 30 (1979), 73. It is discussed by Gianni Guastella, 'Menaechmi e Menechini: Plauto ritorna sulla scena', in Renato Raffaelli and Alba Tontini (eds.), *Lecturae Plautinae Sarsinates X. Menaechmi* (Urbino: Quattroventi, 2007), 87–8.

<sup>57</sup> Edited by Werner I. Gundersheimer, *Art and Life at the Court of Ercole I d'Este: The 'De triumphis religionis' of Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti* (Geneve: Droz, 1972).

<sup>58</sup> As reported by Ferrarini, *Cronica ferrarese*, fol. 206v. For the appropriation of the myth of Hercules by the Este, see Antonia Tissoni Benvenuti, 'Il mito di Ercole: aspetti della recezione dell'antico alla corte estense nel primo Quattrocento', in Antonio Daniele (ed.), *Omaggio a Gianfranco Folena* (Padua: Programma, 1993), 773–92.

Ranuccio I: 'As it is known, Your Highness is a living theatre in whom all heroic virtues represent magnanimous and generous actions.'<sup>59</sup>

The audience watched a small-scale version of their city while, in turn, being watched by the duke. The local audience would immediately identify the set as its own civic space and would connect it with the theatre space, mindful all the time, however, of the castle as the centre of political power.<sup>60</sup> Visitors from other cities would recognize the set design and, by extension, the entire production as the trademark of the court of Ferrara. Its *cave* are the limits of the acting area, and create a flat and impenetrable boundary. It is only with the introduction of a perspectival scene that the backdrop is broken down, thus changing the dynamic relationship between performers and audience, between fiction and reality. The absence of perspective makes the audience spectators and protagonists at the same time, as *spectacula* are as much about seeing as they are about being seen.

#### SEEING AND BEING SEEN

The theatrical experience relies on vision, a fact highlighted by Prisciani when he reflects on the nature and scope of theatre by tracing the etymology of theatre as *visorio*:

. . . Theatro, cioè visorio, nel quale stando grandissima turba, dala longa ancora senza impedimento alcuno vedesse et potesse anche esser vista. (*Spectacula*, fol. 18v)  
 [. . .Theatre, that is, place for viewing, [is a place] in which a large crowd in attendance, from afar and without any impediment, could see and could also be seen.]

The selected audience stood to gain in prestige while indulging in the *fiesta*. Reserved seats in the *orchestra* as much as in the *pozoli* were a tangible sign of honour and distinction.<sup>61</sup> And more importantly, these lavish spectacles were a projection of the duke's own prodigality and power. This explains the relatively extensive treatment that Prisciani reserves for the structure of the

<sup>59</sup> Quoted by Lex Hermans, 'The Performing Venue: The Visual Play of Italian Courty Theatres in the Sixteenth Century', in Caroline van Eck and Stijn Bussels (eds.), *Theatricality in Early Modern Art and Architecture* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), 96.

<sup>60</sup> Zorzi, *Il teatro e la città*, 5–59, who comments that the Estense castle is 'non un palazzo, ma una città in forma di palazzo.' Cf. Tuohy, *Herculean Ferrara*, 60–62; Marco Folin, 'Architettura e politica alla corte degli Estensi: il castello come emblema di potere' in Jadranka Bentini and Marco Borella (eds.), *Il castello Estense* (Viterbo: BetaGamma Editrice, 2003), 11–28.

<sup>61</sup> Cesariano, in his commentary (Kriskey, *Cesariano, Vitruvius*, fol. 81v), also reiterates the importance of class division in the theatre audience. For an excellent discussion supported by archeological evidence of the concept of *discrimina ordinum* in ancient Rome, see Elizabeth Rawson, 'Discrimina Ordinum: The Lex Julia Theatralis', *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 55 (1987), 83–114, and Timothy, J. Moore, 'Seats and Social Status in the Plautine Comedy', *The Classical Journal*, 90.2 (1995), 113–23.

*cavea* and the provisions of additional seating space in the orchestra, as discussed above. The spectacle, then, takes place in the boxes as much as it does onstage.

The duke's earlier architectural works on his private palace in the centre of the city are emblematic of the importance he accorded to the politics of the gaze. These renovations predate the duke's wedding to Eleonora d'Aragona in 1472 and serve the purpose of rendering the ducal residence more secure, centralizing administrative powers by transferring the offices of the Savi to the *cortile* and, more importantly, embellishing the ducal palace and decorating the main square. As Rosenberg remarks, these alterations made the Palazzo Estense the visually dominant structure of the piazza. The piazza turned into an 'urban theater with the square functioning as the stage and the new loggias of the Palazzo Estense serving as the boxes',<sup>62</sup> it thus became the ideal space to host *spectacula*.

The restructuring of the ducal palaces further legitimized the rule of Ercole I by positioning the piazza between the castle and the cathedral, the centres of secular and religious power respectively, ensuring the connection between sacred and secular. Ercole understood the importance of maintaining that delicate balance in the intricacies of domestic and international politics. The revival of Roman drama reflects the duke's attitude: these productions recovered the classical past and made it relevant to a contemporary audience. The synthesis of these elements was filtered through new vital synergies of Renaissance culture and was informed by characteristics typical of Ferrara.

The turning point of the evolution of theatre space was the humanist exegesis of Vitruvius. This process of interpretation and assimilation went hand in hand with the staging of classical plays. Notwithstanding that Vitruvius' theoretical principles were partially applied to the planning of theatre spaces, theatre practice also influenced the humanist exegesis of this ancient text. Only an understanding of these complex interrelations can give us a glimpse of the humanist revival of classical theatre. The issue is not how the people of this time understood ancient performance, but how they devised a viable way of reviving ancient drama, perpetuating tradition while giving it contemporary relevance.

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<sup>62</sup> Charles M. Rosenberg, *The Este Monuments and Urban Development in Renaissance Ferrara* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 116.

## *Abstract*

GIULIA TORELLO-HILL, *The exegesis of Vitruvius and the creation of theatrical spaces in Renaissance Ferrara*

Under the rule of Ercole I d'Este (1471–1505), Ferrara experienced an unprecedented revival of classical Roman comedy. For the first time, the plays of Plautus and Terence began to be staged in vernacular Italian. This essay focuses on the temporary theatre buildings that hosted these productions and discusses the instrumental role played by the short treatise *Spectacula*, written by Ercole's courtier, Pellegrino Prisciani (c. 1435–1510). It argues that the planning of theatre spaces was informed by the humanist interpretation of Vitruvian principles. Furthermore, it evaluates the weight of contemporary iconography and the illustrative tradition of Terence, which was disseminated through the first printed editions, on the planning of theatre spaces. The modernization of set design and the creation of theatre spaces that reinterpreted Vitruvian principles along with the adaptation of classical dramatic texts represents the first modern example of reception of ancient comedy.

**Keywords:** exegesis of Vitruvius; Renaissance Ferrara; revival of classical theatre