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Memory and Performance.
Classical Reception in Early Modern Festivals

Edited by Francesca Bortoletti, Giovanna Di Martino,
and Eugenio Refini

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Edmund Thomas*

Bernini's Two Theatres and the Trauma of Classical Reception

Abstract

This article compares how the theatrical architectural spaces of Francesco Guitti at Parma and Gian Lorenzo Bernini at Rome used classical traditions of spectacle to satisfy contemporary sensationalist demands. Guitti's stage machinery devised after ancient treatises recreated an ancient naumachia as a finale to the performance of the Mercury and Mars that celebrated the marriage of Odoardo, Duke of Parma, at the Farnese Theatre in Parma (see Benedetta Colasanti's essay in this issue). Bernini's spaces at the Rome Carnival in the 1630s played on other memories and misremembrances of popular classical spectacula to target elite audiences, generating a Bakhtinian mood of destabilising carnival laughter. He transformed naumachiae by flooding a stage to recreate a Tiber flood, and on the open-air setting of the 'Festa d'Agone', Domitian's Stadium misremembered as a racetrack, he bestowed the authority of an ancient circus, with turning posts and obelisk. But his most destabilizing performance was to recast the disastrous mechanics of Gaius Curio's legendary two revolving theatres in Republican Rome by means of a shocking pictorial perspective. This surpassed the technological schemes of other architect scenographers and exposed Rome's gentry and curial classes to subversive spectacle.

Keywords: Gian Lorenzo Bernini; Francesco Guitti; stage painting; commedia dell'arte; architecture; carnival; Roman theatres

The theatrical tournament of *Mercury and Mars* at the Farnese Theatre in Parma on 21st December 1628 was the spectacular culmination of a series of celebrations of the marriage two months earlier of Odoardo, Duke of Parma, to Margherita Medici in Florence Cathedral. The application of stage machinery devised after ancient treatises by Francesco Guitti (1605-1645), as described in Benedetta Colasanti's essay in this issue, complemented the innovative design of the theatre a decade previously by Guitti's teacher, the engineer Giovanni Battista Aleotti (1546-1636), the elder statesman of theatral architecture, which combined the classically inspired loggias of ancient theatres in the manner of Palladio's Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza with the elongated, circus-like tournament arena of Bernardo Buontalenti's

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Medici Theatre in Florence (Lavin 1990, 520). A series of letters preserved in the Archivio di Stato at Ferrara, written by Guitti and his colleague Francesco Mazzi (Ferrara, Biblioteca Comunale Arisotea, MS Antonelli 660, nos. 1-4, 6-10 by Guitti and 11-22 by Mazzi) to update the Marchese Enzo Bentivoglio, who was orchestrating the production at a distance from Ferrara, reveal the continued extensive preparations for the performance since the summer of 1627.

The productions involved movable stage sets ("tellari"), constructed and painted by Guitti's older compatriot Alfonso Rivarola, "detto il Chenda" (1591-1640), sent from Ferrara to Parma in 1628 by Bentivoglio (Ferrara, Biblioteca Comunale, MS Antonelli 660; Berni 1631, 3). The local dignitary and intellectual, Marcello Buttigli, who was in charge of the ornamental fittings for Margherita's solemn arrival in Parma, described a novel feature at the foot of the stage:

> a platform extended out from the front of the foundation [of the stage]. It was about a yard above the ground and about ten yards wide and formed a half-ellipse, raised up on little pedestals and surrounded by a balustrade. It provided a place for the musicians, where they could sing and play at the appropriate times and where they could see everything that was happening on the stage without being seen themselves. (Buttigli 1629, 263; translation by Spitzer 1996, 235)

Buttigli (1629, 263) auspiciously described this recent novelty in Italian theatre, which perhaps originated in Florence a few years earlier (Povoledo 1960, 1388; Lavin 1990, 523-4), as an "orchestra", misconstruing Vitruvius' reference to this space in the Greek theatre (Vitr. 5.7.2) as the location of all the performers who were not actors. This space, however, was not only for the musicians. It also facilitated the dramatic special effects that were the hallmark of the performances engineered by Guitti. The surrounding balustrade also protected the musicians from a dramatic flood in a marine scene (Lavin 1990, 523) and from the waters of the recreation of an ancient naumachia, which ended the performance.

This dramatic use of staging, painted sets, and architectural structures notionally modelled on the antique highlights the trend of 'Baroque' theatre in these years to strive for sensational effects. Guitti's performances were courtly manifestations for the Farnese Dukes of Parma and invited visitors to celebrate an aristocratic marriage alliance between the Farnese and Medici, two of the most notable families of early modern Italy. They enacted high-genre scenes of divine epic, and these recreations of classical spectacle allowed their privileged patrons and guests to re-imagine themselves as ancient Roman spectators through a visual language that embraced both the architecture and the entertainments. The painted sets and coded architectural

structures transported them into a world enjoyed before only by the rulers and citizens of ancient Rome.

The devices created by Guitti and Chenda at Parma were not beyond the architects and engineers of ancient Rome. In the last years of the Roman Republic, temporary theatre constructions provided a source of popular and elite entertainment in the theatre festivals that took place in the lower Campus Martius beside the Temple of Apollo, where Augustus would soon build his permanent theatre named after his prematurely lost heir Marcellus. Their aristocratic builders, usually with the office of aedile, responsible for public building and display, spared no expense on these structures, as much as the performances that they contained, competing with those constructed by rivals and showcasing their ephemeral works to promote their own career ambitions. One such work, however, was more notable than others.

During his memorable catalogue of the wonders of Rome, Pliny the Elder surprisingly digresses from his marble theme to mention a temporary wooden construction that not only no longer existed but must have been dismantled within a few years of its creation in 52 B.C.E. Cicero had warned the young Gaius Scribonius Curio, as he prepared for the funeral games of his father, the consul of 76, that theatrical shows were by then a stale genre, "a matter of means, not personal qualities", of which "everybody is sick and tired" (Cic. *Fam.* 2.3; Cicero 2001, 47 1.235, translation adapted). Curio, however, persisted. To compete with the expensive and exotic materials of the sensational theatre constructed six years earlier by the aedile Marcus Aemilius Scaurus, both "wasteful" and "madness" in Pliny's view, but still exalted in popular memory:

> Curio had to use his wits and think up some scheme. It is worth the effort to recognise what he invented and to be happy in our own manners and so, reversing the usual style, to call ourselves, and not our ancestors, the greater ones (*maiores*). He built two very large wooden theatres next to each other, suspended on individual pivots in versatile balance. The morning performance of the show was given with both of them facing in opposite directions, so that the noises from their stages would not drown each other out. Then they suddenly swung round (after the first few days, it is said, some of the spectators even remained seated), and their ends came together, and so Curio made an amphitheatre and produced gladiator fights there, making the Roman people itself seem even more hired out as he whirled them around. What would cause anyone more astonishment in this, the inventor or the invention, the designer or the sponsor, the fact that someone dared to think up this work or undertake or commission it? More amazing than any of these things is the madness of a people that dared to sit in such unstable and treacherous seating. Behold the conqueror of the world, subjugator of the entire globe, which distributes nations and kingdoms, issues edicts

> to overseas peoples, humanity's share in the immortal gods, hanging on a contraption and applauding its own danger! What contempt for life! Why complain of Cannae? How much harm could have occurred here! (Plin. *Nat.* 36.116-20, translation mine)

Pliny details how Curio's two theatres turned Romans' play into risk: the "adsiduous attention to the *ludi*" highlighted by Curio's contemporary Lucretius (Lucr. 4.973-7) returned to haunt them; the Roman spectators became themselves the spectacle; and their enjoyment of what Tacitus (Tac. *Ann.* 14.21.1) would call "the pleasures of the shows" was replaced by peril, as they sat suspended on the rickety contraption (Jory 1986; Isager 1991; Citroni Marchetti 1991). They embodied in themselves an image of Rome the "hanging city" (*urbs pensilis*, Plin. *Nat.* 36.104; Carey 2003, 97). Pliny also compared the audience to passengers on boats, the same idea envisioned by Cicero's friend Caelius, for whom Pacuvius' maritime imagery was a metaphor for the experience of the shows: "You should have heard the 'shrieking and howling, roar of thunder, tackle whistling in the gale'" (Cic. *Fam.* 8.2.1; Cicero 2001, 1.349, translation adapted; Cic. *Tusc.* 2.48-9; Caston 2015). The emotions of the theatre and the excitement of Curio's animal displays reached a new intensity in the literally 'rollercoaster' experience of the audience (Cic. *Fam.* 8.9.3; Cicero 2001, 1.365). The "conquerors of the world" were at the mercy of a man 'neither king nor ruler of nations', who "had to use his own *ingenium*" (Plin. *Nat.* 36.117). Plutarch attributes two theatres to Curio's aedileship: in one, Cato managed the shows of the aedile Favonius; in the other, his colleague Curio "choreographed things at great expense"; though, Plutarch adds, "the people left him and went over to the other place, and enthusiastically joined in the games where Favonius played the private individual and Cato sponsor of the show" (Plut. *Cat. Min.* 46.4). This probably refers to Curio's re-use of the construction in September 51 in his bid to be aedile the following year, holding animal shows with panthers from Africa and Asia which he passed on to Caelius as curule aedile designate after withdrawing from the elections, saddled with debt from the costly shows (Cic. *Fam.* 8.8.10; Cicero 2001, 1.385). If, as Pliny says, the pivots were already "worn and displaced" by the final day of the funeral games in 52, the theatre cannot have withstood much more use. No more is heard of the structure. But it remained embedded in Pliny's treatise as a sombre warning to future builders, of the problematisation of the pleasures of theatre and of the dangers of ambitious architectural schemes.

Although the early humanists Flavio Biondo and Raffaele Maffei repeated that warning, condemning Curio's precarious structure as a hallmark of "insanity" (Biondo 2005-2012, 2.115; Fane-Saunders 2016, 39), later readers emulated the work as an exemplar of ephemeral urban ceremonial. The poet

Giannantonio Porcellio de' Pandoni clearly evoked Curio's construction when he heralded a wooden theatre built in Rome for the marriage in 1473 between Ercole d'Este and Eleonora of Aragon it as a "hanging hall that can hold the people, nobles and dukes", even if he confused Curio with Scaurus as the author of the ancient model (Porcellio de' Pandoni c. 1473, lines 11-14). It was not long before modern designers tried to recreate Curio's theatres more closely. Leonardo da Vinci ingeniously constructed two semi-circular theatres that locked together to form an "amphitheatre"; and Andrea Palladio developed a geometrical reconstruction from his survey of a real Roman theatre in the Veneto, which the printmaker Francesco Marcolini included among the one hundred and thirty-one woodcuts in the first edition of Daniele Barbaro's translation and commentary on Vitruvius in 1556, although Francesco de' Franceschi Senese omitted it from the revised, enlarged second edition eleven years later (Fane-Saunders 2016, 203-12; Witcombe 2004, 252). In 1615, what Pliny had called an "unstable and treacherous" machine became an epitome of stability in Giambattista Marino's dedicatory letter to his *Tempio*, a "stupendous" and "versatile machine"; the "two poles" on which it was "so well fixed" were a metaphor for the poem's twin dedicatees (Marino 1615; Coy 1983). In his epic *Adone* of 1623, Marino repeated the image to describe the scene changes of the theatre of Cupid, whose stage rested "on a central pivot strong, which, mobile yet well fastened to the floor, turns easily, now lowered and now raised; and pivoting its mobile weight around, it comes at last to fasten horn with horn" (Marino 1623, Canto 5, stanza 127). Derived from Curio's theatre, this mechanical stage was a *theatrum mundi*, an image of the world, which "in single globe conjoined two separate hemispheres together, linked by the horizon which from height to depth cuts midway through the whirling universe" (Marino 1623, Canto 5, stanza 128). Pliny's recollection of how the conquerors of the globe had seemed "doomed to perish" on this machine were now, it seemed, long forgotten.

The sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini, a younger contemporary of Marino, whom he had possibly met through his father Pietro (Lavin 2018), took the bold step of trying to replicate the accounts of Curio's double theatre contemporary drama. Bernini's dramatic performances took place in aristocratic residences, especially of his patrons the Barberini, who in 1633 had hired Guitti to stage their renowned dramas (Hammond 1994, 205), but despite their restriction to elite audiences, their staging during the Rome Carnival allowed Bernini to play on the memory of ancient popular spectacle in more carnivalesque spirit. During this period, preceding Lent, dramatic performances and popular entertainments took place in two open-air and longstanding popular settings: the plain below the artificial mountain of amphora waste, Testaccio, to the south of the city; and the Festa d'Agone in the northern Campo Marzio, actualized in the elongated space where

Piazza Navona is now, but then an open area surrounded by churches and aristocratic residences, whose classical history as the Stadium of Domitian was misremembered as a hippodrome with images of ancient chariots. Bernini's productions of *commedia dell'arte* within the houses of his patrons borrowed this spirit and were presented, in contrast to the mythological epics staged by Guitti, on a comic, human level that harked back to Roman comedy and pantomime. That does not, however, mean that they were improvised, as that genre usually expected (Molinari 1962; Lavin 2007, 26-7). Unlike Guitti, Bernini did not only design the scenographies for these performances; as the English diarist John Evelyn noted in 1644, for a recent "Publique Opera" Bernini had painted the sets and carved the sculpted figures himself, written the dialogue and music, and even performed as an actor on stage (De Beer 1955, 261). Altogether, he carefully planned his works to ensure that word, image, and action worked together flawlessly. Yet the wider carnival context allowed Bernini not to pander to, but to subvert the antique pretensions of his elite audience. In generating that mood of laughter which Mikhail Bakhtin has demonstrated was prevalent in that popular carnival culture transmitted in the sixteenth century by Rabelais, Bernini too had no inhibitions. As the festive phantasmagoria of Rabelais' world moved from the marketplace to court performances in the seventeenth century (Bakhtin 1984, 102), Bernini targeted the elites of Baroque Rome with carnivalesque laughter. In that context, he sought to present a recreation of the ancient special effects described by Pliny. However, it was not the stupendously versatile aspect of Curio's machine admired by Marino and others that he conveyed, but the alarmingly deleterious effects that Pliny had decried. Unlike Guitti, Bernini was no scenographic engineer. Crucially, he wanted to demonstrate that he could reproduce the impact of Curio's ancient spectacle not through theatrical artifice, but through his own art and pictorial skill.

Bernini had a personal point to prove. In January 1637 it was reported from Rome that "the Cavaliere Gian Lorenzo Bernini, who had thought of avoiding comedies altogether, is preparing a very fine one, the subject of which will be on the crack that can be seen on the cupola of St Peter's, and to counter the slanders made against him, namely that it is all his fault" (D'Onofrio 1963, 92-3).[1] Bernini's considerable reputation had taken a hit the previous year when, after he had inserted niches into the central piers supporting the dome to receive colossal statues of the Saints Veronica, Andrew, Helen, and Longinus, cracks had been observed inside the dome (Pollak 1928, 2 511). "The cupola is falling", people cried, "Bernini is to blame!" Although the Pope and the Fabric of St Peter were not convinced by the anonymous complaints, the rumours of Bernini's culpability never went away (Morello 2008, 203; Mormando 2011, 338).

It was not surprising that Bernini chose the theatre as the vehicle for his self-defence as, a few years earlier, he had used the genre of *commedia dell'arte* for personal attacks. His first known comedy, at the carnival of 1633, was described as "full of sparkling quips and very sharp stings against many people in this court, and against the corrupt practices of our time" (D'Onofrio 1963, 91).[2] His "great liberty of speech" was astounding, "and it seemed strange that he risked offending so many people in such a public place, but being loved with extraordinary passion by Our Lord he did not hesitate in anything. Indeed, many people think that everything occurred with the participation and contentment of His Holiness; which is confirmed by the certain knowledge that Pope [Maffeo] Barberini and [his brother] Antonio took extreme enjoyment when the subject of the comedy and the circumstances which accompanied it referred to them" (D'Onofrio 1963, 91; Fraschetti 1900, 261).[3] In a second drama, the next year, at an unspecified theatre (Zangheri 1985), Fulvio Testi reported to the Duke of Modena that Bernini moulded ancient comic invective to the conventions of the *commedia dell'arte* at the carnival: "The Cavalier Bernini has made conform to the practice of other years a very fine comedy of those in antique style which sting, and which, in accusing modern vices, make the persons look so much more ridiculous that if they are not named specifically they are known by practically everyone." (D'Onofrio 1963, 92).[4] A second spectator at that same carnival noted that Spanish cardinal Gaspar de Borja y Velasco subsequently kept an embarrassed distance knowing "full well" that the beating of an ox on stage "was meant for him" as it recalled the Borgia coat of arms (Fahrner and Kleb 1973, 12).

Bernini had not previously developed painted stage designs for his dramatic productions.[5] The 1637 show, therefore, might have been expected to offer more such verbal satire, aimed at his accusers in the cupola affair. Yet this is not what emerges from the detailed account that survives of the production, in a letter from Massimiliano Montecuccoli to the Francesco

[2] Letter to Francesco I d'Este Duke of Modena from Rome, 5 February 1633.

[3] Letter to Duke of Modena from Rome, 5 February 1633.

[4] Letter to Francesco I d'Este Duke of Modena from Rome, 25 February 1634.

[5] Past scholars credited Bernini with eight stage designs known from engravings by François Collignon in the Gabinetto Nazionale delle Stampe (reproduced in Mariani 1949, 254-64), which had graced Cardinal Giulio Rospigliosi's musical drama Sant'Alessio, performed at Palazzo Barberini in 1636 for a brother of the King of Poland. Gigli 1958, 140, reprinted by D'Onofrio 1963, 91-2 and, slightly differently, by Buccheri 2016, 170n12: "marvellous scenes which changed several times making appear palaces, gardens, woods, Hell, angels, who flew through the air speaking, and finally there appeared a great cloud low down which opened up to reveal the glory of Paradise". This attribution, however, rests on a misunderstanding of documents in the Vatican, and it now seems that Bernini played no part in that production (Lavin 2007, 17).

I d'Este Duke of Modena (Fraschetti 1900, 262-3). This highlights a witty exchange between two *covielli*, a Neapolitan version of the *zani* of *commedia erudita* derived from the *servus callidus* of Plautine comedy that had become a stock of Roman *commedia dell'arte* wearing costumes with bells and large-nosed masks (Schironi 2014, 469; Andrews 2008, xxi; Rudlin 1994, 157-8). Yet what most impressed Montecuccoli were the painted stage designs:[6]

> Last Tuesday evening [10 February 1637, by the Gregorian Calendar], I was at such a comedy, a work of the Cavaliere Bernini; and, because it succeeded rather nicely especially for one perspective which remained in sight of all after the curtain dropped and another which was seen at the end of the comedy, I think that it may be of no little amusement to your Excellency to give an account of it as best I can. So, when the curtain fell there could be seen on the inside, that is on the side of the stage, a crowd [*popolo*] part real and part imagined [*fittivo*], which all together was so well constructed that it represented almost the same as that which really existed on this side in great numbers to see the comedy. On the stage were two clowns who, each with paper and pencil in hand, showed that they were drawing; and one looked towards the real audience and the other towards the imagined one. Standing like this for a while, one of them then broke the silence, and, after a few words which indicated their acquaintance and friendship, said to the other that he had little decency to stand in the position in which he was standing, meaning that he had his back to the people, and asked him why, and his answer was that *he* rather was the one committing this discourtesy and, grabbing him by the arm, made him turn towards that part where the fictive people were. When the other saw that, he said: "Well this is certainly the finest oddity that I have seen in people curious to hear comedies"; and he added, "How should we act to give satisfaction to one another?". Both these clowns made many further courteous remarks and concluded that a dividing curtain be drawn along the stage and each recited to his people, that is one of the same clowns on each side, and so in an instant the said curtain was drawn, and they entered inside. The comedy then began to be recited, and for the exquisiteness of the performers it is truly not possible to desire better. At the end, the same two clowns appeared once more on the stage, one of whom arrived there so stressed making wind with his cap that, when his companion asked him why he had arrived so heated, he replied that it was from the effort put into bringing to a conclusion the comedy he had recited to his own people and, when the other asked what invention of perspective or other similar prospect had accompanied that comedy, his companion replied that he had not needed any perspective or curiosity other than that the varied multitude of those who came out of the room together with an

[6] 13 February 1637. Modena, Archivio di Stato, Cancelleria Ducale, Ambasciatori Roma, f. 245.

equal quantity of carriages and horses, accompanied by an infinite number of lights and torches, appeared to him to be a sufficient, or rather a wonderful, representation by itself for the eyes of the observers. Well, naturally the other clown became desirous to see this curiosity, and so his companion asked this dividing curtain to be suddenly lowered as happened directly. There the excellence of the art presented wonderfully before the eyes of the observers a very inviting perspective and in the distance (considering the narrowness of the place) so artful that it hardly left room for the understanding to be able to form it or to imagine such. Above this perspective was seen a sky so well intended and so perfectly divided that it truly astonished the eye, and the curiosity of all remained suspended. The moon which was represented by eight days approximately and which being pursued by an infinite number of fixed and wandering stars was then observable in the sharpness of the lights, if not as much as some small machines expose themselves, was so very artfully obscured in aspect by clouds that running across that sky from time to time they lightly veiled its face, so that in truth there was no one who did not remain suspended in that so lifelike naturalness of the artifice and did not send a thousand praises and blessings to the Author.

Just the same was the effect of those stars, which also in every detail wonderfully represented reality. Then under the same sky, spread out at proportionate distances, were idyllic sites, spring-time greenery, charming shores, very beautiful gardens, houses and palaces of utmost desirability and extremely wonderful sites in the distance, with everything intended and constructed with truly more than the most exquisite mastery. Then peasant women appeared on stage dancing together and performing waltzes, and, something even more curious and notable to see, they did so for a good quarter of an hour more, behind them grooms with burning torches in hand, knights on horseback, walking, and on carriages, with two or six horses, and a great number following and litters conforming exactly to what you would expect to happen, and which in fact did happen at the exit and on the return at the houses of the real audience. Finally, many other grooms could be seen appearing dressed in mourning with dark torches lit in their hands and just behind them, above on a horse, tall but lean and rather frail, appeared Death dressed in mourning with a sickle in his right hand, who walked up and down two or three times and then positioned himself ostentatiously before the audience. At the arrival of this figure, one of the two clowns pretended to be terrified and then recovered to address these words to the audience: "Yes, it is really true, ladies and gentlemen, that this effigy is an image of death like that which finishes and cuts the thread of all the comedies and which by fatal decree breaks off any worldly taste or pastime, which therefore has wanted to do the same with our own staged comedy". And with that the clown instructed his companion to raise the dividing curtain on high so that this hated vision would remain covered and the enthusiasm of the spectators up to that point remain untormented. And so ended the comedy attended by

> fourteen Cardinals between the two Nephews, as well as others including the Prefect and an infinity of Prelates and Knights.[7]

The illusion of two performances has been explained as a variant of the metatheatrical 'play within a play' tradition of Renaissance theatre, of which Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Giovan Battista Andreini's *Two Comedies within a Comedy* (*Le Due Commedie in Comedia*, 1623) (Cuppone 2013) provide examples (Neri 1930; Lea 1934, 1.130; Lavin 2007, 21). Bernini's production, though, was not technically two plays, since we (and the audience) know nothing of what happens in the second play, but a presentation of two *theatres*, which is better explained in terms of the visual impact of the screenplay. He had brilliantly recreated Curio's theatres in pictorial form, but in this case his second, imagined theatre reproducing the audience of the first one presented a confusion between stage and audience and between appearance and reality that enabled the real audience to see a mirror image of themselves watching the play (Warwick 2012, 28-31). As Bernini's son Domenico described in his biography, "in the fiction one saw figures so resembling those that were true as to delight all in showing them to themselves, like seeing themselves in a mirror, such was the counterfeit" (Bernini 1713, 56). Years later, in 1665, when Bernini was at Paris to oversee his design for the Louvre, an oval construction with curvilinear wings, he revealed more about the performers and setting of this early comedy, as his host Paul Fréart de Chantelou recorded (Chantelou 1885, 68). The two *covielli* had been played by himself and his brother Luigi, and during the performance, he recalled:

> pretend howls of laughter were heard from the people on the other side, as if they had seen and heard something very amusing. Everything was constructed in such a way, and the artifice so hidden, that it was believed that this was reality; finally, his brother had come onto his theatre as if very heated and as he pretended to dry off the sweat from his face the Cavaliere had asked him if he had finished his play; and, receiving the answer that he had, had said to him in a serious tone: "Could you at least show us some *part* of this respectable public who were laughing so loudly and enjoying themselves so much?" The brother answered that he could and that he had only to open a window which he pointed to him; once it was open, a great moonlit scene appeared, the representation of St Peter's Square, a quantity of knights, some on horseback, others in carriages or on foot, who were passing back and forth across the square, and many torches, some of which looked large, others of middling size, others smaller, and finally some slender as a thread, arranged according to the diminishing size which perspective produces in reality . . .

[7] Modena, Archivio di Stato, Cancelleria Ducale, Ambasciatori Roma, f. 245, 13 February 1637 (translation mine).

> the magnitude and intensity of the light had also increased by degrees. He said that this representation had deceived everyone and added that a space no more than twenty-four foot deep was needed for the perspective of the candles; this space was enough to show infinite perspectives if the lights were used well. (Del Pesco 2007, 256-7; Stanic 2001)

Bernini's *Two Theatres* answered the critics who had challenged the architect's ability to re-design Rome's premier Christian site. It not only presented a deceptive perspectival stage design that recreated an image of St Peter's Square, the archetypal locus of Baroque performativity (Snickare 2012), opposite the real theatre where the audience was gathered; it also presented the illusion of two theatres placed face to face to form an amphitheatre with the stage like an arena between them. A telling example of how Bernini's ephemeral structures for the theatre offered an experimental and preparatory terrain for his more permanent works in different media (Warwick 2012, 22), this image would inform Bernini's subsequent vision for St Peter's Square, whose two spacious semi-circular colonnades produced the impression of an "Amphitheatre of the Christian Universe" on the site of the so-called "Circus of Nero" (Kitao 1974, 22-6; 52-6). Like the Louvre project, Bernini's first plan for St Peter's Square, a rapid sketch of 1656, has two facing semi-circles like Roman theatres (Kitao 1974, 12-13).[8]

Others have discussed the metatheatrical and illusionistic aspects of Bernini's scenographies and theatrical effects, especially his flamboyant recreation of cloudy skies (Damisch 1972; Warwick 2012, 19-41). What has not been noticed, however, is how far his theatrical ingenuity reworked the devices of ancient spectacle. Curio's *res mira et ingeniosa* was the inspiration for Bernini's own *ingegno* in the *Two Theatres*. Bernini knew Pliny's account from the excerpt in Barbaro's edition of Vitruvius (Barbaro 1567, 170-1). To counter the attacks on him for threatening the stability of the new St Peter's, Bernini chose the architectural icon of Curio's two theatres which had lately been recast as a model of stability, but turned it against his Roman audience, restoring the image of instability in Pliny's account and its traumatic consequences in undermining their pleasure at the show. Yet the 1567 edition which Bernini owned lacked the illustration of Palladio's geometrical reconstruction published by Marcolini. He dispensed with the mechanics described by Pliny and instead presented the two theatres through the power of his painted scenography, creating the second theatre through pictorial perspective alone. He took the opportunity not only to show his own architectural genius in his conception for St Peter's Square, but also to expose the weakness of his audience and his power over them through his deception.

[8] Vat. Chigi H II.22, fol. 155v.

As Curio had reduced the all-conquering Roman people to a near-death experience, suspended like gladiators on his revolving contraption, Bernini mocked his own Roman audience by deceptively mirroring their appearance in a second, painted audience wearing masks to resemble the more eminent members of the real audience in front (Baldinucci 1948, 151). Such deviousness demonstrated those qualities that led Cardinal Sforza Pallavicino to describe him as "la fenice degl' ingegno": his wit, fancy, and apparent participation in a divine power (Bernini 2011, 68-70, 267n153-4). His final image of Death with a scythe left the spectators in no doubt that they had been subjected to a near-death experience. The description of Curio by Velleius Paterculus (Vell. 2.48.3) might have applied to Bernini himself: "a man of noble birth, eloquent, reckless, prodigal equally with his own fortune and modesty as with those of other people, a perverse fellow in the cleverest possible way".

Two weeks later, the Duke of Modena, no doubt enthused by Montecuccoli's account, was told that Bernini "could not reproduce his comedy because the Doctor Gratiano was ill; others say there were other mysteries" (Fraschetti 1900, 263n1). Stanislao Fraschetti supposed that a repeat of this comedy had been "insistently requested", but that Bernini was not able to carry it out, "perhaps following orders from above" (Fraschetti 1900, 263). Yet the letter says nothing of such a request. The absence of the actor who played the Doctor, a leading role in the *commedia dell'arte*, was a plausible reason; but significantly Mantovani suspected something more sinister. Bernini's mockery of Roman nobles and prelates, aped by a painted audience across the stage, had unnerved all concerned. When the play was re-performed at the Carnival of 1638, the musicologist Giovan Battista Doni, writing a history of ancient music theory for Cardinal Francesco Barberini, was intrigued to see "the fiction of seated viewers watching a comedy, the first row of which was composed of real men with their backs to the audience, which therefore saw itself within the proscenium in an extension from life into depth, while in the distance there was a great crowd of painted figures, such that there appeared to be an opening into a great hall" (Montanari 2004, 312). Genevieve Warwick interprets the fictive audience on this occasion as "not that of a mirroring reflection of the guests [as at the first performance] but a laddered extension of the social viewer into illusionistic space", with the proscenium acting "as the glass of a window looking into a reflexive yet fictive realm" (Warwick 2012, 30). In the late 1660s, at Casa Rospigliosi for Pope Clement IX (Bernini 1713, 56), the performance was even "sadder".

The spectacular impact of Bernini's pictorial illusionism was also overtaken by events. Just days before the performance, celebrations in Rome of the recent election of Ferdinand III as King of the Romans had included fireworks in the Piazza di Spagna: etchings by Claude Lorrain, who lived nearby, record how a square tower had been constructed for the occasion

and spectacularly set alight, collapsing to reveal a round tower which in turn was set in flames to expose a statue of the new king (Boorsch 2000, 19).[9] The Roman population marvelled at such dramatic effects using three-dimensional temporary constructions or artificial *macchine* representing the volcanoes Etna and Vesuvius (Osborne 2019, 70-1).[10] Later that year, Nicolò Sabbatini's book on mechanical devices for the stage expanded the taste for the spectacular in contemporary drama (Sabbatini 1955). Bernini too experimented in his theatrical productions with the mechanical devices now in vogue, but did so less from fondness for sophisticated special effects and more for their ability to alarm his audience. In a play of 1638 he simulated the collapse of a house on stage; in another at the same festival, he recreated the disastrous Tiber flood of the previous February that had risen to record levels (Rankin 2018, 141), outdoing Guitti's recreation of an ancient *naumachia* in Parma ten years earlier by filling the stage with water which threatened to flood into the audience (Fraschetti 1900, 264-5; D'Onofrio 1963, 96-7). In 1645, one of the performers in a torch-lit procession pretended accidentally to set fire to the stage, causing the spectators to head for the exits in panic. Some of these stage effects were tricks in Sabbatini's handbook. Finally, with his architectural vision, Bernini later restructured the medieval carnival setting of the Agone as Piazza Navona, to give this traditional popular setting the appearance and authority of an ancient circus, complete with a central obelisk, atop his Fountain of the Four Rivers of 1651, and two other fountains in place of ancient turning posts. In 1653, under Pope Innocent X, the piazza was flooded to bring the italics recreated in courtly theatres into the open-air popular carnival, as in Pannini's famous painting of the giochi d'acqua. But none of these achievements made him so proud, as his painted recreation of Curio's ancient theatres, with which he had played to the destabilising nature of the carnival by recasting Pliny's account of Curio's disastrous mechanics in pictorial form and laid bare the subversiveness of Roman spectacle by ridiculing Rome's gentry and curial classes. He had not only defended his architectural reputation and traumatised his audience.

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[9] See also Agostino Ciampelli, "Election of Ferdinand III as King of the Romans, Rome 1637", an engraving after Niccolò Tornioli: New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. no. 49.46.1.

[10] Rome, BAV, Urb. Lat. 1105, fols. 31v-32, avviso 7 February 1637.

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