

# Italian Open Air Theatres and Festivals in the New Millennium

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**Abstract:** *For historical reasons and its position in the Mediterranean area, Italy is the country in which there is the greatest number of open air theatres in the world: many were built in the Greco-Roman era, but many others were built in the following centuries (and even in the New Millennium). In Italy there are many typologies of outdoor performance spaces but, unfortunately, they are never been considered as a subject for an academic research: this paper presents a first mapping and classification of them, considering their use in the Summer season. Nowadays, the number of the festivals in Italian open air theatres is increasing, and – especially with tourism – is linked to important social, cultural, artistic and economic aspects. The International Symposium at the Ovidius University is a precious occasion to reflect and consider in depth a very important cultural heritage and its legacy in the New Millennium, especially for the new generations.*

**Key-words:** *open air theatre; festival; performing arts; Italy.*

## 1. Introduction

When we pronounce the word “Theatre”, we usually think to an indoor building (with the roof) in which many artists work for the audience. In fact, in Western Europe it is common to specify with “Open Air Theatre” a building – ancient or structured on the Classical model – without the roof. But human history, anthropology and architecture teach us that, in Western Europe, theatre was born as an outdoor performing space where actors and audience shared moments of deep artistic life: it was a social custom with a relevant educational meaning, aimed to the spiritual development of the people through the vital contact between Art and Nature.

For historical reasons and its position in the Mediterranean area, Italy is the country in which there is the greatest number of open air theatres in the world: many were built in the Greco-Roman era, but many others were built in the following centuries (and even in the New Millennium). Nowadays, many of these buildings are still used as a performance space and the number of festivals is increasing – especially in Summer with tourism. In Italy, the organization of these festivals is usually linked to important social, cultural, artistic and economic aspects.

The ancestral human desire to enjoy the open air theatre in Summer is described by the art critic Sheldon Cheney (1886 - 1980) in this way: “Nature is the great revivifier, and the mere calling of masses of people away from the roofed-in places has its salutary effect. Men always taken their sports into the open; and the outdoor dramatic production, like a game, sends men and women back to their cities refreshed in mind and body. Then there is the social solidifying of the community that comes, first from association in a common artistic purpose, and only slightly less so from the mere fact of recreation in crowds. The outdoor productions usually brings great numbers of people to the stage, and the constant association in rehearsal creates a very real bond of interest: there is moreover no such gulf between players and audience as exists in the indoor theatre. [...] And above all these others there is the intangible spiritual aspect, a subtle, almost religious effect on each individual, which collectively must

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make for social betterment. For man is never else so near God as when certain sorts of dramatic beauty revealed to him under the open sky<sup>2</sup>.

The contact with Nature is the secret of the success of the outdoor theatre: this is a great resource for the contemporary society and its frantic life. For their architectural structure, open air theatres are always under the danger of rain, but they are able to create a direct contact with the light of the day and the darkness of the night, the breath of the trees, sky and stars, crickets and birds, wind and all the perfums of Nature.

In Italy, Summer festivals are the best way to promote open air theatres and their magic contact with Nature. Unfortunately, they are never been considered as a subject for an academic research project: this paper presents a first mapping and classification of them, and the International Symposium at the Ovidius University is a precious occasion to reflect and consider in depth a very important cultural heritage and its legacy in the New Millennium – especially for the new generations.

## 2. Italian Festivals in the Greco-Roman Theatres

On August 10, 1913, in order to celebrate the centenary of the birth of Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901), took place an acclaimed staging of *Aida* at the Arena in Verona: the great success was due to the monumental scenography – properly designed for an outdoor performance – which inaugurated a new style. Since then, the Arena Opera Festival is one of the most prestigious cultural and artistic attraction for people from all over the world, and in the 1930s was founded the Ente Lirico Veronese for its management.

In June 2012, in order to celebrate the centenary, was inaugurated the Arena MuseOpera (AMO) in Verona: it is aimed to the international promotion of the Arena Opera Festival ([www.arena.it](http://www.arena.it)). On June 21, 2019, the Arena Opera Festival was opened with a new production: *La Traviata*. The director Franco Zeffirelli died in Rome (at age 96) a week before, on June 15, 2019. As homage to this great master, the staging was broadcast worldwide on TV in the presence of the President of the Italian Republic, Sergio Mattarella. Zeffirelli's monumental scenography is one of the most complex and astonishing in the history of the Arena Opera Festival<sup>3</sup>.

After the Second World War, a relevant outdoor staging took place also at the Roman Theatre in Verona: on August 26, 1948, with Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* started the activity of Ente Teatrale Veronese. The assistant of the old director Renato Simoni (1875-1952) was the young Giorgio Strehler (1921 - 1997). In the first years, this festival was only dedicated to the Shakespearian plays; from 1955, in order to increase the audience, were also included the comedies of Carlo Goldoni ([www.estateteatraleveronese.it](http://www.estateteatraleveronese.it)).

In 1913 the nobleman Mario Tommaso Gargallo (1886-1958) organized a committee, in order to restore the staging of the ancient drama at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse: the first cycle of Classical performances was inaugurated on April 16, 1914, with Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. Was also important the work of the renowned scholar Ettore Romagnoli (1871-1938), which led to the foundation of the Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico (INDA) in Syracuse. In 1931 this cultural institution started the publication of the magazine "Dioniso", still active, with the collaboration of the most important scholars for Greek and Latin dramaturgy ([www.indafondazione.org](http://www.indafondazione.org)).

<sup>2</sup> S. Cheney. 1918. *The Open-Air Theatre*. New York: Mitchell Kennerley, p. 9 - 10.

<sup>3</sup> M. P. Pagani. 2019, September 23. "La Traviata": The Last Masterpiece of Franco Zeffirelli, at the Arena Opera Festival. In *The Theatre Times*. Retrieved April 15, 2020, from [www.thetheatretimes.com](http://www.thetheatretimes.com).

This revival involved also the Roman Theatre in Pompeii<sup>4</sup>. Since 2017, the Teatro Stabile in Naples is the organizer of the festival Pompeii Theatrum Mundi ([www.teatrostabilenapoli.it/pompeii-theatrum-mundi/](http://www.teatrostabilenapoli.it/pompeii-theatrum-mundi/)).

On August 28, 1922, was staged the tragedy *The Dead City (La Città Morta)* by Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863 - 1938) at the Roman Theatre in Fiesole (Tuscany), the director was Renzo Ricci (1899 - 1978). This play was also staged in other important open air theatres, such as at the Castle Regina Cornaro in Asolo, in 1932<sup>5</sup>. Since 1962, after a long period of silence, the beautiful Roman Theatre in Fiesole is the seat of the festival Estate Fiesolana<sup>6</sup>.

On June 26, 1957, with the staging of Aristophanes' *Women in Parliament*, started the new life of the Roman Theatre in Benevento. The director was Luigi Squarzina (1922 - 2010). Since 1980, this ancient open air theatre seats the festival Benevento Città Spettacolo ([www.cittaspettacolo.it](http://www.cittaspettacolo.it)).

In Italy, many other open air theatres built in the Greco-Roman era are used in the Summer season, but without the regular organization of a festival. Nowadays, those in Verona, Syracuse, Pompeii, Fiesole and Benevento are the most renowned Summer festivals of the country.

### **3. Italian Festivals in the „New” Open Air Theatres**

The Sferisterio in Macerata is one of the most prominent architectural structures of the late European Neoclassical Style. It was inaugurated on September 5, 1829 for sport activities. In 1921, with the successful staging of Verdi's *Aida*, it started to be used for opera performance: in fact, the harmonious structure of the building ensures perfect visibility and wonderful acoustics. The Second World War imposed a long silence for this open air theatre. In 1967 the staging of Verdi's *Otello* was an incredible success and started the new life of this incredible performance space. At the end of the 1980s, at the Sferisterio was organized a Summer opera season, called Macerata Opera Festival ([www.sferisterio.it](http://www.sferisterio.it)).

In 1927, after an acclaimed staging of his tragedy *The Daughter of Iorio (La Figlia di Iorio)* in the garden of the Vittoriale (the director was Giovacchino Forzano, 1883 - 1970), the poet D'Annunzio began to plan the building of an open air theatre in his residence in Gardone Riviera (on the Lake of Garda), crowing his dream of a *théâtre en plein air* shared with the famous actress Eleonora Duse (1858 - 1924) for many years<sup>7</sup>. The Amphitheatre of the Vittoriale was designed by the architect Giancarlo Maroni (1893 - 1952), on the Classical model, after a careful study in Pompeii in 1931, with the sculptor Renato Brozzi (1885 - 1963). D'Annunzio observed the starting phase in 1934, but died in March 1938 before seeing the final building<sup>8</sup>.

After many problems related to the costs, the inauguration of the Amphitheatre of the Vittoriale took place on August 8, 1953, with a concert of the Teatro alla Scala Orchestra (the conductor was Carlo Maria Giulini, 1914 - 2005). Since 1953, it is regularly used in Summer, hosting many international artists<sup>9</sup>. Since 2010, it is also the location of the Festival “Tener-a-

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<sup>4</sup> N. Sammartano. 1965. *Gli spettacoli classici in Italia (1914 - 1964)*. Urbino: Argalia.

<sup>5</sup> M. P. Pagani. 2019. “La città morta nel teatro all'aperto del Castello Regina Cornaro di Asolo (1935)”. In *Sinestesie* 17, pp. 327 - 338.

<sup>6</sup> M. Borgioli. 2009. *Il teatro romano va in scena: documenti per la storia dell'Estate Fiesolana*. Florence: Polistampa.

<sup>7</sup> M. P. Pagani. 2019. “Eleonora Duse and the Open Air Theatres”. In *Education, Research, Creation*. Proceedings of the X International Symposium in Constanta, Romania (Ovidius University, Faculty of Art, 30<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup> May 2019). 5 (1), pp. 223 - 228.

<sup>8</sup> M. P. Pagani. 2017, July 15. “Parlaggio”: the Open-air Theatre on Garda Lake. In *The Theatre Times*. Retrieved April 15, 2020, from [www.thetheatretimes.com](http://www.thetheatretimes.com).

<sup>9</sup> C. Arnaudi. 2015. “I primi quarant'anni del teatro del Vittoriale”. In *Quaderni del Vittoriale* 11, pp. 1 - 93.

mente”<sup>10</sup>: it takes place between June and August, and has conquered a great audience, becoming one of the most important Summer festivals in Italy ([www.anfiteatrodelvittoriale.it/](http://www.anfiteatrodelvittoriale.it/)).

Since 1956 is organized the Plautus Festival in Sarsina, a little town in Central Italy where the Roman playwright was born. In 1996 was built the Arena Plautina, which is the seat of this important Summer festival ([www.plautusfestival.it/](http://www.plautusfestival.it/)).

In Italy, many other “new” open air theatres were built from the XIX<sup>th</sup> century and are used in the Summer season, but without the regular organization of a festival. Nowadays, those in Macerata, Gardone Riviera and Sarsina are the most popular Summer festivals of the country.

#### 4. Conclusions

Why does the building of the open theatres continue in the New Millennium? This is the renovating “answer” to the eternal spiritual need of mankind, linked to the aesthetical dimension of the performing arts and its effect on the human soul. The list of these new performance spaces is long, but some interesting examples are: Teatro Cucinelli in Solomeo (Central Italy), Teatro Andromeda in Santo Stefano Quisquina (Sicily), and Nuovo Teatro all’Aperto in Triscina di Selinunte (Sicily).

Usually, these new performance spaces are set in strategic places with a deep contact with Nature, where the feelings of the community (artists and audience) are perceived in a stronger way: they are an instrument for living and sharing emotions for the spiritual growth of the community, aimed to the research and the enjoyment of Beauty. In this way, they are considered as a vehicle of love for Art and Life, able to generate a collective catharsis.

In this perspective, the improvement of the quality of life is directly linked to the artistic evolution: in fact, the open air productions could be a relevant element for the artistic work of many artists, and the spiritual benefit of the audience. The organization of Summer festivals could be a good solution for those who wants to work re-creating vital original forms, and could be a possibility to be free from all the inhibitions and artificialities that characterize indoor theatre: “in the whole history of dramatic art there is no more illuminating truth than this: always when the drama has been simplest, most genuine, and lit up most brightly by the joy of living, and always when the drama has been closest to the life of the people, it has had its setting in the open. [...] For the average theatregoer, who thinks of the outdoor dramatic production as an extra-normal affair, it comes as a surprise to find that the open air theatre has existed more than two thousand years, whereas the history of the indoor playhouse is a matter of mere three of four centuries. Indeed, the story of the birth of dramatic art, and of that art’s growth through its greatest eras, is exclusively the story of the open air theatre<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> M. P. Pagani. 2016, September 19. “Music and Performance at the Vittoriale: Festival “Tener-a-mente” 2016”. In *The Theatre Times*. Retrieved April 15, 2020, from [www.thetheatretimes.com](http://www.thetheatretimes.com)

<sup>11</sup> S. Cheney. 1918. *The Open-Air Theatre*. New York: Mitchell Kennerley, pp. 1 - 2.

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