

Boxholders at the Opera: Identity and Functions at the Theatres of the ex-Serenissima

Cristina Scuderi

The boxholders (referred to as *palchettisti*) were those who had either bought a box at the theatre or who had a subscription to a box. Owning a box often meant that one had bought a share (*azione*), so in this context the term *palchettista* or *azionista* (shareholder) or *socio-azionista* (company shareholder) came to mean the same thing. This box – which could be assigned by the drawing of lots¹ – could then be rented out to other people; a third party was usually in charge of the rental of the shareholders' boxes.² Each shareholder received from the theatre management a document proving his or her ownership.³

The shareholders-boxholders were to be found at both the subsidised and unsubsidised theatres, but they certainly played a more central role at those that received no subsidy either from a municipality or from the regional government (the *Luogotenenza*). At the theatres without public subsidy, the contribution of the sums paid by the boxholders was fundamental and indeed indispensable for the organisation of opera. Together with these sums, the income from the rental of other boxes at the theatre could also make up part of the endowment granted to the impresario for the organisation of an opera season.

Many theatres of the Istrian and Dalmatian coastal region were *teatri sociali* and still adopted the Italian impresario system at least until the First World War. Although by this time in the 19th century this region was politically under

¹ The drawing of lots meant renouncing precedence of status. If the box assigned was considered unsatisfactory, it could be traded in and exchanged; see Circular letter (*Circolare*), [Zadar, n.d.], Državni arhiv u Zadru, (hereafter HR-DAZD) 252: Kazalište "Verdi" u Zadru 1863–1936, busta 2.

² At the theatre of Zadar in the early 20th century, for example, this task was carried out by Signora Anna Bolcovich, who was officially assigned to the role of collecting the money for the rental of the shareholders' boxes; Circular letter (*Circolare*) of the Teatro Verdi of Zadar, Zadar, 30. 3. 1904, HR-DAZD-252, busta 22. There was therefore a specific figure who performed this task.

³ At Šibenik each share gave the right to the ownership of a box, either on the ground floor or in the first tier, that was drawn by lot. Hence the shareholder (*azionista*) was also a boxholder (*palchettista*), so the two concepts were inseparable. The shares could be transferred to third parties. See ch. II, Statuto della Società del Teatro di Sebenico, HR-DAZD-562, busta 1.

Habsburg rule, following the end of Venetian domination, from the cultural point of view it was still closely tied to Italy. The theatres scattered throughout the area could seat audiences of 800 to 1,500 people and were situated in harbour cities with populations that ranged from 7,000 to 32,000 inhabitants, at least in the second half of the 19th century.⁴

For example, the theatre of Zadar/Zara, which had a capacity of 1,500 seats, was divided into 48 shares. Each share corresponded to a ground-floor or first-tier box, as well as an undivided 1/48 share of the whole building. The price of a share was fixed between 1,500 and 2,000 florins.⁵ As a point of comparison, the theatre of Šibenik/Sebenico – which had about 1,000 seats, hence was smaller than that of Zadar – was divided into 38 shares and the price for each share was fixed at 1,650 florins. Not necessarily were the shares sold in their entirety. In fact, of these 38 shares at Šibenik, 28 were purchased at the start, while 10 were still purchasable in 1915. The sales were not carried out by the theatre management, but by private citizens who might find themselves having to sell their shares over the years for a price much lower than the original one, depending on the position of the box – better or worse, as the case may be – associated with the share. Naturally the price was also determined by the type of theatre; and what could also make the trading price fluctuate considerably – even from one day to the next – was the number of events (greater or lesser) hosted at the theatre and the quality of its productions.⁶ At Šibenik in 1915 the value of the share was lower than its original price and came to around 2,000 crowns (in other words, about 1,000 florins, after the change of currency applied in the area in 1900, whereby one florin was equal to two crowns). At the Teatro Fenice of Rijeka/Fiume the value of a share was even lower only three years earlier and could be bought for only 200 crowns.⁷

The boxholders, as well as buying one or two shares, took an active part in the funding of the opera season through the payment of a membership fee (*canone sociale*), which was periodically defined and voted by the members' assembly. At Zadar the fee at the beginning of the 20th century was fixed at 40 crowns: less than the 50 crowns of Šibenik, most likely because the theatre in Zadar (unlike that of Šibenik) already received a public subsidy.⁸ From a receipt, for example, we

⁴ The coastal area under consideration extended from Pula to Dubrovnik; see Cristina Scuderi, *Organizzare l'opera (1861–1918). Teatri dell'Adriatico orientale* (Lucca: LIM, 2022), 5–6.

⁵ See the deed certifying the foundation of the theatre, dated 16. 1. 1864, HR-DAZD-562, busta 1.

⁶ An overall reputation for good productions contributed to increase the value of the shares. See various documents, Državni arhiv u Šibeniku (hereafter HR-DAŠI) 103, busta 4.

⁷ See <http://www.passaporto-collezionismo-scripofilia.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/1912-Teatro-La-Fenice-Fiume.jpg> (accessed 12 December 2022).

⁸ In 1884 the presidency of the theatre had proposed an extra contribution of 10 florins per share to partially cover the expenses of restoring the theatre building.

learn that in 1909 a shareholder at the Teatro Mazzoleni in Šibenik paid the sum “as a contribution to the expenses of maintenance and to the staging of an opera season.”⁹ It was not, therefore, just a contribution to the production of opera: a part of the sum was to be allocated to restoration work on the theatre building. Indeed, it turns out that at that same meeting a request was expressly made for an overall contribution of 1,400 crowns, to be divided among the 28 shares, meaning that each holder of a share would make a contribution of 50 crowns.¹⁰ The sums collected, however, might not be sufficient to cover the payments that needed to be made before the beginning of an opera season. In this case the solution proposed was to take out a loan at a local bank.¹¹

But what can we say about the identity of these financiers who were so closely involved in the organisation of the opera seasons? Unfortunately, any attempt to study the provenance of the families owning boxes at the theatres of the Eastern Adriatic, though of primary interest (and not only from the sociological point of view), is actually complex and very difficult to carry out, for a series of reasons. In particular, many Italian surnames were modified over the years through the addition of letters such as “k” or suffixes like “ic” or “ch” on the part of priests who were recognised as civil status registrars under Austrian rule. Hence families such as the Karaman, Krekic(h) or Giljanović were actually Italian and not Croatian, in spite of appearances.¹²

Regrettably the archives do not provide lists of boxholders for all the coastal theatres in any continuous form over the decades. For example, for Pula/Pola we have a list of the boxholders only for the theatre that preceded the Politeama Ciscutti (hence pre-1881); for Rijeka, we know of the boxholders at the Teatro Adamich, but not, with any regularity, those at the Teatro Comunale that fol-

⁹ This happened in accordance with the resolution taken at the general meeting of shareholders on 17 February 1909; see Receipt for contribution to organisation costs for the opera season, issued by Antonio Raimondi – owner of a share at the theatre – signed by the treasurer director Ugo Fosco, 30. 3. 1909, HR-DAŠI-103, busta 5. The expenditure for the maintenance of the theatre and that for the financing of opera constituted one item. At the meeting of the shareholders of the Teatro Mazzoleni the councillor Marco Inchiostri made the proposal that the two sums should be kept distinct, but his suggestion was not followed up. Any revenue from the opera productions would be used to cover the expenses of maintenance. See Minutes of the meeting (*Protocollo di seduta*), Šibenik, 17. 9. 1909, HR-DAŠI-103, busta 4.

¹⁰ This contribution was regulated by Articles 23 and 24 of the theatre’s statute.

¹¹ The management had asked in this case to take out a three-month loan of 3,000 crowns to cover the preliminary expenses for the spring season. The initial proposal was to approach the Banca Popolare Zaratina, but then the shareholder Francesco Inchiostri came forward and offered to pay the required 3,000 crowns into the theatre’s account at the same conditions given by the bank. See Minutes of the meeting (*Protocollo di seduta*), Šibenik, 17. 9. 1909, HR-DAŠI-103, busta 4.

¹² On the question of the denaturalisation of surnames, see also the comments made by Giulio Menini in *Passione Adriatica: ricordi di Dalmazia, 1918–1920* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1925), 9–10.

lowed it; for Split/Spalato, we have the names of the boxholders at the Teatro Nuovo, but not those at the previous Teatro Bajamonti, which indeed are impossible to track down because the theatre burned down. If we had had the lists for both theatres for each city, we could have attempted, for example, to verify whether or not we find the same boxholders in both theatres, and thus be able to monitor the activity and role of these families in a diachronic perspective. In spite of these difficulties, however, the situation of the documents allows us to make various considerations on the identity and role of these people.

The boxholders comprised, as was always the case, elements of both the old aristocracy and the more recent wealthy bourgeoisie. The nobility of the coastal cities was reflected in certain family names: those of the Lantana or the de Petris, the Nakić d'Osliaik, the Felicinovich von Treustern or the Lapenna, just to mention a few. The mayors (or *podestà*) of the cities had their personal box. We know that Guglielmo Vareton at Pula sat in Box no. 6 of the theatre built by Pietro Ciscutti before the Politeama; and that the mayor of Rijeka, Giovanni Ciotta, had Box no. 12 of the first tier in the theatre built by his father-in-law Adamich. However, for Conte Cosimo de Begna and Nicolò Trigari, both of whom were mayors of Zadar,¹³ as well as for other mayors of the coastal cities, the information is lacking. Not necessarily did the mayor also occupy the role of manager of the theatre, though this was the case at Split. All the mayors, however, could have a say in matters concerning the timing of an opera season, given that they were also financiers of the theatre, and all the more so if the municipality contributed a subsidy.

Many well-known members of the Dalmatian Autonomist Party also had their box. Until about 1870 the autonomists governed over almost all the coastal towns, and their presence could be traced without difficulty. At Šibenik many of the Italian and autonomist families had contributed to the construction of the theatre itself: we think of names such as the Fenzi, Frari, de Difnico and Galvani.¹⁴ The situation was similar in Dubrovnik, where Marino Bonda even gave his name to the building he had founded. And also in Zadar, which was the city with the highest percentage of party members: Natale Filippi, Pietro Abelich (Abelić), Antonio Smirić, the Salghetti-Drioli family and many others. The Italian community was strongly represented among the shareholders of all

¹³ Cosimo De Begna was mayor of Zadar from 1866 as well as director of literary journals. Nicolò Trigari succeeded De Begna as mayor of Zadar on 23 February 1874; see Angelo De Benvenuti, *Storia di Zara dal 1979 al 1918* (Milano: Bocca, 1953), 119.

¹⁴ On these names, see also Stefano Trinchese, Francesco Caccamo, eds., *Adriatico contemporaneo: rotte e percezioni del mare comune tra Ottocento e Novecento* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2008), 98–99. The Teatro Mazzoleni of Šibenik had been able to purchase various boxes directly from the Società del Casino. See Luciano Monzali, *Italiani di Dalmazia 1914–1924* (Firenze: Le lettere, 2007), 367.

the coastal towns, with the exception of Split. At Split, with the transition from the Teatro Bajamonti to the Teatro Nuovo, only some of the former boxholders of the Bajamonti – for the most part autonomists – purchased boxes at the new theatre. Though duly informed by the Croatian administration of Gajo Filomen Bulat in 1888, many did not respond to the call.¹⁵ One can imagine there was a certain hostility towards the new administration, which politically speaking was hardly in harmony with that of the old mayor Bajamonti. It was an administration that wasted no time in changing the opera repertoires and greatly reducing the presence of Italian opera in the seasonal programmes. No secret was made of the ideological “Croatisation” that was steadily making headway over the years, if Bulat’s successor, the mayor Ivan Manger, could categorically state that no Italian company would ever set foot in the new Croatian theatre, nor would one hear “filthy operas by Verdi, Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, etc.” (*porcherie d’opere di Verdi, Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, ecc.*).¹⁶ With these premises it is quite likely that a part of the old boxholders found the situation increasingly incompatible and chose to renounce their boxes.

Among the boxholders, however, there was no lack of less partisan elements, in particular the families of industrialists and shipowners, landowners and merchants, notaries and lawyers, pharmacists and doctors. There were also women among the box owners, albeit a small percentage. While women certainly played an active role at the meetings (their names appear in the lists of members invited to the periodical assemblies), it is not clear from the surviving documentation if they themselves had the right to vote or if a male member was needed for them to express their choices, as happened in the other Italian theatres of the age.¹⁷

Some of the boxholders might be running a business that provided the theatre with services. For example, Ugo Fosco, a boxholder-shareholder at the theatre of Šibenik, had a printing house where the posters for the season were produced. His workshop directly invoiced the theatre.¹⁸ The same can be said for Ante Šupuk, who was mayor of the city and shareholder at the local theatre, as well as being head of the company that supplied the building with the electricity for the opera productions:¹⁹ the receipts of his company attest that there was a financial

¹⁵ Duško Kečkemet, *Ante Bajamonti i Split* (Split: Slobodna Dalmacija, 2007), 242. In Split the boxes belonged either to private individuals or to the city.

¹⁶ “Gazzettino Dalmato,” *L’Eco di Pola*, 5. 1. 1895.

¹⁷ On the subject, see Carlotta Sorba, *Teatri. L’Italia del melodramma nell’età del Risorgimento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2001), passim. Not all the female box-owners had a designated proxy to represent them, so we do not know if they had the power to act autonomously or not.

¹⁸ The letterhead and stamp on the invoice simply stated “Consortio tipografico / Ugo Fosco & C. i / Sebenico,” HR-DAŠI-103, busta 9.

¹⁹ Together with his son Marco and the engineer Vjekoslav Meichsner, Ante Šupuk had founded in 1895 the first hydroelectric power plant (Jaruga) of the whole of Dalmatia. The company stamp

relationship with the theatre that continued over the years. When similar services were provided by internal members, the production processes and paperwork could naturally be greatly simplified and the whole organisation made swifter.

The nature of the services rendered to the theatre were defined at periodic meetings. In fact, the boxholders were expected to take part in more or less regular meetings that concerned them. As a rule the theatre presidency or management would issue a circular letter indicating the place and date of the meeting, as well as its agenda. The meeting could also be held at the home of one of the directors or members, not necessarily in the theatre itself. In Šibenik, for example, the members might be convened to the house of one of the directors, either Giovanni Mazzoleni or Antonio Bontempo. The announcement of the meeting included a list of the shareholders, who were asked to sign against their name to confirm they had read it. It was circulated usually with very short notice, often the day before the meeting. At the Teatro Comunale in Rijeka, for example, the meetings with the theatre management were even announced in the morning for the evening of the very same day. It was also not unknown for the meeting to be held in the theatre itself after an act of the opera.²⁰

For the actual meeting itself, at Zadar a printed sheet was prepared giving the names of the presidents at the top,²¹ the list of members present in the central part of the page, and a formula at the bottom that declared the meeting officially began after compliance with formal criteria had been verified: "After establishing the correct communication of the circular letter of [...], and the legality of the numbers present, in relation to the subject indicated in the agenda, the session was opened to discuss what follows."²² Then the subjects for discussion were listed. The discussion itself was recorded in the minutes.

If certain boxholders could not attend, they could use a power of attorney; in other words, a document appointing a third person to act as a proxy on their behalf. We find many of these power of attorney documents, formulated in various ways. They could be just a couple of lines written by hand, a typewritten sheet, or a more complex pre-compiled form that included all the necessary clauses. As an example, I will cite the one sent in 1909 by the widow of the member Doimo Miagostovich to appoint her son Gregorio as her proxy:

reads as follows: "Šupuk & Meichsner / Prima concessionata centrale elettrica / in Dalmazia Krka / Sebenico," HR-DAŠI-103, busta 4.

²⁰ Register for incoming and outgoing documents (*Protocollo degli esibiti*) 1885–1910, Rijeka, Državni arhiv u Rijeci (hereafter HR-DARI), DS 60, busta 10.

²¹ The terms *presidenti* and *direttori* seem to have been interchangeable in certain theatres. On this printed sheet from Zadar, for example, three people are indicated as "presidents" that elsewhere are referred to as "directors" of the theatre.

²² See various documents, HD-DAZD, buste 3 e 4.

Power of attorney with which I, the undersigned Ludmilla, widow of the late Dr. Doimo Miagostovich, in my capacity as mother and guardian of the minor children Domenica Maria and Giovanni, appoint and establish as my proxy my son Dr. Gregorio Bogić of the late Giuseppe, that he may represent me at all the members' meetings of the Teatro Mazzoleni of Šibenik, and to that end I convey to him all the powers contemplated by section 31 of the Code of Civil Procedure, promising that everything carried out by my aforesaid proxy or his substitutes will be valid and irrevocable on the strength of the present power of attorney.²³

We find the same type of power of attorney also at the new theatre of Split:

I entrust Signor Pietro Katalinić to represent me at the meeting scheduled by the management of the theatre for the 29th of the current month, and I authorise him to vote on all the subjects on the agenda and on all the proposals that may be made.²⁴

A proxy could represent more than one boxholder. Box-owners did not necessarily live in the city where the theatre stood. When the distance from one's home made it impossible to be present at meetings, appointing a proxy was a mandatory step. At Split, for example, there were those who, instead of choosing a relation to represent them (as in the preceding cases), directly delegated as their proxy the mayor of the city, who at the time (as mentioned earlier) also happened to be one of the directors of the theatre:

²³ Power of attorney of Ludmilla Miagostovich, Šibenik, 7. 2. 1909, HR-DAŠI-103, busta 4. We have powers of attorney that are both handwritten and printed. At Šibenik, for example, we find certain printed forms worded as follows: "I, the undersigned, hereby appoint Signor [...] as my attorney, to represent me in this case before any authority, and for this purpose I grant him the power to replace, settle, defer, refer, offer, accept oaths, take recourse, appeal, execute, adjudicate at the Auction, reach compromises in arbitration, whilst guaranteeing that his actions are valid [...]" Also circulating was another, which was even more detailed and complex: "Power of Attorney. For [...] and heirs, I confer upon Signor [...] of [...] a general and unlimited mandate to make representations both in and out of Court in all criminal and civil cases, whether active and passive, with the power to receive preliminary deeds, enter into disputes, reach settlements, compromise in arbitration, recede, replace, defer, offer, accept, report and take oaths, request and obtain time-limits, reservations, publicise properties, executions, seizures, sequestrations and any other legal security measures, as well as those relating to land registers; to compete in [...] name at auction and adjudicate; to collect sums and issue receipts, to undertake any action he deem opportune in the best interests of the business transaction, even if such were to fall under the jurisdiction of the Court of the Empire or the Court of Administrative Justice, and agree to indemnify him for any competence and expense he may encounter at his domicile in [...], obliging him to consider his actions as valid and irrevocable," in HR-DAŠI-103, busta 4.

²⁴ Power of attorney of Vincenzo Katalinić, Split, 28. 11. 1894, Muzej Grada Splita, (hereafter HR-MGS): Kazalište 3 / kut. I–XII.

The undersigned, as owner of a box at the Teatro Comunale of Split, being domiciled in Graz, authorise Dr. Gaetano F. Bulat to represent her at the meeting of the boxholders that will take place within the month, and at any subsequent meeting, with the faculty to vote for her on any subject that will be brought to discussion.²⁵

At the shareholders' meetings, the ownership of a single share gave the right to one vote, two shares to two votes, three to three, and so on.²⁶ Those who had contributed more therefore had a greater say in the decisions. For the proceedings to be valid, a minimum number of members had to be present. At Šibenik the meetings were valid with half plus one of the members. In Zadar in 1884 the quorum was fixed at 25 shareholders.²⁷ If we consider that the total number of shareholders was 48, the proportion was identical to that required at Šibenik. At Rijeka there were 102 boxholders in 1870, and the quorum was fixed at 68, hence higher than the half plus one required at Šibenik and Zadar.

Usually, these meetings started with the reading and approval of the minutes of the previous meeting, and were followed by announcements, which might concern the results of the preceding opera season or the appointment of new directors, auditors or other key figures in the management. In fact, one of the duties of the boxholders was to elect the management, which at the time consisted of three directors and two deputies. Proposals aimed at benefiting the social enterprise could also be presented by the management or by members; or the status of the enterprise itself could be discussed. Also taken into consideration at times were requests for financial support from the widows of theatre workers, who turned directly to the theatre management when they were left without any source of income.

The association of boxholders could also be involved (more or less, as the case may be) in the relations with the impresario.²⁸ At times it was the impresario himself who appealed to it for the payment of a sum of money owed.²⁹

²⁵ Power of attorney of Carolina Mastrovich, Split, 22. 11. 1894, HR-MGS: Kazalište 3 / kut. I–XII.

²⁶ After the first four shares, only the ownership of another four shares gave the right to a further vote, another eight to two votes, and so on; *Statuto della Società del Teatro di Sebenico* (Šibenik: Tipografia S. Anich, 1870).

²⁷ See Società del Teatro Nuovo di Zara. Electoral round of 16 September (*Tornata del 16 settembre*) 1884, HR-DAZD-252, busta 4.

²⁸ On this matter, see the explanations in Consiglio Rispoli, *La vita pratica del teatro* (Firenze: Bemporad, 1903), 37.

²⁹ For example, Bruto Bocci, who was one of the most important impresarios of operetta, wrote to the management of Zadar: "In consideration of the desperate state of the company, the undersigned begs the Honourable Management to have the gentlemen shareholders urgently confirm the authorisation for the concession requested" ("In considerazione allo stato miserando della compagnia il sottoscritto prega Ess'Onorevole Direzione a voler ripetere d'urgenza dai signori

Alternatively, an impresario, following a disastrous season, might appeal to the management, begging it not to be forced to resort “to public charity” (*alla pietà cittadina*) in order to fulfil his duties. He might, for example, ask for sufficient funds to enable him to leave the theatre without having failed in his obligations.³⁰

What was decided at these meetings? A number of things, as for example: changes to the statute; measures to be taken concerning possible lawsuits brought against the theatre’s members; maintenance work on the theatre building; management of the autumn, carnival, Lent and spring seasons. It would establish the endowment to be assigned to the impresario and/or the concession of certain boxes.³¹ It could choose the operas for the next season and even the impresarios who would run them. As a rule, the selection of the impresario would be made from a short list, which (on the evidence of the surviving archival documentation) could include up to seven names for each season. In cases where several candidates had accepted the terms and conditions set out in the tender specifications (the *capitolato d’appalto*), it was the impresario offering the best guarantees that would prevail. The proposals were accepted with a majority of two thirds of the vote. The boxholders could also establish the price of admission to the theatre.³² Ongoing contacts with theatrical agencies could also be discussed.

It lay in the power of the shareholders to choose the type of spectacle to be given at the theatre. Since they were paying, they had the right to express their preferences. They were not just a consortium of spectators; they were a group of people acting as genuine patrons. The decisions concerning the proposal of operas were made collegially, so the operas were subjected to collective approval. And clearly, with as many as 48 shareholders (as there were at Zadar in the early 20th century) one can readily understand that decision-making and coming to an agreement was a long and arduous business.

Not always were the shareholders in agreement with what the presidency or management decided. There were those like Signora Natalia Dudan in Zadar, who didn’t wait to speak at the meeting itself, but voiced their opinions directly against their name on the circular letter convening the assembly. She protested

azionisti l’autorizzazione per la richiesta concessione”); Letter from Bruto Bocci to the theatre management of Zadar, [1885?], HR-DAZD-252, busta 5.

³⁰ The subsidy could also simply consist in the travel expenses back to his home if the impresario should find himself completely broke; Letter from Gaetano Benini to the theatre management of Šibenik, Šibenik, 20. 2. 1882, HR-DAŠI-103, busta 3. In this case the theatre management of Šibenik donated 25 florins to the troupe leader to cover the travel expenses of himself and his family to Trieste.

³¹ See for example the letter from Doimo Miagostovich to Enrico Viscardi (for many years an agent of the theatre of Zadar), [Zadar, n.d.], which states that “the management grants the boxes of the third tier for the benefit of the company;” HR-DAŠI-103, busta 3.

³² See Minutes of the meeting (*Protocollo di seduta*), Šibenik, 28. 7. 1907, HR-DAŠI-103, busta 4.

in no uncertain terms against the management for giving the then impresario an advance payment in cash. “The undersigned,” Signora Dudan wrote, “doesn’t believe the gentlemen presidents could be so stupid as to pay the impresa – without any advantage for itself – the instalment of the endowment before the due date established in the contract.” If that had happened, the presidency would have to refund the money that had been prematurely paid out. “It would be high time,” she continued “for the presidency to stop making itself ridiculous, and along with it making the entire association ridiculous with further negotiations, circulars, meetings, etc. etc.”³³ An alleged incompetence of the management was also expressed in the newspaper *L’eco dell’Adriatico*, which wrote that it “clings to the first production offered, without looking at the artistic side.” The directors were accused of being people endowed with anything but artistic taste, “one more anti-musical than the next; who let themselves be swindled by crafty impresarios.”³⁴ Having the capacity to make judicious decisions on artistic matters was in fact a real problem. And evidently the situation at Zadar had got worse after the composer Nicolò Stermich di Valcrociata – one of the very few musically accomplished people to be involved in the management of the coastal theatres – left the board of directors.³⁵

If the opera season went badly, the box-owners complained. Some even tried to ask for their membership fee back, as in the case of Innocente Monass in Zadar:

Esteemed Management! On behalf of my wife, as owner of the box of Tier I no. 10, some time ago I paid the fee of 40 crowns for the opera season of 1906. Seeing now that, following the failure of *Rigoletto* and the cancelled performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, the whole opera season was thus reduced just to the performance of *Mefistofele*, and confident that the impresario was not given any subsidy, seeing that he had not fulfilled his respective contractual obligations, I request that this Esteemed Management return the said fee, especially in consideration of the fact that I understand that other boxholders have, quite rightly and justly, also refused their contribution.³⁶

³³ Letter from Natalia Dudan to the presidency of the theatre of Zadar, Zadar, 25. 10. 1869, HR-DAZD-252, busta 3.

³⁴ “The gentlemen boxholders,” the article went on, “pay every year large fees that the Management imposes on them and they get the productions that they get: each of less artistic value than the one before. Let them go on paying, but at least let them not be forgetful of the glorious traditions of our forebears, who offered all that was finest that our Italian art could produce, with select artists, and made Zadar an artistic centre of excellence in the theatrical world;” “Da Zara,” *L’eco dell’Adriatico*, 17–18. 1. 1907.

³⁵ Stermich was one of the directors of the Teatro Nuovo of Zadar from 1874 until about 1885.

³⁶ Letter from Innocente Monass to the theatre management of Zadar, Zadar, 17. 11. 1906, HR-DAZD-252, busta 22.

In the event, however, Monass didn't get his money back, because it was pointed out that the assembly of shareholders had voted that the sum of 40 crowns was to be spent "on the overall number of productions given, or to be given, during the year 1906."³⁷

At the Teatro Bonda of Dubrovnik the boxholders also played an active role in the choice of repertoire and companies, and they discussed the matter with the management, which again was made up of five people.³⁸ On the other hand, a place where boxholders had no say in the choice of opera productions was curiously Rijeka. On this matter the newspaper *La Bilancia* also gave its own opinion by calling for a greater involvement, perhaps in the form of a committee that should include not only the boxholders but also the season-ticket holders of the parterre. For they too should have the right to examine the competing proposals and to express their concrete opinion to an already established delegation (*delegazione teatrale*), whose task it would be merely to verify the financial solidity of the participating impresarios and decide for or against. In other words, the body appointed to choose the operas and, later, to judge the productions at the dress rehearsals should be exclusively this committee.³⁹ Instead, with the move from the Teatro Adamich to the new Teatro Comunale, it was only members of the management that were allowed to take part in the assemblies, which were held in the theatre offices (*cancelleria teatrale*).⁴⁰ This is the reason that we do not find at Rijeka those printed forms used to convene the boxholders to a meeting (with the list of names and a space beside them for signatures), as instead we do for example at Zadar. For the meetings to elect the members of the management, on the other hand, both the boxholders and the season-ticket holders of the parterre were invited to take part.⁴¹ One might also expect a newspaper not known for its impartiality to ask the boxholders to vote for one or other candidate as director of the theatre. Indeed, in the elections for this position at Zadar, for example, the newspaper *La Bilancia* recommended voting for Lodovico de Adamich, Giovanni Prodam and Francesco Dall'Asta; and, as it turned out, they were all elected.⁴²

³⁷ Letter from the theatre management of Zadar to Innocente Monass, Zadar, 1906, HR-DAZD-252, busta 21.

³⁸ Miljenko Foretić, *Kazališni život u Dubrovniku od 1882–1914* (Dubrovnik: [n.p.], 1965), 9.

³⁹ "Teatro civico," *La Bilancia*, 3. 6. 1875.

⁴⁰ See Invitation (*Invito*), Rijeka, 2. 10. 1908, HR-DARI-557, busta 562/1.

⁴¹ Those renting a whole box had the right to two votes; for half a box it was one vote; the season-ticket holders of the parterre also each had one vote. For the election to be valid, at least a third of those eligible to vote had to cast a ballot; and a candidate could be considered elected with at least a third of the number of votes cast. See Notice (*Avviso*) no. 26, Rijeka, 15. 3. 1894, Museo Marittimo e Storico del Litorale Croato, Collezione teatrale.

⁴² Also elected were Achille Franchi and Ernesto Brelich; "Teatro civico," *La Bilancia*, 5. 3. 1870 and 19. 3. 1870.

In spite of the many conflicting opinions expressed at the assemblies, there was, however, one circumstance that united the various boxholders at the coastal theatres, and that was the death of Giuseppe Verdi in 1901. Various theatres were named after him immediately after the event. In the case of Zadar the change of name was proposed by the councillor Giambattista Filippi and was voted at a meeting of the theatre's members and shareholders.⁴³ In the hinterland both Poreč/Parenzo and Gorizia did the same. In Trieste, on the other hand, it appears that an assembly was held on the very night the composer died, and on 29 January 1901, in other words just two days later, it was decided, with a resolution of the city's deputation, to name the theatre after Verdi.⁴⁴ The Teatro Comunale of Rijeka became the Teatro Verdi only later, in 1913, to mark the centenary of the composer's birth.⁴⁵ Was all of this only a sign of esteem and respect towards the great man or was it perhaps an indication of "resistance:" resistance towards a region that was increasingly changing its physiognomy under political pressures that came from both the Croatian faction and the Habsburg government, which responded to the specific instructions of the emperor Franz Joseph?⁴⁶ This

⁴³ At Zadar, the minutes of the meeting in question recorded the event as follows: "The councillor Giambattista Filippi takes the floor and proposes that in memory of the grand old man, of the master whom the whole world without distinction honours and whose death it laments, the name of 'Verdi' should be given to the theatre and the title 'Società del Teatro Nuovo' be changed to 'Società del Teatro Verdi'." Minutes of the meeting of the Committee (*Protocollo della seduta del Comitato*), Zadar, 18. 2. 1901, HR-DAZD, busta 10.

⁴⁴ Giuseppe Caprin, *Il Teatro Nuovo: XXI aprile 1801* (Trieste: Schimpff, 1901), 14.

⁴⁵ The mayor communicated the decision to the theatre management of Rijeka as follows: "I have the honour to inform you that the Illustrious Municipal Council in its session of 14 April of the current year, as a corollary to its proposals concerning the commemoration of Giuseppe Verdi, has decreed, again with a unanimous vote, that the name of the supreme Italian master be given to our Teatro Comunale. Henceforth the official title will therefore be: Teatro Comunale Giuseppe Verdi. Abbreviations of the title are not to be admitted, and much less so is it permitted that the adjective 'comunale' be omitted." Letter from the mayor of Rijeka to the theatre management of Rijeka, Rijeka, 18. 4. 1913, HR-DARI-557, busta 562/1. A bust of Verdi was also made to be placed in the theatre.

⁴⁶ On 12 November 1866 Franz Joseph had ordered the Crown Council to resist the influence of the Italian community resolutely: "His Majesty has ordered that the influence of the Italian elements still present in certain Lands of the Crown be contrasted in the most resolute way with the appropriate appointment of political and court officials and teachers, and with the influence of the press in South Tyrol, Dalmatia and the coastal regions, and that the Germanisation or Slavicisation of the relevant parts of the Country be pursued with all the energy possible and without any hesitation, depending on circumstances. His Majesty imposes an obligation on all central offices to act in this manner as planned." See the text of the session of 12 November 1866 in *Die Protokolle des Österreichischen Ministerrates 1848/1867. V. Abteilung: Die Ministerien Rainer und Mensdorff. VI. Abteilung: Das Ministerium Belcredi* (Wien: Österreichischer Bundesverlag für Unterricht, Wissenschaft und Kunst, 1971), 297.

is a question that is still open and that accompanies the final years of Italian shareholding at the coastal theatres.

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Boxholders at the Opera: Identity and Functions at the Theatres of the ex-Serenissima

Abstract

This article sheds light on the identity and functions of the boxholders in the coastal theatres of part of the former Venetian republic at the turn of the 20th century, investigating which social categories were represented among them and in what economic terms of “ownership” they were related to the theatre. The boxholders held regular meetings. How were their assemblies organised? What was discussed? Those who paid a social fee for the opera season had a say in the works to be performed, the endowment to be granted to the impresario, and even the cost of admission tickets to the theatre. There were many disputes that could arise from these collective decisions; one event, however, managed to unify the intentions of the boxholders, namely what happened with the death of Giuseppe Verdi. There was a common intent to name many of the coastal theatres after the composer: was it just a tribute to a great artist or perhaps the desire to affirm the *italianità* of the shareholders in an area that perceived pressure from Croatian nationalists and the growing demands of the Habsburg monarchy for a “germanisation” or “slavicisation” of the territory?

Držitelé lóží v opeře: identita a funkce v divadlech bývalé Benátské republiky

Abstrakt

Článek osvětluje identitu a funkce držitelů lóží v pobřežních divadlech části bývalé Benátské republiky na přelomu 19. a 20. století a zkoumá, jaké sociální kategorie byly mezi nimi zastoupeny a v jakém ekonomickém „vlastnickém“ vztahu byli k divadlu. Majitelé lóží se pravidelně scházeli. Jak byla jejich shromáždění organizována? O čem se diskutovalo? Ti, kdo platili společenský poplatek za operní sezónu, mohli rozhodovat o tom, jaká díla budou uvedena, jaká dotace bude poskytnuta impresáři, nebo dokonce o ceně vstupenek do divadla. Z těchto kolektivních rozhodnutí mohlo vzniknout mnoho sporů; jedna událost však dokázala záměry držitelů lóží sjednotit, a sice to, co se stalo po smrti Giuseppe Verdiho. Existoval společný záměr pojmenovat mnoho pobřežních divadel po tomto skladateli: šlo jen o poctu velkému umělci, nebo snad o snahu potvrdit italskou příslušnost akcionářů v oblasti, která vnímala tlak chorvatských nacionalistů a sílící požadavky habsburské monarchie na „germanizaci“ či „slavizaci“ území?

Keywords

Boxholders; Shareholders; 19th and 20th Century Opera; Social Theatres

Klíčová slova

držitelé lóží; akcionáři; opera 19. a 20. století; společenská divadla

Cristina Scuderi

Institut für Musikwissenschaft, Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz

cristina.scuderi@uni-graz.at