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monica centanni

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Redazione | Centro studi classicA Iuav, San Polo 2468, 30125 Venezia, Italia

Tel. 041 2571461

www.engramma.org

Bastianello | Bonazza | Calabi | Centanni | De Michelis | Ghiraldini
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500 anni di editoria e cultura
a Venezia. Il Ghetto, Aldo Manuzio
e altre imprese

a cura di Elisa Bastianello

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Jewish Theatre Production in Venice During the Renaissance

Venice Before and During Ghettoization

Erith Jaffe-Berg

In Venice, Jews took part in a number of performative activities, ranging from music and dance to theatre. Musical performances by Jews date back from as early as 1443 (Harrán 2001, 212). The earliest evidence for a theatrical performance dates to 1531 on the occasion of the holiday of Purim, which roughly corresponds to the Catholic Carnival celebration. According to the diarist and Venetian historian Marino Sanudo, on the fourth of March, 1531 the Jews of Venice produced a wonderful comedy in their neighborhood (Schirmann 1979, 54-55, f.n. 20*). In November of 1590 we have archival evidence that “a company of fourteen Jewish players” obtained a license to go out of the Ghetto during the Carnival “to try out and perform *una opera premeditata*” (Pullan 1971, 553. Pullan’s source is the ASVe, *Ufficiali al Cattaver*, b. 243, reg. 3 f.191). Of course, *una opera premeditata* was the term by which works were known when they had been rehearsed and memorized by the performers. Often, for example, a *commedia dell’arte* performance would be known as, in the words of Andrea Perrucci, an *opera premeditata ed all’improvviso* (Andrea Perrucci’s treatise on acting based in *commedia dell’arte* is titled *Dell’arte rappresentative, premeditate, ed all’improvviso*: see Perrucci *Arte*). In the example I cited, it is also notable that the group of Jewish players was known as a company of Jewish players. This is similar to another instance in which the ‘company’ of Don Livio of Ferrara, a Jew residing in the Ghetto of Venice, was allowed to perform dances in Christian homes during the Carnivals of 1594 and 1595 (Pullan 1971, 553). In both cases, the groups were known as ‘companies’, suggesting that there were several examples of theatre actors who had organized themselves to perform on a recurrent basis. This resembles similar groups in Mantua, Ferrara and other Italian cities in which Jewish acting troupes were active.

In Venice, it appears that Carnival time was a time in which the boundaries of the Ghetto were made more porous than usual, and increased contact among the Jewish and Christian communities was possible

(Pullan provides even more examples of musicians and dancers who were authorized to perform outside of the Ghetto during Carnival, see: Pullan 1971, 553). While these performers were intended to be shown outside of Venice, there is much evidence that many musical, dance and theatrical performances took place in Venice during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (Harrán 2001, 213). Among well-known performers were several female performers. There was Madonna Bellina, as well as the well-known Madama Europa, sister of the famous Jewish composer Salamone Rossi, all of whom performed in Venice (Harrán 2001, 214 on both Madama Europa and Bellina).

We also know of theatrical performances that took place within the Jewish Ghetto (created in 1516) when a wealthy Jewish community member in Venice built a building for dramatic presentations. The erection of a permanent theatre to serve the Venetian Jewish community does not mean that there was unanimity within the community about producing plays. In fact, the creation of a permanent theatre revealed an internally-riven community in which dissent to the theatre was rife and influential voices threatened to stop and eventually succeeded in stopping theatre making. The theatre historian Jefim Schirmann proposes that in Venice Jews could view theatre performances often, and not only during Purim or other holidays. It was the very permanence of the theatre that enabled continuous presentation of theatre, making it a very popular venue. This popularity may have been the basis for the wrath that the theatre fomented (Harrán 2001, 214). For one, the conservative Venetian Azariah Figo opposed this theatre.

In the seventeenth century, Rabbi Samuel ben Abraham Aboab (1610-1694) engaged in a famous dispute about theatre in a *Responsum* known as *Devàr Shemu'el* (The saying of Samuel) (Venice, 1702) (Zinberg 1974, 177. See also Schirmann 1979, 47. The exchange is also referred to in detail in a freshly published book, in Italian, by Michela Andreatta about Mošèh Zacuto: Andreatta 2016). From Aboab's text we learn something about the creation of the theatre. Apparently it was a wealthy Jewish resident of Venice, whom Aboab refers to as "Ploni ve cohen hu" who was a great supporter of these productions (see Schirmann 1979, 56). *Ploni* in Hebrew is the word "someone," suggesting that Aboab is intentionally leaving the theatre impresario unnamed. However, he also says "ve choen hu" which translates to: "and he is a Cohen". Cohen by name refers to the *cohanim* who were the priests who could serve in the old temple (long destroyed by the seventeenth century).

Aboab's main objection in the *Responsum* was to the creation of the theatre in the Ghetto, which he considered as a "holy camp", a sanctified space where the introduction of theatre compromised women and violated the Jewish interdiction on worshipping idols.

He [the wealthy funder of the theatre] has degraded the crown and pride of the Torah to the earth. Within the holy camp [i.e. the Ghetto] he has built theatres and circuses, where men and women and children come together. Modest and chaste Jewish daughters sit together with profligate women of the streets, and all, great and small, violate the law of Moses [...]. If at least only adults went there. But what do they want of the little lambs? A great punishment awaits those who bring little children there. They lead them into temptation by having them sit with actors and listen to their obscene talk which poisons their young souls" (Aboab in Zinberg 1974, 177-178).

Furthermore, Aboab complained about another Rabbi's permissiveness regarding theatrical performances. Rabbi Jehudah Mintz had approved the holding of masquerades on Purim night, in keeping with the dictum to celebrate**. Clearly, the entire enterprise of theatre, with its blurring of boundaries, was not something Aboab was able to accept.

The most well known defender of the importance of theatre and music making in the Jewish community was Leon Modena. One of the most prominent residents of the Jewish Ghetto, Leon Modena (1571-1648) was a great supporter of theatre and music (see Schirmann 1979, 106 and 64. See also Zinberg 1974, 177). He was a musical performer of cantorial music, but was equally encouraging of music that is produced for artistic purposes, apart from prayer.

That Modena practiced cantorial song yet promoted art music poses no contradiction. The one had its rationale in the readings of the prayer services, as they developed in the medieval synagogue; the other was linked conceptually to the ceremonial of the biblical temple yet was otherwise practiced by non-Jews, from medieval times on, in sacred and secular music governed by meters and counterpoint, hence its 'order' and 'relation' (Harrán 2001, 218)

A writer in both Hebrew and Italian, and even a playwright in his own right, who created a pastoral play called *Jacob and Rachael*, Modena was an active defender of the value of performance, both theatrical and musical (Schirmann 1979, 106 references Leon Modena's autobiography *Hayeii Yehudah* "The Life of Yehudah").

Harrán has argued that Modena was the director of a music academy in the Venetian Ghetto (Harrán 2001, 227):

The reason for its foundation, we learn, was the influx of musicians from Mantua. They fled the imperial armies, which, in the War of Mantuan Succession, invaded and ransacked the city, especially its Ghetto. The musicians included singers and instrumentalists, and to all appearances it was they, and not Modena, who formed, or pressed to form the academy as an outlet for their talents (Harrán 2001, 227).

The performers were supported by wealthy members of the community. We know of this through the account of Samuel Nahmias, known as Giulio Morosini upon his conversion to Christianity, in a book published in 1683 (Harrán 2001, 227). Morosini refers to the singing on holy days in the Spanish synagogue and on the use of an organ (Harrán 2001, 228. See also Schirmann 1979, 50-51).

The academy in Venice was doubly struck when the plague in Venice (1630-31) killed off the “best members” (Harrán 2001, 229), who were presumably the migrant artists recently arrived from Mantua. The academy was known as “Accademia degli Impediti” that Harrán describes as: “of the impeded, in allusion to the unfortunate state of our captivity that impeded the completion of any valorous action” (Harrán 2001, 229). But later, it was known as a *compagnia* or society, which Harrán suggests was due to the fact Modena explained that the academy met regularly, where they did not. However, it is interesting that the term *compagnia* also was how theatrical performers called themselves, as in the *Compagnie della Calza*, *Compagnia dei Gelosi*, etc. I have already referred to the way in which the Jewish performers were incorporated as a company or a troupe. Therefore, it is possible that upon the arrival of so many artists from Mantua, where musical, dance and theatre artists were often on and the same or certainly shared company, the appellation would borrow from theatre. In fact, Elliott Horowitz, basing himself on writing by Modena as well as Morosini, lists the large number of Jewish confraternities, and indicates the fact that they modelled themselves on the Christian confraternities (Horowitz 2001, 239-240). Furthermore, the Jewish theatre appeared to have modelled itself after the Christian theatre in its incorporation of *intermedi* (musical interludes), as well as in the comic form it adopted (See mention about the *intermedi* incorporated in Ferrara and Venice in Schirmann 1979, 57).

In conclusion, there appears to have been a vibrant Jewish theatre scene in early-modern Venice. While some theatrical performances took place within the Ghetto, a large amount of performances were also shared with the Christian community outside of the Ghetto. Made manifest in the performance are the multiple valences theatre can take on: a form of expression and release, a bridge amongst different people, and a challenge to mechanisms that otherwise seek to separate peoples from one and other. Further work on the Venetian theatrical landscape in the early-modern period will complete the picture of the ways in which performances became a basis for exchange – cultural and other – taking place between Christian and Jewish communities in Northern Italy.

*Schirmann 1979, 54-55, f.n. 20, cites Roth 1928. Schirmann understands Sanudo as stating that members of the Christian nobility were invited to attend this performance. However, it appears from Sanudo's original that no Christians were allowed to the performance. I thank Elisa Bastianello for pointing out this mistranslation.

**I am thankful to Michela Andreatta who pointed me to Aboab's writing. In *Sefer Ha-Zichronot, Zikkaron Two*, chapter 2, 14b cited by Zinberg 1974, 177-8.

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Perrucci Arte

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ABSTRACT

This essay describes the theatrical activities of the Jewish community in Venice during the Renaissance. Jews were active producers of dance and musical performances; theatre was another important avenue for Jews to engage their own community and also reach out to the broader Christian population. Jews resided in the Venetian Ghetto beginning in 1516; however, that separation did not mean that their theatrical activities were limited to the Ghetto alone. Rather, the foundation of a stable theatre in the Ghetto, the continuous sharing of performances and teaching of performances to Christians, and the borrowing of Jewish performers for different events outside of the Ghetto suggest that the Jews of early modern Venice cultivated a very robust theatrical presence within the Northern Italian region.



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