FRANCIS REID VISITS

THE THEATRES OF POMPEII

Roman theatre remains are to be found all around the mediterranean. As far as I can ascertain, the ones which are most complete (or perhaps it would be more accurate to say less incomplete) are those at Sabratha in Libya and Merida in Spain. Until Libya becomes a less traumatic area for tourism, Sabratha will have to remain but a tantalising hope for a future journey; however I have positive plans to combine Roman Merida with eighteenth century Almagro. Meanwhile my feeling for Roman performance conditions slowly builds up as I sit on a series of tiered stones that have known Roman bottoms, strut upon variously fragmented stages which once supported the thespians of the ancient world or contemplate the records made by painters of what they thought they saw.

A visit to Pompeii adds a new dimension to that search for the elusive nature of Roman theatric experience. Here we have theatres in the context of a city whose people they served. We can leave the houses, walk along the streets, visit the shops, pass through the forum and take our seats in the theatre. We need to choose which one because the Romans tended to build their theatres in pairs. (A tradition currently active in the German Stadtheater practice of and adjacent Grosses Haus and Kleines Haus.) Or if we seek a more gutsy entertainment, there is an amphitheatre down the road.

Our knowledge of ancient theatres is more extensive in plan than in elevation. Foundations are often reasonably complete and there is frequently a clear indication of the audience seating arrangements, particularly when built into the natural slope of a hillside. But as we move upwards from the floor, our knowledge of the structure has to be based increasingly upon speculation. The stage buildings, inevitably, have mostly disappeared: the slow disintegration of time accelerated by removal of building materials for recycling elsewhere.

In Pompeii the agent of destruction was also a means of preservation. Although the volcanic fall-out from Vesuvius sliced off the topmost layers of the city's buildings, it also preserved the remains by placing the site under a very effective planning blight. Redevelopment was totally inhibited by up to twenty feet of ash, combined with the fear engendered by folk memory of the apocalyptic nature of the destruction. The combination of a volcanic activity which included debris, poisonous gases and a blacked-out sun, with lightning, earthquakes and tidal waves, contained virtually every phenomenon ever associated with the wrath of the gods—an event over which Vesuvius maintained a grumbling presence throughout subsequent centuries.

One of the joys of Italy is that their architectural heritage is so extensive that they have no alternative but to treat it casually. Somehow the general unkempt air of Pompeii, the weeds, even the occasional fugitive squashed coke can, promotes a feeling of reality. Imagination completes the picture in a way that a full restoration never could. Visiting the theatres is primarily a revelation of scale. Not just the way in which they are scaled to catalyse the actor-audience experience, but their relationship with the city's public, commercial and domestic buildings and road system.

The large theatre of Pompeii was originally built in the Greek form around 200BC, undergoing a number of transformations into the Roman with the remodelling probably being just before the destruction of Pompeii—the city underwent considerable reconstruction following an earthquake just five years before the great Vesuvius eruption. The experience of sitting in the auditorium has similarities to visiting a Georgian theatre whose thrust has been removed. The audience tiers focus on the orchestra whereas in the final decades of Pompeii the actors had retreated to the stage and the audience had infiltrated the vacated space.

The feeling of intimacy is strong even when one sits in near solo occupancy: with a full house of 5000 the atmosphere must have been quite claustrophobic. Facilities for modern performances have been provided in a very simple way that does not intrude. Steel framing allows the stage to be floored and the seating tier gaps filled by supporting temporary timber planking. These steel ribs do not hide any of the original structure: indeed they act rather like a line drawing in emphasising shape. The rust, being compatible with the generally weathered aspect of the site, helps to keep this modern material from intruding. Interestingly, the gentle weathering of Pompeii often imparts something of a romantic ambience, rather as if one is viewing classical remains through the eyes of the early romanticism of an eighteenth century pastoral. This is particularly so in the smaller theatre (or **Odeon**) which has some rather fetching greenery climbing over the stage wall, together with weeds implanted amidst the stones so randomly yet delicately that one is reminded of the theatres which were constructed as ruins in eighteenth century gardens by noble ladies who liked to play shepherdess.

The Odeon is a beautifully proportioned space, scaled for music, mime and recitation. It was roofed whereas the larger theatre had only an enormous *velarium* canopy which protected the seating area from sun and rain. (It was supported by poles fastened in rings which can still be seen behind the topmost seating row.) The Odeon is a purely Roman theatre whereas the larger theatre developed out of the original Greek one on the site.

In both theatres it takes little imagination to recreate the reality of the original *cavea* where the audience sat. It is the architectural backing to the stage—the *scaenae frons* with its doors, niches and statues—that can only be a conjectural image. However there is enough wall structure remaining to allow satisfactory speculation based on the various wall painting fragments that remain elsewhere as an illustration of standard Roman practice.

Curiously though, I found that the influences which fed my own imagination most strongly while sitting in these Pompeii theatres were the renaissance architects who sought to rediscover the staging conditions of the ancients. The *scaenae frons* of Palladio in Vicenza, the outwardly turned ends to the seating of Scamozzi in Sabionetta and the orchestral entrance doors of Aleotti in Parma (all from the renaissance and still existing today)—these helped me to flesh out the marvellously scaled ruins of Pompeii. None of these renaissance theatre builders were able to include Pompeii in