

TWO ROMAN THEATRES

Francis Reid visits Fiesole and Verona

Fiesole is a twenty minute bus ride from Florence, climbing all the way. As a consequence of this elevation, a magnificent valley view unfolds from the site of the Teatro Romano. The prospect of Tuscan hills that we see today from a seat in the auditorium's ancient tiers, would have been masked from a Roman audience by the long lost scaenae frons whose stones have doubtless been recycled several times within the town's architecture. However the landscape would have been an integral part of anyone's coming and going to the theatre, or to the adjacent baths and temple.

The theatre dates from the 1st century BC but underwent many restorations and modernisations until the 3rd century AD. It was completely covered for many centuries until digs commencing in 1792 revealed an auditorium in a rather good state of conservation. Once again we can experience a positive feeling of the reality of sitting in the audience cavea, after entering by vomitoria and descending the radiating staircases which divide the upper seating into four segments. The lower order of seating, separated from the upper by a narrow passage way, provides four continuous steps of seats, next to the orchestra, for those of importance in the community. These rows have some feeling of being an audience intrusion into the orchestra. This was a feature of the development of the classical theatre but the result here is to make the orchestra relatively small and, while the entry tunnels to it would accommodate a chariot, there is little room to do much more than drive off the other side. So this theatre presumably was rather more devoted to straight drama than to what purer perceptions than mine consider to be the Roman theatre's decline into spectacle.

The wall that forms a fascia to the front of the stage has a rounded niche in the centre and rectangular niches to each side. The stage floor has gone but, tantalisingly, there is a curtain trench immediately behind this fascia wall between stage and orchestra. For summer performances a temporary timber stage covers this but allows one the excitement of making an entrance through the vaulted side doorways to strut and feel an easy command of the coke swilling backpackers who find the cavea seating tiers a welcome resting place on their tourist trail.

While the Teatro Romano of Fiesole is on the edge of a small town and rural in outlook, that of Verona is in the centre of a major city. Perhaps not quite so close to the epicentre as Verona's more famous Arena, but nevertheless a theatre where one is aware of urban surroundings, even if the adjoining river and trees give it something of that pastoral flavour which nearly always seems to inhabit ruins. Even when, as here, a summer visit will normally show the auditorium adapted to reflect some of the expectations of today's audience, and a

temporary stage built for a production style that is not concerned with archaeology.

The feature of Verona's Teatro Romano that immediately strikes the eye is the intrusion of the 14th century church of SS Simon e Libera, which encroaches considerably on one section of the cavea. Its presence makes the auditorium look like an operatic stage set. The seating tiers have, rather exceptionally for a roman theatre, a centre gangway: was the more normal absence of a centre aisle the result of a conscious debate, I wonder, or was it innate commonsense that stopped them inserting anything so divisive?

At the back of the stage there are some remains of the scaenae frons and these help to contain the space to something approaching its original feel. They are masked in summer by scenery, but whatever form such temporary staging takes, it is insignificant in

terms of the overall ambience which I find, curiously, neither Roman nor modern. Rather, it is mediaeval—so that one feels that one is sitting there, in a Roman fragment, awaiting the renaissance. Perhaps it is the intrusive proximity of the church and the quality of the Veronese skyline. Or could it be one's awareness that, whereas most Roman theatres were not excavated until after the renaissance, this one was known to Palladio. For its reality must have been a strong factor in enabling him to effect the transformation of Vitruvius that is Palladio's triumphant Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza. My own first visit to the Verona theatre was the day after my first visit to Vicenza. A couple of years later I visited them on the same day but in reverse order: I have experienced no better key to an understanding of the kernel of the renaissance.



Teatro Romano, Fiesole



Teatro Romano, Verona