

FORTUNY IN VENICE

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This summer's exhibition at the Museo Fortuny in Venice is **Fortuny e Cambra: Costumi di Scena 1906–1936**. These costumes were not designed for specific productions. Indeed they are not even designed for specific characters in specific plays but are general stock from which productions could be dressed. Thus the 94 costumes displayed on dress stands were labelled in very general terms. Some as periods (Medioevale, Settecentesco, Rinascimentale etc); others as function (Mantello, Kimono, Tipo Ecclesiastico etc).

The result was a consistency of style that one would not normally expect to find in a costume exhibition – even a one man show. However these costumes are not mere historic dressmaking: the artist's eye of Mariano Fortuny, textile designer and man of wide theatre interests, ensures that there is a transformation. Nevertheless the total impact of this exhibition seemed less than the sum of its parts. One's eye caught felicitous details but there was little to cause a catch in one's theatric breath. Perhaps it was the reality – possibly the lack of theatrical heightening in many of the designs, and certainly the lack of artifice in their construction. But then this was a wardrobe from which wide ranging seasons were, and still could be, dressed.

What did however quicken this particular theatric tourist's pulse was the group of architectural models, not exhibited but used as a bit of ambient theatricality to set the costumes off against.

But what props! I first saw these models skulking in a dark corner of the Museo Fortuny some years ago, and noticing their absence on a later visit remarked in Cue 38 that I hoped they were under restoration. Alas, not yet.

The models develop intriguing concepts. One is a fairly straightforward addition to Bayreuth of a solid engulfing cyclorama dome. Another is a splendid hybrid. The exterior suggests the twentieth century looking at the form of an ancient theatre such as the Theatre of Marcellus in Rome: while the interior looks at the Roman auditorium through the renaissance eye of Palladio's Vicenza. This faces a huge domed cyclorama with the remains of lighting groundrows masked by some rather tatty scenic groundrows. Stage and auditorium are separate units to allow access. There are remains of the rheostats for the lights.

This is very important historical material. I venture to suggest that it has a much more significant place in the history of theatre than Fortuny's costumes.

Has the full contribution of the cyclorama to staging styles of the first half of the twentieth century been fully researched? By

cyclorama I am not referring to an ordinary plain skycloth with, perhaps, the ends turned downstage for a couple of feet. Nor am I really thinking of the full cycloramas still to be found in central European opera houses – the kind that can be wound on to a vertical shaft in either downstage corner of the stage, and can totally surround the stage and complete its vertical masking for the worst seat in the front row. No. I mean the full plaster cycs, often domed, which were a fixed integral part of the stage structure. And especially I mean the way

they were used: the interrelation between them and the staging. Their contribution to the visual look of the productions.

The equipment has all but disappeared. And the surviving people are getting old. Have we made a good enough record? It is something of a test case for stage archaeology.

Perhaps I worry in vain. Somewhere there are probably several splendidly researched theses. Someone has assuredly gotten his doctorate for an analysis of Fortuny's contributions to scenography. I missed the *Fortuny Nella Belle Epoque* exhibition in Florence in 1984 but the catalogue hints at various delights including a model at (?of) the Teatro della Pergola with a full cyc dome.

Museo Fortuny will doubtless mount an exhibition of Fortuny's Theatre Technology in due course. I do hope they will publicise it beyond the Grand Canal.

