

*la finta pazza di Venexia:*  
**Masking, performance and identity in Seventeenth century Venice.**

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**Introduction [slide 1]**

This paper briefly explores the relationship between the theatricality of Venice and the expression of Venice in the theatre. I will do so by focusing on the wildly popular performances in 1641 of *La Finta Pazza* and the architecture of the *Teatro Novissimo* in which the opera was performed. The masking of identities, a central theme in the original story on which the opera is based, was given a particularly Venetian twist in the operatic re-telling. Essential to the performance was the double entendre of the character Deidama who, feigning madness, performed both as a masked actor on the stage and as a Venetian in the audience. Giacomo Torelli's set design further blurred distinctions between the world of the stage and the city of Venice. Concurrent to the production of *La Finta Pazza* was the unprecedented construction of new theatres and specifically the development of *palchi*, or theater boxes, in the *Teatro Novissimo*. Such boxes, rented out for the season and occupied by masked Patricians and foreigners, allowed conversation between the two groups that was forbidden by law. It is my wager that the nature of identity and participation shifts within a context that is simultaneously both theater and city.

**Theater of the City**

That Renaissance Venice might be compared to a theater is not shocking. **[slide 2]** Indeed, many historians of Venice note the analogy between city and theater. Manfredo Tafuri, by way of Molmenti and Ferrari, discusses the similarities between Serlian perspectival views **[slide 3]** and similar scenes from the Venetian bacino. John Onions relates Serlio's theatrical views to Sansovino's built work through the specific use of orders in each. **[slide 4]** Eugene Johnson connects the physical form of the Marciana to the Theater of Marcellus in Rome **[slide 5]** and then describes the theatrical performance of the piazzetta of S Marco, the small square bound by the Marciana and the Palazzo Ducale. **[slide 6]** The upper level plan of the Marciana shows small rooms equipped with balconies facing the piazzetta. Opposite the library, the Palazzo Ducale also offered spectators a covered but open-air viewing platform. **[slide 7]** Indeed, the piazzetta of S Marco was regularly fitted with temporary tiered seating for the masked inhabitants to witness executions, as well as carnival rituals including the *volo del turco* (flight of the Turk), **[slide 8]** *forze d'Ercole* (human pyramids), and even a mock trial of twelve pigs (and later, bulls). **[slide 9]** In these settings, one can easily imagine the

paired columns of S Teodoro and S Marco acting as proscenium. **[slide 10]** (Though be careful as it is considered bad luck to walk in between the columns today.) **[slide 11]** In the larger piazza of S Marco, both the “new” and “old” Procuratie also offered Patricians a room with a view into the processions and performances of the piazza. **[slide 12]**

The Carnival, of course, also brings such comparisons to life. Unlike the evening-long masquerades in England or France, Venetian carnival in the mid-Seventeenth century had been extended to last at least ten weeks. Carnival began just after Christmas and then continued from *Befana* through Shrove Tuesday. By the beginning of the eighteenth century the festivities lasted a full six months. Masks, an essential component of carnival, had been worn in Venice at least since 1268. Historically the masks were taken directly from the tradition of the *commedia dell’Arte* and filled both the stages of the city’s theaters and its squares. For Francis Mission, a visitor to carnival in 1688, the city of Venice itself resembled a scene from a show. Mission explained his experience in S Marco:

You may put yourself in what Equipage you please, but to do it well, you must be able to maintain the Character or the Person whose dress you have taken. Thus, for example, when the Harlequins meet, they jeer one another and act a thousand Fooleries. The Doctors dispute; the bullies vapour and swagger; and so of the Rest. Those who are not willing to be Actors on this great Theater, take the habit of Noblemen; some Polonian Dress, or the like, which obliges them to nothing.

Notwithstanding the popularity and influence of the *commedia* tradition within carnival, a different set of masks begins to appear in the Seventeenth century with much more regularity: the *tabarro e bauta*, and the *moretta*. **[slide 13]** The *tabarro e bauta* consisted of a tri-corn hat, a white half-mask, and a black cloak. This last component completely covered the wearer’s clothing and kept him or her warm during the carnival’s colder months. The white mask allowed the wearer to speak freely while concealing their facial features. **[slide 14]** The *moretta*, a smaller, round mask, had no straps but was secured to one’s face by a small button on the reverse side of the mouth that the wearer held between his or her teeth. This had an interesting effect: the wearer was unable to speak. It was often worn with a *nizioletto* (shawl) that again had the effect of concealing one’s dress. It is interesting to consider that neither mask was related to any of the well-known stock characters from the *commedia dell’Arte*, and, as such, did not give the wearer an alternate identity to play. The *bauta* and *moretta* had no “other.” Rather, these masks signified anonymity, allowed for transgression, and offered an alibi.

## City of the Theater

Masks, however essential to the Carnival, were not only worn for amusement. Indeed, masks were required for entry into the theaters and gaming halls of Venice. The wearing of such masks was regulated and controlled by the *Magistrato alle Pompe*. In an attempt to curb displays of wealth, various sumptuary laws through the Seventeenth century required patrons to mask their faces and their clothing when attending the theater, specifically with the *bauta e tabarro*. This masking directly affected the nature of discourse. Cardinal de Bernis, a French Ambassador to Venice in the 1750s, noted the import of masking for international relations.

It must not be supposed that, although the Venetian nobles are forbidden to hold any intercourse with ambassadors (a very wise severity; if the Republic ever renounces it, she will lose her morals, and soon she will change her laws; the one follows the other) it must not be thought, I say, that in spite of this rigor foreign ministers do not have any sort of intercourse with magistrates; they speak to one another by third parties; they communicate many things by signs at the Opera, a circumstance which renders the frequenting of theaters and the use of the mask necessary to foreign ministers.

The theater season aligned with the Carnival and it is interesting to note that, as the wearing of such masks became regulated within the city, masks began to leave the stage of the theater.

**[slide 15 - blank]**

Opera, as a genre separate from the commedia tradition, grew up in Venice in the Seventeenth century and this growth was matched by the incredible rise of theaters. Backed by Patricians' wealth and a paying public, seven theaters were constructed in the relatively short time between 1637-1678. The popular operatic plots were not based in the tradition of the commedia dell'arte, but rather on mythological, Ovidian or Homeric tales and the plots were decidedly about Venice and Venetian affairs. Indeed, the aim of many productions was inherently political. It has been argued that the splendor of the stage was only matched by the splendor of la Serenissima herself, or at least the myth thereof. **[slide 16]**

*La Finta Pazza* embraced these aims and was, by most accounts, the first blockbuster. It initially ran twelve times in seventeen days and, in an unprecedented move, reopened after Easter for additional shows. **[slide 17]** Written by Giulio Strozzi, *La Finta Pazza* tells the story of Achilles on Skyros. Thetis, Achilles' mother, sends her son to the island of Skyros and disguises him as one of King Lycomedes daughters to avoid his certain death in joining the Trojan War. On the island, he falls in love with Deidamia and they bear a child. Soon thereafter, Diomedes and Ulysses arrive on the island in search of the hero and persuade

Achilles to join in the call to arms. Deidamia, feigning madness, delays Achilles' departure for Troy by persuading him to marry her, upon which they depart together and Achilles goes on to fulfill his destiny.

The show's success benefited from an enormous amount of pre-production publicity, marvelous stagecraft, and a very particular relationship with Venice. There is definite connection between Ancient Troy, the setting of the play, and Venice. Prior to his fame as "the most experienced librettist," Giulio Strozzi wrote the epic poem *Venetia edificata* (1624) that outlined the origins of Venice and connected the rise of the Republic to the downfall of Troy. Scene one of *La Finta Pazza* also makes it clear that the fall of Troy will lead to the rise of Venice. More direct connections between the city of Venice and the performance exist as well. Characters often step out of their roles as Greeks and speak as Venetians directly with the audience. In the first act Lycomedes lifts a curtain to reveal his daughters at play. Diomedes responds to the "beautiful scene" and Ulysses comments that "this is either an earthly theater made by the Gods, or else a man-made heaven." He is referring to both the scene in the play and the theatricality of the *Teatro Novissimo*. A few acts later, Deidamia (performed by Anna Renzi), feigns madness in front of the visiting Diomedes and Ulysses. During this "madness" Deidamia performs in at least two roles simultaneously. She plays Deidama, mother to Achilles. She is also, in the space of the theater, recognized as Anna Renzi commenting to the audience on the magnificence of the spectacle. In another scene, the Eunuch turns and makes a direct plea to the audience asking the age old question "is there a doctor in the house" to help cure the ailing Deidamia.

Although no records exist of the stage setting, a performance of *La Finta Pazza* in Paris years later included scenes of Paris as the background and the Venetian references were re-written. *Bellerofonte*, the immediate successor to *La Finta Pazza*, literally brings the city to the stage. **[slide 18] [slide 19]** In the preface of the libretto, Nolfi expresses the importance of the spectacle of the theater to myth of Venice.

As for scenic spectacles, those instructors of men, which by offering a *true* [emphasis added] model for living set them on the path of virtue, she has in these last years multiplied her power with sets and performances that are indeed regal, that would make ancient Latium blush; heavenly harmony, wondrous illusions and stage machines, most magnificent displays of costumes, and all this in multiple theaters with almost incredible productions.

The magnificent stagecraft of both *La Finta Pazza* and *Bellerofonte* was designed by Giacomo Torelli, also known as *il grande stregone* (the great sorcerer). Torelli is typically noted for his influence on either the innovation or development of the chariot system of stage

machinery. What is known is that Torelli introduced the use of counterweights in addition to the winches and windlasses, which allowed for the rapid changing of scenes in the *Teatro Novissimo* and also for actors to appear to fly through the air. Similar machines were also employed to allow the “flying Turk” to fly during the carnival. Such machinery certainly induced awe amongst the spectators. Maiolini Bisaccioni Count of Genoa, printed an entire book, the *Cannocchiale per la finta pazza*. (1641), so that everyone could appreciate the machines developed by Torelli. He explains his intentions:

May the eyes even in the most distant and secluded foreign countries enjoy in these pages what eyes and ears have enjoyed in this city, which in its every aspect surpasses the bounds of the marvelous.

One is left to consider if the “city” of the statement is the performance, the city of Venice, or perhaps both. It is exactly this fantastic machinery that allowed for the piazzetta to rise from the theatrical lagoon. The same piazzetta mentioned at the beginning of this paper that was witness to so many spectacles.

Torelli also had a hand in the design and construction of *Il Teatro Novissimo*, which was one of seven theatres built in the Seventeenth century. The theater, built in 1641, in use through 1645 and finally destroyed by fire in 1647, was located behind the Mendicanti near the Fondamente Nuove. The *Novissimo* is unique in that it was the first purpose-built Opera house in Venice, hence the name. The *Novissimo* was also managed by a group of Patricians, not only one, and employed a group of previously itinerant musicians to essentially work full time for the Theater. This unique organization, built upon a broad base of financial support allowed the theater to develop the relatively expensive spectacle of the Opera.

At this time the design and re-design of theaters was shifting. Many began to conform to a similar layout known as the *teatro all’italiano*, characterized by an open ground level surrounded by a wall of *palchi* (boxes) that sat opposite to the stage. **[slide 20]** *Palchi* could be closed off from the corridor that led to them as well as from one another. This separation from other patrons allowed for the disreputable behavior for which they became known. **[slide 21]** There is a distinctly urban quality to the wall of openings from which masked spectators might take in, or not, the spectacle before them. To offset the construction and operational costs, patrician families who owned the theaters would lease the *palchi* for the theater season to other patricians. Although *palchi* were leased to specific people, by the eighteenth century it was not uncommon for Venetians and visitors to the city to rent a room for an evening. **[slide 22]** An etching by Gaetano Zompini, which was part of a larger set of typical Venetian street scenes originally published in 1753, shows a masked couple, whose identity or relationship to one another remains hidden, negotiating the use of a *palco*. The

etching shows two masked characters framed by a partial archway with the colonnade of the Procuratie Vecchie of S Marco in the background. The framing of the scene and background in S Marco takes on the quality of a stage set.

### **Conclusion: Participation in the Venetian Public Sphere**

Although Jürgen Habermas, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), does not discuss eighteenth-century Venice, his critique of the emergence, transformation, and disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere is relevant to this essay. Distinctions between the contexts discussed by Habermas and the social conditions in Venice do, however, exist. Unlike other European cities, there was never a court culture in Venice, as patrician families had ruled the Republic since its beginnings. The social hierarchy of Venice's inhabitants was essentially set in 1297 after the *serrata*, or closing, of the ruling class, but by the beginning of the eighteenth century real cracks were evident in this hierarchy. The financial disintegration of the patrician class and the opening up of this ruling class to the *cittadini* (merchant class) is just one marker of this transformation. My interest in Habermas's work is less about his analysis of consumerist politics than it is about public participation.

According to Habermas, participation in the public sphere required that institutions must share at least three criteria. First, the social intercourse that occurred in such institutions disregarded status. Next, discussion included issues, like the intent and meaning of cultural production, that would not have been present prior to the appearance of these institutions and thirdly, these issues were open for debate. Discussion of the topics found in the various literary and scientific journals could be had in the growing number of cafés and salons, institutions described by Habermas in other cities. Indeed, there were over two hundred cafés in eighteenth-century Venice, each with its own colorful name. The most well-known café was *Venezia Trionfante* (Triumphant Venice), which still sits in piazza S Marco and was later renamed for its first owner, Floriano Francesco. (It is known today as Florian's.) Concurrent with the emergence of such institutions in Venice were two other public interior spaces: the *ridotto* and the theater.

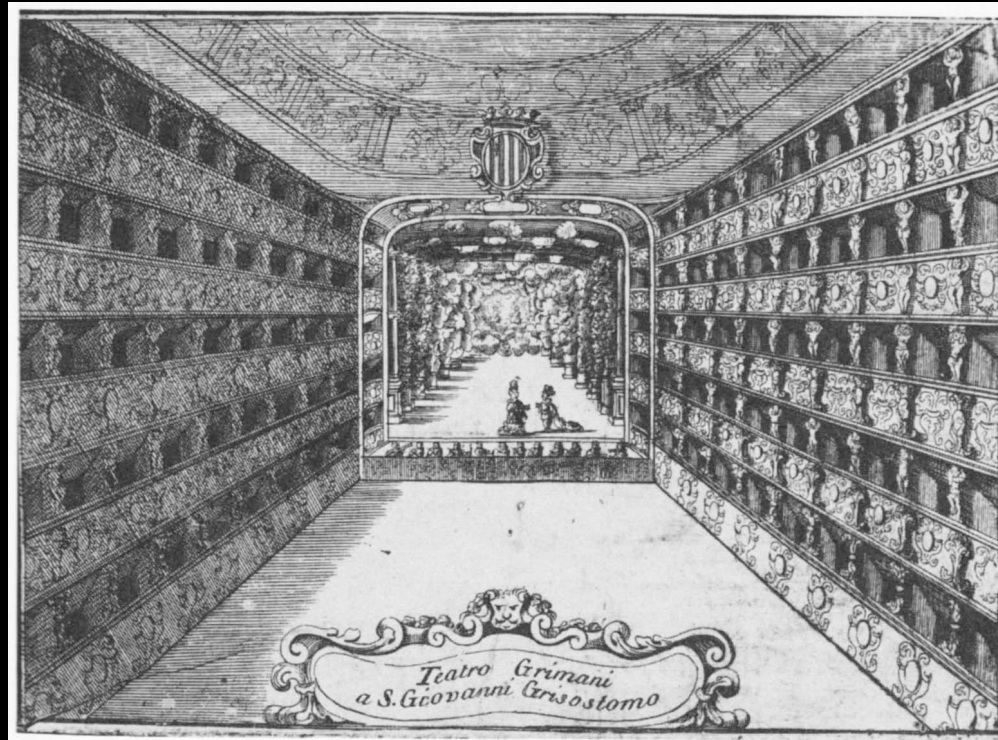
### **[slide 23]**

Ironically, as removing their masks reveals the identity of the actors on the stage, the identities of those in the city are concealed by the *bauta* and *moretta*. In the theater of the public sphere, identity, gender, class, and race could be hidden, if so desired. The effect of this was to allow for transgressive acts to occur: loss of money at the gaming table, illicit affairs, and sexual acts, for example. The foreign tourist taking on the role of Harlequin is an example of this, but so too is the Ambassador taking on the role of the anonymous *Sior*

*Maschere* to converse with Venetians in the boxes of the theater. While the conversation would have clearly identified those speaking, the masking offered an excuse. The same excuse was offered to anyone who walked into the *ridotto* to carelessly gamble through the night while flirting with another. Both actions would have certainly been curtailed if the person were not wearing their mask. In a sense, much of the allure of Venice was the possibility that one could be anonymous, that their actions would have little or no consequence. (To refer to a more modern context, we might say that what happened in Venice, stayed in Venice.)

I would propose, therefore, that the emergent public sphere is present in the spaces of the *palchi*. However, it is not simply the existence of physical and institutional public interior spaces—such as the *ridotti*, the theatre, or café as described by Habermas—that allows for participation within the public sphere. Rather, with the shift of the theater into the city and the city into the theater a different form of participation begins to emerge. The mode of participation is clearly different than that described by Habermas. It is not open and free, allowing “better argument to win.” Rather the discourse and activities that occurred in such public institutions so important to Habermas’ argument could, in Venice, only have occurred while one was wearing a mask. Masking offered an alibi to act freely, openly. I would claim, then, that a more nuanced sense of public interior space emerged in Venice in this period—the space that existed between one’s face and the mask that they wore.

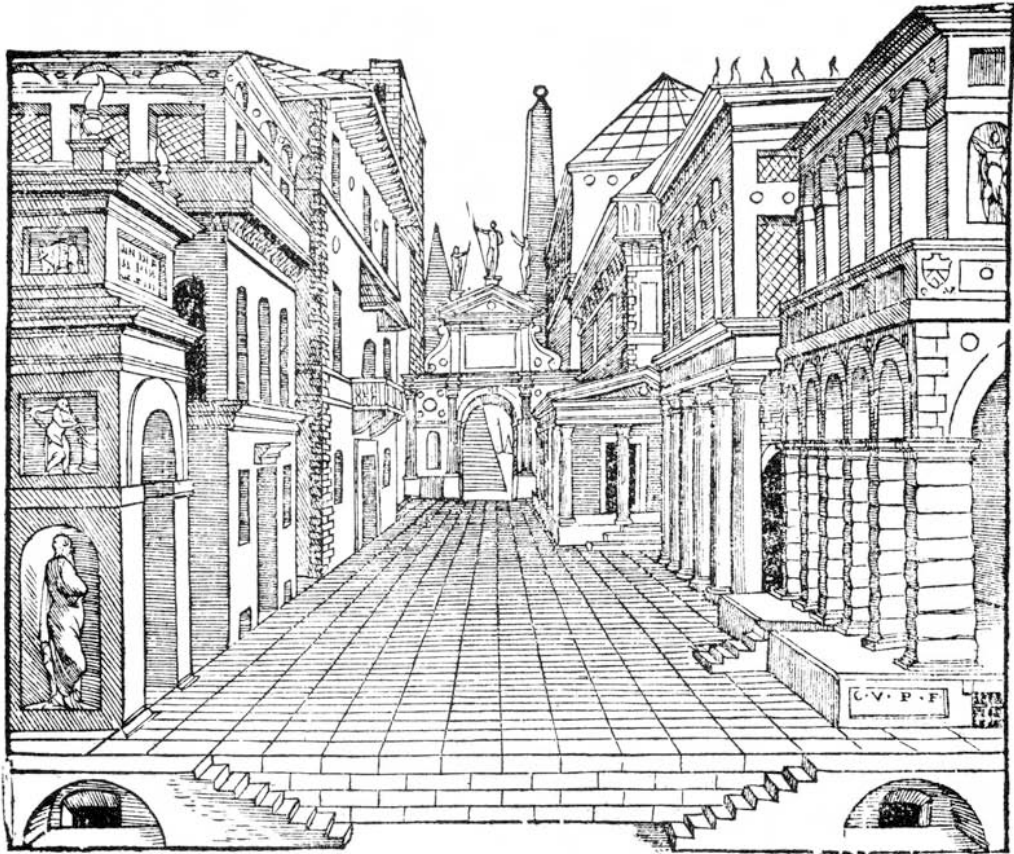
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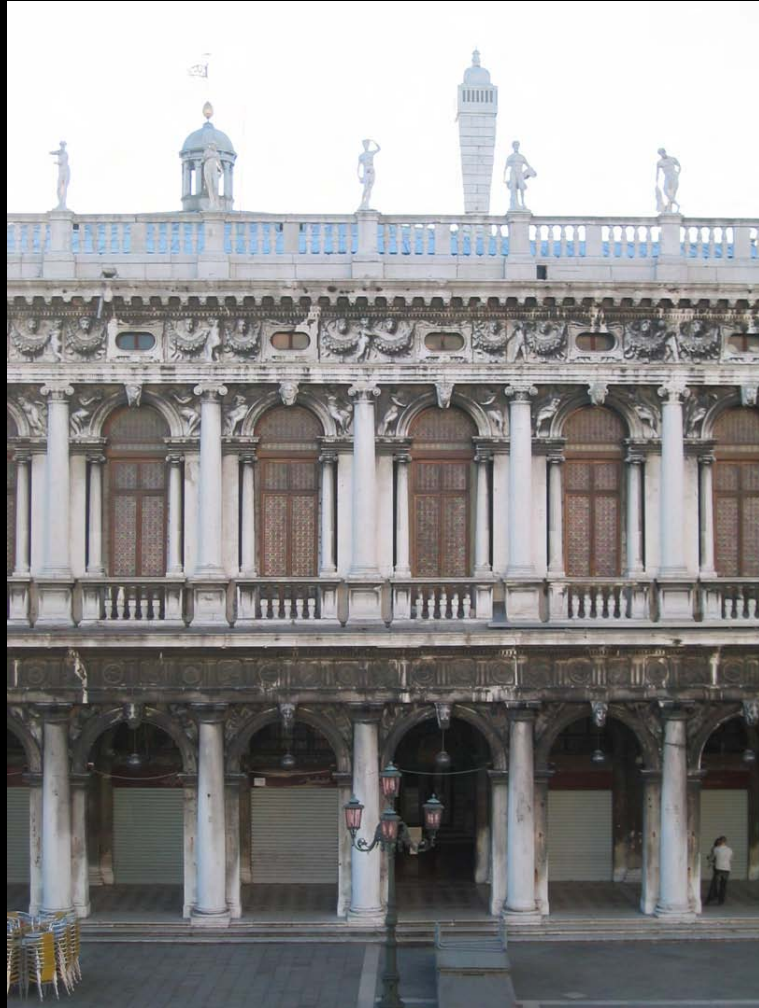
Marc J Neveu





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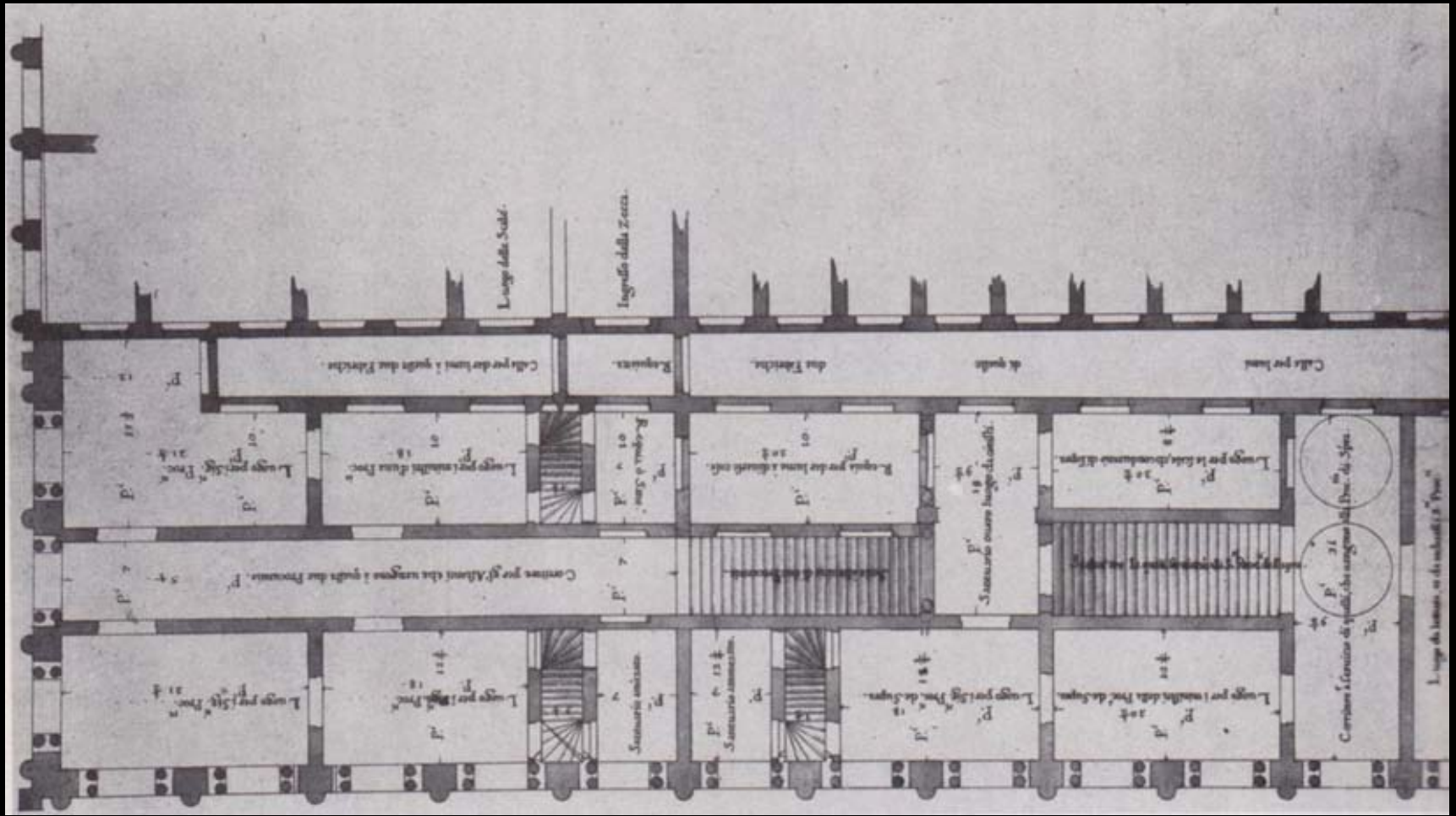






*Il giovedì grasso p memoria di certa uittoria ottenuta d.<sup>la</sup> Rep<sup>ca</sup> nel friuli si fa pub.<sup>ca</sup> festa  
nella piazza di S. m.<sup>co</sup> douè assiste il Doge et la Sig.<sup>ria</sup> p non derogare all'antica istituy.<sup>ne</sup>*

*Giacomo Franco Forma con Priuilegio*





Il volo del Turco (The Flight of the Turk)  
1816 (after the original of ca. 1548) Venice



Feste che si fa il Giovedì Grasso,  
Giovanni Antonelli, 1650-1680

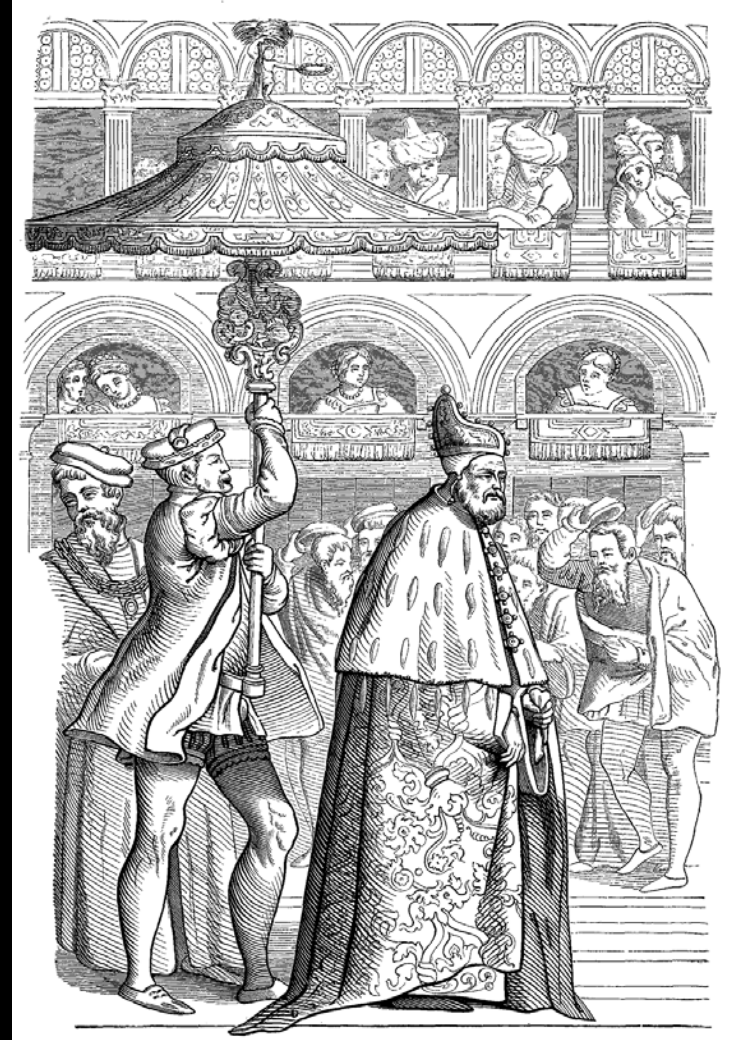
























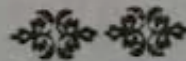
*La Finta Pazza*

ARGOMENTO,  
E SCENARIO  
DELLA  
FINTA PAZZA:

*Drama di Giulio Strozzi.*

Da rappresentarsi con solenne appa-  
parato di Musiche, Macchine,  
e Scene, il presente Carnouale  
dell' Anno Mille e seicento qua-  
rantuno, nel Theatro Nouissimo  
della Città di Venetia.

*Con Licenza de' Superiori.*

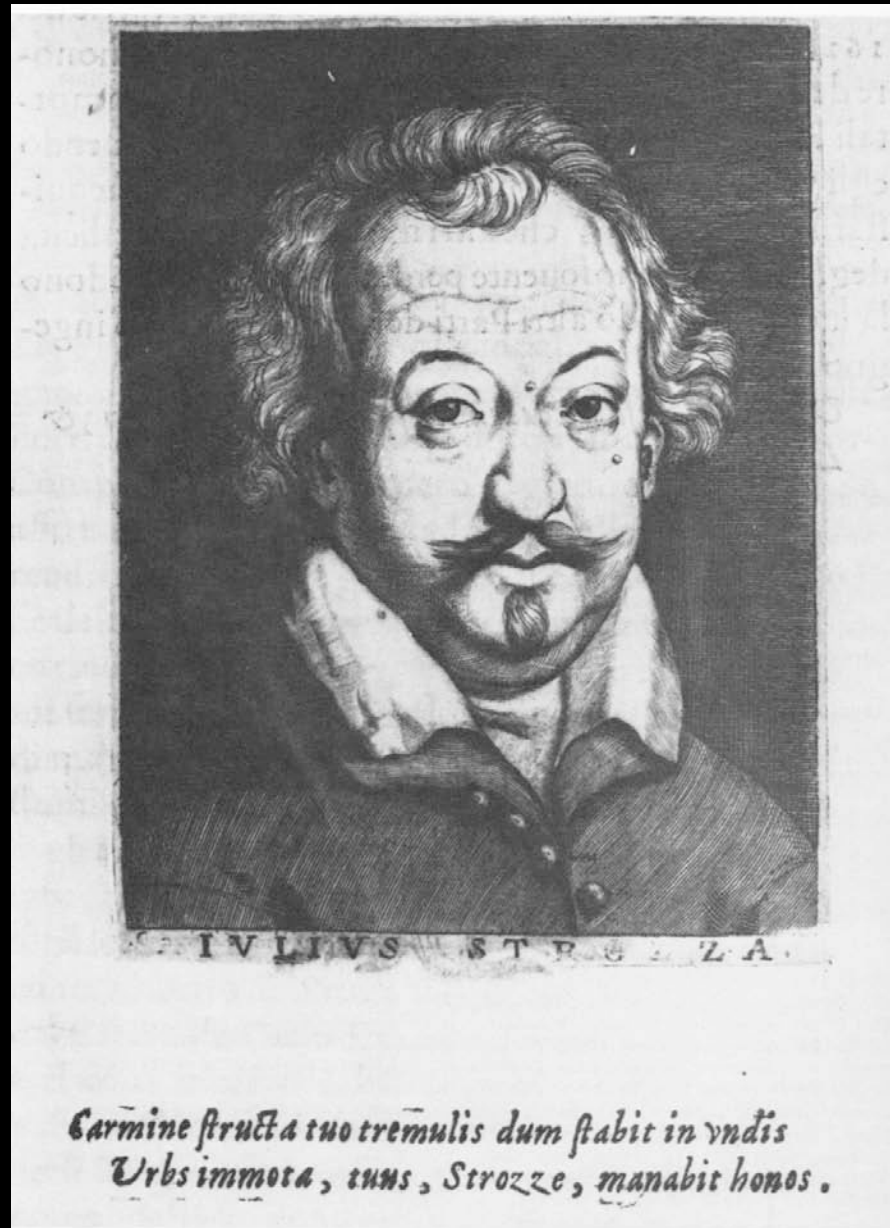


IN VENETIA;  
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Per Gio: Battista Surian

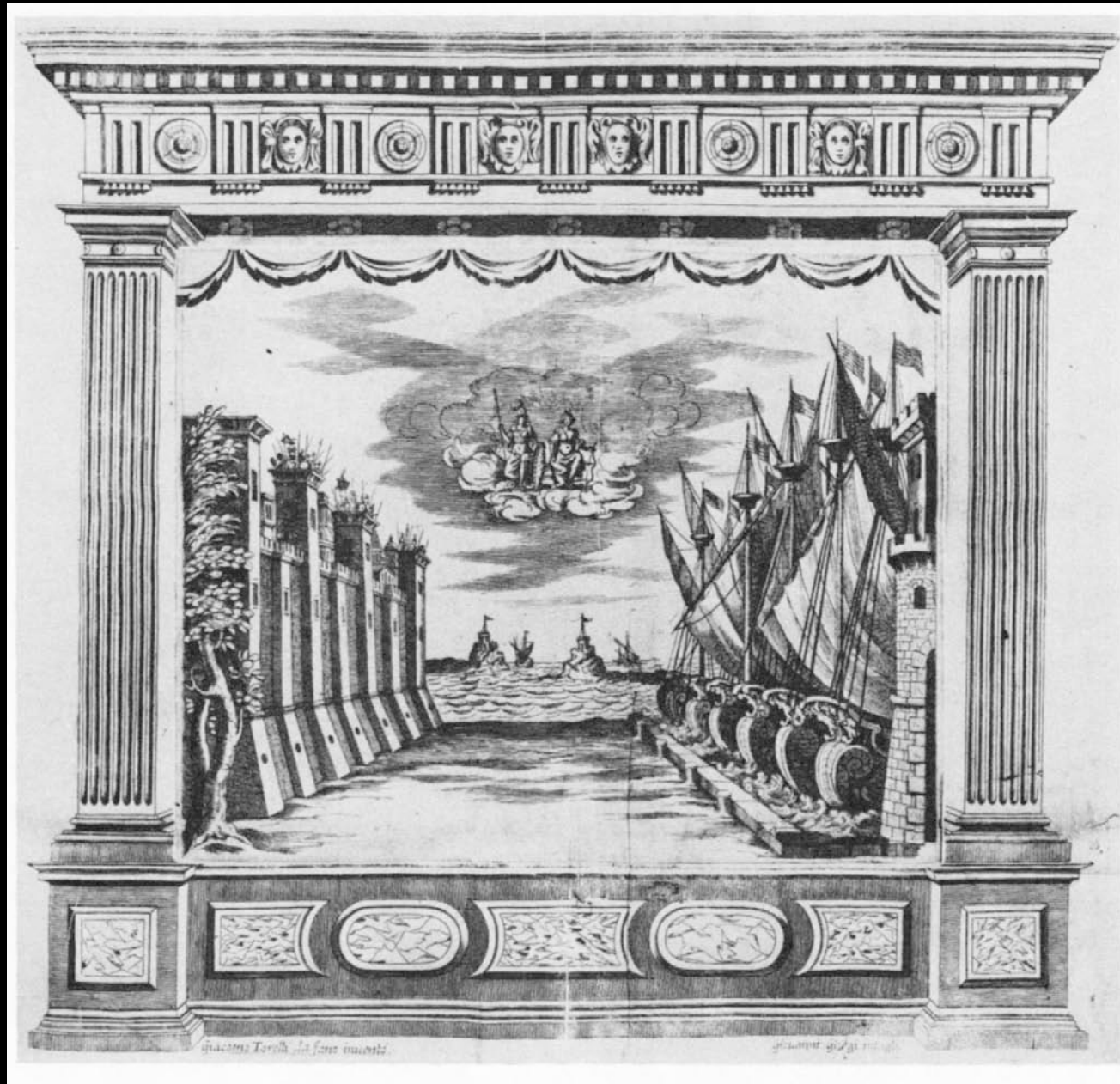


Giulio Strozzi





*La Bellerofonte*



*La Bellerofonte*







*palchi*





*In piazza de S. Marco semo avezzi  
Fitar palchi ogni sera in sie teatri  
D'Opera, e de Comedia a varij prezzi.*

27





teatro pubblici