

The Bonifazio Asioli Civic Theatre

History

The present day 'Bonifazio Asioli' Civic Theatre stands on the same spot where Niccolò Postumo da Correggio had his palace erected in the late 1400s, that in turn was most probably an adaptation of an existing fortification for which documentation exists from 1476 onwards.

From the late 1500s to the early 1600s, the Court of Correggio was culturally rich and active, thanks to the presence of such renowned figures as Niccolò Postumo and Veronica Gambara. Such a context was conducive to the encouragement of theatrical activities, both of an erudite and a popular nature, which took place in the ambience of the Courts, including the Palace of Niccolò Postumo. The passing of the State of Correggio to the Duke of Modena and Reggio in 1635 and the changed political climate did not bring a halt to the theatrical activity. On the contrary, it became much livelier and involved greater segments of society. So much so that, in 1642, the Estense Governor allowed the young people of Correggio to use one of the palace rooms to stage a play. A decade later, in 1653, Duke Francesco I permitted one of the palace rooms, known as the *Sala Grande*, to be used as a permanent theatrical space.

And so, in May of 1661, the first public performance of a play was held in the presence of Duke Alfonso d'Este, in a theatre with ninety-five boxes, even though reconstruction work on the building—financed by the merchant Pietro Rosa—had not yet been completed.

A century later, between 1750 and 1754, after the theatre had been used as a wartime depository, major reconstruction work was done on the building again. Based on the design of Francesco Cipriano Forti, the ceiling and boxes were rebuilt and a coat check, a cafeteria and a ballroom were added.

Intense cultural activity continued for more than a century afterwards, including the staging of dance performances, plays, farces, operettas and musicals, which were often performed by 'amateur' singers and musicians of Correggio, amongst whom stood out the members of the Asioli family, in particular Quirino, Bonifazio and Luigi.

Towards the mid 1800s, the theatre, which was quite old, was considered to be dilapidated and dangerous; enough so to prompt its demolition and total reconstruction. The project, designed by Francesco Forti—nephew of Francesco Cipriano—was completed in 1852 with a new auditorium in the classic horseshoe shape. However, only in 1873, with the construction of the façade (designed by the engineer Tegani, who was working on the Municipal Theatre of Reggio Emilia at the same time), could the reconstruction work be considered complete.

Named after Antonio Allegri in 1863 and then after Bonifazio Asioli in 1880, the theatre was destroyed by a raging fire in September of 1889. The restoration, which began in 1890 and was headed by the City engineer, Giuseppe Aimi, and the master builder, Pio Marchi, was completely faithful to the previous theatre. After eighty years of work and severe criticism regarding the delay, the theatre was inaugurated on the evening of 10 October 1898. Just over a decade later, in January 1909, during the projection of a film, a second fire broke out claiming two lives, injuring dozens of people and provoking renewed and incandescent controversy regarding the inappropriate materials employed and the improper use of the building. In 1942, the Asioli Theatre was rented to a private individual who used it primarily as a cinema. Twenty years later, in 1962, the City—which had reclaimed the theatre after a long legal battle—decided 'to return it to its antique splendour'. The restoration work began in 1968 and was concluded with the inauguration of the building on 18th November 1973. The theatre was closed again in 1991 for maintenance work and upgrading to new safety regulations; however, during this process it was severely damaged by an earthquake in 1996. The completely restored Asioli Theatre finally re-opened to the public on 3rd November 2002.

The visit

On the façade are four marble medallions executed by the sculptor Eusebio Casalgrandi, portraying

Bonifazio Asioli, Claudio Merulo (1533-1604), Niccolò da Correggio and Samuele Jesi (1788-1853). Three entrance doors lead into the octagonal-shaped atrium and then another three into the vestibule in which two mounted, marble plaques honour the musicians Claudio Merulo and Bonifazio Asioli.

A staircase on the left side of the atrium leads up to the original foyer. The central hall is decorated with frescos by A. Capretti and F. Forti and as a false balcony that sheds light to the other one. This one hosts the greatest remnant of Niccolò Postumo's original palace: a 23-metre frieze executed in the 'false fresco' technique that runs along the entire east wall. The fragments on the other walls display images of mythical beasts.

The large fragments show images of knights facing each other in battle, armed with tournament maces and mounted on mythical beasts with heads and upper bodies of unicorns (a symbol in the Estense iconography from Nicolò II onwards, particularly associated with Duke Borso, which can also be found in the Sala del Liocorno, or Unicorn Hall, of the castle in San Martino in Rio) and lower bodies of tritons. Centred above each pair of contenders are the crests of families that were either related to or friends of the Da Correggio family (the Sanvitale, Bentivoglio, Gonzaga and Pio di Carpi families). The pairs of knights alternate with vases holding curled floral arrangements. Datable to the late 15th century or very early 16th century (no later than circa 1510), the frieze can be ascribed to a well-educated painter who had knowledge of the Ferrarese masters from the epoch of Borso d'Este; even though its style is older than the more recent tendencies in the Emilian-Romagnol and Lombard wall painting of that time.

Thanks to Nicolò Postumo, this commonality is another aspect reinforcing the deep cultural bond that existed between the late 15th-century Correggio and the Ferrara of the Este family, which was living its greatest moment of splendour in that period.

The main door of the vestibule leads into the horseshoe shaped auditorium which is composed of: a proscenium stage; sixty boxes on three tiers decorated in Louis XV style; and a gallery. The royal box is decorated with a portrait of Bonifazio Asioli and the City emblem. The enchanting ceiling decoration, painted by Giulio Ferrari (1858-1934), depicts two winged cherubs, above the left proscenium, seated on the cornice of an imaginary architectural structure draped with elegant damask cloth of red and gold that also circles the entire ceiling. Above them, perched on billowing clouds, are representations of the muses, Tragedy, Comedy, Dance and Music. Ferrari was assisted by another painter from Reggio Emilia, Giuseppe Ponga, while the Correggese Emilio Meulli did the plasterwork and also designed the magnificent border of the red velvet curtain which was embroidered by Imélde Levi.

To visit the theatre, please call: 0522 637813