‘I had to fight with the painters, master carpenters, actors, musicians and the dancers’: Rehearsals, performance problems and audience reaction in Renaissance spectacles

Jennifer Nevile

Early Dance Circle Annual Lecture, 21 February 2021

In 1513 Castiglione wrote about the difficulties he was having during the rehearsals for a production at Urbino.

> [the *intermedio*] about the battles was unfortunately true - to our disgrace. … [The *intermedi*] were made very much in a hurry, and I had to fight with the painters, the master carpenters, the actors, musicians and the dancers.[1]

Unfortunately, we do not know exactly what caused the arguments between Castiglione and all the personnel involved in this production, and neither do we know how these difficulties were resolved. But Castiglione’s letter reminds us that then, as now, not everything went as smoothly as those in charge would have hoped for. In spite of the many glowing reports as to the success of theatrical spectacles in early modern Europe, the wonder and amazement of the audience, the brilliance of the glittering costumes, the quantity of jewels and precious stones worn by the performers and the virtuosity of the dancing, problems were encountered during production and the performance. It is this aspect of Renaissance spectacles that is the focus of today’s lecture. I will begin with a discussion of the desire for a successful outcome, and what efforts went into achieving this aim, before moving to an examination of what disasters did occur, from audience over-crowding and noise, stage-fright of the performers, properties being too big to fit through the door into the hall in which the performance was taking place, to more serious catastrophes such as a fire during a performance. I

[1] ‘quello delle guerre fu pur troppo vero per nostra disgrazia. … Furon fatte molto in fretta, e da chi avea da combattere e con pittori e con maestri di legnami e recitatori e musici e moreschieri.’ Translation by the author from the letter in Appendix II in Giorgio Padovan (ed.), *La calandra: commedia elegantissima per messer Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena* (Padua: Editrice Antenore, 1985), p. 207.

will conclude this lecture an examination of audience reaction to such disasters, and the effects of these disasters on the dynamics between spectators and performers.

Desire for a successful outcome

In early modern Europe theatrical spectacles usually carried serious political messages regarding the relationship between the monarch and the state: they were far more than an evening's entertainment, and a successful performance greatly enhanced a country's reputation on the international stage. Expert and virtuosic displays of dancing added to the prestige of a court, and was one measure of its sophistication, and, by extension, the sophistication of the country as a whole. Danced spectacles were part of the political process, as rulers used multi-media spectacles to further their domestic and foreign policies, as well as a vehicle for the expression of diplomatic positions, and the dissemination of the image of himself or herself that a ruler wished to project. While spectacles were employed by a monarch to reinforce his or her political authority, they were also part of the on-going negotiations between a ruler and the political factions of a court as to the amount of political authority each would allow the other to hold. As Katherine Butler has commented in regard to Queen Elizabeth I's entertainments and spectacles, although they always preserved the 'outward trappings of royal compliment, the diverse interests and intentions jostling for position within courtly entertainments only intensified the further from her control they were'.[2]

Given what was at stake in a Renaissance festival, and the number of political messages that found expression in these spectacles, it is no surprise, therefore, that there was a very strong desire for a successful outcome, and a great deal of effort, money and time went into ensuring problems did not arise. For example, the Medici Grand Duke Cosimo II was so insistent on proper order and discipline onstage from the singers, actors and stagehands that he kept two dwarves armed with crossbows and instructions to shoot at anyone who made themselves visible to the audience by leaning out from between the upstage wings, thereby ruining the perspective and potentially interfering with the stage machines.[3] While the measures employed by Cosimo to keep the technical

---

[2] Katherine Butler, *Music in Elizabethan Court Politics* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2019), p. 104.

[3] 'Deve avvertire più che sia possible che nessuno de' recitanti o altri de quei ministri s'affacci alle prospettive, perché oltre alla brutta vista che fanno, possono impedire i movimenti de' triangoli e causare molti altri disordini, se bene

crew in order may have been a little extreme, what was very common was the large amount of time and expense devoted to rehearsals, both onstage and off.

During the Renaissance those involved in creating multi-media spectacles – playwrights, poets, choreographers and composers – all recognized that rehearsals were essential for a successful production of their work, stressing in letters to their noble patrons that enough time must be devoted to pre-production practice. This is illustrated by the letter of Giovanni Battista Guarini in 1584 when writing about his musical drama *Il pastor fido*.

> My tragicomedy … is full of novelty and the grandest gestures and movements, [all of] which must be fitted together and with much diligence practised and re-practised on stage. This especially applies to a game which has been put into the third act in the form of a *ballo* for a chorus of nymphs.[4]

Even for a performance of a military spectacle like a barriers contemporaries recognized the need for practice beforehand. 'The barriers, because they are performed in time to the music and with measured blows, must be very well studied and rehearsed beforehand'.[5] In his diary about the Medici court, for example, Cesare Tinghi records that rehearsals for a barriers performed on the 17 and again on the 19 February 1613 started in mid-December 1612,[6] and continued into the new year, with Tinghi again recording rehearsals on the 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14 and 15 February.[7]

---

questa sarà cosa molto difficile non essendo mai riuscito al granduca Cosimo di felice memoria il poterlo conseguire in altro modo se non con tenere due nani che davano delle balestrate a chiunque s'affacciava.' *Il corago*. Edited by Paolo Fabbri and Angelo Pompilio (Florence: Olschki, 1983), p. 125.

[4] 'la mia Tragicomedia Pastorale … et tutta piena di novità et di grandissimi movimenti, i quali vogliono essere concertati, et con lungo studio provati e riprovati in scena, et massimamente un giuoco, che va nel terzo atto ridotto in forma di ballo, fatto da un choro di Ninfe'. Translation by author from original text cited in Iain Fenlon, *Music and Patronage in Sixteenth-Century Mantua*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), I, p. 200.

[5] 'Le barriere, perchè si fanno con tempi e colpi misurati, dovranno essere molto bene studiate e provate innanzi.' Translation by author from *Il corago*, p. 104.

[6] 'Il signor Principe Don Francesco e il signor Pavolo Giordano rimasero a Pisa a studiare et essercitarsi alla nuova barriera da farsi questo presente carnevale'. Angelo Solerti, *Musica, Ballo e Drammatica alla Corte Medicea dal 1600 al 1637* (Florence: R. Bemporad & Figlio, 1905), p. 68.

[7] Solerti, *Musica, Ballo e Drammatica*, p. 68.

Having adequate rehearsals was one way of trying to ensure a successful outcome, and those responsible for a spectacle sought to exercise tight control over the rehearsal process. For example, Giovanni de' Bardi, who was responsible for the stage direction of the 1589 Florentine spectacle, insisted that no rehearsal of any of the *intermedi* should occur unless he was present and had given permission for the rehearsal to occur.[8] As far as Bardi was concerned he knew what standards should be followed, even if others did not! When a danced spectacle was part of the wedding celebrations for a head of state perfection was expected of all the parties involved, and preparations could extend for months rather than weeks. October 1608 saw the wedding of Cosimo II de' Medici to Maria Maddalena of Austria, but as early as December 1607 the Florentine Grand Duke refused to lend his musicians to the Duke of Mantua, citing as his reason the fact that they were already ten months hence fully involved in practising for the wedding.[9] While the Grand Duke's statement *may* have been an excuse, a similar time period for musical rehearsals is found twenty years later. In late October 1627 Monteverdi started the musical rehearsals of the first three *intermedi* to accompany *La liberazione di Ruggero* while still composing the music for the last two *intermedi*.[10] Thus rehearsals started a year before the wedding of the Duke of Parma and Margherita de' Medici actually took place in October 1628. Medici court records from 1600 to 1640 indicate that rehearsal periods of six to eight weeks were common. In 1624, for example, Tinghi mentions six rehearsals for the opera *Santa Orsola* (a work which included dancing), starting two months before the performance.[11] When this opera was performed a second time approximately four months later on 28 January 1625 there were another six weeks of rehearsing intermingled with rehearsals for a new *balletto* performed by the ladies of the court, a horse ballet, both performed on 2 February, and a barriers performed

[8] James M. Saslow, *The Medici Wedding of 1589: Florentine Festival as* Theatrum Mundi. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 73.

[9] Solerti, *Musica, Ballo e Drammatica*, p. 41.

[10] Denis Stevens, *Letters of Claudio Monteverdi*, (translated and introduced) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 373.

[11] The music of *Santa Orsola* was composed by Marco da Gagliano, the text by Andrea Salvadori, the dances were created by Angiolo Ricci and the sets and machines by Giulio Parigi.

on 10 February.[12] Similar time periods were the norm for rehearsals at the French court in the sixteenth century.[13] Reports written six to eight weeks before the 1581 wedding celebrations record that the king 'was absorbed in his horse ballets and tourneys, and the queen and her ladies in preparation for their ballets, to the extent they do nothing else'.[14]

Similar rehearsal periods occurred in England. For the 1611 masque *Oberon*, for example, the two dance masters Jeremy Hearne and Nicolas Confesse were paid for their 'peyns bestowed almost 6 weeks continually', while in 1616 masquers are recorded as practising for fifty days.[15] The Florentine agents' reports from England in the 1630s cite two to three weeks as the minimum rehearsal period, with this time often extending to as long as five weeks.[16]

The wedding celebrations of Ferdinand de' Medici and Christine of Lorraine included a performance of Girolamo Bargagli's comedy *La pellegrina* and six accompanying *intermedi*. Rehearsals onstage in the Uffizi theatre of the *intermedi* performers – singers, dancers, and instrumentalists – started in late December 1588, four months before the opening night on 2 May 1589.[17] (See Figure 1). The *intermedi* rehearsals became more frequent in February 1589, and in March the onstage rehearsals also involved the machines and stage devices. The six *intermedi* varied in complexity in regard to their technical requirements, with the most simple, the third *intermedio*, needing only seven stagehands. However, for the first and last *intermedi* eighty-two stagehands grouped into twelve teams were necessary to operate the equipment. The total number of stagehands required for the entire performance was ninety-five, with another fifty men needed to

---

[12] Solerti, *Musica, Ballo e Drammatica*, pp. 173-80.

[13] Margaret M. McGowan, *Dance in the Renaissance: European Fashion, French Obsession* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 81-87.

[14] McGowan, *Dance in the Renaissance*, p. 85.

[15] Barbara Ravelhofer, *The Early Stuart Masque: Dance, Costume, and Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 75.

[16] Ravelfhofer, *Early Stuart Masque*, p. 75.

[17] Saslow, *The Medici Wedding*, p. 40.

operate the lamps.[18] The first complete run-through of the six *intermedi* occurred on the 16 March, six weeks before opening night.[19] Increasing numbers of technical difficulties emerged with the complex sets and machinery which necessitated daily rehearsals from 18 March onwards. When one reads of the number of stagehands needed for this performance it graphically illustrates the potential for something to go wrong during a performance, and the absolute necessity of long rehearsal periods.

December 1588	Late	Rehearsals onstage in Uffizi theatre started for *intermedi* performers. Carpenters and scene painters moved to Palazzo Vecchio during the day, work at night continued in Uffizi by candlelight.
February 1589		More frequent onstage *intermedi* rehearsals
March 1589		Onstage rehearsals with machines and stage devices
	16	First complete run-through of 6 *intermedi*
	18	Daily rehearsals started due to technical difficulties
April 1589	1	Onstage rehearsals start for *La pellegrina*
	16	Duke attends dress rehearsal of comedy and *intermedi*
	25	Duke attends dress rehearsal of comedy and *intermedi*
May 1589	1	Final dress rehearsal
	2	First Performance

Figure 1: Outline of Rehearsal Schedule for *La pellegrina* and the accompanying *intermedi*

The trouble and expense those responsible for court spectacles were prepared to go in order to ensure a memorable and outstanding performance is well illustrated by the 1589 Florentine production. When the *intermedi* rehearsals began in late December the work on the machines and set designs were still a long way from completion. Emilio de' Cavalieri, therefore, insisted that the

[18] Saslow, *The Medici Wedding*, p. 115. For descriptions of the scenery and the stage machinery and how they operated, see Saslow, pp. 81-86.

[19] Saslow, *The Medici Wedding*, p. 102.

carpenters and scene painters move to the Palazzo Vecchio to work so that the Uffizi theatre was empty and quiet for the *intermedi* rehearsals. Then, once the rehearsal was finished for the day, the craftsmen could return to the Uffizi theatre to continue working by candlelight.[20] Even though providing candles for night construction work was an added expense, and the production team were always looking for ways to reduce expenditure, Cavalieri was still prepared to incur this expense in order to start rehearsing on-stage with the groups of singers, musicians and dancers required in the *intermedi*.

A second illustration of the amount of trouble and expense that organizers of court spectacles were prepared to undergo is found in the number of times new, and mostly ephemeral, buildings were constructed in order to accommodate those attending banquets and other entertainments. In the seventy years between 1546 and 1626, for example, there were at least fourteen temporary structures built just in, or close to, London alone.[21] The largest and most famous of such buildings was constructed for Henry VIII at the Field of the Cloth of Gold. It was much more than just a large hall or empty space. The ground floor provided space for the wine cellars and offices, and had brick walls, while the first floor, constructed of painted canvas on timber frames, comprised 'apartments for the royal entourage … a gallery, a 100 foot chapel and a 220 foot banquet hall.'[22] Perhaps the most expensive part of this temporary building was the glass used to construct the large windows. In the early sixteenth century glass windows, especially large ones, were still uncommon and extremely expensive. Even approximately one hundred years later when the French queen Marie de' Medici replaced stained glass windows in one of her palaces with clear glass 'it was regarded as an unprecedented luxury'.[23]

---

[20] Saslow, *The Medici Wedding*, p. 73.

[21] Sydney Anglo, 'Overcrowding at court. A Renaissance problem and its solution: temporary theatres and banquet halls,' in *Architectures of Festival in Early-Modern Europe: Fashioning and Re-Fashioning Urban and Courtly Space*. Edited by J. R. Mulryne et al. (Routledge, 2017), p. 173.

[22] Anglo, 'Overcrowding at court,' p. 172.

[23] Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History*. Translated by Katherine H. Jewett (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 14.

Performance Disasters

I would now like to move onto the problems and disasters that did occur. The problems encountered during performances of court spectacles ranged from more minor annoyances such as audience overcrowding and excessive noise, to serious catastrophes such as a fire during a performance. Some disasters just involved embarrassment for the performers, while others resulted in death. Some problems were unforeseen, while others were the result of rushed and hurried preparations. While we will probably never know what was the cause of the arguments and fights encountered by Castiglione in 1513, there are primary sources that do describe how a spectacle came to a grinding halt. In August 1389 a magnificent entry and reception was organized in Paris for the Queen of France, Isabella of Bavaria [wife of Charles VI]. Froissart records the events in some detail. The day after Isabella's ceremonial entry into Paris there was a banquet, and right from the beginning overcrowding was a problem, with Froissart recording that 'the crowd in the hall was so dense … it was difficult to move', and that the servers could only distribute the food to the 500 ladies 'with the greatest difficulty'.[24] It was when the spectacles began and a castle, an assault-tower and a ship entered the hall that things really started to fall apart. To quote Froissart again:

> But the entertainment could not last long because of the great crush of people round it. A table near the door of the parliament chamber was overturned by force. The ladies who were sitting at it had to get up hurriedly, without ceremony. The great heat and the stink of the crowd almost caused the Queen to faint, and a window which was behind her had to be broken to let in the air. … The King saw what was happening and ordered the performance to stop. This was done and the tables were quickly cleared and taken down, to give the ladies more room. The wine and the spices were served hurriedly, and, as soon as the King and Queen had gone to their apartments, everyone else left also.[25]

Audience overcrowding was usually the result of too many people being admitted into the hall, as while tickets of admission were issued, those at the door often allowed individuals without tickets to enter. This happened in 1615 for a performance of the *Ballet de Madame*, at which

---

[24] Jean Froissart, *Chronicles*. Selected, translated and edited by Geoffrey Brereton. (Penguin, 1968. Reprinted with minor revisions 1978), p. 357.

[25] Froissart, *Chronicles*, p. 358.

Elisabeth, eldest sister of the French king Louis XIII, was one of the leading dancers. In this instance it is believed that the overcrowding was an act of sabotage by the Queen-Mother's opponents, who had distributed counterfeit tickets secretly beforehand to uninvited commoners.[26] In this case the overcrowding caused the performance to be abandoned and to be performed again three days later on 22 March.[27] Furthermore, the chaos diminished Marie de' Medici's image as a competent leader. In a report sent back to the Dowager Grand Duchess Christine of Lorraine, by the Florentine agent in Paris, Luca degli Asini Fabbroni, the confusion is described thus.

> With all the preparation complete, it pleased Their Majesties that the rehearsed ballet be performed in its entirety … [D]espite the fact that two thousand tickets had been distributed the day before in accordance with the capacity of the great Salle de Bourbon so that things could proceed with comfort and calm, nevertheless, due to the falsification of tickets, nearly two thousand uninvited people entered with great uproar. When the Queen saw that not a speck of space remained in the hall, it was resolved to remove half of the commoners and other low-class individuals. This displeased the Queen so much that the day's event was cancelled. To those people who had managed to enter at great pains came no other satisfaction than to return home with dashed hopes and damaged wheels, and some even having lost jewellery.[28]

The entertainments devised in honour of the French king Henri II in 1558 by the City of Paris are a superb example of the problems caused by inadequate preparation time.[29] Henri only gave nine days notice of his intention to celebrate the re-capture of Calais after 210 years of English occupation by attending a banquet in the City Hall. It was only five days later, a mere four days before the event was to take place, that the Parisian merchants realized that more was required of

---

[26] Sheila Barker with Tessa Gurney, 'House Left, House Right: A Florentine Account of Marie de Medici's 1615 *Ballet de Madame*,' *The Court Historian*, vol. 20 no. 2 (2015): 145-46.

[27] For a discussion of the conflicting reports as to whether the ballet was cancelled on 19 March, see Barker with Gurney, 'House Left, House Right,' pp. 145-46.

[28] Translation by Barker and Gurney in 'House Left, House Right,' p. 155. The original text of the letter is found on page 160.

[29] The information about the 1558 disaster is from Margaret M. McGowan, 'Apology, Justification and Monuments to Posterity: *Le recueil des inscriptions* (1558) and *l'entrée de la reine Marie de Médicis dans Paris* (1610),' *Texte*, vol. 33-34 (2007): 83-88.

them than just a banquet. So several masquerades were hastily organized to follow the banquet. What actually followed was more akin to a shambles.

Even from the beginning things fell apart. The king's guards allowed all their friends into the hall, even if they did not have an invitation, so the hall became overcrowded and totally disordered, with the noise emanating from the audience often drowning out the actors' speeches. The excessive audience numbers also meant that not only was it difficult to hear the actors, it was also almost impossible to see them. Due to the very short lead-in time, Estienne Jodelle, the poet and dramatist responsible for the masquerades, was forced to 'cut parts, to improvise speeches … and to rehearse his amateur players right up to the hour of the banquet.'[30] (Does this sound familiar)? In spite of this last-minute rehearsing, some of the actors still forgot their parts. The hall was not cleared after the banquet, and so the machines could not fit into the small amount of available empty space. Furthermore, the carpenters responsible for the stage machinery did not follow instructions, and made the machines too large for the available space. The ship carrying ten musicians, therefore, became stuck in the doorway into the hall, with entry only possible after its mast was broken off. Similarly, the costumes were not as specified, and the young children who represented *amorini* were so taken with their costumes that they 'refused to spoil their new clothes by attaching wings to them.'[31] Jodelle himself was traumatised by all the cascading disasters and suffered memory loss in the middle of his performance.

Performance problems also occurred during outdoor events, and these ranged from weather-related problems, such as the collapse of temporary entertainment structures due to storms as occurred at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520 when the French king's pavilion was destroyed by a bad storm,[32] to difficulties caused by poor planning. The latter is exemplified by the entertainment staged in honour of Queen Elizabeth I on her visit to Bristol on 14-21 August 1574, where a three-day mock siege was held, involving over 400 combatants in which the Fort of Peace was attacked by the forces of War. Unfortunately, the organizers positioned the besieged fort too far

---

[30] McGowan, 'Apology,' pp. 86-87.

[31] McGowan, 'Apology,' pp. 87.

[32] Anglo, 'Overcrowding,' p. 172.

away from the Queen, and the speeches addressed to her could not be heard. This called for drastic action, and so, 'Mr John Roberts, barrister and later Mayor of Bristol, swam fully clothed across the Avon River to present the Queen with a book of all the speeches, petitioned for her aid in their military effort, [then] plunged back into [the river] to return to the siege.'[33] The background to this entertainment was the Treaty of Bristol that was to be signed at the end of August. The goal of the treaty was to settle diplomatic and trade disputes which had arisen between England and Spain. Bristol's prosperity depended on trade, and the town's merchants were firmly on the side of 'peace' and an amicable resolution to the trade dispute.[34] Therefore it was important that their speeches be heard and understood by Queen Elizabeth, which may account for the heroic efforts of John Roberts.

The pitfalls and disasters that struck on the day of the performance of a spectacle or entertainment could also blight the rehearsals. Often problems were caused by the absence of key personnel from the rehearsals. This may have been the cause of the difficulties encountered during the rehearsals held for the wedding celebrations of the Duke of Parma, Odoardo Farnese, and Margherita de' Medici planned for October 1628. Already in March of that year there were problems: the musicians were not able to co-ordinate their tempi with the speed of movement of the machines, the singers were inexperienced and not singing well, and Monteverdi's musical effects were not working as intended. Denis Stevens hypothesizes that '[p]erhaps Monteverdi had already left [Parma] for Venice; and without his guidance and supervision, the musicians were unable to give of their best'.[35] In Mantua in December 1591 it was the absence of the *maestro di ballo* from the rehearsals of the *Balletto della cieca* which seemed to be part of the reason for the work falling apart. In one letter to Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga, his secretary Annibale Chieppo wrote:

> The *Balletto della cieca* is giving us difficulty because of those who have already rehearsed it in the presence of Your Highness. As I understand the situation, some have now left, some are sick,

[33] C. E. McGee, 'Mysteries, Musters, and Masque: The Import(s) of Elizabethan Civic Entertainments,' in *The Progresses, Pageants, and Entertainments of Queen Elizabeth I*. Edited by Jayne Elisabeth Archer, Elizabeth Goldring and Sarah Knight (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), footnote 61 p. 120.

[34] Kathryn Butler, *Music in Elizabethan Court Politics* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2019), p. 177.

[35] Stevens, *Letters of Claudio Monteverdi*, p. 392.

> and some have become so stubborn in not wanting to be present [at rehearsals], that after the absence of Isachino [Massarano the *maestro di ballo*] for a few days everything had to be begun again from the beginning.[36]

At Mantua it was definitely the dancers who were causing delays and problems!

The letter by Chieppo also illustrates the importance of having a strong and clear chain of command and responsibility for such large-scale and complex multi-media events. Certainly contemporary theoretical writings on the subject of staging *intermedi* from both Italy and France all agreed that the best method to guarantee the optimum outcome was to have only one man bear overall responsibility for such an event, whether it be a tragedy, comedy, pastoral, a *ballo*, an *intermedio*, or an opera.[37] While this advice may have seemed sensible in theory, it was not always followed in practice. For example, in Florence in 1589 there was a three-way split of responsibility between the humanist and musician Giovanni de' Bardi, who was responsible for the stage direction and had conceptual responsibility for the six *intermedi*,[38] Bernardo Buontalenti, chief architect and engineer at the Medici court, who was in charge of the visual and technical side of the production in the Uffizi theatre,[39] and Emilio de' Cavalieri, whose roles encompassed the musical direction and choreography, the composition of some of the music, as well as keeping the accounts and acting as the communication channel between the Grand Duke and the other members of the creative team and the workmen at the Uffizi.[40] Perhaps this divided responsibility may have helped to create some

---

[36] 'Il Balletto della cieca ci da che fare, perchè di quelli che lo provarono già, come intendo, alla presenza di V.A., alcuni mancano, alcuni sono infermi, et alcuni si sono resi per un pezzo cosi ostinati in non volervi intervenire, che dopo l'assenza d'Isachino di parecchi giorno, è convenuto tornar da capo'. Translation by author from original text cited in Fenlon, *Music and Patronage*, vol. I, p. 199.

[37] For further discussion of the question of who was in charge of these spectacles, including the role of the duke or monarch and members of the ruling family, see Roger Savage, 'The Staging of Courtly Theatre: 1560s to 1640s', in *Europa Triumphans: Court and Civic Festivals in Early Modern Europe*, 2 vols. Edited by J. R. Mulryne, Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly and Margaret Shewring (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), I: pp. 57-62.

[38] Saslow, *The Medici Wedding*, pp. 27-28.

[39] Saslow, *The Medici Wedding*, p. 42.

[40] Saslow, *The Medici Wedding,* p. 37. For a summary of the chain of command for this event, from the Duke himself down to the craftsmen and workers, see Saslow, pp. 25-27.

of the problems encountered during the long weeks of rehearsing. As mentioned earlier, the first complete run-through on stage of the six *intermedi* occurred on the 16 March 1589, six weeks before the opening night. Daily rehearsals started two days later. But even so, the notebooks of the production-cum-stage manager Girolamo Seriacopi record scenes of frantic activity from the end of March and into April. The lighting (both candles and oil lamps) was not yet satisfactory, and continued to present problems of excessive smoke, heat and unpleasant odours. Clouds were not operating properly, sea monsters still had to be finished, and work on construction of the large, free-standing puppet representing Lucifer, with its moveable head, horns and wings was well behind schedule. In fact the green taffeta for Lucifer's wings was only ordered on 25 April.[41] To give you an idea of the work involved in just one of the large puppets: Lucifer was 8 *braccia* or about 4 metres in height from his chest to his head. The puppet had to appear through an open trapdoor which itself had to be decorated so that it resembled a lake of ice.[42] Even six weeks before the first performance other large, movable constructions were also not complete, for example the python with which Apollo fought in *intermedio* three.[43] Apollo was played by the dancer Agostino, but when Apollo was flying through the air a cardboard figure held aloft by a wire was substituted for the dancer. But even though the puppet was cardboard it was still dressed in a real costume that was identical to that worn by Agostino.[44]

As rehearsals continued deficiencies in costumes became apparent. On 11 March, for example, Bardi ordered additional decoration be added to the costumes of the dancers in *intermedio* three as they appeared to be very lacklustre when seen from the body of the hall.[45] Changes to the colour of

---

[41] Saslow, *The Medici Wedding,* p. 114. 'Taffetà verde br […] per far l'alie del diavolo'. Quotation from the edition of Seriacopi's notebook published in Annamaria Testaverde Matteini *L'officina delle nuvole Il Teatreo Mediceo nel 1589 e gli* Intermedi *del Buontalenti nel* Memoriale *di Girolamo Seriacopi* (Milan: Associazione Amici della Scala, 1991), p. 233.

[42] Saslow, *The Medici Wedding*, p. 234.

[43] Saslow, *The Medici Wedding*, p. 102.

[44] Saslow, *The Medici Wedding*, p. 231.

[45] Saslow, *The Medici Wedding*, p. 103. 'Il signor Giovanni Bardi da Vernio questo di 11 di marzo à dato il sottoscritto ricordo: … Nel terzo intermedio: … riadornar le mascher che ànno da ballar, chè son pover'. From Testaverde Matteini, *L'officina*, pp. 204-205.

the clouds were necessary in order to ensure that they did not fade into the overall backdrop, and some of the stagehands on the overhead catwalk were found to be visible to the audience when the clouds opened.[46] If all this was not enough, attention also had to be paid to basic, mundane matters such as toilet facilities. In an entry in Seriacopi's notebook for 18 March 1589 there is a comment that the 'piss buckets' are too full and stinking, and all of them must be emptied more often.[47]

Sometimes it was a rehearsal that precipitated drastic alteration in the planned programme. On the 9 February 1525 forty Venetian senators and sixty ladies attended a six-hour rehearsal of three *comedie*. Unfortunately, one of these theatrical pieces caused much offence and was condemned by the audience because of its crude content and derogatory tone in regard to women. To quote from Sanudo:

> Then the Paduans Ruzante and Menato, dressed as peasants, put on a rustic-style comedia that was very lascivious with very dirty words, to the point that it was condemned by all and they were yelled at. There were almost sixty women on the stands wearing veils, and the young ones with their hair in coifs, and they shuddered at what was said in their name. The whole ending was about messing around and cuckolding their husbands.[48]

After that reaction the organizers had no choice, and in the intervening four days between the rehearsal and the performance this *comedia* was cut and another prose piece which was more respectful to women was inserted in its place.

> Today, although the weather was bad, the comedia of the Triumphanti was put on at the Ca' Arian, at San Raphael, and it was very lovely and chaste. About one hundred women attended,

[46] Saslow, *The Medici Wedding*, p. 127.

[47] Testaverde Matteini, *L'officina*, p. 216.

[48] Translation by Linda L. Carroll, in Patricia H. Labalme and Laura Sanguineti White, (eds). *Venice* Città Excelentissima. *Selections from the Renaissance Diaries of Marin Sanudo* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 523-24. From Marin Sanudo, *I diarii*, vol. 37 p. 560. 'Poi Ruzante et Menato padoani da Vilan feno una comedia vilanesca et tutta lasciva, et parole molto sporche, *adeo* da tutti fo biasemata, et se li dava stridor. Quasi erano da done 60 con capa soler, et scufie le zovene, che se agrizavano a quello era ditto per so' nome. Tutta la conclusion era de ficarie, et far beco i so' mariti.'

and the comedia that the Triumphanti had [the players] recite was not the dirty one … but instead the one by Ruzante in the rustic style.[49]

Fire was an ever-present threat to theatrical performances in early modern Europe, as not only were torches and candles used to illuminate the performance space,[50] many spectacles also included dances by performers carrying torches while they danced. To give you an idea of the sheer numbers of lights which were positioned around the stage area only of the Uffizi theatre for the performances of *La pellegrina* and the *intermedi*, we know that there were 'hundreds of … lamps, each holding 2 or 4 lights, … positioned at the sides and front of the stage platform for general lighting.'[51] More lamps were placed behind the scenery and still more in the flyloft, in order to create the impression of stars twinkling in the sky. Then there were even more chandeliers, candles and lamps positioned around the theatre to illuminate the audience space. All in all there were thousands of lights used for this performance.[52] While no incendiary accident happened to mar the performances of the play and *intermedi*, there was a fire in the theatre on 21 December 1588, when two workmen left a burning candle on a pile of planks of wood, probably after one of the night rehearsals.[53]

In 1589 in Florence the lamps and chandeliers were all fixed, but often torches or candles were carried by torchbearers or pages or by the dancers themselves. The ballet at the court of Lorraine in Nancy in 1606 began with the entry of eight pages each of whom carried two torches of white wax. The costume designs by Jacques Bellange include images of two pages with their white wax

---

[49] Translation by White, in Labalme and Sanguinetti (eds), *Venice* Città Excelentissima, p. 524. From Sanudo, *I diarii*, vol. 37 p. 572. 'In quest zorno, *licet* fusse cativo tempo, fu fato la comedia di compagni in cha' Arian a san Raphael, et fo bellissima et honesta. Vi fo da zerca 100 done, et non feno recitar la comedia sporca … ma ben quella di Ruzante a la villota.'

[50] For the *Ballet de Madame* performed at the French court in 1615 the Great Hall of the Bourbon Palace was lit with 1,200 white wax candles.

[51] Saslow, *The Medici Wedding*, p. 87.

[52] Saslow, *The Medici Wedding*, p. 87.

[53] Saslow, *The Medici Wedding*, p. 73.

torches.[54] Both these designs convey a visually stunning impression with the elaborately and sumptuously decorated costumes of the pages from their headgear to their shoes, and with the large torches they hold in each hand. It is interesting to note that both pages are wearing flexible but sturdy gloves in order to protect their hands from any dripping wax, which is shown as running down the sides of the torches. In this ballet the pages do not dance, but in other early seventeenth-century *ballets de cour* there are examples of dancers entering carrying torches and then continuing to dance with their torches. In the 1605 *Ballet de la reine*, for example, twelve pages enter 'each holding two white torches in his hands, dressed in incarnat and white, wearing little white boots covered in tinsel, making a thousand passages and figures'.[55]

From the description of the torches carried by the dancers in the first *entrée* of the 1615 *Ballet de Madame*, and from the illustrations by Bellange, it seems that the flames on these torches were large: they were not small, match-size flames.

> Each of these [nine] little children bore on his head four great lights and in his hands two great torches that flared from the wrists upwards, which meant that the flame was a good two feet high, without there being, however, any spark from it and without its in the least way troubling those who were carrying them.[56]

While the author of this description of the 1615 ballet may have had no qualms about the danger of these two-feet high flames, the children who were dancing with them, however, may have had other reactions. Certainly when dancers performed with torches their movements were often more complex than a simple procession. Cesare Negri published two theatrical torch dances in his treatise *Le gratie d'amore*, and in these two choreographies the dancers execute jumps, cross diagonally, and weave around each other in hays, with each crossing movement necessitating a change of the torch

[54] The designs are reproduced in full colour on pages 76 and 77 of Paulette Choné and Jérôme de La Gorce, *Fastes de cour xvii^e siècle. Costumes de Bellange et de Berain* (Éditions Monelle Hayot, 2015).

[55] 'douze pages avec deus flambeaux blancs chascun en leur mains uestues dincarnat et blanc portant de petites botines blanches couvertes de clinquan faissant mille passages et figures'. See Melinda J. Gough, 'Marie de Medici's 1605 *ballet de la reine*: New Evidence and Analysis,' *Early Theatre*, vol. 15 no 1 (2012): 123 for the original French text and page 129 for Gough's translation.

[56] *Description du Ballet de Madame*, translated by William D. Howarth in *French theatre in the neo-classical era, 1550-1789*. Edited by William D. Howarth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 97.

from one hand to the other in order to present the appropriate 'empty' hand to the next approaching dancer.

Perhaps the most famous, or infamous, example of a spectacle devastated by fire comes from the 1392 festivities at the French court. In this case it was the highly flammable costumes of the dancers constructed of flax and pitch which caused the disaster. The six dancers (that is, the French king and five high-ranking noblemen) were disguised as wild men, and, although accounts differ, it appears that a torch carried by a member of the audience who approached too closely to the dancers in order to determine their identity, accidently set fire to their costumes. Four of the dancers died, a fifth saved himself by jumping into a vat of water, while the king was saved by the Duchess of Berry who smothered the flames in the yards of heavy fabric of her dress.

Audience reaction to disasters

The reaction of the Duchess of Berry and her fellow audience members to the tragedy taking place before their eyes would have been the natural human reaction to such a disaster: horror, despair, fear. But for less serious problems the reaction of the audience members varied. The French King Henri IV, for example, is reputed to have been highly amused when the fireworks associated with an indoor barriers performance caused the hall in which the military spectacle was taking place to catch on fire thereby ending the performance.[57] In 1614 when audience overcrowding marred a performance of the Ballet of the Argonauts, the French queen was incandescent with anger. The poet François de Malherbe described the occasion thus.

> On Thursday we saw the ballet which we had all been waiting for. … I shall say nothing about it except that there never was such chaos, in which the dancers, however, had something to be grateful for, because though the whole conception was hardly worth the money spent on it, the fault for the failure is attributed to the lack of space available for dancing. The captain of the guards, M. de Plainville, was unwilling to disoblige anybody and admitted everyone who turned up. The enclosure was so thronged that even a single man would have had difficulty in passing through. The Queen saw this crowding on her arrival and flew into the greatest rage I have ever seen her in and, turning around, declared that the ballet should not be danced. [After a while]

[57] Gough, 'Marie de Medici's 1605 *ballet de la reine*,' p. 115.

> the Queen returned with the King, who had already been put to bed, and then the ballet was performed in a slipshod fashion, not as it is described in the printed account.[58]

I would now like to turn to an unusual and interesting account of the audience's reaction to a bungled dance performance that should have included the presentation of speeches to the French king Henri IV. In 1605 the French queen, Marie de' Medici and eleven princesses danced in a *ballet de cour* before the king and members of the elite. The end of this ballet was unexpected, as it did not follow the usual pattern. After the completion of the Grand Ballet danced by the queen and princesses, a new set of performers entered the hall to the sound of trumpets, oboes and drums. These performers included two live camels ridden by two 'savages': a dwarf and a Tartar.[59] The animals and their riders then tried to dance a galliard, a dance that required agility, expertise, and for some variations, strength. One eyewitness to this ballet described the final scene in this manner.

> It was the greatest pleasure in the world to see the sink-a-pace made by these beasts who, hearing the trumpets, drums, oboes, violins, lutes, and other sorts of instruments, made a noise, a great discordant din, and seeing that the Ladies pissed themselves and that the majority of gentlemen were disposed to shit from laughter over the ballet, … [the performers] were so ashamed … they [were] … unable to speak a word. They were given wine and vinegar[60] yet they [still] couldn't say a thing and lost their voices completely, which caused His Majesty to command them to deliver their speech in writing. … The camels exited the room well mocked and ashamed, and the best way they had of ending this embarrassing situation was that everyone got in his coach and went to write their speech in order to have it seen the next day by the king.[61]

In this case the audience's reaction was so extreme that it literally stopped the performance in its tracks, even though the performers were about to deliver a speech to the king. The audience obviously did not feel inhibited at spoiling a speech directed towards the king. They did not suppress their laughter so that the performers could re-group and deliver their speech to their

---

[58] Translation by Howarth in *French theatre*, p. 93.

[59] Gough, 'Marie de Medici's 1605 *ballet de la reine*,' p. 132 footnote 1.

[60] As Gough explains this phrase refers to the fact that the performers received both encouragement and ridicule from the audience, ('Marie de Medici's 1605 *ballet de la reine*,' p. 134 footnote 1).

[61] The translation is by Melinda Gough, 'Marie de Medici's 1605 *ballet de la reine*,' pp. 133-34. The original French text is found on page 124.

sovereign. The ridicule by the audience and subsequent cessation of the performance indicates that in the context of this performance the relationship between the king and the audience was altered. Even in the French court the interactions between the king and members of the court were controlled and regulated by social protocols. Yet in this performance situation the hierarchy and order demanded by these social protocols were broken down and the relationship between the monarch and the rest of the audience became closer to one of equality.

Conclusion

It is clear that in spite of the necessity to produce a spectacular performance, and a very strong desire to do so on the part of the organizers, things did go wrong: performances were not always as described in the printed accounts. Those involved in creating, rehearsing and producing a spectacle had to contend with events outside of their control – like the weather – but also with recalcitrant performers, inattentive workmen, disobedient entry guards, inadequate preparation time, poor planning, and with all the potential problems associated with co-ordinating a very large technical and artistic workforce. As we have seen from the Venetian example, they also had to be able to quickly adapt to negative responses by the audience at a rehearsal. Given the nature and size of these spectacles, unforeseen events or performance disasters must have been more common that is recorded. An audience reaction of laughter and amusement at memory loss or stage fright by the performers points towards an expectation, or perhaps even an acceptance, that problems would arise during a performance.