



Steadman, Philip. Renaissance Fun: The Machines behind the Scenes

Gianni Cicali

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Steadman, Philip.

Renaissance Fun: The Machines behind the Scenes.

London: UCL Press, 2021. Pp. xix, 397 + col. ill. ISBN 978-1-78735-917-8 (hardcover) £50; 978-1-78735-916-1 (paperback) £30; ISBN 978-1-78735-915-4 (open-access) free.

Steadman's book seeks to explain "what was involved in conceiving, producing and putting on these productions [i.e., shows with machines] and displays, and showing what the technical crews were doing. Many of the designers were architects, as I am, and perhaps in that capacity I have some qualifications" (5). The author brings his expertise as an architect (Emeritus Professor of Urban and Built Form Studies at UCL) to the study of Renaissance theatre and spectacle, and this gives him a methodological perspective that lets him present and explain the elaborate machinery one finds on the Renaissance stage to create the illusion of clouds, flying and singing angels, gods and goddesses, natural phenomena, automata, water tricks, early optical cameras, changing scenes, and the famous and thoroughly studied/discussed *periaktoi*.

The book has a clear structure and adopts a prose that works for both scholars and non-scholars. The volume is divided into three parts: "Part I: The Machine in the Theatre"; "Part II: The Machine in the Garden"; and "Part III: A Garden and an Opera." These three long chapters trace the evolution and use of theatrical and non-theatrical machinery, the application of mathematical perspective to the stage set, the rediscovery of classic theatre and Vitruvius's surviving treatise on architecture, and the machines and the fountains for the villas, gardens, and grottos. The pages (and illustrations) on the villa Medici in Pratolino (Florence)—one of the most spectacular residences of the family—are particularly rich, fascinating, and interesting. This villa, among the many villas of the Medici, deserved a proper investigation, and Steadman provides excellent explanations and descriptions of the many marvels of this residence.

The important steps in the evolution of theatrical and non-theatrical machinery are presented in chronological order and organized through themes such as the "invention" of stage lights. Besides some famous figures (Filippo Brunelleschi, Leonardo da Vinci, Bernardo Buontalenti, the Sangallo family, Sebastiano Serlio, and Andrea Palladio), less known artists, proto-scientists, and "set designers" are also part of the rich profusion of examples. To achieve his goal, Steadman offers his readers the reconstructions of famous theatres,

scenes, and stages and the complexity of their machinery. He draws his information from contemporary treatises, iconography, manuscripts, and the descriptions penned by actual viewers and spectators.

The author might have drawn some important and more updated information from Anna Maria Testaverde's old, but still very relevant, book *L'Officina delle nuvole il Teatro Mediceo nel 1589 e gli 'Intermedi' del Buontalenti nel 'Memoriale' di Girolamo Seriacopi* (Milan: Associazione Amici della Scala, 1991) on the machinery and the "nuvole" (clouds) of the "Teatro Mediceo" for the famous *Intermedi* of 1589. It would have helped and enriched the bibliography and the scholarship of this study. I was particularly surprised by the absence of any references to the works by Nerida Newbigin, the major expert of Florentine religious theatre of the Renaissance. Steadman seems instead to have relied extensively on the standard studies by Ludovico Zorzi from the 1970s (indispensable, but somewhat dated by now) and on the models of Brunelleschi's fifteenth-century "ingegni" (theatrical machinery) designed by Zorzi and architect Cesare Lisi and published in 1975 and 1977.

Familiarity with some of this missing scholarship might have avoided some incomplete explanations of the dramaturgic role of the special effects. For example, the mechanical sun designed by Antonio da Sangallo in 1539 for a spectacular Medici wedding that played an important role in Renaissance theatre and spectacle should have been linked to the contemporary "fixation" with the so-called three Aristotelian unities. The device conceived by Sangallo served to mark the passing of time during the twenty-four hours in which the action of the play was supposed to be taking place, thus providing visible evidence that the text of the play (*Il Commodo* by Antonio Landi) as presented to Duke Cosimo I and his wife Eleonora of Toledo followed the Aristotelian unit of time, thus placing the event in the middle of the contemporary debate among the intellectual and academic communities on Aristotle and dramaturgy. As for myself, I have doubts about the 1545 reconstruction of Serlio's scene for comedies and am left perplexed by the author's suggestion that Renaissance spectacularism is a form of paleo-cinema.

Aside from these few flaws, the volume brilliantly highlights the creation and evolution of theatrical and non-theatrical machinery by providing a great number of examples of many and different devices that served to create the illusion of nature and at the same time provided fun for the "happy few" and, some time, for larger audiences such as those attending the "sacre rappresentazioni"

(sacred plays). Steadman's reading is interesting and the sources and illustrations he includes are many. In the end, Steadman provides a "user-friendly" combination of text and images, thus allowing readers to follow and discover the development of stage scenery and machinery in the "Golden Age" of this art.

The richness of the research at the foundation of this study makes it useful for scholars such as historians of theatre and spectacle, historians of architecture, historians of Italian culture and drama, historians of sciences, and cultural studies specialists. Since this book wisely merges together several different disciplines, it represents an appropriate and documented "guide" for both undergraduate and graduate students in the humanities. The well-organized thematic subchapters also allow readers to use the book through *loci selecti*.

GIANNI CICALI

Georgetown University

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