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CURTAIN

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Ancient Theatre.

Canvas cloth usually painted or decorated – in modern theaters more frequently made of heavy velvet with trimmings or fringes – designed to close the scenic arch at the proscenium and separate the stage from the audience and orchestra, in order to cover and uncover the proscenium at the beginning and end of a show or any intermediate subdivision, the curtain derives its name from the Latin *siparium*, originally indicating a second shorter curtain, also in cloth (the variant *supparum* and the analogous Greek σίφαρος [*sípharos*] or σείφαρος [*seípharos*] denote, in fact, the linen of a garment or a sail, see Fabia 1873) with the function of hiding part of the stage and facilitating scene changes.
The largest canvas, which is still used today to separate the stage from the spectators, was called the *aulaeum* in Latin (frequently declined in the plural, perhaps because it consisted of several strips). However, at least in its most antique use, it appears that its operation differed from modern and contemporary practice, since, using a purposely constructed groove in the proscenium, it was lowered from the top at the beginning of the representation and raised at the end. The corresponding Greek word, the feminine αὐλαία [*auláia*] – usually indicating a tent – takes on a theatrical connotation only in the later lexicon of Hesychius [463.15 Bekker] (in Pausanias, *Periegesis*, 5.12.2 παραπέτασμα [*parapétasma*] is, instead, the veil, designed to conceal statues of deities in the temple of Zeus at Olympia), perhaps because the curtain system composed of a sliding curtain or open or closed curtains at the beginning or at the end of the tragic or comic performance was unknown in classical theater.
While the absence of literary and archaeological evidence do not allow us to pronounce ourselves in this sense for the Greek world, for the Latin theatre too – at least in its most fortunate season, between the middle of the 3rd and the middle of the 2nd centuries BC – the surviving texts of tragedies and comedies do not indicate what, ultimately, represents one of the most significant contributions of the Romans to the evolution of the scenic apparatus (Beare 1955, p. 267). According to a tradition dating back to Aelius Donatus, the 4th century AD grammarian, the *aulaeum* appears to have been introduced to the Roman scene only after 133 BC: on that date, in fact, on the testamentary bequest of King Attalus III, several of the magnificent carpets or curtains that adorned the walls of the sumptuous Asian palace seem to have arrived in Rome. Roman architects and scenographers are said to have taken these as models for the large rectangular canvases, measuring no less than 3-4 meters in height to hide the scenery (see Crema 1959, p. 82 e Chiarini 1996, p. 47), see Donatus, *De comoedia*, 8.8 *aulea quoque in scaena intexta sternuntur, quod pictus ornatus ex Attalica regia Romam usque perlatus est* («woven drapes are also spread out on the scene, since illustrated curtains were brought to Rome from the palace of Attalus») and, for the connection with the Hellenistic ruler, Propertius, *Elegiae*, 2.32.12; Valerius Maximus, *Dicta et facta memorabilia*, 9.1.5; Servius, *In Georgica*, 3.25 and *In Aeneidem*, 1.697; Isidorus of Seville, *Etymologiae*, 19.26.8 (Varro, *De vita populi Romani*, 3 instead maintains that the halls were precious vestments, also transmitted to the Romans «from the legacy of Attalus»).
The presence of a curtain in Rome – probably of a more modest size than that used in actual theatres, but with functions not unlike those it still has today – is mentioned for the first time in the Ciceronian *Pro Caelio*, 56 BC: in recalling the hasty conclusion of a mime, Arpinate mentions the *aulaeum* as an essential element of the farces represented in his time which were often terminated precisely by the appearance of a curtain, evidently suited to the improvised structures that hosted the outdoor shows, without an above stage housing where a curtain, once folded up, could be kept, cf. *Pro Caelio*, 65 *Mimi ergo iam exitus, non fabulae: in quo cum clause non invenitur, fugit aliquis and manibus, dein scabilla concrepant, aulaeum tollitur* («Well, this is a closing scene worthy of broad farce, not serious drama. When the

author is at a loss how to work out his plot, he throws in a chase and gives somebody the slip. Then clog dance by the whole company, and curtain!»)

Beyond the Ciceronian testimony, the ancient literary sources, especially poetic, appear reticent about the mechanism that set the *aulaeum* in motion, because of the vagueness with which the writers of the time dwell on the habits of everyday life (Savarese 1996, p. LIX), making the reconstruction of the lexicon of props (Saglio 1877; Reisch 1896) problematic.

From Virgil, *Georgica*, 3.24-25, for example, we get reference to a curtain that gave viewers the impression of being lifted by the same embroidered or painted figures, life-size, on his fabric («to see […] how the woven Britons lift the purple curtain»). Horace mentions the conclusion of a show following the maneuver of the curtain in *Ars poetica*, 154-55 («If you want us to stay in our seats till the curtain Call, when the actor cries out "All applaud!"»), but without specifying the dynamics of the lifting from below, which is correctly clarified by Porfirion's commentary on the pass («if you want to be heard until the curtain rises») and by his own *Epistulae* 2.1.189, where we learn that the *aulaeum* was left «for four or more hours under the stage», resulting in an annoyingly long performance (coinciding with the beginning of a performance, the *aulaeum* was lowered until it rolled into an fissure-like opening in the sub-stage, the so-called *hyposcaenium*).

Mention of the gradual raising of the curtain – probably at the end of the *fabula* – is made, instead, in the Ovidian passage of *Metamorphoses*, 3.111-13, where the Augustan poet subtly compares the gradual appearance of figures represented on the *aulaea* as it is slowly unrolled from the bottom up to the slow emergence from the earth of the warriors born from the dragon teeth sown by Cadmus («Just as at festivals in the theatre, when the curtain is lifted at the end, designs rise in the air, first revealing faces and then gradually the rest, until, raised gently and steadily, they are seen whole, and at last their feet rest on the lower border»): a similar comparison appears, a few centuries later, in Ammianus Marcellinus' *Historiae*, 26.6.15, see den Boeft et al., 2008, pp. 163-64.

Alluding to the presence on stage of divinities announced by simulated thunderclaps, a few years after Ovid the fabulist Phaedrus recalls that the performance began *aulaeo misso* (5.7.23), that is, after the curtain had been lowered below the *hyposcenium* and placed on the vault or on the stone pavement that covered the theatre pit. Such dynamics, not entirely ascertained due to the wooden installations of the Republican age, would seem to find confirmation in the archaeological evidence of various theatrical structures of the Augustan age (for example in Lyon, Vienne, Autun, Orange, Vaison, Aosta and Alba Fucens, see Ducaroy-Audin 1960), all equipped, between the orchestra and the stage, with 2-3 meter deep fissures. Still visible today on the interior of these fissures are variable numbers of small wells supporting wooden shafts which, perhaps in several 'telescopic' segments (Mazois 1838, p. 64), were operated using pulleys hidden in the two masonry foreparts on the sides of the *proscenium* (for the theatres of some places in North Africa such as Sabratha, Dugga, Tipasa, Timgad, Philippeville, Leptis Magna, see Frézouls 1952, pp. 98-99; Caputo 1959, p. 75; Caputo 1987, pp. 91-101): in this way, through a device made of ropes, weights and counterweights, a large tarpaulin could slide along one or more moving cylinders, rolling up and unrolling if necessary to hide or reveal the scene completely (Pisani Sartorio 2009, pp. 271-72). The literary testimonies in our possession mention, next to the *aulaeum*, the *siparium*: in the continuation of the above-mentioned Donatian text (*De comoedia*, 8.8) the grammarian states that the curtain, destined, in a not well-defined moment, to supplant the *aulaeum* (*pro quibus [scil. aulaeis] siparia aetas posterior accepit*), was a *mimicum velum, quod populo obstitit dum fabularum actus commutantur*, or a sort of curtain that during the evolution of pantomime – if we accept the *mimicum* lesson against the *minutum* variant – hid from viewers what was happening behind the scene, not unlike the so-called "comodino", the small supplementary curtain used in Italian and European theaters in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A similar set of horizontal sliding curtains (Courtois 1989, p. 97; Beacham 1991, pp. 171-72) must have been common on Roman scenes as early as the 1st century BC, as evidenced by the expression *post siparium*, which Cicero uses in *De provinciis consularibus*, 14.6 to designate shrewd discretion of Piso, a man used to act, according to a

theatrical metaphor, in the space separated from the proscenium by means of similar tapestries. The *siparium* is still associated with mimic representations by Festus (p. 459.4) and by a later note to Juvenal, *Saturae*, 8.186: it is probable therefore preceding the performance of the actual drama, mimes and pantomimes recited mostly interludes and finals in front of it. The contextual use of *aulaeum* and *siparia*, increasingly enriched with decorations, is well documented in the theatrical practice of the imperial age (in *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, 8.26607, an inscription of the 2nd century AD from Dugga, North Africa, praises the benefactor Publius Marcius Quadratus, in particular, for having equipped the new theatre with a complete set of *siparia* see Bieber 1961, p. 205; Sear 2006, p. 288). In two famous passages of the *Metamorphoses* Apuleius gives explains their different functioning: in *Metamorphoses*, 1.8 *oro te – inquam – aulaeum tragicum dimoveto et siparium scaenicum complicate* («"I beg you" – I say – "take away the tragic hall and fold up the curtain"»), he mentions the maneuver of the *aulaeum* with the verb *dimoveo*, which does not indicate the direction of the movement and leaves open the hypothesis that the cloth was actually transported elsewhere immediately after the start (Juvenal in *Saturae*, 6.67 also alludes to the removal of the *aulaeum* coinciding with theater performance holidays). Secondary stage curtains were instead folded (in this regard, it should be noted that the theater of Madaura, home of the writer, Caputo 1959, p. 58 assumed the presence of a curtain with two sections unfolded from above and which probably moved to the sides of the stage during the performances). In *Metamorphoses*, 10.29, the novelist describes in great detail the pantomime on the judgement of Paris performed before the eyes of the donkey Lucius, at the theatre of Corinth: it is interesting, in this regard, what he observes about the scene destined to receive the actors of the theatrical *fabula* proper at the end of the evolutions of mimes and dancers, that is, when the *aulaeum* was somehow removed and the *siparia*, placed immediately behind it, were gathered on one or the other side of the proscenium (*At ubi discursus reciprocali multinodas ambages tubae terminalis cantus explicuit, aulaeo subducto et complicitis siparis scaena disponitur* [«But when a trumpet blast put an end to all those twists and turns and complicated exercises, the curtains were rolled up, the curtain was folded and the scene appeared»]). While the clearest meaning of «rising from the bottom up, lifting» is given to the verb *subduco*, it is evident that as early as the 2nd century AD the movement of the *aulaeum* had experienced an evolution similar to that of current practice at the beginning of the show (Fo 2010, p. 606). Moreover, as a wall decoration of the time from the basilica of Herculaneum seems to indicate, such use seems to have already been employed in the Neronian era: in fact, introducing the viewer to the vision of a spectacular theatrical scenography, typical of Late Hellenism and the Roman world, this decoration depicts an *aulaeum* with rich draperies that is raised just like our curtains (Pappalardo-Borrelli 2007, p. 215).

In the light of such uncertain and conflicting testimonies, one may conclude that the methods of opening and closing the *aulaeum* were not univocal at the time, and that, moreover, depending on the size of the structure or even of the performance to be represented, these varied from theatre to the theater (Beare 1955, p. 274): a manoeuvre of the curtain with a technique not dissimilar to the modern one is confidently attested by Ammianus Marcellinus, who in the 4th century AD employed the theatrical metaphor of the cloth lowered onto the proscenium at the end of the representation to indicate the conclusion of dramatic human events, cf. *Historiae*, 16.6.3 *et Dorus evanuit, et Verissimus ilico tacuit, velut aulaeo deposito scenae* («and Dorus disappeared and Verissimus was instantly silent, as if the curtain had fallen on the scene») and 28.6.29 *hoc quoque post depositum accessit aulaeum* («This also happened after the curtain was lowered»). Not entirely conclusive is a further testimony of Aelius Donatus who, mentioning the presence of the *aulaeum* already at the time of Terence, seems to contradict mention of its introduction in Rome in the period after 133 BC (however, the grammarian may instead have used terminology in use in his time): in the commentary on *Eunuchus* (*praefatio*, 1.5), Donatus recalls that Terence would have avoided the subdivision of his comedies into acts to prevent some spectators, distracted by the interruption of the flow of events, from getting up from their places before the end

of the whole performance at the same time as the raising of the *aulaeum* (Kragelund 2012, p. 422).
Finally, the *siparium* mentioned by Quintilian in *Institutio oratoria*, 6.1.32 and 6.3.72 – a tent used to provide shade to the praetor's court, but which some lawyers apparently also used to represent crime scenes in order to influence the judges – belongs to an entirely different kind of curtain.

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[ANGELO LUCERI]

Modern Theatre.

Although no longer an essential element of theatrical practice, given the multiplication of possible theatre spaces and ways of staging in the 20th century, the theatre curtain – the drop cloth that divides the stage from the space reserved for the audience – remains central in the way of thinking about theatre in the West. In the «theatre we have in mind» (Cruciani 1992, p. 11), it is a symbol of theatrical fiction and scenic marvel, dividing the world created by the actors from the everyday life of the spectators, marking the transition from

reality to illusion. A function it has assumed as a fundamental element of the "teatro all'italiana" ("Italian-style playhouse") – a type of theatre building that has been culturally hegemonic in Europe between the 16th and 19th centuries – where the curtain is usually made of heavy velvet fabric (to muffle the noises from the backstage), and of the same colour as the theatre's upholstery (from the late 19th century mostly red with golden fringes, but previously often green, blue or silver, cf. Barba-Savarese 2017, pp. 139 and 142).

The Italian-style playhouse, which was created from Renaissance inventions in Italy, was later perfected in France and later taken up in Austria, Germany, in the north and east of Europe, as well as in Spain and England as a "cultured" alternative to traditional spaces (Schino 2006, p. 47). It has a cylindrical structure identified by its «internal volume» (Cruciani 1992, p. 13), where a curtain framed by the scenic arch covers the stage. Stages boxes, places for meetings and relations designed to face each other, overlook the stalls area. In the basic typology, these are sitting rooms that can be hidden from view with drapes in the style of the main curtain (more sumptuous for the royal stage which is usually above the entrance to the stalls).

The cloth that covers the stage – which was already present in ancient Greek and Roman theatres (see A. Luceri, *Sipario/Courtain*), on which the invention of a new space for theatre in the courts and academies of the Italian Renaissance was modelled – is a recurring element in spaces for the performances of actors in different theatrical epochs and cultures.

The chapter dedicated to architecture in the *Natya-sastra*, a treatise summarising the knowledge about–the performing arts in India between the 2nd century BC and the 2nd century AD, describes the action of bringing a curtain onto the stage behind which «preliminary actions» take place (Cruciani 1992, p. 83). It can still be observed in Kathakali, where the actor, in elaborate traditional costume, begins his dance behind a multicoloured curtain held by two men, which he moves and shakes amidst shouts before lowering it to show himself to the audience. Also in Bali, in the Topeng, the curtain is integrated into the performance and used by the actor-dancer to dramatise his entrance onto the stage (first shaken, then moved aside to face the audience, finally vigorously opened). In Chinese theatre, the stage has no curtain, but curtains close off the space reserved for the actors at the back. In Japan, in the space fixed since the 16th century for Nô, a curtain closes the "mirror room" where the actor prepares (at the end of a bridge diagonal to the stage). In contrast, Kabuki, a genre widespread in the 17th century, since 1644 has a large curtain that opens and closes the performance (it is composed of vertical stripes of different colours, canonical for the different families of actors), and other curtains are used during the action for spectacular effects (cf. Barba-Savarese 2017, pp. 142-43; Cruciani 1992, pp. 84-89).

Historically, in Europe the curtain can also be found in the simple canvas-dressing rooms at the bottom of temporary stages erected for performances in public squares and fairs (Cruciani 1992, p. 95). In the Middle Ages, curtains were used to cover the various *mansions* (*sedes*, or *loci*) in and around which liturgical dramas in churches or open-air performances took place (cf. Brockett 1998, p. 102). They are mentioned in the captions: in France, they were called *rideaux* or *courtines* (as in *Jeux d'Adam*, 13th century), in Great Britain *curteynes*, in Italy *cortine* (as in *Quem quaeritis*, 12th century), *tende*, or *tele*. These were drapes hanging from rings sliding on a pole, like those visible in the miniature *Martyr de Sainte Apolline* by Fouquet (15th cent., cf. Povoledo 1962): they were opened where the action took place, closed on the surrounding *sedes* to focus the audience's attention.

15th century sacred representations used cloths for the sudden revelation of scenic prodigies, such as the machinery for Paradise in the Annunciation in the Church of the Annunziata in Florence in 1439, on the occasion of the Council: suddenly «the curtains of the upper tribune opened, making a noise similar to that of thunder», and one saw «God the Father surrounded by more than five hundred burning lamps». From there, an angel descended on ropes and started a fire that filled the space with sparks and then, returning to the tribune, lit «i lumi della chiesa» ("the lights of the church"). When the angel ascended, the flame went out, and the curtains closed again (testimony of a Russian bishop reported in D'Ancona, *Origini del teatro italiano*, Turin 1891, vol. I, pp. 248-49, cited in Schino 2006, pp. 30-31).

Curtains also adorned the spaces set up for tournaments. These different traditions meet with the inventions of the Renaissance when, in connection with the culture of the court and humanistic research, the need for a specific space for performances arises. The model is Vitruvius' *De Architectura*. The Roman Academy of Pomponio Leto and Sulpizio da Veroli (to whom we owe in 1486 the first publication of the text, rediscovered in 1414) began around 1470 to stage ancient texts, looking for indications in its descriptions of Roman theatre. The stage – it is assumed – was similar to the one illustrated in the edition of Terence's works printed in 1493 in Lyon by Johann Trechsel and imitated and known throughout Europe: a scenic façade on which are doors closed by curtains,-through which the actors enter. The designer, Jodius Bodius Ascensius, had participated in productions at the court of Ferrara, another outpost (soon followed by other courts and academies), where the processes of reinvention of ancient theatre took place (cf. Brockett 1998, pp. 151-52; Morpurgo 1984, p. 90).

Famous are the two curtains, made of satin and "sarzo", lowered using a system of ropes (of which a drawing remains in the *Codice Atlantico* in the Ambrosiana Library), which marked the Annunciation in the *Festa del Paradiso* that Leonardo Da Vinci set up in 1490 at the Castello Sforzesco for the wedding feast of Gian Galeazzo Maria Sforza and Isabella d'Aragona (cf. Povoledo 1962). However, the main centre of diffusion of the new theatrical culture of the early 16th century was Rome: it was here that the use of perspective on stage – the new wonder revealed by the fall of the curtains (cf. Panicali 1984, pp. 26 and 28) – was consolidated and «a separate and special place [...] for the spectacle was determined» (Cruciani 1992, p. 17). In 1519, the ambassador of Ferrara Alfonso Paolucci attended a performance of Ludovico Ariosto's *I suppositi* by Raphael in Rome and reported to Duke Alfonso d'Este of a curtain lowered at the sound of fifes, with the jester of Pope Leo X, Friar Mariano, and some devils painted on it, see Panicali 1984, p. 25, quoting G. Antonucci, *Teatro e spettacolo nella Roma del '500*, in «Capitolium» 2-3 (1975), p. 39. Ariosto refers to the diffusion of the classically derived "falling" curtain in the 1532 edition of *Orlando Furioso*, comparing the appearance of Bradamante's beauty, when she removes her helmet and reveals her face, to the astonishment of the audience in front of the decorated and illuminated scene as the curtains open: «Quale al cader delle cortine suole / parer, fra mille lampade, la scena, / d'archi, et di più d'una superba mole / d'oro e di statue e di pitture piena» (canto XXXII).

16th century treatises, such as the second of Sebastiano Serlio's *Sette libri dell'architettura* (1545), a summary of the stage practices adopted up to that point, describe the curtain as a canonical element of the theatrical space. Its task is to entertain «the wait before the opening» of the performance (Banu 1990, p. 239): until the arrival of the princes, when the scene is quickly revealed, it is «"the focus" on which the audience's gaze rests longer» (Panicali 1984, p. 27). It is only closed (raised) at the end of the performance.

The Renaissance also saw the adoption of painted curtains, an announcement of the performance and an integral part of the play: curtains rising upwards, wound up on rollers, sometimes in addition to the traditional ancient-style curtains. In 1565 in Florence, Federico Zuccari's large curtain for Francesco d'Ambra's *La Cofanaria*, staged with interludes by Gian Battista Cini in the Salone dei Cinquecento for the wedding of Francesco Medici and Giovanna d'Austria, was presented as a great innovation. It depicts a "Landscape with hunters and an ideal view of Florence in the background", which recalls the perspective scenario created for the performance by Vasari (cf. Panicali 1984, p. 26). On other occasions, the curtains recall the surrounding space, as in the apparatus for the staging of Giovanni de' Bardi's *Amico Fido* set up by Bernardo Buontalenti for the Grand Duke of Tuscany in the Uffizi Hall in 1586. Here the curtain, behind which a backdrop with a perspective of Florence appears, is integrated with the room, and painted to simulate a garden with plants and birds. However, a second curtain was also composed of two «large cloths of red velvet, with beautiful and great tassels of gold and silk» («in a moment, with unspeakable wonder, the curtains covering the Scene were raised before the eyes of the spectators, and it seemed as if they transformed into two very rich and large red velvet

cloths, with beautiful and large gold and silk tassels on both sides. And when they fell, it seemed as if Paradise had opened, such was the view of our imitated City» (*Descrizione dell'Apparato e intermedii per la Commedia "L'Amico Fido" di G. de' Bard*, Florence 1585, Marescotti, cit. in Panicali 1984, p. 27). This kind of curtain was to become canonical, but the curtains in the 16th century were still the object of variety and invention: in the *Intermedi fiorentini* of the *Pellegrina* by G. Bargagli, staged in 1589 by Buontalenti, a curtain of silk or glass fringes descends slowly from above, simulating «the thickening of a shroud of vapours», which was then illuminated by the appearance of the «silhouette of the sun » (Panicali 1984, p. 28), and the scene appeared at the end «all surrounded by golden reeds» (*Diario descritto da Giuseppe Pavoni delle feste per le nozze di F. Medici e Cristina di Lorena*, Bologna 1589, cit. *ibidem*).

Theatres in stonework such as the Olimpico in Vicenza designed by Palladio (completed in 1585), and the Farnese in Pama (1618-28, cf. Povoledo 1962) had an *ad auleum* curtain, while the use of a double curtain remained rare until the 17th century (cf. Panicali 1984, p. 28). Gian Lorenzo Bernini for *I due Covielli*, in Rome in 1637, used the traditional curtain as an innovative dramaturgical expedient: when it fell, the audience saw other spectators in front of them, mirrors of those present in the small academy theatre, and two actors (Bernini himself and his brother) each facing his own stalls area. A play made of theatre within theatre and perspectives: "the two Covielli" decided to close the curtain and to act each one «to his people». In the end, as the curtain was reopened, the real audience saw the simulated one heading home in carriages while Death galloped between them (cf. Schino 2006, p. 89, and M. Montecuccoli's report to the Duke of Mantua from S. Fraschetti, *Il Bernini. La sua vita, la sua opera, il suo tempo*, Milan 1900, Hoepli, pp. 262-63, cited there, pp. 89-91).

With the triumph of melodrama – born in Florence in 1600 – and Baroque stagecraft, the tradition of the decorated curtain, in front of which mythological interludes were performed, was enriched. A famous curtain was designed in 1637 by Alfonso Parigi il Giovane – together with the provisional theatre at the back of the Pitti Palace and the scenography – for the musical opera *Le nozze degli dei* by Abbot Coppola at the wedding of the Grand Duke of Tuscany Ferdinando II and Vittoria Princess of Urbino: raised to half-height, it took different shapes according to the changes of the scene, to finally rise up to the stage's arch, leaving the three levels of the stage open to view (cf. Panicali in Morpurgo 1984, pp. 94-95). The curtain was now also a "frontispiece": it bore the title and event of the performance like the cover of a book, or was painted like an allegorical prologue (cf. Panicali 1984, p. 28).

In the *Pratica di fabbricar scene e machine ne' teatri* (Ravenna 1638) Nicola Sabbatini dedicated a few short paragraphs to the curtain, which could be dropped or raised using ropes and counterweights (Nicoll 1971, p. 97). For scene changes, he suggested drawing the audience's attention elsewhere (with noises, mock accidents, or the sound of trumpets and drums – cf. Fagiolo 1973, pp. 59-60), but the Baroque practice had already imposed astonishing kaleidoscopic changes in plain view.

In Germany, the work of the architect-scenographer Joseph Furttenbach (1591-1667), who had studied under Buontalenti and had in-depth knowledge of the work of Italian architect-scenographers, was fundamental: in his treatise *Architectura Recreationis* (1640). Furttenbach distinguished «Four Fuora, or tarps or painted curtains», starting with the *Portalvorhänge*, which marked the beginning of the performance (Morpurgo 1984, p. 95).

In England, in the open-air public theatres built from the 16th century onwards, curtains could close the doors of the multi-storey facade that formed the back of the stage. These curtains were used for actors' entrances or exits or were opened to make the *inner stage* (or *discovery place*) visible: a hidden space, shown when the action required it. As in medieval theatre, *mansions* and simple scenic elements were used, of which the most important was the costume that was sumptuous and contemporary in style (Brockett 1998, pp. 199-200 and 204-6). However, at court, for the staging of the *masques* – allegorical tales in which music, dance and visual apparatus prevailed – Italian scenographic principles were taken up,

using scenic arches and curtains. A famous stage designer was Inigo Jones (1573-1652) from London, who, like Furttenbach, had studied in Florence with Buontalenti (cf. Brockett 1998, p. 212 and Schino 2006, p. 47).
The *corrales*, the public theatres of 16th century Spain which had a similar structure to the English ones, also lacked a stage arch and curtain. The several storey high façade at the back of the stage had doors closed by curtains, which sometimes opened to reveal interior rooms (Brockett 1998, p. 234). At this time, the scene in the Italian style became popular at court, but its fortune was mainly linked to the arrival from Florence in 1626 of Cosimo Lotti (who in 1640 built a permanent theatre in the Buen Retiro palace, which was a synthesis of Italian and Spanish styles - Brockett 1998, p. 236).
In France, stage curtains are documented in court ballets from 1610 (Povoledo 1962). The most common use at the time were structures derived from medieval *sedes*. These were closed off by curtains and arranged on the sides and at the back of the stage (cf. Brockett 1998, p. 256-57). The court theatre, the Palais Cardinal, that Richelieu had appointed Le Mercier to build (Morpurgo 1984, p. 95), was inaugurated in 1641 with Jean Desmarets' tragicomedy *Mirame*, which had a curtain-frontispiece announcing the title of the work. In 1645 the Petit-Bourbon was transformed by Giacomo Torelli, who had been called to the court to set up operas, in an Italian-style playhouse with machines for scene changes in plain sight for the triumphal staging of *La finta pazza* (Brockett 1998, p. 258). However, in 1647 at the Hôtel de Bourgogne the curtain ceased to be an element of the *décor* of the individual performance and became part of the theatre (Surgers 1991). The stage of this theatre, which was built in 1548 for the religious performances of the *Confrérie de la Passion* and adapted at the turn of the century to house theatre companies, was initially closed by a metal grate: «It was the last example of the festive citizens' theatre, when audience and actors [non-professionals] were so close that they had to be separated» (Taviani in Schino - Taviani 2007, p. 448). On the contrary, the cloth curtain would mark the separation between the two distant worlds of the society of spectators, owner and commissioner of the new buildings, and the "micro-society" of the actors (cf. Meldolesi 1984). It is perhaps no coincidence that its function – which had become canonical and repetitive in the customary use of Italian-style playhouses – was again discussed and reinvented when (as in the performances of Renaissance courts and academies) actors and spectators (and directors) were-once again part of the same society (cf. Schino 2017, p. 13).
From the 16th century – while the use of a simple cloth at the back of the stage in the squares was continued, as witnessed by the iconography – the professional actors of the Commedia dell'Arte acted in public theatres, court theatres, or "comedy rooms", set up in imitation of the Italian-style theatres (Cruciani 1992, pp. 69-71). Together with that of the architects-scenographers, their circulation is what «reinforces a basic homogeneity of the theatrical space in Europe» (*ibid*., p. 27).
The decorated curtain, which was influenced by Italian models, became a widespread tradition from the 17th century (Bachler 1984, p. 33). In the Renaissance it was a «visual prologue» to the performance (Panicali 1984, p. 28). Between the 18th and 19th centuries it was increasingly linked to theatres and cities, representing allegories of power, remembrances of local history, theatrical, mythological, and symbolic or naturalistic themes. Techniques and styles alternated, following the influence of different architect-set designers and artists. Famous in Vienna was a curtain (inaugurated in 1888, destroyed by fire in 1945) painted by Josef Fux and his pupil Leopold Burger for the *Burgtheater an der Ringstrasse*, where the most famous actors of the theatre were portrayed as muses and geniuses (Bachler 1984, p. 35). In the 19th century, at the height of the diffusion of Italian-style playhouses in large and small towns as a representative building for bourgeois society, every theatre had one or more painted curtain (nowadays they are only exhibited on special occasions, as museum pieces). It was only in the 19th century that the use of red velvet curtains with golden fringes prevailed, matching the decorations of the auditorium: instead of the picture of the painted curtain within the frame of the scenic arch, a closed curtain completed the

theatre's cylindrically-shaped inner space of theatre. The theatre hall closes in upon itself in the exaltation of bourgeois values (Banu 1990, p. 249).
To combat the risk of fire, which increased with gas lighting, a metal curtain descending from above was introduced in the 19th century to separate the stage and the auditorium. First made of mesh, then usually of corrugated metal sheet, the iron curtains became compulsory around 1880 (Nicoll 1971, p. 161). They could also be designer curtains decorated to simulate artistic gates like those of the Vienna Opera (painted by Anton Brioschi). Churchill made of them a metaphor for the division of Europe after the Second World War, talking about the *iron curtain* that came down with the closing of the borders at the beginning of the Cold War (cf. Banu 1990, pp. 256-57, Barba-Savarese 2017, p. 184).
Also dating back to the 19th century, the drop scene (*comodino*) is a lighter and more maneuverable curtain than the main one and was used until the early 20th century for breaks between the scenes. Sometimes it was replaced with special "advertising curtains". An opening, closed by a cloth, allowed the actors to come out and receive applause at the end of the act. Furthermore, on the main curtain and drop scene there was normally a small glass-covered hole that allowed the actors to observe the audience as it made its way to the stalls area (cf. Tofano 1965, pp. 233-36).
The use of the curtain between acts is a widespread practice from the end of the 18th century when «the use of mutation on sight is progressively abandoned» (Cruciani 1992, p. 42. However, the captions of Boiardo's *Timone*, printed in 1500, already provided for the closing of the curtain at each act, cf. *ibid.*, p. 60). In France, the writer d'Aubignac (for *La Pucelle d'Orleans*, 1641) was the first to propose closing the curtain to indicate a change of location for the action (Banu 1990, p. 240). With the spread of public theatres, it was mostly the provincial theatres that closed the curtain for scene changes due to fewer technical possibilities. In Germany and the Netherlands it was closed «to remove the candle ends» (G. Bapst, *Essai sur l'histoire du théâtre*, Paris 1893, cit. *ibidem*). However, «the Romantic custom of opening and closing the curtain at each act» only prevails from 1839, with Rossini's *William Tell* in Paris (Cruciani 1992, p. 15), becoming the norm of bourgeois drama.
In Charles Garnier's Paris Opera, inaugurated in 1875, the curtain is painted to simulate an elaborate gold-fringed red velvet drapery. The idea was to avoid the practical difficulties of the traditional curtain – with its increasingly opulent and complex drapery (Morpurgo 1984, p. 125) – without renouncing the «aim [...] of conveniently, luxuriously, and sumptuously closing the proscenium opening and harmonising this closure with the ornamentation and colouring of the room» (Charles Garnier, *Le Théâtre*, Paris 1871, Libraire Hachette, p. 238, quoted in Banu 1990, p. 254). One year later, in 1876, the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth was inaugurated. Richard Wagner had renovated the space to further involve the audience in the theatrical illusion: the curtain had a new way of opening, radiating from the centre towards the corners at the top and marked by a rhythm linked to the atmosphere of the drama. This was the beginning of an "expressive" curtain (cf. Bablet 1984, p. 44, Banu 1990, p. 259), which was to be the object of research and experimentation in the 20th century.
The curtain that Konstantin Stanislavskij wanted for the Moscow Art Theatre (cf. Ripellino 2002, p. 37), designed and adapted from the Liazonov Theatre by the architect Fëdor Šechtel in 1902, was sliding and made of grey velvet: the colour harmonised with the green-olive walls, and simple Art-Nouveau decorations on the flounce repeated the decorative themes of the hall. The idea was that of a fourth wall that opened onto a moment of life (not the ostentatious exaltation of the beginning of the play, but a wall that imperceptibly recedes when the actors have already begun to act – Banu 1990, p. 259). The set designer Viktor Simov placed furniture near the proscenium, facing the stage (cf. Di Milia 1984, p. 36), and the actors could have their backs to the audience – as in Chekhov's *The Seagull*, 1898. In memory of the success of this play, a double, small seagull was painted to decorate the curtain next to the central opening (Barba-Savarese 2017, p. 173).

The curtains created by the *Mir Iskusstva* group ("The World of Art", founded in 1868 in St Petersburg) for Djagilev's *Ballets Russes* and Vsevolod Mejerchol'd's productions were quite different in style. They were designed to be part of the performance, to which these artistis lent active collaboration with their taste for theatricality and the masks of the Commedia dell'Arte, as in Blok's *Balagančik* ("The Little Shanty") staged by Mejerchol'd in 1906 with Konstantin Somov, where a tragic story of masks takes place on a small theatre built inside the stage. A theatre within a theatre was also built in 1911 for *Petruška*, a ballet on Stravinsky's music with libretto, sets, costumes, and curtain by Aleksandr Benois (Di Milia 1984, p. 37). Experiments were made at the intersection of pictorial and theatrical languages, with actors assimilated to the backdrop and dancers whose movements and costumes harmonised with the painted scene. The curtain of the Russian Symbolists heralds the performance, revealing its hidden meaning. In *Padiglione di Armida* of 1907, «Benois's curtain, inspired by a *gobelin*, was repeated as the first scene and began to move, giving the impression of an optical hallucination» (Di Milia 1984, p. 39). For Djaghilev's ballets, Picasso, in addition to the well-known Bakst, also painted, starting in 1917 with *Parade*, a ballet by Jean Cocteau with music by Erik Satie (premiere in Paris, Théâtre du Châtelet, 18 May 1917 - cf. Morpurgo 1984, pp. 157-67), for which he created scenes, costumes, and a courtain-showing a moment of the backstage life of the characters.

In 1917 for *Maskarad* ("The Masked Ball") by Lermontov Mejerchol'd used a different curtain for each act: the painter was Alekandr Golovin, with whom he had been working since 1890. The play was the result of seven years of work, and the curtains, harmonised with the atmosphere of the scenes (and the decorations of the Aleksandrinsky's hall), were an «elaborate system» for the frequent scene changes (Ripellino 2002, pp. 181-82; Morpurgo 1984, p. 168). For the dance scene, the curtain was multicoloured but did not exclude black, the colour of tragedy, and was cut by slits to allow the masks to enter quickly. These were unique 'semantic' curtains, while around them the tradition of the classical decorative curtains continued (Klim 1984, p. 41). The spectacle-event created by the new art of direction thus leads back to the Renaissance curtain, that is decoration and prologue, and an integral part of the performance (cf. Banu 1990, p. 260). Clothes, drapes and draperies and a sumptuous gold-dust curtain had already invaded the space of Calderón de la Barca's *La devoción de la Cruz*, staged by Mejercol'd in 1910 in a small private theatre. However, the tendency to want to bring the stage and stalls closer together, enhancing the proscenium, led the director in the same year to abolish the curtain, in *Dom Juan*, (cf. Ripellino 2002, pp. 144 and 150). This trend became the rule after the revolution of 1917, with the triumph of constructivism in the theatre replacing the old stage sets (Ripellino 2002, p. 282). The curtain, if present, now had a dramaturgical value, as in Mejerchol'd's *The Inspector General* by Gogol in 1926, a «prodigious theatrical machine» (*ibid*., p. 319) in which every movement of actors and scenes was arranged in detail. In the finale, a white curtain on which the announcement of the arrival of the real Inspector was written in black letters, rose very slowly: the characters, who had been deceived by the fake, «scattered screaming», and «the white curtain began to rise again with equal slowness, revealing the 'mute scene'»: motionless wax figures replaced the actors, creating a strong contrast between the great movement that preceeded and their tragic appearance of petrified beings (Ripellino 2002, pp. 332-33).

In Germany, the Bauhaus offered an experimental *Curtain Play* in 1928, investigating its expressiveness given by the rhythm of openings and closings in dialogue with the actors' movements (cf. O. Schlemmer, *Neue Formen der Bühne - Eine Unterhaltung von Oskar Schlemmer* in «Schünemanns Monatshefte», Bremen 1928, pp. 1062-72, now in Schlemmer 1982, pp. 175-78: 175). In the same year, Max Reinhardt, who also used circuses and large open spaces for his stagings, wrote about abolishing the curtain (cf. Perrelli 2019, p. 196). The separation between everyday life and fiction was no longer sought, but, already with Mejerchol'd, continuity and gradualness of the passage from the arrival in the theatre to the theatrical fiction are investigated, leaving the curtain open to allow the public to observe the stage environment (cf. Quadri-Ponte di Pino 1984, p. 47).

The curtain that Bertolt Brecht used for his "epic theatre" has a similar function: it neither contradicts traditional space nor does it conceal or «reveal» (Banu 1990, p. 242). It is a curtain derived from those used in variety shows and *café chantant*, light-coloured to allow the projection of the titles of the scenes of the play, and suspended at half height to make the preparation of the scene visible so that the audience does not forget they are in a theatre and can see the actual work of the actors (Brecht 1951). It is a curtain that excludes theatricality and wonder, laying bare the mechanisms of the theatre as well as unmasking those of the society of which it is a part (but the Theater am Shiffbauerdamm, that became home of the Berliner Ensemble in the years following War World II, also has its traditional curtain, on which Brecht wanted Picasso's dove painted).

The search for «new relations between the theatre and the stage; and new places for performance» (Cruciani 1992, p. 106) had already begun at the end of the 19th century. Having become canonical together with the Italian style theatre-space, the curtain in the 20th century is again questioned and reinvented on the basis of specific theatrical poetics. Innovative theatre experiments take inspiration from the past and the exotic: they look at the circus and the Elizabethan stage, and adopt a space open to the full participation of the public from Greek theatre (like Lugné-Poe with the Cirque d'Été in Paris, or Reinhardt with the Schumann Circus in Berlin). Moreover, even when realised in traditional spaces, the theatre sought new logics: continuity beyond the division into scenes, in a show intended as an autonomous work of art. The theories and experiments of Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig (both against the use of the curtain for a greater closeness of the audience, cf. Bablet 1984, pp. 45-46), opened the way to the idea of a space created by the single performance, a space which was no longer a starting point, but a dynamic «linguistic and expressive instrument» (Cruciani 1992, p. 121).

With the avant-garde movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the relationship between actors and spectators increasingly became the object of experimentation (Cruciani 1992, pp. 168-69): the theatre curtain, the diaphragm dividing them, disappeared or lent itself to new forms and meanings. The different "spaces of relationship" between actors and spectators created since 1959 in the performances directed by Jerzy Grotowski were not divided by any curtain: the audience and performers were in close proximity, and their reciprocal positions were part of the dramaturgy. As in *The Constant Prince* of 1965, where four wooden walls excluded the audience from the square of the action, which they could observe by leaning out from above (Cruciani 1992, pp. 164-66). Since 1964, Eugenio Barba, with the Odin Teatret, has been constructing performances based on the physical proximity of actors and audience; the curtain, generally excluded, appears in *The Gospel According to Oxyrhincus*, 1985, to conceal the spatial arrangement. Here the spectators witnessed a traditional scene on entering, a wooden stage with a red cloth. However, the curtain then dropped, revealing behind it another terrace with an audience, and the action took place in the centre (Barba in Nagel Rasmussen 2006, p. 118).

The effect is reminiscent of Bernini's "*I due Covielli*": the theatre is reinvented through a dialogue with the ancient, but the actor's space of action with Barba is new, and really open on two sides. Schlemmer imagined it in the same way in 1926 for the theatre of the Bauhaus in Dessau, with the aim to overcome the «visual box» (*Die Bühne im Bauhaus*, in «Bauhaus 1», Dessau 1926, p. 3, in Schlemmer 1982, pp. 146-47: 146).

The curtain takes part in the search for new dynamics in spectator observation and perception. Happenings played around with the curtain (such as Ben Vautier's *Sipario II*, 1963, where only the sounds of a performance behind a close curtain arrived, cf. Morpurgo 1984, p. 84), and it is a sort of barbed wire fence to divide the spectators from the actors of the Living Theatre in *The Brig* in 1963 (cf. Quadri-Ponte di Pino 1984, p. 52). This was one of the many ways to reinvent the "fourth wall" and question its function. The semantic use of the curtain is also possible through traditional apparatuses, as in Giorgio Strehler's finale for the second edition (1966) of Pirandello's *I giganti della montagna*, with the iron curtain that comes down to crush the carriage of comedians, showing the destructive weight of technocracy on poetry (cf. *ibid*., pp. 55-56). The examples could be endless.

Besides the permanence in opera or prose theatre of the traditional curtain, with openings and closures marking pauses in the show and the moments of audience sociality in the auditorium, the present theatre, which is realised in multiple and different kinds of spaces (and also when it uses the Italian-style playhouse often tends to modify it in view of new possible relationships between actors and spectators), is left with the possibility of infinite reinventions. When present, the curtain can be the usual sign of the opening and closing, or an integral part of the sense of the performance. It can be an external frame or a living element that participates with scenes and actors in the complex language of the staging.

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