

THURSDAY, MAY 27, 2021

10:45 - 12:45 (EDT)

# WORLD AND STAGE

MISE-EN-SCÈNE: ANCIENT TO MODERN

# 2

SESSION #

## PRESENTATIONS

### **Roman Theatre's *scenae frons* as a Thematic Edifice**

Dagmar Motycka Weston, University of Edinburgh

### **"All heaven is his stage"**

### **Theater, Piety, and Architecture in the Church of Hagios Georgios, Thessaloniki**

Elena Gittleman, Bryn Mawr College

### **A Question of Décor: Political Theatre in Renaissance Ferrara**

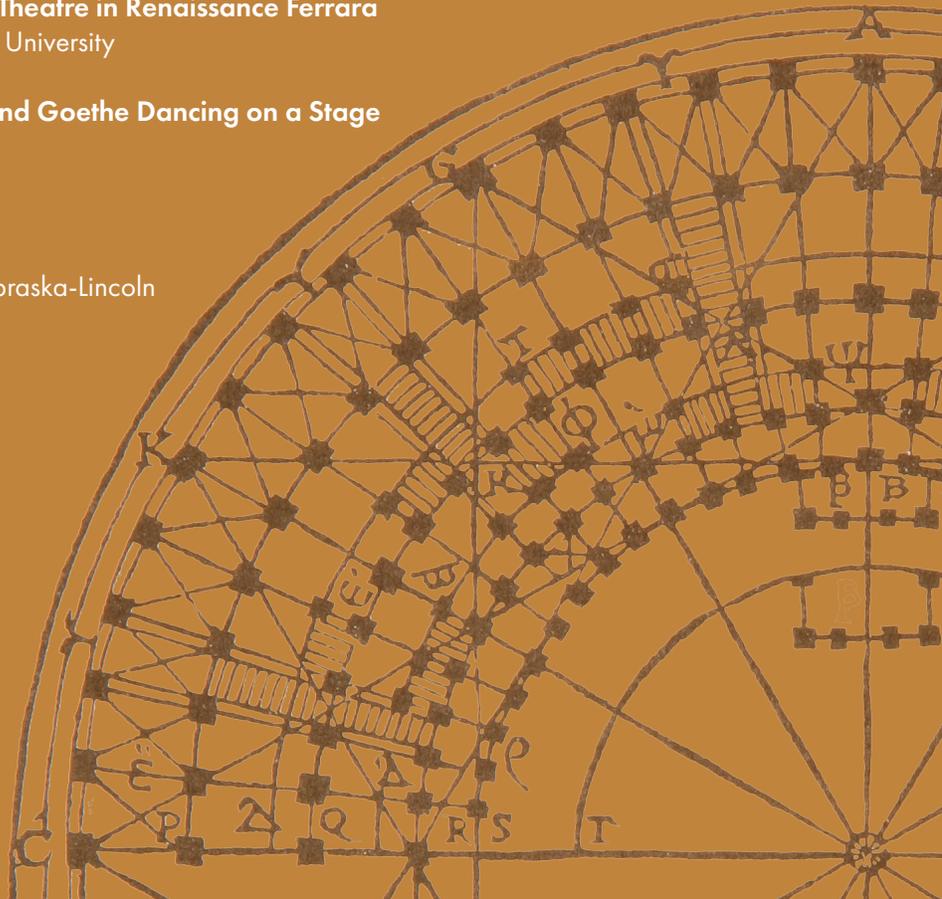
Indra Kagis McEwen, Concordia University

### **Semper, Wagner, Nietzsche and Goethe Dancing on a Stage**

Golnar Ahmadi, Virginia Tech

## MODERATOR

Rumiko Handa, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

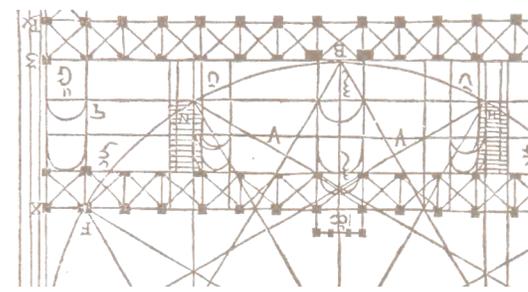


## SESSION 2

### WORLD

#### Roman Theatre's *scenae frons* as a Thematic Edifice

Dagmar Motycka Weston, University of Edinburgh



Ancient theatre was understood to have a cosmic significance, and may be seen as an archetype of architecture. The paper focuses on the symbolic content of Roman theatre's scene building façade, the *scenae frons*, which may be considered one of the key origins of the western sacred architectural façade. Developed from the city gate and the Hellenistic *skene*, and informed by the façades of Roman imperial palaces, the elaborate structure of the *scenae frons* provided a scenographic framework and an additional layer of symbolic meaning to drama. An architecture of both religious and a political significance, the *scenae frons*, with its hierarchical structure of portals, columnar screens and aediculae, represented the celestial city of the gods, into which exceptional men may ascend. By being placed in the façade, the earthly ruler was deified. During the imperial period, the architecture of the *scenae frons* came increasingly to represent Rome's ambitions of world domination. In a culture highly attuned to commemoration and the art of memory, it seems likely that some façades were in part understood as an elaborate mnemonic device. The paper further considers the affinity between the *scenae frons* and the scenographic and commemorative architecture of the triumphal arch. It then looks at how the thematic structure of the Roman façade was absorbed into early Christian and medieval iconography, where it lent a narrative, microcosmic content to church fronts, and an appropriate grandeur to Christ, represented in terms of a triumphant Roman emperor.

**Dr. Dagmar Motycka Weston** trained as an architect in Toronto, before undertaking graduate studies at the Architectural Association and the University of Cambridge. She holds a PhD in the History and Philosophy of Architecture from the latter. She has taught architectural history and design at the University of Edinburgh (where she is now an Honorary Fellow), specializing in early 20th-century art and architecture. Her publications include essays and book chapters in *Chora II*, *Symbols of Time in the History of Art*, *Modernism and the Spirit of the City*, *Tracing Modernity*, *ARQ*, *Papers of Surrealism*, *The Humanities in Architectural Design*, *The Cultural Role of Architecture*, *Phenomenologies of the City*, *The Living Tradition of Architecture* and the *AA Files*. Her recent book, *The Seventh Hall of the Leathersellers' Company*, was an interpretation of Eric Parry Architects' new Livery Company hall in the City of London. She is currently working on *Eric Parry Architects, Volume 5*.



## WORLD

## “All heaven is his stage”: Theater, Piety, and Architecture in the Church of Hagios Georgios, Thessaloniki

Elena Gittleman, Bryn Mawr College

In the midst of the Byzantine Church’s condemnation of theatrical performances and spaces, late antique cities were filled with actors, mimes, and dancers. Despite this reality – and the substantial corpus of evidence associated with Byzantine theater – modern scholars have generally held the opinion that Byzantium rejected theater *in toto*. My research challenges these claims and embraces the inconsistencies, indeed, the dichotomies, within and between the written and material record to explore theater in Byzantium anew. In this paper, I revisit the mosaics of the fourth/fifth-century church of Hagios Georgios in Thessaloniki, arguing that in this space, theater was embraced as a vehicle of the sacred despite Christian invectives against it.

The central dome is embedded with great mosaics depicting *orant* (praying) saints standing before giant, glittering architectural façades. Although these façades are widely interpreted as depictions of Heavenly Jerusalem, it is my contention that they are in fact *scaenae frons*, the permanent architectonic backdrop of Greco-Roman theaters. Thus, they literally situate the saints as actors or rhetoricians upon a stage. Rather than shunning the immense social force of theater, the patrons of Hagios Georgios embraced it, subverting the pejorative associations to create a powerful space of piety.

I argue that the decorative program of Hagios Georgios embraced and transformed the mimetic potential of theater, which was a concern at the core of ecclesiastical condemnations. I combine a conceptual framework rooted in contemporary performance theory with traditional methods of art and architectural history to offer a novel analysis of the architecture and materiality of Hagios Georgios and its mosaics. Created while “traditional” theatrical performances (i.e., tragedies, comedies, mimes, and pantomimes) regularly occurred throughout the Thessaloniki, and the Church was simultaneously attempting to shut down such performances, these mosaics provide a valuable opportunity to reevaluate the social power of theater in Byzantium.

**Elena Gittleman** is a PhD Candidate in the History of Art Department at Bryn Mawr College. She received her Bachelor’s degree in Art History & Archaeology from Washington University in St. Louis, and a Master’s degree in the History of Art from Southern Methodist University. During and after her MA, she worked as a square supervisor at the Huqoq Excavation Project in northern Israel. She has held positions in education and curatorial departments at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the MET Cloisters. Her dissertation explores the legacy of ancient Greco-Roman theater in medieval Byzantine visual culture, arguing that the cultural memory of theater was intimately entwined both with medieval performativity and in the elite preservation of the Empire’s classical heritage. Her research has been supported by grants from the International Center of Medieval Art, the Istanbul Research Institute, and the Medieval Academy of America, and she has presented her research at both national and international conferences.

### WORLD

#### **A Question of Décor: Political Theatre in Renaissance Ferrara**

Indra Kagis McEwen, Concordia University

“The greatest glory of the art of building is to have a sense of what is appropriate,” Alberti wrote in his *On the Art of Building* (9.5). The paper examines this appeal to décor and decorum (“what is fitting”) and its attendant vindication of a hierarchical city in the context of political developments 15<sup>th</sup>-century Ferrara, where Alberti’s architectural career began in the mid 1440’s. Not coincidentally, Ferrara was where, during the reign of Ercole d’Este revival of the classical theatre would be accompanied by a reciprocal and closely analogous transformation of the entire city into a classically inspired stage for its ruler’s power. Ferrara became a dukedom in 1471 and investiture with the sovereign title of duke gave him power which, dependent until then on popular acclamation and ongoing collaboration with a municipal council of elected officials, was now autonomous and absolute.

Alberti had long since left Ferrara by the time Ercole d’Este acceded to the newly established dukedom in 1471, but he participated in the city’s transformation through the mediation of his devoted disciple, Pellegrino Prisciani, librarian, archivist, court astrologer, and architectural advisor to the duke for whom he wrote a short treatise called *Spectacula*, in which, as he writes in his preface, he sought out “ancient records of . . . spectacles and games and the buildings they require,” for the staging of shows he claims would “be of no small benefit to the entire state.” The “ancient records” he refers to are, almost exclusively, those transmitted by Vitruvius and Alberti and the city’s altered décor, conceived in terms of spectacle and underwritten by ancient authority, was to be proof of the new political order. In Ferrara, the “world” the theatre shaped and the world it was shaped by converged in the same, intensely worldly world of early renaissance politics.

**Dr. Indra Kagis McEwen** is an architect, historian and affiliate professor in the Art History Department at Concordia University, Montreal. She has taught at several different universities as well as, for 13 years, in the scenography department at the National Theatre School of Canada. She holds an honours B.A. in English and Philosophy (Queen’s), as well as professional degree in Architecture, a Master’s in Architectural History and Theory and a Doctorate in Art History (McGill). Her many publications include *Socrates’ Ancestor: An Essay on Architectural Beginnings* (MIT, 1993), *Vitruvius: Writing the Body of Architecture* (MIT, 2003) and *Ordonnance for the Five Kinds of Columns, a translation from the French of Claude Perrault’s 17-century treatise*, published with an introduction by Alberto Pérez-Gómez (Getty Centre, 1994). A new book on Vitruvius in the Renaissance called *All the King’s Horses* is forthcoming.

## SESSION 2

### WORLD

#### **Semper, Wagner, Nietzsche and Goethe Dancing on a Stage**

Golnar Ahmadi, Virginia Tech

The nineteenth-century German Architect Gottfried Semper introduced the metaphor of “architecture as a stage” to the actual stage for the design of his Dresden Opera house. His notion for the Opera House was to manifest a microcosm of universal order where philosophy, poetry and music are playing their roles together on the stage of architecture. Semper’s long interest in Greek culture and history allowed him to draw upon the idea of the theater as the stage of the world. Furthermore, Nietzsche’s book, *The Birth of Greek Tragedy*, appeared as a main philosophical presence in Semper’s ideas about arts and its relations with ritual dances and cultural festivals.

In nineteenth century, Wagner’s idea about the “transformative experience” of theater through the notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art), has been embodied into Goethe’s idea of *Einheit* (unity.) Wagner interpreted the music as a unity of music, dance and theater. Moreover, Gottfried Semper in his book *Der Stil*, stated that the music of color should be in harmony with the music of forms. Moreover, in one of his publications, he referred to a quotation from Goethe’s *Faust* that all theories of life are grey except the golden tree of life which is green. Philosophical music, musical poetry and poetry of philosophy are all characters in the drama in his opera house. The synaesthetic idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was central to his approach. This paper will scrutinize Semper’s opera house as a stage and explore the roles of music, philosophy and poetry through the influences of Richard Wagner, Friedrich Nietzsche and Johann Wolfgang Goethe.

**Golnar Ahmadi** is a current Ph.D. candidate at Washington Alexandria Architecture Center, which is part of Virginia Tech. She received Bachelor’s and Master’s degree in architecture from Tehran University, in her native country, and the second Master of Architecture degree with a focus on sustainability from Frankfurt University, Germany. She teaches studio design at JMU and history and theory in architecture at VT. Her research is on the role of sound and music in the experience and design of architectural environments through the perception of rhythm, harmony, and proportion, and how a 2D drawing could be visualized as a 3D perception. Also, she has done some research about “Gesamtkunstwerk” and “Gestalt” theory.