The Concept of ‘Open Space’ in Italian Summer Theatre Festivals

Case Studies of the Pergine and Kilowatt Festivals and their Impact on Audience Participation

Francesco Pace

Dieser Artikel untersucht die Transformation von Theaterräumen bei italienischen Sommerfestivals und konzentriert sich dabei insbesondere auf das Festival di Pergine Valsugana und das Kilowatt Festival. Beide Festivals definieren traditionelle Theatertraditionen neu, indem sie historische, städtische und unkonventionelle Orte nutzen, um die Beteiligung des Publikums und partizipative Erfahrungen zu fördern. Die Fallstudien zu *Diario di un dolore* (Pergine) und *Relazioni necessarie* (Kilowatt) zeigen, wie ortsspezifische Darbietungen die emotionale Beteiligung, die Interaktion zwischen Schauspielern und Zuschauern und die Gemeinschaftsidentität stärken. Die Studie zeigt, dass diese Praxis ein Beispiel für innovatives Kulturmanagement ist, bei dem das Theater über konventionelle Grenzen hinausgeht und zur Stadterneuerung sowie zur Schaffung inklusiver und dynamischer öffentlicher Räume beiträgt.

In recent decades, the concept of theatre space has undergone a profound transformation. Traditionally, theatre has always been seen as a closed and isolated place, a building separated from the surrounding world. During the 20th century, however, theatre began to transcend its physical boundaries, evolving into an interactive experience. Movements like the *Living Theatre* broke down boundaries between stage and audience, fostering a more immersive, participatory experience. This new conception of the actor/audience relationship came into being at the same time as new movements questioning the theatrical space, with the emergence of the concept of the

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performative.[1] This term refers, quite simply, to the co-presence and interaction between the actors and the audience. These changes have been reinforced by a growing tendency to perform outdoors, but above all, to use non-traditional venues, leading to a more fluid conception of the theatrical space. This research intends to focus in particular on the reception of these new theatrical experiences in the sphere of Italian theatre festivals.[2] The Pergine Festival and the Kilowatt Festival stand out as emblematic cases of this significant evolution: both were distinguished by their creative use of historical and urban spaces, reconfigured as theatrical performance venues. As will be analysed in the course of this work, this practice does not only concern the original productions of the festivals, but also involves the guest companies, whose works are often reworked to adapt to new scenic contexts. These festivals, therefore, do not limit themselves to offering an alternative to the traditional stage, but tend to redefine the very coordinates of the performance space, elevating it to an active and constitutive component of the dramaturgy. By transforming everyday places into venues for artistic expression, these festivals invite audiences to engage with space and performance in new and dynamic ways.

Case study: Pergine Festival

The Pergine Festival[3] takes place annually in Pergine Valsugana, in the territory of the Autonomous Province of Trento.[4] The Festival represents the oldest and longest-running theatre festival in the province of Trento, having been founded in 1976 on the initiative of three town cultural associations.[5] Initially centred on performances set against the backdrop of the game of Draughts in Costume in the main square of Pergine,[6] the festival, immediately considered a pioneer in its genre, underwent a profound transformation over the years until the decisive turning point under the artistic direction of Cristina Pietrantonio in 2007. Her direction initiated a process of ideological and curatorial repositioning: the festival became a mouthpiece for issues related to discomfort, marginality and collective memory, especially through the creative reuse of the city's former psychiatric hospital, a place laden with historical removals.[7] In the following years, and in particular with the

1 On the concept of the performative in theatre, see: Erika Fischer-Lichte: *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2004.

2 Author's fieldwork as an accredited journalist and participant observer at the 2022 and 2023 editions of both festivals.

3 Born under the name *Pergine Spettacolo Aperto*; see: Pergine Festival: "Chi siamo", https://pergine festival.it/chi-siamo/ (30/03/2025).

4 The Province of Trento is located in Trentino-Alto Adige Region.

5 Pergine Festival, "Chi siamo".

6 Pergine Festival, "Chi siamo".

7 Pergine Festival, "Chi siamo".

direction of Carla Esperanza Tommasini and, from 2023, of the Babilonia Teatri company, the Festival consolidated its role as a platform for contemporary performing arts, favouring site-specific creation, dialogue with the territory and openness to international projects. A particularly significant example of the intertwining of performance, space and community, analysed in this study, is the performance *Diario di un dolore* by Francesco Alberici (July 2023),[8] realised in the former coach house of Pergine. The 212 m² space, with concrete floor and wooden beams,[9] was transformed into an intimate and evocative theatre hall. The choice of this location, once linked to the country's everyday rural life, fits in with the festival's curatorial line that promotes the transformation of marginal spaces into places of cultural production and participatory encounters.

Diario di un dolore, inspired by the text of the same name by C.S. Lewis, is articulated as an open reflection on mourning and the representability of grief. Alberici, joined on stage by Astrid Casali, constructs a performance that develops through direct dialogue with the audience, almost as if it were an 'open rehearsal'. The actors, constantly oscillating between narration and confession, share their personal experiences of suffering, inviting the audience to a choral and engaging reflection. The performative dimension extends right from the initial welcome, when the performers informally greet the spectators at the entrance, offering them a glass of wine or a non-alcoholic drink, thus cancelling the distance between the stage and the audience and opening up a space for human sharing before even becoming theatrical. In a performance lasting just under an hour, with no complex set design and entrusted entirely to the body, voice and presence of the actors, the dramaturgical force is released precisely from the context: the unconventional use of space and the direct relationship with the audience become central elements of staging. The audience welcomed the performance with enthusiasm and emotional participation, underlined by long applause and positive comments gathered during the interviews conducted on site.[10] By transforming these spaces into venues for artistic performances, the festival not only reinvigorated the city's cultural life, but also involved the community in reclaiming spaces once deemed unfit for public use. This process of re-appropriation is, even today, a key aspect of the festival's identity, creating a direct link between performance, space and community.

8 This was the XLVIII edition of the Pergine Festival, held from July 1 to 15, 2023. According to data provided by the Festival Press Office via email and also confirmed on the official website, 3,258 tickets were sold in that edition. If the admissions to the free events are also included, the total attendance was between 10,000 and 11,000.

9 Pergine Festival: "Ex rimessa carrozze", https://perginefestival.it/places/ex-rimessa-carrozze/ (25/03/2025).

10 The audience reactions are based on interviews conducted by the author during and at the end of the evening, as accredited journalist. For more details see: Francesco Pace: "Pergine Spettacolo Aperto 2023. La nuova edizione di un festival che guarda alla contemporaneità", in: *Corriere dello Spettacolo*, 27/08/2023, https://corrieredellospettacolo.net/2023/08/27/pergine-spettacolo-aperto-2023-la-nuova-edizione-di-un-festival-che-guarda-alla-contemporaneita/ (10/03/2025).

Case study: Kilowatt Festival

Moving southwards, to central Italy, we find the Kilowatt Festival, held in Sansepolcro, Tuscany.[11] Founded in 2003 by the Compagnia CapoTrave, it is now an international multidisciplinary festival dedicated to contemporary theatre, dance and performing arts.[12] The heart of the project is the summer festival, which takes place in July, and which in the 2022 and 2023 editions was extended to the city of Cortona.[13] The festival is known for its unconventional approach to the use of stage spaces, with performances hosted in squares, historic buildings, former churches and other symbolic places.[14] The desire to create an active relationship with the territory and its citizens has found its most original expression in the birth of the *Visionari* project, launched in 2007. This is a group composed of non-professional spectators from Sansepolcro and nearby towns, who view and discuss hundreds of applications, selecting a part of the official festival programming.[15] This participatory system, which has involved around 200 citizens over the years, has generated an unprecedented collective energy, transforming the spectator from simple user to co-curator of the festival, and thus constituting an exemplary case of active participation and democratisation of the curatorial process. For this very reason, the project was awarded the Ubu Prize in 2010 as a Special Project, and continues to represent one of Kilowatt's strongest identity elements.[16] Currently, the artistic direction of the festival is entrusted to Luca Ricci and Lucia Franchi, who continue to guide its curatorial identity in the name of innovation, openness to the territory and active involvement of the public. Fusing art forms and confronting the history of the city, the Kilowatt Festival offers an innovative approach to theatre and space. In recent years, the festival has recorded a stable and significant audience participation: in 2022 – the year to which this fieldwork also refers – there were 8,071 paying spectators, to which must be added numerous unofficially registered participants, especially on open-air events with free admission.[17] This interaction between urban space, the artistic dimension and collective participation finds one of its most effective expressions in the performance *Relazioni necessarie* by the Compagnia Lisi/

11 A small village in the Valtiberina, in the province of Arezzo, Tuscany. The small centre is also known for being the birthplace of Piero della Francesca, to whom the Civic Museum is dedicated.

12 Kilowatt Festival, "Chi siamo", https://kilowattfestival.it/chi-siamo/ (01/04/2025).

13 Kilowatt Festival, "Chi siamo".

14 Kilowatt Festival, "Le edizioni del Festival", https://kilowattfestival.it/festival-altre-edizioni/ (01/04/2025).

15 Kilowatt Festival, "Visionari", https://kilowattfestival.it/visionari/ (01/04/2025).

16 For more on the *Visionari* Project see also: Lucia Franchi/Luca Ricci: Lo spettatore è un visionario, Spoleto: Editoria & Spettacolo, 2019.

17 Data provided via email by the Kilowatt Festival Press Office (February 2025). Estimates do not include free admissions, which are difficult to quantify as many performances take place outdoors. For further details, see also: Kilowatt Festival: "Guest list", https://kilowattfestival.it/guest-list/ (01/04/2025).

Milani, presented in July 2022 inside the former church of Santa Chiara, now converted into an auditorium. The building retains its original architectural features: frescoed niches, a raised space at the former altar, and a large central hall that contributes to creating an atmosphere suspended between sacredness and theatricality.[18] The transformation of this place into a space open to contemporary culture is one of the guidelines of the festival, which recognises in the redevelopment of places an act of urban and community regeneration. The show, selected by the *Visionari* group, is a production by the young company founded by Nadia Milani and Valentina Lisi, artistically born within the *Animateria* course on figure theatre.[19] On stage, Valentina Lisi gives life to an emotional and visually rich narration, animating with scenic skill silhouettes and paper shapes emerging from a large pop-up album. The performer single-handedly constructs a plurality of voices, characters and emotions, telling the story of Matilda, a young woman grappling with the familiar knots of her past. The former sacred space amplifies the symbolic tension of the performance, making *Relazioni necessarie* an emblematic case of how the architectural context influences the perception and reception of the theatrical event. The audience's reception was particularly warm, as emerged from the numerous interviews conducted on site:[20] the performance was appreciated both for the quality of the interpretation and for its ability to evoke profound questions about identity, family and memory.

Results and impact on the public

The two cases analysed – *Diario di un dolore* and *Relazioni necessarie* – show how the adaptation of unconventional spaces profoundly affects the spectator experience. The testimonies collected in the field show that historical, intimate and reconverted environments not only foster greater emotional involvement but also contribute to redefining the relationship between actor and audience, multiplying the levels of perception and participation. In this context, theatre proves capable of inhabiting 'other' places, transforming them into living narrative devices, capable of restoring meaning, memory and identity to the community that inhabits them. Both the Pergine Festival and the Kilowatt Festival today represent two virtuous models of site-specific cultural planning, in which care for space is intertwined with artistic

18 Laboratori Permanenti: "Gli spazi – Auditorium Santa Chiara", 2021, https://www.laboratoripermanenti.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/gli-spazi-Auditorium-Santa-Chiara.pdf (01/04/2025).

19 Information from the *Animateria* project and the artists' personal websites: Nadia Milani: "Album fotografico", https://flickr.com/photos/167600854@N05/albums (01/04/2025); Valentina Lisi: "Lizard Cartoon Theatre", https://lizardcartoontheatre.wordpress.com/blog/ (01/04/2025).

20 The observations on audience reception are based on interviews conducted by the author during and at the end of the performance, in the context of field research carried out during the Kilowatt Festival 2022. For a direct testimony see also Francesco Pace: "Il Kilowatt Festival di Sansepolcro. L'energia propulsiva del fare cultura", in: *Corriere dello Spettacolo*, 18/07/2022, https://corrieredellospettacolo.net/2022/07/18/il-kilowatt-festival-di-sansepolcro-lenergia-propulsiva-del-fare-cultura-reportage-di-francesco-pace/ (25/03/2025).

vision. Their experience shows how contemporary theatre can evolve outside the confines of the traditional stage, contributing to urban regeneration and the construction of a more aware and involved audience. Looking ahead, it will be increasingly necessary to continue exploring these directions: experimenting with new places, activating new relationships between stage and spectator, interweaving art and territory. The future of theatre could pass from here: from the ability to make space – physically and symbolically – in the places of life. As a direct observer of both festivals, I was able to see for myself the transformative power of these practices: experiences that are not merely 'shows' to be seen, but become shared moments of creation, listening and community.