

**Renaissance and Reformation**  
**Renaissance et Réforme**



**Berzal de Dios, Javier. Visual Experiences in Cinquecento  
Theatrical Spaces**

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images and vestments; yet in order to adhere to the queen's wishes, he felt he had no other choice than to defend her religious program. His actions in London, therefore, signalled a "distinct shift" for him and effectively put him outside the "vanguard of the reform movement," where he once was positioned (123).

The only minor drawbacks of this monograph are several typos and Bastow's repeated anachronistic use of "nation" rather than "commonwealth" to describe England. Nonetheless, she successfully captures the intricate, tortuous narrative of the reforms in England. In tracking Sandys's career with his evolving and shifting religious views, Bastow effectively draws out the slippery politics of evangelical change in Reformation England. This work is an important contribution to scholarship on the history of religious change in England, and it brings a fresh perspective that encourages a more nuanced understanding of evangelical conformity and nonconformity.

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**Berzal de Dios, Javier.**

***Visual Experiences in Cinquecento Theatrical Spaces.***

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018. Pp. 216. ISBN 978-1-4875-0388-8 (hardcover) \$65.

While reading Italian plays of the Renaissance, such as Machiavelli's *Mandragola*, most students will wonder what the actual performances looked like. We will then, perhaps, nod towards the three printed illustrations in Sebastiano Serlio's stage designs: the tragic (a mainstream, idealized city of classical Roman times), the comic (a contemporary Italian city), and the bucolic scaena of the satyrs. Some of us will recollect the *Teatro Olimpico* in Vicenza to associate it, rather vaguely, with Andrea Palladio.

The book under review goes much further than that, for it contextualizes these famous examples within a much larger culture of architectures and drawings that sketch out the scenes of many different plays from the sixteenth

century and beyond. Divided into four chapters, the book roughly spans from Baldassare Peruzzi's sketch for Bibbiena's *Calandria* (1513) to Orazio Scarabelli's engravings for Buontalenti's *La pellegrina* (1589). Javier Berzal de Dios thus deserves praise for working with many such less-well-known *cartoni* and theatre buildings. Merely leafing through the thirty-five illustrations (which are reproduced in passable quality) makes the reader want to learn more. And indeed, the author is very knowledgeable in the extant literature, and deeply and polemically immersed in scholarly debates on his topic. The book is led by one goal: namely, to demonstrate that neither theatres nor stage designs are held by strict adhesion to the rules of linear perspective, vantage points, or the expression and presentation of princely power. Berzal de Dios instead wishes to "explicate the presence and aesthetic function of pictorial displacements, visual anomalies and architectural paradoxes" (7) in Italian Renaissance theatre. This alone commends the book to specialists in the field.

However, and for reasons explained below, to a slightly more general reader (among whom this reviewer counts himself) it is advisable to start with chapters 3 and 4, which explore the architecture of theatres and their relationship to contemporary urban spaces. According to Berzal de Dios, these theatres were constructed with the intention not to detach the audience from the stage but to act as an enclosure that secured an exciting, integral, visual, and social space. Time and again, Berzal de Dios argues that this space was not exclusively subordinated to an order imposed by the rules of central perspective, and hence to a vantage point; that Renaissance theatres were instead multi-dimensional spaces that facilitated highly variegated forms of social interaction and spectatorship (105–07). Especially interesting are his observations on the decorations and layout, and their relationship to the audiences of the *Teatro all' antica* in Sabbionetta (1590) (86–97). Berzal de Dios accordingly emphasizes that the spectators of a theatrical show are not merely passive but that they actively engage with the play (116–18). In this respect, I wonder why Berzal de Dios has bypassed the rich scholarship on Shakespeare's stage, as it would bolster his argument.

More problematic in style and argument are chapters 1 and 2, on sketches of stage design. Again, Berzal de Dios claims that these images are not naturalistic but "counter-factual and fictive depictions of cities" (45) which lack "naturalism" (47). Thus, Peruzzi created an image of the city of Rome "not as

an individual instantiation, but as a conceptual entity” (8), one that becomes imbricated with the actual city. With nonchalant disregard for anachronism, chapters 1 and 2 apply (post-) modern theory by (*inter alia*) Barthes, Derrida, and Didi-Huberman (44–45), and even the psychology of Freud (17) to demonstrate that these stage designs are no *simulacra*.

I wonder if this is not simply begging the question? Renaissance designers were neither able to produce, nor intent on producing, photographic or holographic images of a city. They sought to produce an *imagined* urban space, a pastiche of some well-known buildings that served as a backdrop for an *imagined* urban story. Most spectators would have probably enjoyed seeing such idealized pastiches of cities they had never visited. Nor would that have been a novelty, for such condensed images were also quite common in other contemporary visual art—a fact that is mentioned, albeit only in passing. (It may also be noted in passing that *simulacrum* was a technical term in Renaissance Platonism denoting the image of an image of an image of an idea, the shadow of a shadow, and therefore not wholly unfitting to describe these designs.)

Amid his polemics, Berzal de Dios eclipses the intermediate function of these images: i.e., sketches for stage designs. These images served as rather non-technical sketches produced either for the patron who commissioned the scenery, or as indications of the images that would have to be thoroughly transformed into a much larger actual stage design that combined three-dimensional elements with a flat background; both elements were used to enhance the impression of spatial depth of the stage. This considerably intricate work of transformation relied on experts who had to be, like it or not, well versed in the perspectival arts to be able to create their marvels.

Another puzzling aspect of these chapters is Berzal de Dios’s reluctance to explore in depth the plotlines and texts of the plays for which these stages were designed. For example, the visual order and *reduction* of urban spatial complexity by the stage design (imposed, for instance by Serlio Venice, 54–55) is in stark contrast with the intricate, labyrinthine plots that are so characteristic of Italian comedy. Could this contrast have aimed at showcasing the comic effects, as when, say, some fool gets lost?

But then, such questions amply testify to the vibrancy of the topic of Italian Renaissance theatre, and one may hope for further research in this field, encompassing, for example, early modern city maps and city guides. Without a

doubt, the book under review has presented fresh material for further research on the topic.

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### **Brevaglieri, Sabina.**

*Natural desiderio di sapere. Roma barocca fra vecchi e nuovi mondi.*

La corte dei papi 31. Rome: Viella, 2019. Pp. 476 + 32 ill. ISBN 978-8-8331-3233-4 (paperback) €49.

Sabina Brevaglieri's book *Natural desiderio di sapere. Roma barocca fra vecchi e nuovi mondi* is an original and welcome addition to scholarship which brings together work on the history of science and medicine, art patronage, scholarly networks, cultural diplomacy, and urban history. Her impressive evocation of the intellectual fervour in Rome in the first half of the seventeenth century, which saw the creation of the *Accademia dei lincei* in 1603 by Federico Cesi and the presence in Rome of key European intellectuals, makes the city come alive. Readers are treated to a riveting depiction of the city and the learned players involved in sharing and disputing ideas and circulating new knowledge about the Asian and American worlds. The protagonists are at once the Eternal City itself, at the time a key centre of exchange and mediation, and the botanists, physicians, mathematicians, philosophers, artists, and scientists who lived there. The result is a vivid glimpse into the dynamics that brought them together in the space of a few decades especially propitious for intellectual discovery and exchange.

Organized in six chapters, the book is dense and full of detail while at the same time highly readable and accessible to those who are not grounded in the history of science or medicine. Brevaglieri, already an accomplished scholar who has worked at length on the scientific and medical culture of seventeenth-century Rome, offers extensive archival research and a thorough command of the published works of the period. Contemporary scholarship provides us with a suggestive glimpse of a time when the Germanic and Hispanic worlds converged in Rome through the circulation of manuscripts, intellectuals, knowledge, and debate around natural science (*naturalia*) and botany. This