LIVING history

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Behind the heavy velvet curtains of an 18th-century opera house, hundreds of singers, craftspeople and artists are labouring to resurrect the splendour of a more beautiful past. *Konfekt* goes in search of lost time at the stunning Teatro alla Scala in Milan.

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Previous spread
1. Marco Filippo Romano, Bartolo in 'The Barber of Seville', in makeup at La Scala
2. Central view of La Scala stage

This spread
1. 'Barber of Seville' dance troupe with Svetlina Stoyanova's Rosina

The curtains are heavy carmine velvet. The loges are upholstered in vermilion satin damask. We're at the opera and it's showtime, at least for the performers and crew. As the dress rehearsal commences, the grand, oyster-shaped auditorium of Milan's Teatro alla Scala is seemingly empty. Amid its 2,000-odd seats, there are just a dozen or so observers, invisible below the 383-bulb starburst chandelier overhead and the boughs of globe lights glowing as faintly as embers. But every seat in the sunken orchestra pit is occupied, the musicians poised with reed to mouth or bow to strings. And as those velvet curtains lift their gold fringes, the actors onstage are beginning their legerdemain of reviving the characters of a centuries-old opera.

La Scala is the most celebrated opera house in the world. The neoclassical landmark was built in 1778 by empress Maria Theresa of Austria, who then ruled Milan. Its restrained façade by architect Giuseppe Piermarini belies the grandiosity within: under a coffered rosette ceiling, the theatre envelops visitors in its lustrous reds and golds. There are six tiers of finely appointed box seats and the ghost of star soprano Maria Callas is said to roam the upper galleries. The parapets, with their velvet-covered balustrades, are bedecked with gilded chimeras and goddess heads; the carved wood of the balconies is edged with frets of Greek meanders and flanked by caryatids – an evocation of the roots of European theatre in ancient Greece, a tradition that has nourished our hunger for allegory, sensory pleasure and a collective experience of culture for millennia. Yet opera is a uniquely Italian art in its origin. Like the ethereal glow of flesh in a Renaissance painting, the nonchalant wearing of a well-tailored suit, or pizza, there are wonders that sprout in Italy and improve the lot of humankind as they spread.

A performance at La Scala begins months in advance at the Ansaldo workshops, a sprawling former steel factory in Milan's Tortona district. In 2000 it was converted into a facility where more than 150 specialists make the costumes, wigs, hats, jewellery, sets and props that transform the stage and its actors, bringing the past to life. "I could never go back to the civilian world," says Chiara Montagnera, a seamstress in the costume department. "I chose the theatre. Here, there's beauty and variety. In the civilian world, I'd be hemming trousers every day."

With a cadmium-yellow silk bolero for *Don Quixote* spread flat on her worktable, Montagnera pins back a gilt-trimmed edge and hand-stitches it into place. The wadding of the lining reveals meticulous sewing, the graceful interior traced with lines hinting at the dazzle of the ribboned and beaded layers of its shell: a jacket that has taken months to create. "La Scala is perhaps the only theatre, or one of the few, that is still committed to this couture style of costume production," says Montagnera, who has spent more than 20 years sewing at the Ansaldo. "The audience can tell if you're superficial in your approach, even in the details that you can't see, such as the inside of a jacket. So the costume designers here are extremely fastidious. You have to be precise to the millimetre. When we see the performances, we can see the difference that our work makes. It's very rewarding."

The sprawling factory rooms of the Ansaldo form the backdrop to La Scala's extravagant, carnivalesque rows of costumes, with their fine tailoring and rich polychrome detailing that can be seen even from the cheap seats. Here, a pink felt clown costume with a heart silhouette, white scalloped edging and red ball ornaments adorns a steel rack. A crimson-flowered brocade Tang jacket is draped on a dress-maker's torso, its appliqués of cranes in golden thread and ribbon lifting their three-dimensional wings off the satin surface. A mannequin's bordeaux velvet tailcoat reveals a lining of bird feathers in bright yellow. Along racks of peasant shirts, bodices, hoop skirts and tutus, handwritten tags are pinned to each garment with an actor's name and role.

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1. The opera house's headwear department
2. 'Barber of Seville' actors backstage
3. Costume designer
4. Running repairs
5. Costume rack
6. Adjusting a jacket
7. Signed photo of dancer Roberto Bolle
8. Maxim Mironov as Conte di Almaviva
9. Wig department
10. Inside the theatre
11. Large plaster prop in the scenography workshop at Ansaldo
12. Svetlina Stoyanova as Rosina

In a neighbouring room, a vast archive stores about 70,000 stage outfits, the fraction of La Scala's costumes that has been digitally catalogued so far. (There are many thousands more that have yet to be logged in a second facility on the outskirts of Milan.) Among the archives are the creations of the innumerable talents who have designed for La Scala over the past decades, including couturiers Yves Saint Laurent and Gianni Versace, artist David Hockney and the film director Franco Zeffirelli, along with the top costume designers from around the world.

"To work in the theatre means there are always new adventures," says Ruggero Bellini, director of the Ansaldo workshops, as he makes his way down an aisle lined by Renaissance-style gowns with crinoline skirts, lace cuffs, virago sleeves and gold piping. "And they are adventures that we take on as a team."

La Scala's season has been extended to cover the entire year except for a brief break in August. On average, the Ansaldo's specialists simultaneously prep costumes and sets for at least three performances, which span opera, ballet and theatre.

Bellini, who started his career as a set carpenter 26 years ago, walks through the Ansaldo's many labs, beginning with the scenography rehearsal studio, where a set for Francesco Cavalli's opera *La Calisto* sits positioned at a sloping angle to mimic the five-degree tilt of La Scala's stage. In a circle of towering bookshelves, stagehands adjust a reproduction of a Victorian telescope that looks long enough to study the face of the moon with.

In the wood shop, carpenters scurry about carrying planks to finish a large cupola entirely made of pine. "Our workshops follow in the footsteps of the opera of the 1700s," says Bellini. "We're among the few theatres that continue to use real wood for sets." He raises his voice to be heard over all the hammering – part of the commotion behind the perfectly composed performances that the public will experience. "What the audience sees is beautiful but the unpainted rear of the structure, which only we see, is also beautiful."

The sculpture department is at work on a stylised life-size elephant. Plaster heads of pharaohs, each standing taller than an adult human, are crowded along a wall; on another, a sizeable legion of knights in armour are frozen in a permanent struggle. "Everything looks smaller on stage so we exaggerate," says Bellini. They begin in miniature, however: dozens of stage-set models line a suspended walkway, tabletop-sized dioramas of classical and contemporary scenographies for *Don Carlos*, *Turandot*, *La Traviata* and more, which overlook the painters at work on the ground floor who are filling in a grand-scale medieval mosaic backdrop. Everything made here is eventually packed up and transported for its debut at La Scala.

"At the theatre is where the real test of our work comes," says Patrizia D'Anzuoni, head of the dressing department, in the back hallways of La Scala, where the Ansaldo's costume creations arrive and are fitted on performers for the dress rehearsal. This is also where the garments go if they become unstitched and need rapid fixing. "Or maybe the director doesn't like how the colour looks with the set and we have to stay up all night, dyeing an entire chorus's worth of tunics from beige to grey, as we did for *Nabucco*," D'Anzuoni says, as she stacks tutus flat atop each other in a trunk.

Her seamstresses are moving quickly in preparation for the afternoon's rehearsal of *The Barber of Seville*, wheeling in a rack with two costumes newly adjusted to fit the last-minute substitutions in the cast. D'Anzuoni opens a binder in which each costume is listed with its scene and changing time, which can be as brief as one minute backstage. She lifts her arms and rips down an imaginary costume and rapidly pulls up another one on her hypothetical actor, saying, "From eunuch to knight in 60 seconds."

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1. Performers take to the stage to rehearse their movements

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1. Workshops at Ansaldo
2. Ansaldo carpentry department
3. Backdrops are painted by hand

Silvia Aymonino, costume designer for this production of *The Barber of Seville* by director Leo Muscato, stands in a dressing room in the bowels of La Scala as she flips through her own binder, this one filled with collages and drawings that she has made for each of the characters. There is Figaro, her line drawing depicting the character in a hussar military jacket and a work apron stuffed with haircutting scissors. When she was 19 years old, Aymonino started working in a respected costume design workshop in Rome, "knowing only that I wanted to use my hands and be close to the world of music", she says, with a stash of sewing pins stuck into her black lapel.

Moments later Figaro himself, as incarnated by baritone Mattia Olivieri, walks by. He is tall, strapping and warbling one of his verses in the narrow hallway but still in his street clothes, a black T-shirt and jeans. Closing the door to his dressing room, he sits down at a piano and accompanies himself with scales as he warms up, his voice sliding up and down the octaves. Next door, mezzo-soprano Svetlina Stoyanova practises her aria as Rosina, the story's love interest, as a coach drills the Bulgarian opera singer on the finer points of Italian pronunciation. "It's one L, not two," she says. "Sing!" And Stoyanova, the understudy who assumed the role only the day before, sets her chin and trills the line back, reclining in a salon chair so her hot-ironed curls can be pinned with a red ribbon bow.

Michele Tiano, La Scala's head of hair and make-up, stands back to take a look at the star's bouffant tresses. "What is important in theatre is having a wide knowledge of history and historical styles," he says. "But I also need to stay on the cutting edge. Today these performances are broadcast in cinemas and you see every detail of the make-up so I use an airbrush and the latest, lightest products. The days of make-up as a mask are over." He delicately feathers the singer's eyeshadow. "Back in the day, Pavarotti would darken his eyebrows with the burnt end of a cork. Now you would be terrified if you saw anything that crude."

Tiano also oversees the wig-making facility at La Scala, where seven women craft everything from pompadours of felt strips to manes made of IV-drip tubes and wigs of human hair that are painstakingly knotted, strand by strand, to the mesh of a tulle base. One of the wig-makers studies a photo of Roberto Bolle on her desk; she uses a crochet hook to attach one dark, chin-length hair at a time, making a wig for the Italian dancer's performance in *Madina*, a new ballet, in a process that she says will take about 10 days to complete.

Then the strings of the overture pulse out from the orchestra and beckon me to the theatre. The royal box, where Napoleon, Princess Sisi and Victor Emmanuel III of Italy would watch the opera, is unoccupied for the dress rehearsal. I put my notebook away and take a padded damask seat there, surrounded by the cloudy reflections of the imperial chamber's bevelled antique mirrors, the dim light of its own crystal chandelier, its gilded everything. Nothing today is so luxurious. Nothing is so unabashedly built for beauty as the opera houses that served beauty above all – in music, in costumes and in a realm designed to enrapture.

"Fiiiigaro, Figaro, Figaro, Figaro!" The baritone sings out the most recognisable namecheck in opera, yet the effect on me in the near-vacant theatre is electrifying, like hearing it for the first time, as I lean forward, my mouth agape, on the velvet parapet. And in a sense this really is my first time hearing the line. Opera must be experienced live to absorb the air and weight that the human voice can occupy in this art form, to quake from the timbre of this melody like a thick brass bell reverberating all the way to the royal box.

The music director, Riccardo Chailly, a yellow silk scarf thrown around his neck, calls a break after the sparse audience applauds the song. The actors desert the stage, the musicians abandon their

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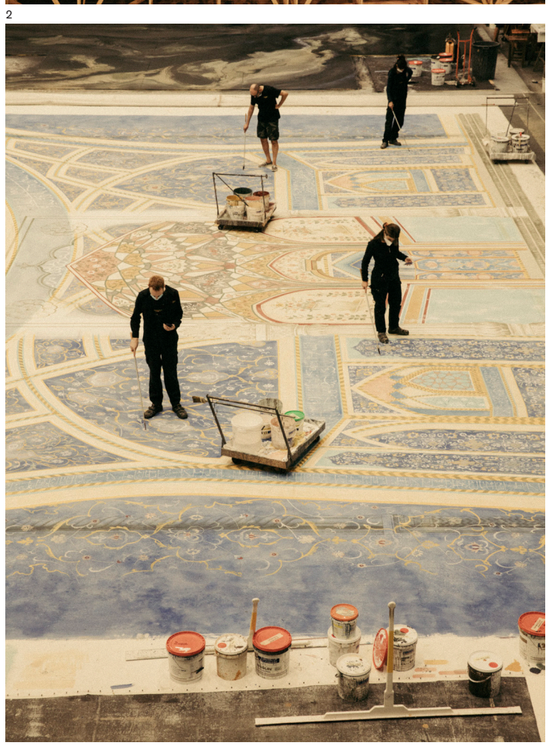

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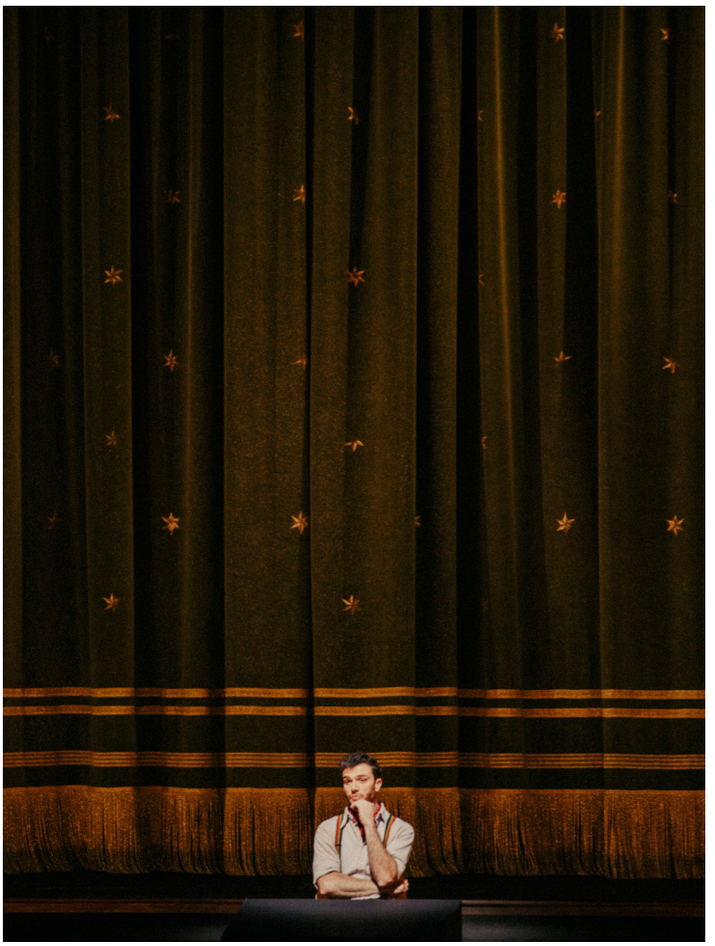
1. Mattia Oliveri as Figaro
2. Welcome to Teatro alla Scala

The origins of opera

In 1597 a group of humanists in Florence decided to revive the Greek fusion of poetry, drama and music described in the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. The result was the first opera, with its distinctive recitative singing speech: *Dafne*, a now-lost work inspired by the ancients. The Renaissance city, where music was exalted and humanism reigned, launched the art form that would come into its florid prime over Italy's Baroque and unification periods, inspiring composers such as Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini, and later the great Verdi and Puccini, as well as rousing maestros beyond its borders such as Mozart, Handel and Wagner.

More than any other art form, opera bears us to the wonders of another time, to the marvel of theatre when it was the ornate, stirring apex of the cultural experience



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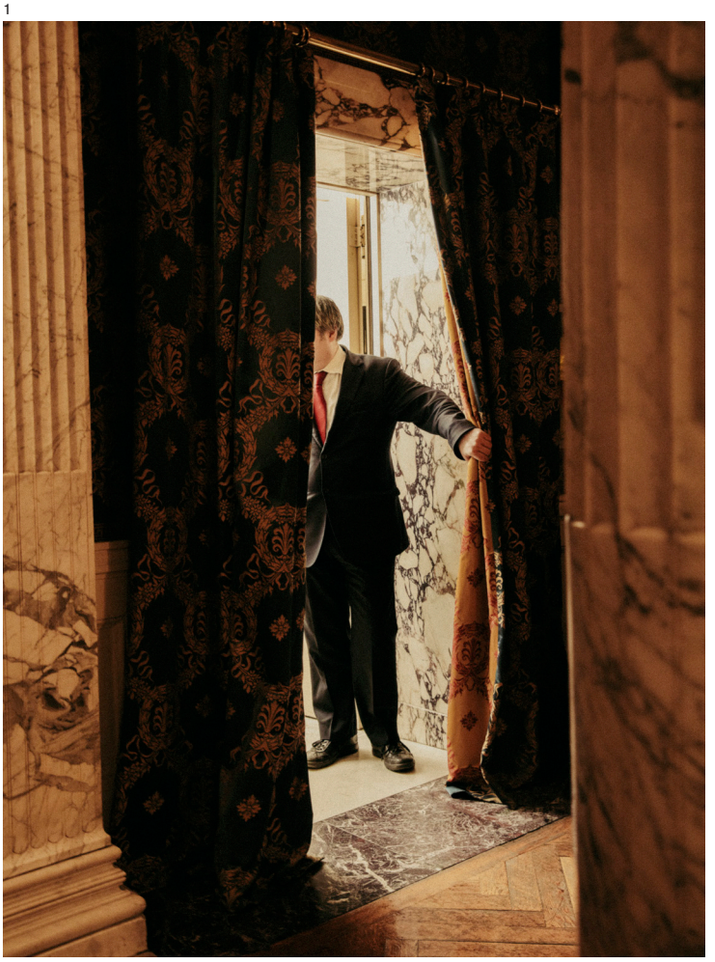
instruments on their chairs, and I relinquish my royal post to watch the performance from a new vantage point: backstage. Behind a porthole door, swarms of actors and stagehands mill about the side wing. Young men in long, white tutus cluster to one side; propmen in dusty T-shirts surround a huge writing desk to haul it onstage. A new backdrop – a library wall of framed paintings – is unfurled with pulleys. I lean against an offstage table and feel an unexpected sword against my legs. Thankfully it is fake.

In the wings, the set furniture is crowded together and the panel backdrops are reduced to flat screens. Rosina, onstage in her pink tutu and seen from behind, clutches a letter and drops to her knees, crooning out her aria in mellifluous high notes. Around her, fellow cast members are in polos or T-shirts, not yet in costume, but still projecting an almost supernatural resonance from their jersey-collared throats.

To witness opera singers performing in their street clothes is an eye-opening reminder that the magic of this art form comes from mere mortals and that we all have the potential not to just appreciate the arts but to be an artistic force too. The sumptuous costumes transform these mortals into envoys of a glittering cultivation of the past. There is some sorcery in the ritualised stylings of the opera. More than any other art form, it bears us to the wonders of another time, to the marvel of theatre when it was the ornate and stirring apex of the cultural experience.

Today the competition for our attention is steep, with our illuminated screens offering almost every kind of entertainment imaginable. But the poignancy of a tenor's refrain about the depth of his love (often incomprehensible yet nonetheless tear-inducing), the familiar melodies that become refrains in the stories we watch unfold onstage – these are pleasures that link us quite perceptibly to the audiences in bodiced gowns and petticoat breeches who first came to watch these performances under the thousands of candles of a long-ago era's chandeliers. They are reminders too of the enduring power of culture to transport our minds from the everyday to delight. —— K



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