

Friulian-language theatre

The first theatrical performances to be recorded in Friuli are the so-called *Sacre Rappresentazioni* (Mystery Plays), which originated in France towards the end of the 10th century and were used as a means of teaching Bible stories and to bring religion alive to people. But there is no evidence of anything that could be described as “theatre” as we understand it today prior to 1300.

Gradually the setting of these performances moved out of the church and their theme became correspondingly less sacred. The show turned into a comic parody of life and its purpose became pure entertainment. And as the register changed, so the characters began to speak in the vernacular.

Among the first poems in the Friulian language, dating from the mid-14th century, are two examples of unrequited love in the form of sonnets, found in Cividale del Friuli: *Biello dumnlo di valor* and *Soneto furlan*. The former is written as a dialogue for two voices (male and female) and may be regarded as an embryonic popular entertainment.

The first theatrical works written totally in the Friulian language do not appear until the 15th century: Giuseppe di Strassoldo's *Testament* and the anonymous *Contrasto Homo e Dona*. In view of its completeness and structural coherence, *Testament* may be considered the bedrock on which Friulian drama rests. It is also worth recalling that performances at the time were held in the open, in public squares and churchyards, and not in specially built theatres.

The early decades of the 16th century were difficult times for Friuli: in 1508 the area was struck by the plague, followed in 1511 by the so-called “Shrove Thursday” people's revolt and an earthquake soon after. There was no time to devote to pleasure and indeed there is no record of any performance being staged. The first such mention dates from 1563 and refers to a play performed in the main hall of Udine Castle. From the mid 1500s it becomes possible to talk of theatrical performance being staged using professional actors in specially designed premises. In previous centuries, shows for the general public were put on in squares, while those designed for the nobility were performed inside palaces throughout Friuli. From 1550, town halls began to make their own halls available for theatrical events.

The Commedia dell'Arte emerged in Italy around the turn of the 17th century, developing a variety of theatrical works that depicted daily life, with all its vices and virtues. The Commedia dell'Arte also introduced the first masks and the language became increasingly local and regional. However, shows in Friuli were not performed by local companies, but by travelling players from Venice. And it was this lack of the Commedia dell'Arte's solid cultural foundations that hamstrung the Friulian-language theatre's development, only making its first appearance in the 19th century.

It can therefore be said that the birth of theatrical literature in Friulian as such dates from 1800, to put a round figure on it.

Friuli was only marginally involved in the political and social upheavals that shook northern Italy in the 19th century, especially the events of 1848. Since it was still under

Austrian rule, Friuli remained largely untroubled by the revolutionary movements and cultural changes associated with the Risorgimento.

There were remarkably few innovations in theatrical works in general in the area in the first half of the 19th century, a situation that changed radically in the second half. Indeed, Friulian-language productions flourished after 1870.

The figure that stands out in this period is the poet Pietro Zorutti. The novelty of his allegorical farce *Il trovatore Antonio Tamburo*, a sort of musical comedy, caused a sensation in Friulian drama circles when it was published in 1847. In fact, there were several poets active in 19th-century Friuli and some of these, following Zorutti's example, also turned to writing for the theatre. Among these were Pacifico Valussi, with the comedy *Sang no je aghe* and Caterina Percoto, with *La plui bieie*.

Theatrical works began to multiply towards the end of the century and the theatre began to attract its own fans and admirers. The themes of the plays were straightforward and the plots cheerful and good-humoured, depicting as they did the peasant's day in the surrounding Friuli countryside.

There were no further momentous changes as the theatre embarked on a new century. The Friulian theatre repeated the form and substance of the plays of the previous century, remaining faithful to tradition and the trusted recipe of undemanding comedy. The advent of the two world wars also acted as a brake on theatrical production, especially as regards works in the Friulian language. At the same time, though, the 20th century saw the birth of several theatrical companies and the appearance of a number of new authors of light comedies. Audiences have always enjoyed these light-hearted, amusing plays in Friulian. At this point, it is worth mentioning the founding of *Società Filologica Friulana* in Gorizia in 1919, which has always taken a great interest in the theatre. Indeed, the association's secretary Ercole Carletti took it upon himself to set up *Compagnie dialetâl furlane* in 1921 and this company played an important part in spreading the theatre throughout Friuli. The first competition for works written in Friulian was established in 1923. Bruno Paolo Pellarini won the first edition with his play *Nine nane*. The main aim of the competition was to encourage authors who normally wrote in Italian to try their hands at a text written entirely in Friulian.

Theatrical works written in Friulian began to appear more regularly after the Second World War. Economic and social development went hand in hand with cultural changes and poetry readings, where the use of Friulian came more naturally, became regular fixtures and were eagerly attended.

This was the time when perhaps the most satisfying and fascinating Friulian play, *I Turcs tal Friul*, was written. Not actually a native Friulian at all but one by adoption, its author was to become one of Italy's greatest poets and an internationally renowned cultural icon, Pier Paolo Pasolini. *I Turcs tal Friul*, written in 1944, was his only play in Friulian and wasn't published until thirty years later, in a version edited by Luigi Ciceri, in 1976. The play tells the story of a village during the Turkish invasion of 1499, using it as an allegory of events that took place during the Second World War and as a way of introducing certain autobiographical details. Unlike Pasolini's poetry in Friulian, which has done so much to inspire a new generation of local poets, *I Turcs* remained an isolated foray into the theatre and was never taken up by subsequent playwrights.

The postwar rebirth of the Friulian theatre really has its roots in the work done in the late 1950s and early 1960s, which served to stimulate widespread debate and nurture a

growing sense of identity. Writers came to realize that they couldn't continue speaking and writing just about the past; they needed to discuss the present, with all its problems, claims and counter-claims. At the heart of this renewal are the works of Alviero Negro and Renato Appi. Negro can be considered the first pioneer of a theatre that breaks with the past: protest, recrimination and commitment become the new watchwords. This disenchantment with current orthodoxy and desire to hivel off the past is also typical of Renato Appi's considerable works. At the same time, it should be said that this new trend failed to find much favour among theatre-goers, more used to queuing to have fun and a good laugh. With the benefit of hindsight, this can be seen as just the beginning of a slow process that gradually forged a new awareness and a greater sophistication in audiences, who came to appreciate the theatre's wider responsibilities to the community.

Another important boost to the renewal of the theatre scene in Friuli, especially as regards the use of the local language, came from the *Risultive* group, whose sole aim was to encourage and expand the use of Friulian in the arts and beyond. Language was turning into a means of laying claim to a distinct way of life, cultural self-awareness and a confident identity.

The 1970s saw intense theatrical activity, backed up by several new events. As Lelo Cjanton (Aurelio Candoni) puts it: "The Friulian-language theatre has always been able to rely on the passion of amateur directors and actors, without it ever occurring to the authorities to create a theatre manned by professionals". The desire to put the *malilenghe* (Friulian) theatre on a firmer footing and establish a permanent Friulian theatre run by professionals began to make itself felt towards the end of the 1970s. The theatre started to jettison some of its dustier traditional material and at the same time welcome more modern narrative approaches in an effort to forge its own cultural identity. Exploring new themes went hand in hand with experimenting with language; expressing new content meant using language that was different from the traditional means of expression. The innovations introduced by Negro, Appi and Candoni were linked to social and economic transformations that were occurring in Friuli at the time, which had inevitable repercussions in the theatre. One of the more amazing aspects of this reinvigoration concerns the role of language, which acquires an increasingly important, indeed pivotal role in fashioning identity.

The first two plays written in the Friulian language recognized as having unquestioned literary merit are Luigi Candoni's *Strissant vie pe gnot* (1974) and the previously mentioned *I Turcs tal Friûl*, written by Pier Paolo Pasolini in 1944 and not published until 1976. This work marks a watershed in modern Friulian drama: the 1996 staging, directed by Elio De Capitani, is a milestone in the history of the development of the modern Friulian theatre.

Gianni Gregoricchio's work around that period and in the following years was fundamental in introducing an ingredient into the local theatre that had been lacking until then: character-driven drama.

In addition to a large number of very active amateur companies, the contemporary Friulian theatre can now also count on professional actors trained at *Civica Accademia d'Arte Drammatiche Nico Pepe*, which was founded in Udine in 1988. Other institutions that have contributed greatly to the development and promotion of the *marilenghe* theatre include *Ente Regionale Teatrale de Friuli Venezia Giulia* (ERT), *CSS Teatro Stabile di Innovazione* and *Teatro Club di Udine*.

Elio Bartolini, a writer and screenwriter/dramatist of national renown, who together with Paolo Patui wrote *Bigatis* in 2000, a wonderful play on the woman's lot in early 20th-century Friuli, deserves to be singled out.

A three-year agreement, *Farie Teatrâl Furlane*, was signed in 2011 by which fourteen organizations, including various institutions and theatres, undertook to promote the Friulian-language theatre and to reinforce and give greater continuity to theatre productions staged by professionals. Other important institutions have been added to those already mentioned, such as *Teatro Incerto*, *Teatrino del Rifo*, *Accademia degli Sventati*, while new authors and actors have come to the fore and are now regulars on the Friulian theatre scene: Franco Marchetta, Paolo Patui, Massimo Somaglino, Carlo Tolazzi, Andrea Collavino, Aida Talliente and many others.

Theatres now put on shows of all kinds in Friulian, ranging from experimental productions to satire and social critiques. Children's theatre has also witnessed a considerable boom, thanks to the commitment and creativity of younger writers.

The amateur theatre has continued to be a fruitful source of talent and in this regard *Associazione Teatrâl Furlane* (ATF), founded in 1986 with the declared aim of supporting the Friulian language, culture and theatre, is a shining light. Besides staging various shows, ATF also runs acting courses and a biennial competition of theatre works in Friulian. To date, it encompasses over sixty companies scattered throughout the three provinces in Friuli.