

IL GAZZETTINO

Paul Atkin, English entrepreneur and musicologist, wants to rebuild the 17th-century theatre of San Cassiano as a research centre for Baroque music. Mission in the USA.

“A theatre in Venice: I won’t stop”

THE STORY IN VENICE

Last year, he garnered the encouragement of the British Crown for his project. In recent weeks, he has been organising another “mission”, this time between New York and Washington, in search of new financiers. Meanwhile, with his team of researchers, he is discovering new details about the origins of the 17th-century theatre of San Cassiano. Paul Atkin, the English entrepreneur and musicologist who wants to rebuild what was the world's first public opera theatre in Venice, is not giving up. This ambitious project, modelled on what the Globe Theatre in London does with Shakespeare's plays, aims to create an international centre for Baroque opera in Venice, with a small theatre that is a faithful replica of the 1637 San Cassiano theatre, where the repertoire of the period can be staged in a historically informed manner. Atkin has been working on this full-time for at least ten years. He has spent the last few years in Venice, where he has taken up residence. With a background as a successful financial advisor in London, he is investing millions and a great deal of energy in what has become his mission.

“[PUBLIC] OPERA WAS BORN HERE, WHICH IS WHY IT IS SO IMPORTANT FOR ME TO REKINDLE THAT SPARK”

NEVER SO CLOSE

“Venice gave the world [public] Baroque opera. That small theatre sparked the flame that made the world fall in love with it,” he repeats. “It is an intangible heritage of Venice that must be revived. Over the years, I have fallen in love with the city and its people; and I feel even more compelled to carry on with the project. For the music and for the city.” Passionate words, as always, this time more charged with optimism. “Never before have we been so close to closing everything. It remains difficult, but in four years we can realise the project. Obviously, this means working better with the municipality.” The obstacle to overcome remains the acquisition of the site where the theatre will be rebuilt. For more than two years now, Atkin, with his company, the [Teatro] San Cassiano Group, has been focusing on Palazzo Donà Balbi, the former headquarters of the Provveditorato agli studi (Education Authority) on the Riva de Biasio, owned by the Metropolitan City. The project, entrusted to architect Jon Greenfield - not coincidentally the same architect who designed the Globe - envisages rebuilding the small wooden theatre in the garden area at the rear, in place of some minor buildings in the complex, while the palace, once restored, would become a centre dedicated to Baroque opera, with a museum, library, visitor centre and restaurant.

THE PALACE OF OPPORTUNITY

The project, including its economic framework, has been under consideration by the local administration since the end of 2023. In 2024, Atkin had identified important economic partners. However, the location remained undecided, perhaps due to the Palude investigation, which broke out in the summer of 2024 and must have put a stop to any building sales. Who knows... Certainly, 2025 also passed without any news on this front. "We didn't make any progress at all," admits Atkin, who is now pragmatically confident that there will be a turning point after the upcoming municipal elections. He also wrote this in the newsletter sent to all his supporters at the beginning of the year. In recent months, Atkin has found the full support of City Councillor Simone Venturini. This was thanks to the British Embassy, which last year awarded the Venetian administrator a prize for emerging young talent and at the same time promoted the San Cassiano project with the Crown. "It's an excellent project," Venturini now confirms. "If the opportunity arises, it will be a priority for me, compatible with a city that attracts new investment." A potential mayoral candidate in favour, then; but over the years, the centre-left has also shown openness to the project. All that remains is to wait for the elections, also for this reason.

AUTHENTIC RECONSTRUCTION

The large photo on the left shows a rendering of how the theatre might look after restoration: it would become a historically-informed setting for performances of the Baroque repertoire.

EVER CLOSER TO HIS DREAM

Paul Atkin is on a mission between New York and Washington in search of new investors: in the photo above, the entrepreneur poses outside the old site of the Teatro San Cassiano, dating back to 1637.

NEW RESEARCH

Meanwhile, Atkin continues his frenetic activity. Next month he will be in the United States, looking for new financiers. As a musicologist, he is also deepening his research on theatre. "We have found new material. In a manuscript there is an image of the barrier that separated the orchestra, where the Venetian waterfront was represented..."

WAITING FOR THE COUNCIL'S DECISION[;] ON FUNDING, "ONLY AT THE OUTSET, THEN IT WOULD BE SUSTAINED BY ITS OWN INCOME"

Another detail of that theatre, which no longer exists but has left its mark, starting with the street names. It stood in what is now the garden of Palazzo Albrizzi, between the 'Ponte delle Tette' and the theatre courtyard. "In the 17th century, this was the entertainment district, where prostitutes were plentiful." Atkin knows these places brick by brick. On the water's edge by the 'Ramo secondo del teatro', he identified the remains of what appears to have been the torch holder lighting access to the theatre. "Palazzo Donà Balbi is only 500 yards distance from the original site of the theatre. It is an accessible location, perfect for a theatre today. In the 1600s, San Cassiano made its profits from music, card games and prostitution. Our San Cassiano will also be able to live on its own income, thanks to historically-informed performances, cultural activities and hospitality," concludes the entrepreneur-musicologist.

Roberta Brunetti

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