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Something extraordinary is happening in Venice. Two hundred years after Napoleon ordered its demolition, an exciting plan to reconstruct the Teatro San Cassiano - the theatre which in 1637 gave birth to public opera - has won the crucial backing of the Sindaco of Venice. With a preferred site also now identified, the new theatre could be in place as early as September 2024 with Venice once more hosting Baroque opera in its original setting with working period stage machinery, scene-sets, and those magical special effects we thought were lost to history. But this venture is as much about the future as it is the past.

MORE THAN A THEATRE

More than opera, the Teatro San Cassiano project aims to deliver regeneration, impact, and sustainability. It has already worked with over 25 Venetian companies and will employ some 160 direct and indirect staff. Both in build and in operation, the Teatro

Reconstructing the world's first public opera house, Teatro San Cassiano (Venice, 1637)

Celebrating opera and Venice in an Anglo-Italian project

San Cassiano will create new jobs, businesses, opportunities, and all driven out of an ethos for a sustainable regeneration of Venice. Its outreach programme intends to reimagine the meaning of "public opera" in the 21st century.

The project to rebuild this historic theatre is the brainchild of English musicologist and businessman Dr Paul Atkin, who said "It is almost impossible to accept, but no one living today has ever heard or seen an opera by

Monteverdi, Cavalli or Vivaldi in precisely the type of small intimate Venetian theatre for which they composed. This is about celebrating the most important theatre in history."

REIMAGINING OPERA

Back in 1637, the Teatro San Cassiano was the first opera house in history to open its doors to a ticket-buying public. "These spectacular first productions shook the world", Paul explains. "They not only offered the greatest music,

performed by the best singers, musicians and dancers of the day, they also used the latest technology of stage machinery and special effects to set their operas in a magical world of descending *dei ex machina*, rolling seas, thunderstorms, twinkling stars and scene-sets which changed in the blink of an eye. It was like nothing ever seen or heard before, and sadly since. Today, in all of Italy, in all the world, no active seventeenth-century opera theatre survives. This leaves a void, but it also creates an opportunity.”

“The Teatro San Cassiano will be unlike any theatre in the world. With a capacity of just 405 spectators, entering a box will be like walking through a time-machine. Once inside, we will find a Venetian Baroque theatre of 153 boxes over five tiers and a platea (orchestra stalls) just six rows deep. Imagine how small that is! Inside, we shall introduce our guests to a world of “HIP” (Historically Informed Performance), where each opera will have been meticulously researched, now to be performed as its composer would recognise it, complete with period staging, gestures, and costumes. We shall celebrate the famous composers, but also restore those currently forgotten. Our “HIP” operas will be intense, immediate, and intimate. This will be opera rediscovered in its original context. This will be Venice at its exhilarating best.”

HISTORY, LEGACY, IMPACT

In a project seemingly of a million steps, Paul has moved progressively from impossible, to difficult, to feasible. Having had the original idea in 1999, he eventually sold all his business interests in 2014 to dedicate himself to turning a dream into a practical reality and has until now financed the project entirely on his own. “I felt the project was so impossible, but I could not standby and not try. Someone had to restore this theatre to Venice. I had first to make it almost inevitable before I could present it as a serious proposition to corporate sponsors or other investors with deeper pockets. Now we can share it with like-minded people who care about opera, love Venice, and see its potential. This is an opportunity for someone to come forward and to write their name into opera history. This project has everything: History, Legacy, Impact.”

As a Londoner, Paul Atkin clearly believes his efforts to do things the Venetian way have also born fruit. The breakthrough was obtaining the formal backing of the Municipality of Venice, supported by a published letter of endorsement from the Sindaco’s office. The project has identified its preferred site and has instructed a Venetian-British architectural team led by Jon Greenfield, the renowned architect who rebuilt the Shakespeare’s Globe in London. Andrea Marcon and his Venice Baroque Orchestra now lead the artistic

team and for the first time in history the project has succeeded in creating historically informed models and CGI imagery of the original 1637 theatre.

WHY IS THIS PROJECT SO EXTRAORDINARY?

It is simply that the Teatro San Cassiano will do for Venice and opera what the Globe has done for London and Shakespeare, proving that reconstructed historical theatres are both artistically and commercially viable. Paul adds: “With the success in Venice of the Biennale and of course the wonderful La Fenice, this will further establish Venice as one of the most important cultural centres worldwide.”

With the official support of the Venice Municipality a guarantee to TSC’s founding partners, Paul’s final comment is a simple call to arms: “As of now, we have the capacity to rebuild the original theatre of 1637. We are good to go.” His commitment to deliver the historic return of the Teatro San Cassiano to Venice is absolute, but always with the utmost respect for the glorious city of Venice and its people. Certainly, he welcomes other like-minded partners to join him now in making this happen.

Teatro San Cassiano Group is open to a limited number of Founder-Partners, be it as Investors or sponsors who share the vision of this exquisitely Venetian project.

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Opposite: A HIP opera staged in Czech Republic

Left: Paul Atkin (left) with architect Jon Greenfield

Pictures courtesy of TSC

