

Magnetism on Stage – Elisa and Antonio Zanardelli

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Introduction

During the nineteenth century, magnetism was widely discussed all over Europe, and this debate took place mainly in theatres. All theatres participated in socio-political discussions and artists played a role by performing scientific concepts on stage. As regards magnetism, within the scientific and medical community, there were followers of the theory of magnetism and those who opposed it. In choosing one artist over another, a city could make clear its alignment with the scientific community as well as showcase the local opinion on the topic.

After a short introduction to Feltre's Teatro Sociale, its characteristics as a provincial theatre and the performance of Mr and Mrs Castagnola that took place there in 1865, this article presents the theatrical activity of Antonio Zanardelli and his daughter Elisa, whose performances of magnetism took place in many Italian provincial theatres in the mid-nineteenth century.

Performances of magnetism like those staged by Zanardelli are mainly interesting for two reasons. First, their presence shows the variety of genres that provincial theatres hosted throughout the century. In fact, most theatres in smaller or middle-sized towns hosted a variety of theatre and dance performances, concerts, lectures, festivities, pedagogical events, spectacles like magician's shows, 'scientific' presentations and acrobatics. Secondly, on-stage experiments with magnetism demonstrate how the nineteenth century theatrical space was not only a socio-cultural space where citizens could meet and exchange ideas and where public opinion was formed but also a setting for heavily debated, topical subjects. In this sense, theatres were like all other social spaces such as private drawing rooms and academies.

Feltre's Teatro Sociale as a case study

This idea came to me after having analysed the playbills kept in Feltre's archives, collating data coming from the local archives with information from theatrical journals.¹

¹ Feltre's main archives are the Archivio Storico Comunale, where you can find theatre administrative documents and accounting books of the nineteenth century, and the Polo Bibliotecario Feltrino "Panfilo Castaldi", where playbills, contracts, correspondence and regulations are stored in the Fondo Storico. See also the online database under www.hkb-interpretation.ch/documentazione-sul-teatro-sociale-di-feltre-1802-1898 (all weblinks in this contribution last consulted 22 July 2025).

Feltre is a small town in the province of Belluno in the Veneto region. In the nineteenth century, the province of Belluno belonged to the Venetian provinces of the kingdom of Lombardo-Venetia and was under the rule of the Habsburg Empire from 1815 to 1866; Venice was the seat of government for the Venetian provinces, while Milan, where the viceroy resided, was the seat for the Lombard provinces. According to the new political order after the Congress of Vienna, Belluno became the capital and Feltre the second city of the province.

If you want to reach Feltre coming from the Venetian Plain, you have to go up the valley of the Piave River. At a certain point the valley narrows, and then you reach a basin surrounded by the Pre-Alps. There, on top of a hill, the town is perched, surrounded by walls. Toward the northwest, the way heads toward the bordering Primiero, which until World War I belonged to the Austrian Empire, while toward the east, the valley – which has become wide again – continues for some thirty kilometers to Belluno and then continues north within the chain of the Alps.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the city felt the need for a new theatre in the wake of the proliferation of new theatre buildings and the restoration of existing ones throughout the Italian peninsula.² Overlooking Piazza Maggiore stood the Palazzo della Ragione, for centuries used not only as the seat of the Maggior Consiglio but also as a theatre.³ Instead of constructing a new building, the city decided to restore the existing one, that is, the Palazzo della Ragione, engaging the well-known Venetian architect Giannantonio Selva, already famous for designing the La Fenice theatre in Venice and the Teatro Nuovo (now Teatro Verdi) in Trieste.

After a decade of restoration, the theatre opened in the 1810s, and its activity continued throughout the century.

Francesco and Concettina Castagnola in Feltre

Feltre's Teatro Sociale differed from both theatres in large cities and from those built in much smaller and geographically isolated towns, and throughout the century, it hosted a variety of theatrical genres. It was the hub of the town's cultural life but also a pole of attraction – or at least it tried to be – for the surrounding area and especially for other urban centres. In 1865 the theatrical society invited Francesco Castagnola and his wife Concettina for “three performances of magic

² Carlotta Sorba, *Teatri. L'Italia del melodramma nell'età del Risorgimento*, Bologna 2001.

³ In the sixteenth century, the building had housed an auditorium; during the seventeenth century, it had been used for various activities and the hall had been restored and turned into a public venue for comic performances and comedies at Carnival time, with movable scenes to be put together for the occasion. Afterwards, the theatre had operated intermittently and was closed in the last decades of the eighteenth century. See Anita De Marco/Letizia Braitto, *Storia del teatro della Senna in Feltre*, in *Rivista bellunese* 2, 1974, pp. 189–196, 3, 1974, pp. 311–316 and 4, 1975, pp. 87–94; Egle Mazzocato, *Il Teatro Comunale di Feltre. Architettura, spettacoli e lavori di restauro*, thesis, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2014/15.

tricks and fake animal magnetism”⁴ Although we only have the announcement of their arrival in a periodical as a source for their performance, we can imagine it by looking at their repertoire in other theatres. They had performed in Trieste, mostly in arenas and in minor theatres, and they had been very successful there. Usually Francesco Castagnola started with sleights of hand, followed by experiments showing that magnetism was in fact “an obvious result of mnemonics and nothing else”⁵ One of the “amazing things” shown on stage was the experiment in which the magnetiser pierced the woman’s arm with a pin, duly magnetised, then removed the pin without a drop of blood and without the woman feeling any pain.⁶ In other experiments, which produced “frequent enthusiastic applause”,⁷ Castagnola held a lit candle in front of his wife’s open eye, asked her to read a closed book or to describe an object she could not see, made her pulse beat faster and slower, and finally made the woman prove insensitive to a very strong smell of ammonia.⁸ The couple wanted to demonstrate that “catalepsy and clairvoyance” were nothing more than “pure exercises of memory” and “combined artifices”.⁹

Castagnola presented himself as a “simple illusionist” and wanted to debunk those actors who, for at least twenty years, had been offering shows and experiments on animal magnetism trying to demonstrate the existence and capabilities of the magnetic fluid.¹⁰

Performances on animal magnetism were staged in many theatres, where they had great success, but by choosing Castagnola, we can suppose that Feltre and its theatre made a statement against those “who made magnetism a vile market”.¹¹

In 1868, three years after his journey to Feltre, Castagnola accused Antonio Zanardelli of being a charlatan and challenged him to prove the opposite in public. Why? How did Castagnola’s performances differ from those staged by Zanardelli?

⁴ “tre rappresentazioni di prestigio e finto magnetismo animale”. [Anon.], Cronaca locale, in *La Scena. Giornale di Musica, Drammatica e Coreografia* 3/2, 11 May 1865, p. [3]. All quotations taken from newspapers are in Italian in the original source and are translated by me.

⁵ “un evidente risultato di mnemotecnica e non altro”. [Anon.], Cronaca locale. Trieste 29 marzo, in *La Scena. Giornale di Musica, Drammatica e Coreografia* 2/48, 30 March 1865, p. [3].

⁶ “delle cose sorprendenti”. Satana, Teatri, in *L’Arlecchino* 1/8, 24 March 1865, pp. 56f., here p. 57; [Anon.], I coniugi Castagnola e il Magnetismo, in *La Baba* 4/25, 29 March 1865, pp. 98f.; Saltamartino, Ad Arlecchino Capo-squadra dei giornalisti, in *L’Arlecchino* 1/10, 8 April 1865, p. 73. More news in *Notizie locali. Teatro civico di Fiume*, in *Giornale di Fiume* 1/26, 1 July 1865, p. 190.

⁷ “frequenti entusiastici applausi”. [Anon.], Cronaca locale. Trieste 12 aprile, in *La Scena. Giornale di Musica, Drammatica e Coreografia* 2/50, 13 April 1865, p. [3].

⁸ [Anon.], Cronaca locale. Trieste 19 aprile, in *La Scena. Giornale di Musica, Drammatica e Coreografia* 2/51, 20 April 1865, p. 3. On clairvoyance, see Saltamartino, Ad Arlecchino Capo-squadra dei giornalisti, in *L’Arlecchino* 1/10, 8 April 1865, p. 73.

⁹ “provando chiaramente che le virtù magnetiche [...] non sono che arte portata al punto di scienza, onde la trasmissione del pensiero, la catalessia, la chiaroveggenza ed altro, puri esercizi di memoria, combinati artifici e nulla più.” [Anon.], Cronaca locale. Trieste 15 marzo, in *La Scena. Giornale di Musica, Drammatica e Coreografia* 2/46, 16 March 1865, pp. [3]f., here p. [4].

¹⁰ “s’annunziano quali semplici prestigiatori”. Ibid.

¹¹ “combattere coloro che del magnetismo animale fecero fan tuttora turpe mercato.” [Anon.], Cronaca locale, in *La Scena. Giornale di Musica, Drammatica e Coreografia* 3/2, 11 May 1865, p. [3].

Antonio and Elisa Zanardelli's performances

Differently from Castagnola, who claimed to unmask the “fake animal magnetism”, Antonio and Elisa had great success and performed experiments in magnetism and clairvoyance in the 1850s and 1860s. They performed both in the theatre for a general public and in academies and private salons in front of medical panels.

‘Animal magnetism’, more often referred to as ‘mesmerism’, originated from a theory introduced by the physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Mesmer had announced his discovery of a fluid that penetrated all bodies (humans, animals, plants). He had claimed that this invisible force had physical effects and could be used in medicine. As we shall see, a confrontation took place between medical corporations and magnetisers during the nineteenth century. Mesmerism spread all over Europe, but its reception reveals specific national characteristics.¹²

Antonio Zanardelli was an illusionist and a professor of magnetism. His performances were denominated in the press in several ways: “conjuring tricks”, “physical prestige”, “experiments in clairvoyance and somnambulism”, “transmission of images and thought”, “mesmeric attempts”; some correspondents aroused their readers’ curiosity by calling them “phenomena” or “marvels”.¹³

Zanardelli became a successful artist in the early 1850s; he must have been no more than forty years old while his daughter Elisa was fifteen. Antonio dressed up in a sober, elegant, dark suit. His image reflected the typical bourgeois respectability: no flashy or bizarre elements that could link him to conjurers like Bartolomeo Bosco, who claimed to have learnt “the secrets of Egyptian magic”¹⁴ and appeared on stage wearing a tunic of black velvet and surrounded by candelabra, skeletons

¹² George Rosen, *Mesmerism and Surgery. A Strange Chapter in the History of Anesthesia*, in *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 1/4, 1946, pp. 527–550, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhmas/1.4.527>; Fred Kaplan, “The Mesmeric Mania”. The Early Victorians and Animal Magnetism, in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 35/4, 1974, pp. 691–702, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2709095>; Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France*, Cambridge 1968; Clara Gallini, *La sonnambula meravigliosa. Magnetismo e ipnotismo nell'Ottocento italiano*, Milano 1983; Patrizia Guarnieri, *Teatro e laboratorio. Scienziati e medici davanti al magnetismo*, in *Belfagor* 40/5, 1985, pp. 561–575; Alison Winter, *Mesmerized. Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*, London 1998; *Traces du mesmerisme dans les littératures européennes du XIX^e siècle. Actes du colloque international organisé les 9 et 10 novembre 1999 / Einflüsse des Mesmerismus auf die europäische Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts. Akten des internationalen Kolloquiums vom 9. und 10. November 1999*, ed. by Ernst Leonardy/Marie-France Renard/Christian Drösch/Stéphanie Vanasten, Bruxelles 2001 (*Travaux et recherches*, Vol. 45).

¹³ All these definitions (“giuochi di prestigio”, “prestigio fisico”, “esperimenti di chiaroveggenza e sonnambulismo”, “esperimenti di trasmissione delle immagini e del pensiero”, “tentativi mesmerici”, “fenomeni”, “meraviglie”) come from the newspapers collected for this research, namely *La Fama*, *Il Lampione*, *Lo Scaramuccia*, and *Polimazia di Famiglia* from 1849 to 1857.

¹⁴ “segreti della Magia Egiziana”. [Bartolomeo Bosco], *Curiose avventure e brevi cenni sulla vita di Bartolomeo Bosco da Torino esimio prestigiatore ed inventore della Magia Egiziana con un compendio nominativo di dilettevoli giochi di fisica e di meccanica da lui ritrovati*, Napoli 1837, p. 39.

and skulls.¹⁵ Elisa, at her father's side on stage, wearing a light-coloured dress with long sleeves and a tightly laced collar, was praised for her youthful beauty. According to accounts, she had "black hair and black eye",¹⁶ "very thick hair" that "towered on the head [...] like the diadem of an allegorical figure"; she had "diaphanous and transparent skin, like the leaf of the camellia",¹⁷ a "serene forehead",¹⁸ and she was "full of angelic beauty, full of grace, brio, spirit, wit".¹⁹

Zanardelli's experiments in magnetism and his scientific demonstrations were interspersed with magic tricks, comedies and farces and featured musical entertainment. The programme was varied and often included new performances or additions as Zanardelli often stayed in the same town for several days, and people attended his shows several times.²⁰

Thanks to his scientific knowledge and ability to manufacture electrical instruments, Zanardelli also reproduced light phenomena in the theatre and was especially invited when a performance needed "the electric sun".²¹

The most-eagerly awaited moment in the performance was when Elisa, called the "modern Sibyl",²² demonstrated her powers. This moment was made of "mesmeric and physiological attempts at animal magnetism, based on the transmission of thought images and odorous sensations".²³ "Attempts", as Zanardelli emphasised, because the outcome was successful only on "certain circumstances dependent on the physiological qualities of the subject [and] on the disposition of those

¹⁵ Bruno Di Porto, Bosco, Giovanni Bartolomeo, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, Vol. 13 (1971), pp. 208f.

¹⁶ "capelli neri e l'occhio nero". Lo Zio Tom, Elisa Zanardelli e il Magnetismo animale, in *Polimazia di famiglia. Giornale scientifico, letterario artistico e teatrale* 1/19, 22 March 1854, p. 75.

¹⁷ "La sua età è quella dei primi amori: i capelli foltissimi torreggiano sul capo della fanciulla, come il diadema di una figura allegorica. La sua pelle è diafana e trasparente, quanto la foglia della camelia". Carlo Lorenzini, Elisa Zanardelli al teatro del Cocomero, in *Lo Scaramuccia. Giornale-Omnibus* 1/39, 14 March 1854, pp. [2]f., here p. [2].

¹⁸ "fronte serena". Lo Zio Tom, Elisa Zanardelli e il Magnetismo animale, in *Polimazia di Famiglia. Giornale scientifico, letterario, artistico e teatrale* 1/19, 22 March 1854, p. 75.

¹⁹ "una ragazza dotata di angelica bellezza, piena di grazie, di brio, di spirito, di ingegno". [Anon.], Antonio Zanardelli, in *Leco di Fiume* 1/37, 1 October 1857, p. 159.

²⁰ Information about reruns in Arpa, Teatri, in *I fiori* 2/2, 12 January 1854, p. 16; *La Fama del 1854. Rassegna di scienze, lettere, arti industria e teatri* 13/1, 2 January 1854, p. 4; [Anon.], Teatri di musica ed altri spettacoli. Firenze. Teatro del Cocomero, in *Polimazia di Famiglia. Giornale scientifico, letterario, artistico e teatrale* 1/13, 11 March 1854, p. 52; [Anon.], Teatri. Teatro Duse, in *La Rivista Euganea*, suppl. 10 February 1857, p. 24; *Gazzettino di città*. Elisa Zanardelli, in *Leco di Fiume* 1/58, 19 November 1857, p. 243.

²¹ "per la formazione del sole elettrico". [Anon.], Notizie. Ancona, in *La Fama del 1854. Rassegna di scienze, lettere, arti industria e teatri* 13/32, 20 April 1854, p. 128.

²² [Anon.], Teatri di Firenze, in *Polimazia di Famiglia. Giornale scientifico, letterario artistico e teatrale* 1/8, 2 March 1854, p. 32.

²³ "Aggiunse alcuni tentativi mesmerici e fisiologici di magnetismo animale, basati sulla trasmissione delle immagini del pensiero, sensazioni odorose, con prove di rigidità e catalessi". L. Alemani, Teatri e spettacoli. Torino, in *La Fama del 1856. Rassegna di scienze, lettere, arti industria e teatri* 15/35, 1 May 1856, p. 138.

taking part in the experiments”;²⁴ above all, the setting had to guarantee “calm and quietness of mind”.²⁵

Antonio Zanardelli's career

Antonio Zanardelli began his career in the 1830s as an actor, together with his wife Teresa. After an early career in the kingdom of Lombardo-Venetia with the theatre company of Luigi Duse, the Zanardellis had travelled to various pre-unified states, in particular the Papal States, the Grand Ducato of Tuscany²⁶ and the Illyrian territory (Rijeka, Zara, Buccari).²⁷ Elisa was born in 1837 in Padova.²⁸ A few years later, Antonio and Teresa had a second child, who would take Elisa's place at his father's side in the 1860s when Elisa married Eugenio Bosco, son of the famous conjurer Bartolomeo Bosco.²⁹

As a magician and illusionist, Zanardelli sometimes shared his performance with theatre companies still in contact with him after years of collaboration.³⁰ His many tricks and ingenious mechanisms left the audience speechless. A particularly popular performance was “the chest”, described as “the *chest* taken from Venus which, empty at first, is suddenly filled with all the objects necessary for the Goddess' *toilet*”; in this feat, Zanardelli magically suddenly filled and emptied the

²⁴ “talune circos[t]anze dipendenti da qualità fisiologiche del soggetto [e] dalla disposizione di coloro che prendono parte all'esperienze.” Letter by Antonio Zanardelli published in *Corriere delle Marche*, 16 August 1868, quoted by T. Cingolari, I fluidisti alla prova, in *Il libero pensiero. Giornale dei razionalisti* 3.2/14, 1 October 1868, pp. 218–223, here p. 221.

²⁵ “calma e quiete d'animo”. This is what Zanardelli said when he was challenged in Turin in 1856. See [Anon.], Il magnetismo e la medicina. Riflessioni sopra una sfida di magnetizzatori pel dott. Luigi Berruti (Continuazione e fine), in *Gazzetta medica italiana. Stati sardi* 7/25, 16 June 1856, pp. 201–207, here p. 202.

²⁶ In 1842 he was in the Teatro del Corso in Bologna, see Francesco Regli, Teatri. Bologna, in *Il Pirata* 7/84 Suppl., 19 April 1842, p. 342; [Anon.], Teatri. Bologna, in *Bazar di Novità Artistiche, Letterarie e Teatrali* 2/34, 27 April 1842, p. 135. In 1843 Zanardelli was in the Teatro Civico in Perugia, see [Anon.], Perugia. Teatro civico, in *Osservatore del Trasimeno* 18/33, 25 April 1843, p. 4. In 1846 he was in Firenze, Civitavecchia and Tarquinia, see *Il teatro nel Lazio 1798–1870*, online, n.d., <https://movio.beniculturali.it/asrm/ilteatronellazio/it/122/anni/show/15/1560> that refers to Archivio Storico Comunale of Tarquinia, Carteggio amministrativo, tit. XIV, fasc. 11, 4875, Compagnia Viti.

²⁷ For Zara see [Anon.], Notizie. Zara, in *La Fama del 1858. Rassegna di scienze, lettere, arti industria e teatri* 17/84, 21 October 1858, p. 336; for Buccari see P. T., Corrispondenza, in *L'eco di Fiume* 1/66, 10 December 1857, p. 275.

²⁸ Elisa played “parti ingenuae” in itinerant troupes together with her parents. She started her career when she was four years old, first in Treviso and then in Padova in *I due sergenti* with Gustavo Modena. Napoleone Pietrucci, *Biografia degli artisti padovani*, Padova 1858, pp. 289f.

²⁹ About Bartolomeo Bosco see [Bosco], *Curiose avventure e brevi cenni sulla vita*; Bosco, *Gabinetto magico ossia il complesso dell'arte di prestigio*, Milano 1862.

³⁰ For example, in Crema in 1852, Zanardelli performed with the theatrical troupe De Ricci-Jucchi, see Comune di Crema, Teatro Sociale di Crema. Inventario degli atti d'archivio, sec. XVII–1937, Bergamo 2012, p. 204; or in Padova in 1857 when Zanardelli performs in the Teatro Duse with the Monti-Preda theatrical troupe. [Anon.], Teatri. Teatro Duse, in *La Rivista Euganea* 1/5, supplement, 1 February 1857, p. 24.

chest with the most disparate objects: trays of silverware, clothing and eggs as well as ice cream and sweets that were offered to the public.³¹

The first time Antonio became interested in the phenomenon of animal magnetism was in a theatre in Livorno in 1849.³² Zanardelli was probably inspired by the Frenchman Charles Lafontaine, who was at that time performing in Livorno, a small town under the Austrian siege.³³ Before becoming a famous magnetiser, Lafontaine had been a theatre man. He had become famous when a countess, led to a state of somnambulism, had revealed the whereabouts of a treasure buried in the ruins of a convent in Florence.³⁴ In Livorno Lafontaine was a guest of Doctor Pellini, the head doctor at Livorno's hospital. The doctor's sixteen-year-old daughter had convulsions attributed to epilepsy. The father was unable to cure her and turned to Lafontaine, who succeeded thanks to a few magnetic sessions. From that moment on, Lafontaine increased his fame. He was also the author of a treatise entitled *L'art de magnétiser*, a study addressed primarily to physicians.³⁵

Zanardelli was perhaps influenced – even before reading Lafontaine's treatise – by the cover: a man dressed in a sober, dark tailcoat magnetising a woman with his hands (but without touching her); dressed in light-coloured clothing, she is seated on a chair with her eyes closed and seated in a posture that suggests she is levitating. In the image, one can see the signs of the magnetic fluid. Thereafter, Zanardelli's daughter was presented in the role of a sleepwalker.

Zanardelli devoted himself to experiments in magnetism thanks to the encouragement of doctors. They provided him with certificates stating that Elisa was “a sincere and splendid example of magnetic phenomena. [...] not only of external things, but of internal sensations, intimate emotions, images and thoughts.”³⁶ These certificates also emphasised the honesty of Antonio, a “skilful physicist-experimenter and mechanical performer”³⁷ moved by nothing more than “a warm love for science.”³⁸ Zanardelli kept these documents and exhibited them whenever he needed to attest the validity of his experiments.

³¹ “il forziere tolto a Venere che, vuoto dapprima, si riempie all'improvviso di tutti gli oggetti necessari alla toelette della Dea.” [Anon.], Teatri e notizie diverse, in *L'Italia musicale. Giornale dei teatri di letteratura, belle arti e varietà* 3/70, 30 August 1851, p. 278; the show was held in Treviso's theatre.

³² [Anon.], Elisa Zanardelli in Livorno, in *Il Lampione* 251, 19 July 1849, p. [4].

³³ Charles Lafontaine, *Mémoires d'un magnétiseur*, Vol. 2, Paris 1866, pp. 239–248.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

³⁵ Charles Lafontaine, *L'art de magnétiser*, Paris 1847, pp. V–VII.

³⁶ “un sincero e splendido esemplare di fenomeni magnetici. [...] non solo di esterne cose, ma d'interne sensazioni, d'intime emozioni, d'immagini [sic] e di pensieri.” From Giovanni Pellizzari's certificate in *Lo Scaramuccia. Giornale-omnibus* 1/43, 28 March 1854, pp. [2]f., here p. [2] (one of several “Altri documenti relativi al magnetizzatore Zanardelli e sua figlia”; printed identically also in *Polimazia di famiglia. Giornale scientifico, letterario, artistico e teatrale* 1/31, 13 April 1854, p. 124).

³⁷ “valente fisico sperimentatore e meccanico esecutore.” Letter by G. P. Mazzeletti, Spilimbergo, 28 September 1850, in *Lo Scaramuccia. Giornale-omnibus* 1/43, 28 March 1854, p. 3.

³⁸ “un caldo amore per la scienza, specialmente per il magnetismo.” Letter by Dr. Esterle to a friend, Trento, 5 October 1852, in *Lo Scaramuccia. Giornale-omnibus* 1/43, 28 March 1854, p. 2.

On stage

Experiments in magnetism also took place in the open air, where, however, they were considered charlatanism.³⁹ Theatres offered magnetism a guarantee of seriousness and allowed the artists a certain proximity with the audience and visibility in theatrical newspapers.

Provincial theatres were Elisa and Antonio's main places of performance. They travelled through Central and Northern Italy up to the Illyrian coast (in Italian theatres as the performances in the Italian language had to be understandable). They performed in provincial and minor theatres, rarely in main theatres, that were usually devoted to opera. Teatro Carignano in Turin, where the Compagnia Reale Sarda performed, is an exception: the reason goes back to Turin's tradition of passion for magnetism and occultism, proving once again that medical and intellectual communities influenced theatre programming.⁴⁰

On stage, Elisa sat on a chair, and Antonio stared into her eyes; it was one of the "magnetic steps" to make contact with a subject.⁴¹ It is the same procedure that Flaubert humorously describes in his novel *Bouvard e Pécuchet*, where the main characters improvise as magnetisers.⁴² After a few minutes Elisa seemed to fall asleep; that was the state of "lucid somnambulism".⁴³

Evidence of such a state was "soft pallor on the cheeks, [...] oscillating eyelids that barely allowed the cloudy and dilated eye to be seen".⁴⁴ According to the treatises on animal magnetism, this was an exceptional state that could only be obtained "in very few cases and after a greater or lesser but always considerable number of experiences",⁴⁵ and which was characterised by "vision without the aid of the eyes".⁴⁶

At that point, Elisa provided evidence of her clairvoyance. People in the theatre would whisper a word communicating a feeling, a smell, a thought, or a place to

³⁹ Carlo Lorenzini remembers that magnetic experiments occurred in Piazza Vecchia in Florence; see Carlo Lorenzini, *Elisa Zanardelli al teatro del Cocomero*, in *Lo Scaramuccia. Giornale-omnibus* 1/39, 14 March 1854, pp. [2]f.

⁴⁰ Guarnieri, *Teatro e laboratorio*, p. 562.

⁴¹ "passi magnetici". Lisimaco Verati, *Trattato pratico di magnetismo animale*, Foligno 1869, pp. 1–5.

⁴² Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard e Pécuchet*, transl. by Camillo Sbarbaro, Torino 1964, pp. 157–163.

⁴³ "sonnambulismo lucido". Letter by Dr. Esterle to a friend, Trento, 5 October 1852, in *Lo Scaramuccia. Giornale-omnibus* 1/43, 28 March 1854, p. [2].

⁴⁴ "con quel morbido pallore sulle guancie, con quelle palpebre oscillanti le quali lasciano appena vedere l'occhio torbido e dilatato". Il Trovatore, Elisa Zanardelli, in *Il corriere del Lario* 7/36, 3 September 1856, pp. 142f, here p. 143.

⁴⁵ "Il sonnambulismo lucido non si ottiene che in pochissimi casi e dopo un numero più o meno grande ma però sempre ragguardevole d'esperienze." Giacomo D. Nani, *Trattato teorico-pratico di magnetismo animale*, Torino 1850, p. 185.

⁴⁶ "visione senza il soccorso degli occhi". [Anon.], Elisa Zanardelli al Ridotto, in *L'Indicatore. Foglio di Commercio, d'Interessi Municipali, Industriali ecc. ecc.* 2/14, 21 July 1858, p. 58.

Antonio.⁴⁷ Antonio, who walked up and down from the stage to the stalls, would ask Elisa short questions in a loud voice, standing either in front of her or with his back to her; sometimes he would communicate with his daughter with a bell. Elisa would answer in a low voice with “truncated words”⁴⁸ and a “half-closed lip”.⁴⁹

One of the most astonishing experiments was when a person in the audience thought that Elisa should bring an object – a cup, a candlestick, a pen, a playing card – to a certain place in the audience. The person would communicate the thought to the magnetiser by whispering in his ear. Antonio would ask Elisa: “What is he thinking about?” Elisa would perform this very thought.⁵⁰ In a Venetian theatre, Elisa, having descended into the stalls, could go no further than halfway. She gathered up her skirt as if to ford a river but could not, and repeated, “You cannot pass”. Then it became clear why: a woman in the audience had thought (and whispered to Antonio) that the road where Elisa was passing was cut by a ravine.⁵¹

Elisa guessed not only “the thoughts of others, and the innermost things”⁵² but also objects chosen by a person in the audience and secretly passed to the magnetiser. “What’s in my hand?”, someone from the audience asked the blindfolded girl. “A coin,” answered Elisa. “What coin?” “English, a guinea.” According to the chronicles, the proof that this was not deception was a “certain something innocent, childish, primitive” that Elisa showed in her answers. For example, after saying “a guinea”, Elisa asked herself: “What is a guinea?” How could one doubt in front of such childlike innocence?⁵³

Newspaper reports state that during these experiments, “a profound silence” reigned inside the theatre, “interrupted only by some applause or a general murmur of amazement”.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ [Anon.], Altri documenti relativi al magnetizzatore Zanardelli e sua figlia, in *Lo Scaramuccia. Giornale-omnibus* 1/43, 28 March 1854, pp. 2f. (printed also in *Polimazia di Famiglia. Giornale scientifico, letterario, artistico e teatrale* 1/31, 13 April 1854, p. 124); [Anon.], Elisa Zanardelli a Fiume, in *Leco di Fiume* 1/57, 17 November 1857, p. 238.

⁴⁸ “le parole tronche”. Il Trovatore, Elisa Zanardelli, in *Il corriere del Lario* 7/36, 3 September 1856, pp. 142f.

⁴⁹ “labbro semichiuso”. Lo zio Tom, Elisa Zanardelli e il Magnetismo animale, in *Polimazia di Famiglia. Giornale scientifico, letterario, artistico e teatrale* 1/19, 22 March 1854, p. 75.

⁵⁰ [Anon.], Teatri di musica ed altri spettacoli. Firenze. Teatro del Cocomero, in *Polimazia di Famiglia. Giornale scientifico, letterario artistico e teatrale* 1/13, 11 March 1854, p. 52.

⁵¹ [Anon.], Elisa Zanardelli al Ridotto, in *L'Indicatore. Foglio di Commercio, d'Interessi Municipali, Industriali ecc. ecc.* 2/14, 21 July 1858, p. 58.

⁵² “i pensieri altrui, e le cose le più recondite.” [Anon.], Scaramuccia, I giuochi di prestigio, in *Lo Scaramuccia. Giornale-omnibus* 1/37, 7 March 1854, p. [2].

⁵³ “Che cosa ho in mano ? disse uno spettatore. – Una moneta. – Che moneta ? – Inglese. Una ghinea. E poi la stessa magnetizzata domanda a sé stessa: “Che cos’è ghinea ?” con quel fare innocente, infantile che si nota in tutte le sue risposte Come ci possono aver ancora persone che credano ad artificio, ad inganno! [...] Nelle pose, nel gesto, nel parlare, ha certo che d’innocente, d’infantile, di primitivo”. [Anon.], Elisa Zanardelli a Fiume, in *Leco di Fiume* 1/57, 17 November 1857, p. 238.

⁵⁴ “un sì profondo silenzio regna nel Teatro [...], interrotto solo da qualche applauso o da un mororio generale di stupefazione.” Ibid.

Other moments that caught the audience's attention were the "musical ecstasy" experiments. Music was playing in these moments. Depending on the sounds, Elisa would strike a pose suggesting "a sense of sadness, sorrow, anger, delight", only to return to a motionless, almost "marble-like" state when the sound stopped, which "made the spectators burst out in a cry of surprise".⁵⁵

Academies and medical examinations

Antonio and his daughter were also called to private houses and academies where they performed in front of doctors, journalists, city authorities, teachers, cathedral canons, government officials and military officers.

On these occasions, the medical panels subjected them to examinations and often published their judgements and reports.⁵⁶ Private experiments were a good way for them to test the validity of scientific hypotheses about the properties of the magnetic fluid.

Zanardelli did not want to compete with doctors nor challenge the Catholic Church, and whenever doubts arose, he made sure to dispel them before going on stage, publishing declarations about his absolute distance both from medical therapy and the occult. Publicising a "performance of physical jokes, mechanical recreations, and arcane transmission of thought"⁵⁷ given in 1853 at the Teatro Ducale in Modena, a city belonging to the Papal States, Zanardelli published a declaration by three university medical professors, attesting that his experiments "did not depart from the natural order" and had nothing to do with the supernatural and "nefarious and damnable magic."⁵⁸ In addition to this, Zanardelli also distributed a printed sheet in which he assured that his magnetic tests were among those permitted by the Congregation of the Holy Office (and here he expressly quoted two Church interventions, one in 1840 and one in 1850).⁵⁹

⁵⁵ "Avevano termine gli esperimenti colla estasi musicale. [...] in senso di mestizia, di dolore, d'ira, di diletto. [...] la successiva immobilità al cessar del suono è così secca, così marmorea, da far prorompere gli spettatori in un grido di sorpresa." [Anon.], Elisa Zanardelli al Ridotto, in *L'Indicatore. Foglio di Commercio, d'Interessi Municipali, Industriali ecc. ecc.* 2/14, 21 July 1858, p. 58.

⁵⁶ The experiment that took place in Florence in 1854 in front of Celestino Bianchi and Carlo Lorenzini (who, under the pen name Carlo Collodi, would later become renowned as the author of *Pinocchio*), editors for *Lo Scaramuccia*, is carefully described, and the whole report was published in the periodical. [Anon.], Un'esperienza di magnetismo sulla giovane Elisa Zanardelli, in *Lo Scaramuccia. Giornale-omnibus* 1/43, 28 March 1854, pp. 1f.

⁵⁷ "trattenimento di giuochi fisici, ricreazioni meccaniche, e di arcana trasmissione del pensiero". Alessandro Gandini, *Cronistoria dei teatri di Modena dal 1539 al 1871*, Modena 1873, Vol. 2, p. 422.

⁵⁸ "non toglievansi dall'ordine naturale [...], a fronte di coloro che tenebrosamente intendono a travolgere le materie stesse in soprannaturale magia nefanda e dannata." Ibid., pp. 422f.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 422.

Competitions with colleagues

Attacks on Zanardelli never came from the Church, as he always sought its approval, but rather from anti-clerical circles and from artists and colleagues. Accused of being a charlatan, Zanardelli was occasionally challenged to prove his ‘real’ skill in magnetism in the presence of some witnesses and a panel of a few doctors. The doctors had to regulate and manage the competition and assess the experiments of somnambulism and clairvoyance by taking the measurement of the heartbeat, the movement of the eyes and the facial expression of the young sleepwalkers.

One contest came from Francesco Guidi, who called himself a “professor of Magnetism”⁶⁰ and who claimed that his own magnetism was much more serious than Zanardelli’s activity.⁶¹ Guidi arranged a meeting with Zanardelli, and the report stated that the magnetic experiments conducted by Guidi and Zanardelli were “good little games the former, good little games the latter”;⁶² that they both made “a complete fiasco”, and their “nonsense” created “a profound feeling of indignation”.⁶³

Some years later, Zanardelli was involved in a second competition at the end of his career. This time he was challenged by the illusionist Francesco Castagnola, the same Castagnola who had performed in Feltre some years before. While Francesco Castagnola wanted to prove the nonexistence of animal magnetism and completed the experiments with success, Zanardelli failed and published a statement in which he announced that he would be “giving a magnetic session in front of a group of *competent* and *prudent* people”⁶⁴ who would make the result public. After that event, Antonio Zanardelli disappeared from the press.

⁶⁰ In the frontispiece of *Il magnetismo animale considerato secondo le leggi della natura e principalmente diretto alla cura delle malattie con note ed un’Appendice sull’Ipnotismo* (Milano 1860), Francesco Guidi defines himself as a “Professor of Magnetism. Member of the Paris Magnetic Jury and other Mesmeric societies” (“Professore di Magnetologia, Membro del Giurì Magnetico di Parigi e di altre Mesmeriche società”).

⁶¹ [Anon.], Il magnetismo e la medicina. Riflessioni sopra una sfida di magnetizzatori pel dott. Luigi Berruti, in *Gazzetta medica italiana. Stati sardi* 7/24, 9 June 1856, pp. 189–195. On Guidi’s magnetism see Francesco Guidi, *Il magnetismo animale considerato secondo le leggi della natura*, Milano 1860.

⁶² “giochetti belli e buoni i primi, giochetti buoni e belli i secondi”. [Anon.], Appendice. Il magnetismo e la medicina. Riflessioni sopra una sfida di magnetizzatori pel dott. Luigi Berruti, in *Gazzetta medica italiana. Stati sardi* 7/25, 16 June 1856, p. 203.

⁶³ “un completo fiasco [...] a belle e buone cobellerie, le quali [...] fan sorgere [...] un profondo sentimento di indegnazione.” Ibid., p. 207.

⁶⁴ “di dare una seduta magnetica dinanzi un nucleo di persone *competenti ed oculate*”. T. Cingolari, I fluidisti alla prova, in *Il libero pensiero. Giornale dei razionalisti* 3.2/14, 1 October 1868, p. 221.

The audience

Theatregoers loved variety. Men and women, artisan workers and intellectuals, doctors and notables attended Zanardelli's performances.

Chronicles seldom mention the price of tickets, but it was apparently not high enough to prevent a popular audience from attending. Chronicles also emphasise the participation of a "learned and elected" audience.⁶⁵ Zanardelli's theatrical performances testify to the presence of a "social body conceived perhaps as stratified, but also as homogeneous, and above all without tension", as Clara Gallini said about spectacles of hypnotism at the turn of the century.⁶⁶

News in periodicals show that the audience was mainly driven by curiosity. Those who tried to catch Zanardelli's deception sometimes whistled.⁶⁷ People were generally divided between those who believed in the magnetic experiments, those who suspended their judgement and those who thought they were only quack tricks.

Doctors who believed in the validity of magnetism sought seats in the front row to verify the seriousness and the scientific truth of the experiments with their own eyes. After the show, they often invited Zanardelli to perform in private salons or academies.

But people mostly went to see Elisa. All descriptions about the stage focus on her, on her beauty and her innocent air. Women felt admiration. This view was even shared by those who were opposed to magnetism but saw in the sleepwalker the "prima-donna of the magnetic stage".⁶⁸ Probably the public knew Despina's aria in Act I of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* or Bellini's *La sonnambula*, and Elisa could recall for them these female characters.

Chronicles mostly ignored the magnetiser's actions and movements. Those who believed in magnetism thought it was not the magnetiser who transmitted the fluid but the woman, who fell into the 'magnetic sleep' and thus revealed it. According to the critics, Zanardelli was neither a healer nor a hypnotist but an honest man, interested in science and recognisant of the competence of doctors. Only those who disagreed with the magnetic theory commented on his behaviour, such as his continuous loud communication with the audience and with the woman for example, managing each step of the experiment and suggesting answers to the woman. These were actions that they perceived to be manipulation and deception.

⁶⁵ "dotto ed eletto". L. Alemanni, *Teatri e spettacoli*. Torino, in *La Fama del 1856. Rassegna di scienze, lettere, arti industria e teatri* 15/35, 1 May 1856, p. 138.

⁶⁶ Gallini, *La sonnambula meravigliosa*, p. 227.

⁶⁷ Luigi Stefanoni, *Il magnetismo*, in *Il Libero pensiero. Giornale dei razionalisti* 1/32, 9 August 1866, pp. 506–508.

⁶⁸ Kaplan, "The Mesmeric Mania", p. 701.

A symbol of femininity

Magnetism of the 1850s and 1860s has some elements in common with the hypnotism⁶⁹ of the following decades: the theatrical performance, the scientific approach, a belief in phrenology (a pseudo-scientific doctrine that claims the correlation between brain areas and psychic functions) and, finally, the connection between nature, irrationality and femininity.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, the sleepwalker of the middle of the century presents specific characteristics and is somehow different from the hysterical woman of the turn of the century. Both women represent male expectations of female behaviour: in a subconscious state, they are in some ways submitted to a man, and follow his instructions, but at the same time they perform particular aptitudes and are a model of a special force to other women.

Whereas the hysterical woman is seen as a sick person, the sleepwalker is not. It is only from the 1860s onwards that the *somnambula* begins to be seen as ill, and the hysterical image she embodies goes “under the doctor’s jurisdiction”.⁷¹ Moreover, the hysterical woman is no longer a “singular subject” that creates an “unrepeatable event”, as the *somnambula* does in the theatre events, but a “serial, repeatable subject, indeed constituted as a sleepwalker precisely to ensure such repeatability.”⁷² In other words, she is a patient that a doctor induces to reproduce the phases and variants of a hysterical crisis according to a pre-established scientific model.

A poem dedicated to Elisa Zanardelli – written by a man – praises the typically romantic feminine characteristics: “burning ardour”, “joy”, “fury”, weeping “for other’s grief”, “mortal languor”, “kneeling prayer”, “tender sigh”, “virginal” and “candid desire”, “pity” and “love”.⁷³ Elisa is a beautiful, innocent and obedient young lady, showing a suffering expression in her face and a strictly controlled sexuality.

In another poem dedicated to Elisa, Arnaldo Fusinato emphasises her obedience to his requests: “And as a devoted maid / With easy obedience / Every of my

⁶⁹ James Braid, *Neurypnology. Or the Rationale of Nervous Sleep Considered in Relation with Animal Magnetism*, London 1843.

⁷⁰ As regards femininity and irrationality, see for example Valeria P. Babini/Fernarda Minuz/Annamaria Tagliavini, *La donna nelle scienze dell'uomo*, Milano 1986.

⁷¹ “sotto la giurisdizione del medico”. Gallini, *La sonnambula meravigliosa*, p. 314.

⁷² “Egli non è più un soggetto singolare, portatore di un sapere rivelatorio e di un evento irripetibile. È oramai un soggetto seriale, ripetibile, anzi costituito come sonnambulo proprio per assicurare una tale ripetibilità.” Ruggero Eugeni, *La relazione d'incanto. Studi su cinema e ipnosi*, Milano 2002, pp. 112f. See also Donatella Orecchia, Appunti sull'immaginario dei nervi, in *Ara-beschi. Rivista internazionale di studi su letteratura e visualità* 1, January–June 2013, pp. 110–123, here p. 113.

⁷³ “più cocente ardor”, “gioja”, “furor”, “piange [...] Pel duolo altrui”, “languor mortal”, “Le mie ginocchia piego [...] e prego”, “tenero sospir”, “verginal” e “candido desir”, “pietà”, “amore”. Faustino Arici, Elisa Zanardelli nell'estasi musicale, in *Ricordo d'amicizia. Strenna per l'anno 1859*, Milano 1858, pp. 23–25.

new ideas / I saw you fulfil”⁷⁴ Fusinato had asked her to open a book using her thought; at first, Elisa resisted. He then promised her a flower and a poem in her honour, and she overcame “her reluctance”⁷⁵

There’s probably an ambiguity coming from the symbol of femininity that Elisa represents. She invites the female audience to conform to the model she represents on stage. On the one hand, this means that female members of the audience could feel admiration and empowerment, seeing her with strong powers on the stage; for example, the chronicle from Buccari underlines that women applauded Elisa and gathered around her in an ideal way, “forming a crown”⁷⁶ On the other hand, Elisa also represents an ideal of obedience and could encourage women to maintain their subservient position, according to the socio-cultural ideals of the time.

For her public she embodied certain artistic ideals as well: descriptions of Elisa refer to the image of a virginal, ethereal, submissive, angelic woman. From time to time the audience saw in her a Joan of Arc or the *Assumption* painted by the Italian artist Tiziano Vecellio.⁷⁷ We have no images of her on the stage, but those of Luisa, Guidi’s muse, “in the ecstasy of contemplation” are reminiscent of sacred images, like Bartolomé Esteban Murillo’s Madonna or a saint in ecstasy: arms on her chest, her gaze upwards, her head reclined.⁷⁸ Like Luisa, Elisa Zanardelli also resembles this symbolic picture linked to the cult of the Madonna, who is both a virgin and a mother, which meant that, in a young woman, virginity coexists with a maternal role.⁷⁹

Magnetism in surgery

One last interesting aspect concerns the use of magnetism as an anaesthetic in surgery.⁸⁰ The main representative of magnetism in Victorian England was Dr John Elliotson, who, after treating patients in the late 1830s at the North London Hospital with magnetism, was forced to leave academic medicine due to opposition from colleagues and the hospital management. This marked a clash between the practice of magnetism and the medical corporation.

⁷⁴ “E qual devota ancella / Con facile obbedir / Ogni mia idea novella / Io ti vedea compir.” Arnaldo Fusinato, Ad Elisa Zanardelli, in *Lape. Giornale di ricreazione e d’istruzione per popolo* 41, 14 October 1853, p. 162f., here p. 162, published with a picture in Arnaldo Fusinato, *Poesie complete. Nuova edizione Milanese, riveduta e ritoccata dall’autore, con note, illustrate da O. Monti*, Milano 1880, Vol. 2, pp. 293f.

⁷⁵ “La sua ritrosia fu vinta”. Fusinato, Ad Elisa Zanardelli, p. 163.

⁷⁶ “formandole corona”. P. T., Corrispondenza, in *L’eco di Fiume* 1/66, 10 December 1857, p. 275.

⁷⁷ The *Assumption* is an oil painting on panel by Tiziano Vecellio (1488/90–1576), datable to 1516–1518 and held in the basilica Santa Maria Formosa in Venice.

⁷⁸ Francesco Guidi, *Il magnetismo animale considerato secondo le leggi della natura*, Milano 1863 [1860], p. 372.

⁷⁹ [Anon.], Elisa Zanardelli al Ridotto, in *L’Indicatore. Foglio di Commercio, d’Interessi Municipali, Industriali ecc. ecc.* 2/14, 21 July 1858, p. 58.

⁸⁰ See Rosen, A Strange Chapter; Kaplan, “The Mesmeric Mania”.

Apparently, mesmerists envisioned a surgery without pain for the first time. The practice was tested in Calcutta, India, on the native population by the Scottish doctor James Esdaile, who was working for the East India Company in the late 1840s. The news about this practice spread throughout Europe. Doctor Esdaile returned to Scotland in 1851; meanwhile, English hospitals banned mesmerists and began experimenting with the use of chloroform as an anaesthetic.⁸¹ The same happened in other European countries at different times from the early 1850s. In Italy, where official medicine felt no competition from mesmerists, hospitals continued to experiment with magnetism as an anaesthetic even after the middle of the century.⁸²

As Zanardelli's case shows, magnetism in Italy did not compete with medicine but rather sought its scientific endorsement. Instead of intimidating doctors, Zanardelli's performances and experiments offered them the opportunity to test the validity of scientific hypotheses on the properties of the magnetic fluid and to demonstrate the validity of the phrenological theory, namely the connection between regions of the skull and psychic functions.⁸³

Italian doctors were divided on the subject of magnetism. Zanardelli had the support of a medical network that believed that the brain was "a conglomeration of distinct organs" on which "a magnetic agent" acted.⁸⁴

In Italy there were magnetisers who, in their magnetic cabinet and with the help of sleepwalkers, promised to heal "all kinds of illnesses".⁸⁵ According to the

⁸¹ Mesmerists' studies propelled the use of ether and chloroform. See Rosen, *A Strange Chapter*. According to Alison Winter, doctors resorted to chloroform to reassert their professional prerogatives threatened by magnetism in the surgical field, see Winter, *Mesmerized*, pp. 183–186.

⁸² Giuseppe Sacchi, *Intorno alle scienze occulte ed ai così detti tavoli parlanti*, in *Annali universali di statistica economia pubblica, legislazione, storia, viaggi e commercio* 3/10/29, 1856, pp. 133–156, especially pp. 150–156.

⁸³ Experiments in academies demonstrated the phrenological theory. Examples are: a doctor approaches the girl and touches her "cephalic seat of the destructive instinct" ("sede cefalica dell'istinto *Distruttività*") with his finger; "instantly" ("all'istante"), Elisa "angrily" ("rabbiosamente") tears the gold necklace she wears around her neck. (*Commentari dell'Ateneo di Brescia per gli anni 1870, 1871, 1872, 1873*, Brescia 1874, pp. 236–239, here p. 238). Another doctor places a finger below her ear, says loudly that it is "the organ of conservativeness" ("l'organo della conservatività"), and Elisa says, "No, I don't want to die" ("no, non voglio morire"); yet another doctor places his hands on the top of her head and Elisa exclaims, "Saturday and Sunday I went to church for attending Mass" ("sabato e domenica essere andata alla chiesa poi alla Messa") and kneels down in the act of praying, and at this point the doctor reveals "that he had in mind to make the organ of Theosophy act" ("d'aver avuto in animo di far agire l'organo della Teosofia"). G. Scandellari, *Documenti riguardanti Antonio Zanardelli e sua figlia*, in *Lo Scaramuccia. Giornale-omnibus* 1/44, 31 March 1854, pp. [2]f., here p. [2].

⁸⁴ "una congerie di organi distinti", "un agente magnetico". A critic on phrenology and phrenomagnetism in Gaetano Strambio, *Su'l magnetismo animale e su'l freno-magnetismo*. Risposta del dottor Gaetano Strambio al dottor Achille Filippini-Fantoni, direttore dell'ospedale di Chiari, in *Gazzetta medica italiana. Lombardia* 3/3/17, 26 April 1852, pp. 141–148, here p. 145.

⁸⁵ "ogni genere di malattia". See for example Anna d'Amico's advertising in *L'amico del popolo* 3/75, 7 April 1869, p. [4]. In the Magnetic Cabinet in Bologna Anna d'Amico offers her consultation to those who "wish to heal or improve their health" ("a chi desidera guarire o migliorare la salute"). Her activity goes on until the end of the Eighties (see the advertising in the pamphlet *L'Ehi! Ch'hal scusa... all'esposizione* 17, 29 September 1888, p. [2].

law, however, they could be accused of undue exercise of medicine. But in the cases in which the court intervened, magnetisers denied practising medicine and claimed that doctors had prescribed drugs and therapies on the basis of the so called “sleepwalker’s consultation”.⁸⁶ Judges did not say whether magnetism was scientific or not and held that the magnetiser was not punishable for unlawful exercise of medicine.

Conclusion

The theatrical activity of Antonio and Elisa Zanardelli was a way to perform topics that were discussed in their contemporary society; at the same time, their stage appearances contributed to the variety of genres that provincial theatres hosted in the nineteenth century. Zanardelli preferred the theatre, where he could demonstrate his skills as an actor and entertainer thanks to a mix of acting, stage design, music and science. Here, he moved on and off the stage, spoke loudly, involved the audience and created suspense. Critics accused him of preferring the theatre because he loved to be the “master of the field” at all times.⁸⁷

Zanardelli did not deal with theatrical impresarios but instead used his networks of medical and scientific societies, who discussed magnetism in newspapers in light of European scientific literature. As he became a professor of magnetism and a scientist, contact with doctors and their approval became essential. Moving from town to town, he first got in touch with doctors, notables and scholars.

The Zanardellis’ performances in Italian provincial theatres had a wide audience that was as interested in magnetic experiments as they were in all kinds of representations. In any case, as magnetism was particularly discussed at that time in several social venues, a theatrical stage offered the opportunity to present the magnetic theory in front of a local provincial community as well as to submit it to tests by the medical corporation. Zanardelli’s activity and success therefore demonstrates the importance of provincial theatres as socio-cultural environments and vital spaces for the exchange of information, socio-political public debate and the formation of public opinion.

⁸⁶ “consulto della sonnambula”. Example of a verdict in Giudicati sardi. Tribunale Provinciale di Torino. (Sessione del 17 marzo 1859), in *Leco dei tribunali. Sezione prima. Giornale di Giurisprudenza penale* 9/907, 21 April 1859, pp. 679f.

⁸⁷ “padrone del campo”. L. Stefanoni, Il magnetismo (Continuazione), in *Il libero pensiero. Giornale dei razionalisti* 1/32, 9 August 1866, pp. 506–508, here p. 506.

Places of Cohesion and Debate
Socio-Political Roles of Provincial Theatres
during the Nineteenth Century

edited by

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