

L'inconvenienze teatrali – 'Backstage Ups & Downs' – premièred in 1831 at Milan

This opera has a longwinded and unfamiliar official title: Le convenienze ed inconvenienze teatrali. There's no generally accepted English title though 'Backstage Ups & Downs' captures the essence of this plot. As the 'Down' elements predominate, the Italian title might be abbreviated as suggested above.

GAETANO DONIZETTI (1797-1848)

Libretto by the composer, after comedies by Antonio Simone Sografi

Running time: 116 minutes

Performed at the Wexford Opera Festival in 2024

Daria Garbinati, Prima Donna	<i>Sharleen Joynt</i>	Soprano
Procolo, her husband	<i>Giuseppe Toia</i>	Baritone
Biscroma Strappaviscere, Composer	<i>Matteo Loi</i>	Baritone
Donna Agata Scanagalli, Mother of Seconda Donna	<i>Paolo Bordogna</i>	Bass-Bar
Luigia Castragatti, Seconda Donna	<i>Paola Leoci</i>	Soprano
Guglielmo Antolstoinoff, Tenor (who's arrived for <i>The Sound of Music</i>)	<i>Alberto Robert</i>	Tenor
Cesare Salzapariglia, Librettist	<i>William Kyle</i>	Baritone
Impresario	<i>Philip Kalmanovitch</i>	Baritone
Direttore del Teatro	<i>Henry Grant Kerswell</i>	Bass
Conductor	<i>Danila Grassi</i>	
Stage Director	<i>Orpha Phelan</i>	

Press Review 2024

The evening promised a large-scale production of an opera hitherto unknown to me: *Le convenienze ed inconvenienze teatrali* (The Conventions and Inconveniences of Theatre). I had read that it was a biting satire of the bad habits of 19th century Italian theatrical practice and was expecting a comedy. In truth, though, I had no idea that I was about to experience not merely quite the funniest opera I have ever seen, but a viable candidate for the funniest thing I have ever seen. It was up there with the 1992 film of Michael Frayn's play of a decade earlier, *Noises off*, at which I laughed so hard it hurt.

The "conventions" is a reference to the ranking of principals into prima, seconda and comprimaria (first, second and co-star), together with all the expectations of the relative numbers of arias, opportunities for virtuoso display, prominence of billing etc that this engenders. The "inconveniences" refers to the petty jealousies and atrocious behaviour that had become commonplace, with the resulting headache for impresarios and composers, not to mention stage and music directors. The scope for farce is undeniable. In this opera, the headache becomes a self-destructive nightmare, from which the only escape is annihilation. Analogous to the spectacle of Basil Fawlty in meltdown, or the descent into insanity of the Scriptwriter in Mario Vargas Llosa's 1977 novel, the comic fascination of abject collapse robs the helpless voyeurs, paralysed by laughter, of the capacity of empathy. The setting, in keeping with the 'Theatre Within Theatre' theme of Wexford's 2024 Festival, is backstage and rehearsals of a production of a (decidedly uninspired) opera seria, *Romolo ed Ersilia*, by a mediocre provincial company.

Originally a one-act farce, the opera grew gradually with dialogue, then recitative and ultimately random inclusions from other operas of 'star turns' for the principals being inserted, so there is an absence of a definitive edition. Initial plaudits must go to the director, Orpha Phelan, for crafting such an excellent production from the Critical Edition, with research which

included going directly to Roger Parker the edition author for advice. Armed with his blessing to be creative and with a few special tweaks, she has fashioned an absolute masterpiece.

We get to meet the main characters in the first rehearsal. The Prima Donna, Daria (Chinese-Canadian coloratura soprano Sharleen Joynt) is a cut above the rest of the principals and knows it, refusing to rehearse with them after demonstrating a tour-de-force aria from the production, which she has already memorised (and indeed it was truly phenomenal). Later, as one of the non-sequitur 'star-turn' insertions in Act 2, Sharleen sang 'Glitter and be gay', Cunegonde's aria from Bernstein's *Candide*, and it was equally magnificent (if unexpected). Her husband Procolo (Sicilian baritone Giuseppe Toia) starts as her one-man clique, defending her prominence against the efforts of the rest of the cast but, when the tenor deserts the production in disgust, he offers to step in.



Seconda Donna Luigia (Italian soprano Paola Leoci) is unhappy with her part and timidly begs the composer (Sardinian baritone Matteo Loi) for an aria to help her career. He brushes her off with ease but has not reckoned on her formidable mother, Donna Agata (Italian bass-baritone Paolo Bordogna in a travesti role). Determined that the production will launch her daughter's career, she leaves him in no doubt what is expected and what the consequences of non-compliance will be. This leads to a spectacular cat-fight with the Prima Donna and an uneasy truce. As the production begins to fall apart with desertions, Agata offers to take on the trouser role vacated by Pippetto (English mezzo Hannah Bennett), even though she can't read music, with particularly hilarious results.

As the decay of the production progresses, Agata refuses to let go of her daughter's hoped-for career-launch and takes on additional responsibilities, including lighting (full marks to lighting designer Daniele Naldi for simulating the inevitable chaos) and choreography (huge plaudits to Amy Share-Kissiov for superb quality of the dance throughout the production). The scene where Agata instructs and rehearses the ballet dancers had me in stitches (and pausing even now as I recall it, unable to type as I tremble with mirth). In an evening of top-flight performances, Paolo Bordogna's shone unforgettably with excellence in comic timing, drag portrayal and vocal agility.

In the original production, the humour of the role of the German tenor Guglielmo (Mexican tenor Alberto Robert) was based on the parody of German pronunciation of Italian (no longer acceptable to modern sensibilities). Ingeniously, Orpha has tweaked this to him finding himself in the wrong production. He arrives with guitar, bewildered at the absence of nuns, children and Nazis. He rehearses an aria, shoehorning the lyrics of 'Edelweiss' into Donizetti's melody. He comes to blows with Agata, which resolves him to give up and leave, becoming one of the

lucky ones that got away. The Impresario (Canadian baritone Philip Kalmanovitch), already under pressure about the production's precarious finances, is progressively driven to despair at the loss of a tenor, finally resorting to desperate measures when the director (British bass Henry Grant Kerswell) cancels the show). As the whole company plans to scarpers to escape financial liability, the curtain falls as the whole production is about to go up in smoke. Literally.

INTERVAL BETWEEN ACT 1 AND ACT 2

In Act 2, we get a glimpse of dreadfulness of the opera they are rehearsing, when the chorus, all preposterously decked out as Roman senators in white togas (with gold laurel-leaf tiaras) perform a Triumphal March number, with principals in Roman military garb and a malfunctioning set in which two halves of the colonnade of a Roman temple drift back and forth and fail to align. Tribute must be paid to Madeleine Boyd's design: its contribution to the amplification of the hilarity was immeasurable, and Agata's costumes contributed much to Paolo's unforgettable portrayal. Holding the music all together in performance was conductor Danila Grassi. Excellence in the portrayal of mediocrity cannot be easy, but this production aced it.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, 'Convenienze ...' has been the highlight of my attendance at this year's Festival. Absolutely superb.

<https://www.edinburghmusicreview.com/reviews/a8obdpfq5t5uvel0i06f1g8zx8pmr>



Gaetano Donizetti

Donizetti's *Zoraide di Grenata* attracted enough attention in Rome in 1822 to win him a decisive contract with the Neapolitan impresario Barbaja. The next eight years were effectively a 'journeyman' phase (eg following a traditional apprenticeship): operas such as *Le convenienze ed inconvenienze teatrali* characterise Donizetti's experimentation during a period of unflagging productivity. His 1830 success with *Anna Bolena* in Milan was a turning point that won him commissions from all the leading Italian opera houses. Although his three greatest comic operas were still ahead of him, Donizetti mainly confined himself to tragedy after this. *Lucrezia Borgia* (Milan 1833) and *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Naples 1835) soon made him a household name.

Donizetti left Naples for Paris in 1838 attracted by fewer censorship restrictions, as well as by the chance of greater fees and prestige. Four years later he was also named Hofkapellmeister to the Habsburg court in Vienna, so from 1842 to 1845 he divided his time between these two glamorous capitals with occasional trips to Italy. By 1846 he was confined to a sanatorium, and – in an extremely debilitated state – he was then brought back to Bergamo where he'd been born about fifty years earlier.



Donizetti's Operas

It's impossible to imagine any composer who could have written more operas than the 67 written by Donizetti! The table below demonstrates his fecundity throughout a professional career lasting more than two decades, with a particularly prolific period from 1827-1837 where he regularly completed at least three operas every year.

<i>Years</i>	<i>Operas</i>	<i>Principal Theatres</i>	<i>Some Better Known Works</i>
1816-1821	6	Bologna	Il Pigmaliione
1822-1826	12	Naples and Rome	Emilia di Liverpool
1827-1829	9	Naples and Genoa	Il castello di Kenilworth
1830-1831	8	Naples and Milan	Anna Bolena
1832-1833	7	Milan, Rome, Naples, Florence	L'elisir d'amore
1834-1835	5	Naples, Milan, Florence, Paris	Lucia di Lammermoor
1836-1837	7	Naples and Venice	Roberto Devereux
1838-1841	8	Paris, Rome, Naples, Milan	La fille du régiment
1842-1843	5	Paris, Vienna, Naples	Don Pasquale

One curious feature of the individual titles highlighted above is that more than half of them are operas with a British setting! Donizetti worked in an era when Walter Scott was a widespread inspiration. For those familiar with a sunny Mediterranean climate, Scott was able to conjure up an irresistible vision of Celtic islands that lay tantalisingly close to the West European coast! Scott can be directly connected to two of these five 'British' operas, but within the rest of Donizetti's oeuvre his influence is more indirect. For example *Maria Stuarda* is primarily based on Schiller's play. Owing to Donizetti's long-running struggle with censors, it's also fair to note that plots associated with Tudor monarchs were more likely to be acceptable in Italy, because they dealt with Protestant rather than Catholic royalty.

Selected Musical Biography

DONNA AGATA SCANAGALLI: PAOLO BORDOGNA (1972-) is an Italian operatic baritone and bass particularly associated with comic roles in the operas of Rossini, Donizetti and Mozart. He plays down his cross-dressing expertise presumably to avoid typecasting, but this photo of him as Don Magnifico in Rossini's *La Cenerentola* confirms that he's always likely to be the star of the show:

