

Chapter 5 - Opera and Shakespeare in Verona

There is probably no city in Italy that has more romantic associations than Verona. Enclosed by a loop of the Adige river, the old town's character seems almost to have been preserved untouched since the middle ages, even though the city is crammed with tourists year round and most of the old building facades now have modern glass and steel shop fronts hosting boutiques and bustling cafes. But those distractions aside, it is remarkably easy to walk around Verona and imagine you are back in its fourteenth century heyday.

The city is of course also indelibly associated with William Shakespeare, who set *Romeo and Juliet* in Verona, along with his early play *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (though in fact much of the action in the latter play takes place in Milan). The city trades shamelessly on that connection, and a huge number of visitors come purely for that reason, drawn by the timelessly tragic tale of the star-crossed lovers. No doubt that's great for the city's coffers, but there is a good deal more to Verona than that, as we discovered.

On our first visit to Verona, we arrived by train from Venice, having booked a three-week stay in an apartment, and though it was a fairly warm day, we opted to walk there from the station, which is located just outside the old town itself. Not, as it turned out, an entirely wise decision; it took us a sweaty forty-five minutes to navigate our way past the massive Venetian-built city gate (now stranded in the middle of a roundabout), along a broad avenue lined with Liberty-era apartment buildings, through Piazza Bra, filled with tourists gawping at the immense Roman arena, and up the cobbled and boutique-lined Via Mazzini, which connects Piazza Bra with the Piazza dell'Erbe, a lively irregular oblong lined on one side with cafes and restaurants and a market in the middle.

At the far end of the piazza stands the Palazzo Maffei, behind whose grand baroque facade perched our apartment, a small but very stylish one bedroom apartment from whose windows we had a fine view of the activity below. The owner, when we eventually met him a week or so later, turned out to be a young gay man (several tell-tale signs around the apartment had already tipped us off on this point), a builder by trade, who split his time between Verona and another apartment in Milan, using AirBNB to rent out whichever one he wasn't using.

We also discovered one of the downsides of having an apartment on a piazza: noise. The Italians are like the Spanish - they eat late and if they plan to drink, they do that even later. Unfortunately for us, one of the most popular bars on the Piazza dell'Erbe was right below our window; that might not have mattered were it not for the fact that the apartment had no air conditioning, and so we had to keep the window open to get a little air into the place. When the owner showed up, he unlocked a secret cupboard that contained a portable air conditioner, which helped keep the flat cool, but was too

noisy to run continuously, so whether we liked or not we had little choice but to keep Italian night hours, either sitting on the windowsill glass in hand to watch the crowd, or else going down to join the party.

The piazza occupies what was in Roman times the city's forum, the commercial and civic centre of any Roman town, and since then it has always been the commercial heart of the city, hosting the fruit and vegetable markets (hence the name). Today, beneath the immense white umbrellas that provide shade from the sun and shelter from the occasional summer rainstorm, the market still sells foodstuffs, though that function has been relegated to secondary importance, replaced by lots of stalls selling tourist tat. Even so, the locals could be seen every day buying their supplies, impervious to the tourist crowds.

On the northern side of the piazza stands a long four-story structure called the Casa Mazzanti, whose upper facade sports fading but still beautiful frescoes that date from the fifteenth century. The ground floor arcades of this building originally hosted workshops and shops, but are today occupied by restaurants and cafes, perfect for alfresco dining and people watching.

Of these, our favourite was the Caffe Fillipini. Like its competitors, the Fillipini caters primarily for tourists, but it is a little more upmarket than the others, the little tables covered in white tablecloths and the white-shirted waiters sartorially splendid in waistcoats and bow-ties. After a few visits the waiters worked out that we were in Verona for more than the standard two or three days, and we progressed beyond nodding terms with a couple of them, Gianluca and Carlo. Gianluca possessed the good looks of a middle-aged movie star, fancied himself with the ladies, and was possessed of an irrepressible sense of humour that responded instantly to Robert's usual friendship assault. Carlo, on the other hand, was chubby—he wryly referred to himself as 'fat Carlo'—and rather more shy, but good fun once he got talking.

Italians, it must be said, can at times be dead crafty. One night we dropped in to the Fillipini just as they were closing; fortunately Gianluca and Carlo were working that night and they let us have a last drink, even though the bar was technically closed. One thing led to another and eventually Gianluca asked if we would like to see a 'local' bar, the sort of place, he intimated, where regular everyday Italians go to socialise. That seemed like a fun idea, so as soon as he and Carlo had finished up we piled into a taxi and zoomed off, out of the old town and out into the suburbs.

This was a bit confusing; we had expected that we would be taken to an atmospheric old place full of chattering Italians, but instead, after about a quarter of an hour, the taxi went up a ramp and pulled up outside a rather drab concrete complex sporting a lurid neon sign that advertised, in English, the presence of drinks and girls. Though I instantly knew what we were in for, my instinct to flee the scene was overwhelmed by Robert's more naive sense of adventure, and so off we went inside.

The rest of the experience was predictable enough. Gianluca promptly disappeared off somewhere, and we were left at the bar with Carlo and a few under-dressed girls for whom we were expected to provide drinks. That the whole thing had been something of a set-up seemed obvious from the fact that even Carlo was bemused as to quite why we were there. An hour or so passed, during which we made stilted conversation with the girls (clearly baffled by our lack of interest in their physical charms), and eventually Giancarlo reappeared and announced it was time to go.

Needless to say, we were expected to pay for all of the drinks consumed, at an outrageous price, along with an 'entry fee' which was also news to us. Some fraught negotiations followed, and we finally left, having been fleeced with an efficiency that would put any Kings Cross night club operator to shame. Obviously the whole object of the exercise from Gianluca's point of view was to ingratiate himself with the owner of the night club (brothel, more accurately) by bringing him some easy marks while he was getting his end in. It was the kind of thing that in Australia we would never in a million years have fallen for, but of course it is all very different when you are in a foreign country with limited language skills. When we fronted at the Fillipini the next day, Gianluca greeted us as if nothing untoward had happened the night before (and maybe it hadn't, from his point of view), though poor Carlo was more shamefaced, and not a little hungover.

We got another example of Italians playing a little fast and loose when we went to see the opera, at the Arena di Verona. This is, without question, one of *the* great theatrical experiences, even if you are not into opera as an art form. The arena itself is, of course, spectacular enough. The external wall that we see today has 72 arches, enclosing an area of nearly 20,000 square metres. Originally, there was another outer wall, some 30 metres tall, made of white limestone and highly decorated; much of it was destroyed in an earthquake in 1117, leaving only a small portion to hint at its past glory.

At considerable expense to our limited budget, we had booked in advance to see Franco Zeffirelli's fabled production of *Turandot*, Puccini's final masterpiece set in ancient Peking. Alas, on the appointed day the weather was less than perfect, raining on and off, and we spent the day fretting about the whole event. By the time we filed into the arena, still digesting dinner from one of the restaurants on Piazza Bra, it was drizzling slightly, and all we could do was hope for the best.

The arena has a capacity for about 15,000 patrons (half the number it was reputed to be able to hold in Roman times), seated in three grades. Down on the arena floor, where gladiators once fought wild animals, well-dressed opera goers chatted and found their way to the most expensive seats; the next level of expense was the lower tier, which was equipped with proper seats, while those in the upper tiers had to make do with an allocated spot on a stone bench, which they could make more comfortable with a cushion purchased from the vendors dotted about the stadium. One of the things we had learnt from previous experiences of outdoor productions is that the romantic appeal evaporates

pretty quickly when your backside begins to go numb on cold stone and your spine starts to wilt in the absence of any support, and so we had opted for the middle level.

By now, the rain had stopped, and the arena was filled with an anticipatory buzz of conversation as we waited for the production to get under way on the enormous confection of a set whose gabled roofs and soaring towers were a remarkably realistic facsimile of the Forbidden City. The last of the sun disappeared, the lights went off, the opera got under way with its short, stirring overture and opening command for the people of Peking to listen to the recitation of Turandot's laws, and we all settled in for a thoroughly enjoyable first act.

Then, maybe five or ten minutes before the end of the act, the rain started to drizzle down once more. Those who had the foresight to bring umbrellas unfurled them, and the rest of us just put up with it under our plastic ponchos. On stage, the opera wound its way to its spectacular first-act climax, there was a burst of applause and a rustling as people prepared to get up for the interval. But then, to general astonishment, the orchestra struck up again and launched straight into Act Two; we all sat down again, somewhat mystified, and tried to enjoy the performance through the rain, which by now had become somewhat heavier.

After perhaps another ten minutes the performance was stopped, and an announcement made to the effect that this evening's event was 'suspended indefinitely' in order to 'protect the musicians' instruments'. This is where the Italian cunning comes in: buried in the conditions of sale of the tickets was a clause saying that refunds would only be given if the performance was cancelled before the end of the first act. That explained the missing intermission; by skipping it they had taken the performance well beyond that deadline and so, like everyone else, we were unable to claim a refund for that night's performance. All we could do was to book again, at full price, for a subsequent night; the second time we were luckier, and though there were a few spots of rain early on, it wasn't enough to stop proceedings, and we ended up having a wonderful night.

I said at the beginning of this chapter that Verona trades fairly shamelessly on its connection with Shakespeare, and though we resisted for a while, eventually we just had to go on the Romeo and Juliet pilgrimage. Probably the biggest shrine to this cult is the so-called Casa Giuletta, where thousands of people turn up every day and go through the little arched gateway from the Via Cappello, and into a short tunnel whose walls have been obliterated by graffiti love messages scribbled by love-struck acolytes of the cult. Beyond the tunnel, there is a little courtyard, containing a statue of Juliet, whose right boob has been polished to a bright shine by a million kisses and gropes from the faithful (evidently it is supposed to bring you good luck). And above, a fourteenth-century balcony hangs over the scene, from which those girls who are prepared to pay the entrance fee to go into the house itself can be photographed by their boyfriends, mouthing 'Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo?'.

It is all completely fake, of course. If there ever was a real Juliet/Giulietta, it would be the wildest of coincidences if she actually had lived in this particular house, which some very enterprising city councillors in the 1930's simply picked out from dozens of others, probably because it was on the Via Cappello (Capulet—get it?), and then added a concrete imitation of a balcony from the period. This little investment has paid off in spades, and the House of Juliet is now a major tourist drawcard.

The house itself is actually quite fascinating, though relatively few tourists actually go inside, preferring to take their selfies in the courtyard and head off to lunch rather than pay the entry fee for the museum. It is a very tall building, five stories high, and is a fine example of thirteenth century domestic architecture. Inside, the museum features period furniture and lots of exhibits from Franco Zeffirelli's film of the play, still in my opinion one of the best film adaptations of them all.

Of course, it wouldn't make sense to have a Casa di Giulietta without also having a Casa di Romeo also, and, again without any evidence, a nearby house has been designated as Romeo's home simply because it was owned by the prominent Montecchi family (ie., Montague family - seeing the pattern here?) in the thirteenth century. It is still a private residence, and you can't go in; the nearest you can get is to have lunch at the Osteria al Duca next door.

Not content with creating two fictional residences for these two fictional characters, someone went even further and found a burial place for Juliet, at the church of San Francesco al Corso. In one version of the story, Fra Laurence marries the pair at this convent, which was then just outside the city walls. So when an open sarcophagus was found down in the crypt of the church, naturally enough it was instantly adopted as Juliet's tomb.

So is the whole Romeo and Juliet connection with Verona completely fake? Not quite. There have been many versions of the story from which Shakespeare probably drew his plot, including one where the key events took place in Mantua, not Verona. But every version has at its heart the conflict between two feuding families. The cause of the feud is never made explicit, but in the thirteenth century one probable cause could easily be the conflict between the Guelphs, who supported the papacy in that institution's long-running dispute with the Holy Roman Emperors, whose supporters were known as Ghibellines.

The Montecchi family were in fact a prominent Guelph family in Verona in the early fourteenth century, and the Capuletti were a Ghibelline family from nearby Cremona, while the rulers of Verona, the aggressive della Scala family, were also Ghibellines (in fact Cangrande della Scala was regarded as the emperor's right-hand man in Italy). So if you close one eye and squint, it would be possible to reimagine a tale of lovers in fourteenth-century Verona whose amorous ambitions are disrupted by this conflict; in fact, novelist David Blixt has done just that, with his *Master of Verona* series.

Which brings me to an appropriate note on which to end this chapter. Early one morning, while Robert was still sleeping and before the heat of a summer's day was upon us, I went out for a walk

that led me across the Ponte San Pietro, a fine bridge across the Adige that dates back to Roman times, and up the hill past the remains of an ancient Roman theatre (still used today for concerts and plays). After a climb that left me puffed out, I arrived at a viewing platform just below the Castel San Pietro, the old palazzo that tops the hill. Sitting there and looking across the red roofs and church towers of the city, the thought came to me that perhaps a young William Shakespeare himself might have sat on this very spot.

Of course, to the best of historians' knowledge Shakespeare never left England, so the thought was entirely ahistorical and probably absurd. But it stayed with me, and a year or so later I started writing my first novel, *What News on the Rialto?*, which explored the possibility that young Will might indeed have visited Italy and Verona. The more I dug into the mystery of the missing seven years of his life before he became known as an actor and playwright in London in the early 1590's, the more plausible such an adventure seemed, and so I like to think that perhaps young Will did indeed sit up on that hill, sometime in 1586, and absorb something of the atmosphere of this lovely Italian gem of a city. And maybe, just maybe, a story about two lovers from opposite sides of a feud lodged in his mind, to be resurrected years later when he was a successful playwright looking back nostalgically at his time wandering Italy.