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Comment:
Letter from Lombardy

Dear H,

The Teatro Bibiena in Mantua, Italy, also called the Teatro Scientifico, was opened in late 1769, and six weeks later, on January 16, 1770, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, not yet 14 years old, gave a performance of his own compositions there; he played at the keyboard and on the violin, and even sang an aria that he was challenged to compose on the spot to a specified text. His father, Leopold, wrote to his wife, Mozart's mother, "I wish you could see the hall where the concert took place. . . . In all my life I have never seen anything more beautiful of its kind." Young Mozart, according to his father, received plenty of applause: "The crowds, the general shouting, clapping, noisy enthusiasm and cries of 'Bravo' and, in a word, the admiration displayed by the listeners, I cannot adequately describe to you."

In March 2024, we attended a concert in the same theater. An Italian pianist and composer, Remo Anzovino, played his own pieces on a Steinway concert grand. It was an informal and personal performance, the composer consulting his notebook, occasionally singing or calling out beats as he played, and sometimes speaking to the audience. The titles of the pieces were a little New Age: "Don't Forget to Fly" and "Celestial Trees." At one point he spoke about the theater in which he was playing, the warmth of the sound, and the classical detail, pointing out the columns, the statues—and, of course, he mentioned Mozart.

The theater was designed by Antonio Galli Bibiena, from an illustrious lineage of painters, architects, and set designers. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, eight different members of the family created sets for special events and theatrical productions at royal courts across Europe. They were originally from Tuscany—Bibbiena is a town about an hour's drive from Florence—but they did much of their Italian work farther north, in Emilia-Romagna and Lombardy. Bibiena designed the Mantua theater in late Baroque style with tiers of boxes curving around a bell-shaped auditorium, holding 363 seats, and he himself painted elegant monochrome frescoes on the interiors of the boxes. He did not design the façade, which was done in more austere Neoclassical style by Giuseppe Piermarini, who would go on to design La Scala in Milan.

Lombardy is the Italian region dominated by the city of Milan, world capital of fashion and opera. It was named for the Longobard Germanic tribe who invaded northern Italy in the sixth century, crossing the Alps, which are visible as you take off from the Milan Malpensa Airport; Milan is about 35 miles from the Swiss border. Though less frequently

touristed by foreign visitors than, say, Tuscany, Lombardy has a distinctive history and a distinctive character, has its foods and wines and dialects, and its own regional artists. And in the year 2020, this wealthy and industrialized northern region was where the Covid-19 pandemic first broke out in Europe, on a strange and scary weekend at the end of February.

Maybe it's hard to remember right now quite how far away Covid seemed to most of us in New York at the beginning of 2020. Wuhan, where people were dying, had locked down on January 23; on January 31 the United States had put restrictions on travelers from China, but most of us were pretty much going about our business—including travel more or less as usual. And then on February 20, a 38-year-old man at Codogno Hospital in Lombardy, near the town of Lodi, was diagnosed with Covid-19, because his doctor, Annalisa Malara, decided not to follow the Italian protocol then in place, which called for Covid testing only in patients with a connection to China. More cases were discovered that same day, quickly followed by the first deaths. A *New York Times* headline on February 23, 2020, announced, "Europe Confronts Coronavirus as Italy Battles an Eruption of Cases." Italy closed down schools in major cities and the Venice Carnival was canceled. Most dramatically, 10 small towns in the region of Lombardy around Lodi were locked down, with no one allowed to leave or enter without authorization, and masked police stopping cars on the roads.

When we planned our trip to Lombardy in March of 2024, we knew we would be traveling right around the fourth anniversary of that terrible first outbreak. And thinking about the theaters of the region became a way, in part, to think about some of what we all lost when the world shut down, and what it means to get it back, as well as to reflect upon the ways that art and theater and history and epidemiology can be connected.

Mantua is part of Lombardy today, but in the Renaissance it was ruled as an independent principality by the Gonzaga dynasty and then, after 1708, by the Habsburg emperors from Vienna. Tourists come to Mantua to see the artistic heritage of Renaissance Gonzaga patronage and power, including the great palace, with its famous frescoes by Andrea Mantegna in the Camera degli Sposi, and the summer palace Palazzo Te, designed and frescoed by Giulio Romano—but the Teatro Bibiena was built in the eighteenth century during the Habsburg period. In 1822, still under the Habsburgs, another showpiece theater opened in Mantua, the Teatro Sociale, with a massive façade strongly suggestive of a Greek temple with Ionic columns. This was a larger theater, built to seat 900, with three levels of boxes, decorated in white and gold, and two upper galleries. In March 2024, we saw a one-act 1962 Ionesco play, *Delirio a due*, (originally *Délire à deux* in French). An unnamed couple, "He" and "She" (played by Corrado Nuzzo and Maria Di Biase who are married in real life) squabble endlessly in a bedroom about pointless trivialities (for instance, concerning the zoological resemblance of snails and turtles), while from outside the sounds of violence and civil

war come ever closer. The audience was wildly enthusiastic, with laughter and applause throughout, and the actors gave curtain speeches referencing the current wars in Ukraine and Gaza, and the continuing relevance of theater of the absurd.

Every Italian region is subdivided into provinces, each named for its capital city, and Mantua is the easternmost of the twelve provinces that make up Lombardy. As with other Italian regions, local identity is strongly subdivided by province—everyone is aware of being Lombard, but it also matters greatly whether you are from Mantua or Lodi, Brescia or Bergamo, Milan or Pavia. Pavia, just 22 miles south of Milan, is perhaps the most historically Lombard of the provinces, since it was the capital of the kingdom ruled by the Lombards (or Longobards) from 572, after the Germanic tribe invaded Italy, until 774, when they were conquered by Charlemagne, who proclaimed himself their king. His Lombard coronation was just one piece of his claim to rule over all of Christian Europe (preceding his coronation as Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas Day 800), but the crown of Lombardy came to have a mystique of its own: the "Iron Crown" of Lombardy is made of gold, like every proper crown, but contains a strip of iron that supposedly comes from a nail of the True Cross.

The town of Pavia is built on the Ticino River, and in the Basilica of San Teodoro there is a 1514 fresco that shows Saint Theodore of Pavia, miraculously (and counterfactually) causing the river to rise and drown the soldiers of Charlemagne. The well-preserved Teatro Fraschini in Pavia, not far from the medieval university, was also designed by Antonio Galli Bibiena, and it opened in 1773, four years after his Teatro Bibiena in Mantua. Originally the Teatro dei Quattro Nobili Cavalieri, founded and funded by four Lombard nobles, it was renamed in the nineteenth century for a local hero, Gaetano Fraschini, a Pavian tenor famous for his dramatic singing of the curse in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*. He was known as the "tenore della maledizione." His bust is in the lobby.

We heard a concert in the Teatro Fraschini by Avi Avital, an Israeli mandolin player, performing with a 15-person local string ensemble. The theater by Bibiena resembles his theater in Mantua, with another gracefully curving bell-shaped floor plan and four tiers of boxes. Avital played interesting arrangements of Samuel Barber and Benjamin Britten for mandolin and strings, while the Bartók Romanian dances were fantastic with mandolin, and the audience was appreciative.

Nearby Milan, of course, has La Scala, opened in 1778 under Habsburg rule, a bucket-list destination today for opera lovers from all over the world. La Scala was designed by Giuseppe Piermarini, an architect with a serious commitment to eighteenth-century Neoclassicism, already dismissing the late Baroque values of the Galli Bibiena family. Behind the Neoclassical arches and pediments of the La Scala façade, the horseshoe-shaped auditorium held five tiers of boxes (though one is now a gallery). The boxes are upholstered in red and lavishly decorated in gold, with the auditorium illuminated by a spectacular chandelier.

Opening night at La Scala comes in December and remains among the most glittering events of Italian society life, but like all the other theaters of Italy, La Scala shut down when Covid hit, and opening night had to be canceled in December 2020. We were there for the celebratory resumption of the Prima, opening night in December 2021, the theater festooned with flowers by Giorgio Armani for Verdi's *Macbeth* featuring superstar soprano Anna Netrebko. Security was tight (the president of Italy, Sergio Mattarella, was there and received a huge ovation), and masks were required, though some were fashionably bejeweled in the spirit of Milan. In the spring of 2024, at the time of the fourth anniversary of the pandemic outbreak in Lombardy, La Scala was staging a new production of Rossini's *William Tell*, an opera of liberation, in which the finale marks the salvation of Switzerland, and angelic harps introduce the concluding solemn chant, "Liberté, redescends des cieux" (Liberty, descend again from the heavens). Excerpts from *William Tell* were also on the program in 1946 when Arturo Toscanini reopened La Scala following World War II and the defeat of Italian Fascism.

While Milan is overwhelmingly urban, Italy's most modern metropolis, the province of Pavia is largely agricultural, specializing in rice (this is the risotto-eating part of Italy), along with other grains and grapes and dairy products. The Certosa di Pavia, the Carthusian monastery just a few miles outside the city, is set among rice fields. The building was commissioned by the Duke of Milan, Gian Galeazzo Visconti, who laid the first stone in 1396, and the church interior is Gothic with a marvelous Renaissance polychrome marble façade. The monastery was occupied serially by the Carthusians, the Cistercians, the Carmelites, and the Benedictines, though it was two Franciscans who were accused of hiding the body of Mussolini, which had been secretly disinterred and concealed by Fascist supporters, and was discovered in the complex in 1946.

The Certosa monastery church was intended to serve as a mausoleum for the Visconti family and contains, among others, the double tomb of Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan from 1494 to 1499, and his wife, Beatrice d'Este, from the ruling family of Ferrara, the pair lying side by side, sculpted in marble. It was the Visconti dukes of Milan (distant ancestors of the famous twentieth-century director), succeeded by the Sforza dukes (originally a mercenary family hired by the Visconti), who shaped and integrated the Lombard principality in northern Italy across the fifteenth century and made it into something like a small modern state. It would be the Sforza who would then, in the early sixteenth century, lose control of their state, see it contested by foreign powers, the French and the Habsburgs, with the latter ultimately triumphant. When Beatrice died in childbirth in 1497, Ludovico apparently went insane with grief. There are stories that he tried to remarry her dead body, that he had an entirely black room, the Saletta Negra, where he could grieve, that he spent all his time at her tomb, thought only of the mausoleum, and lost interest in governing. Shakespeare might have had such a figure in mind, a century later,

when he imagined the magus Prospero, Duke of Milan, expelled from his duchy by a fraternal usurper.

From the 1490s the presence of French and Habsburg armies in the Italian peninsula brought sieges, wars, political upheavals, and infectious disease. Italian doctors described a disease they had seen on the bodies of French soldiers, a pustular eruption that could, they believed, be spread by sexual intercourse. The disease was syphilis ("the French disease"), according to some theories just arrived from the New World, and spreading with particular virulence as a new pathogen introduced into a European population. A 1496 woodcut by Albrecht Dürer showed a soldier with chancre sores, suffering from the new infection.

If syphilis was new in the 1490s, bubonic plague was all too familiar in Italy, dating back to the cataclysmic outbreak of the Black Death in 1347–8, and regularly returning. Milan was less hard hit in the initial wave, but suffered badly in the 1360s, and Duke Gian Galeazzo, who laid the first stone of the Certosa in 1396, died of plague in 1402. In a devastating wave of plague in Milan in 1576–7, Archbishop Carlo Borromeo, born a Lombard nobleman, distinguished himself by not fleeing from the city, but remaining and tending to the sick. The Milan Verziere Column, with Christ the Redeemer on top, was erected to mark the end of that outbreak; it still stands in Largo Augusto. Carlo Borromeo was canonized in 1610 to become Lombardy's most important modern saint, with churches dedicated to him from the great Karlskirche in Vienna, to the Philippines, to 141st St. in Harlem. During the Thirty Years War from 1618 to 1648, troop movements helped spread bubonic plague. The subsidiary War of the Mantuan Succession from 1628 to 1631 (between the French and the Habsburgs) probably helped bring the plague to Milan in 1629–1631. The city tried a quarantine, but relaxed it for Carnival, with deadly results. It has been estimated that out of a population of 130,000 in Milan, possibly 60,000 people died.

This was the outbreak that Alessandro Manzoni wrote about in his historical novel *I promessi sposi*, originally published in 1827, in Lombard dialect (the author was born in Milan), with a revised version in Tuscan—modern Italian—in 1842. The Manzoni novel, set in 17th-century Lombardy, was invoked frequently in Italy during the early months of the Covid pandemic, not least by Pope Francis. In a Sunday message on March 15, 2020, he urged priests in a time of pandemic to find creative ways to care: "priests with apostolic zeal who understand that in times of pandemic, you shouldn't be Don Abbondio." Don Abbondio, in the novel, is a priest who tries to keep himself safe. Instead, Pope Francis admired Father Felice, who in the novel worked among the sick in the lazzaretto, the Milan plague hospital.

For the fourth Covid anniversary, the National Day of Remembrance, organized by the Italian government, we were in Bergamo, the capital of the province that was hit hardest of all: possibly as many as 6,000 deaths in that first wave of spring 2020. As we arrived in Bergamo in 2024, something that looked very like Carnival was going on. It was the

holiday of Half Lent, the Sunday midway through the month of privation. People were in costume, and a large fair was in progress, building to a parade, on the eve of the Day of Remembrance.

"This is the bleak heart of the world's deadliest coronavirus outbreak," said the *New York Times* of Bergamo on March 27, 2020. Why Bergamo? There was speculation that a soccer game on February 19th might have played a role; 40,000 people from Bergamo had traveled to Milan to cheer. By November, analysts and journalists were pointing to errors made early on—a hospital detected an outbreak and tried to close but was forced to reopen, exposing many people to the virus. There were days of delay when the national government, which had locked down towns in the province of Lodi, did not seal off a similar set of towns in the province of Bergamo.

Prosecutors in Bergamo brought a legal case against the Italian government, naming then Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and Health Minister Roberto Speranza, and another case against the then president of the Lombardy region, Attilio Fontana. They were charged with causing unnecessary deaths by their alleged mishandling of the pandemic, but the lawsuits were "archived" (shelved) by Italian courts in 2023. Local people, speaking through the Association of the Families of the Victims of Covid-19, noted that the charges had not been refuted or rejected, and they resolved to persist in assigning responsibility for the deaths of 2020: "From today we are rewriting the history of the Bergamo and Lombard massacre, the history of our families, of the responsibilities for our losses. The history of an Italy that has forgotten that what happened in the spring of 2020 was not caused by Covid-19 but by precise decisions that were made or not made."

Bergamo is really two towns: a historic upper town surrounded by fortress walls and reached by funicular, looking down upon a modern lower town with broad avenues, perfect for a Half Lent parade. Historically, Bergamo, though only 30 miles from Milan, was not part of Lombardy. Just as Renaissance Mantua was ruled separately by the Gonzaga family, so Renaissance Bergamo was actually part of the Venetian Republic, though 140 miles from Venice. The walls of the upper town are marked by the carved image of the Lion of San Marco, and he stands guard against the neighboring province of Lombardy. It was only when Venice lost its independence in 1797 that Bergamo became available for other political affiliations and ended up as part of the Lombardy region in united Italy.

We were staying in the upper city, just off the magnificent Piazza Vecchia, its venerable palaces surrounding a Renaissance marble fountain of sphinxes and lions. An arcade leads into the smaller adjoining Piazza Duomo, which contains the exquisite Renaissance Bartolomeo Colleoni Chapel with its multi-colored marble facade; the tomb of the mercenary warrior and his gilt equestrian statue dominate the interior. Across the square from the Baroque cathedral is the Lombard Romanesque Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore which holds

the nineteenth-century tomb of native son Gaetano Donizetti, but also an extraordinary work by the Renaissance artist Lorenzo Lotto, who created the designs for a series of stunning inlaid wood panels (executed by Giovan Francesco Capoferri) depicting biblical scenes. Santa Maria Maggiore was built in the twelfth century and dedicated to the Virgin Mary as the guardian of the city against plague.

The gentleman who checked us into our hotel showed us a video on his phone from the early days of March 2020. There were Piazza Vecchia and Piazza Duomo totally empty in the video from four years ago. Everything stayed closed for six months, he recalled, and when they reopened, people worried it would be four or five years before tourists really came back to Bergamo, which had been the subject of such terrible pandemic stories. But people came back quickly, he said, Italians and also foreigners: there were lines to eat in the hotel restaurant right away, people wanted to be together.

Monday, March 18, would be the National Day of Remembrance, but Sunday afternoon we went to Bergamo's newly renovated Teatro Donizetti: originally built in the 1780s as the Teatro Nuovo, a classic horseshoe auditorium, rebuilt in 1797–1800, and renamed for Donizetti in 1897, the composer's centennial year. We saw an Italian operetta there, *La Duchessa del Bal Tabarin* composed by Leon Bard (pseudonym for Carlo Lombardo) in 1917. It's a highly frivolous confection, centering on Frou Frou, a singer at the Bal Tabarin nightclub in Paris, who has married a duke and promised to be faithful for six months. The operetta takes place on the night that the six months are up, and both she (the duchess of the title) and her husband head to the nightclub, intent on infidelity. The Milanese soprano Elena D'Angelo both directed the charming production and sang the starring role of Frou Frou. Supposedly the operetta, full of Viennese-style waltzes, was originally intended for performance in Vienna, but the outbreak of World War I—with Italy and Austria on opposite sides—meant that the operetta became instead a wartime hit all over Italy. The waltzing comedy of operetta was a distraction from war and might be considered similarly tonic in post-Covid Lombardy (completely sold out at the Teatro Donizetti). One hit number of the show is a comic duet "Ah, come si sta ben" (Ah, we're doing fine), which aptly summed up the mood in Bergamo in 2024.

On the National Day of Remembrance, there were ceremonies at a cemetery outside Bergamo, with visiting European and Italian dignitaries, speeches acknowledging the tragedy of Bergamo in 2020. In the evening, however, the occasion was marked in the center of the city with the performance of a modern requiem to honor the Covid dead, presented at the Basilica of Sant'Alessandro in Colonna. The patron saint of Bergamo, Alessandro was an ancient Roman soldier who was beheaded on the site of the current church for refusing to renounce Christianity in AD 303.

A requiem is a mass for the dead, a form that has been undertaken by

many classical composers, including Mozart whose deathbed Requiem was his very last work, left unfinished in 1791. Giuseppe Verdi's Requiem of 1874 was composed to commemorate Manzoni and had its premiere in Milan. We attended an outdoor performance of the Verdi Requiem in Florence in August 2020, conducted by Zubin Mehta, to honor the Italians who died of Covid in the first wave. The Bergamo Requiem was specifically composed to honor the collective dead of the Covid pandemic, and most particularly the local victims of Bergamo.

How do you commemorate a global pandemic? How do you mourn your local losses? Some 3 million people died of Covid in 2020, and perhaps 7 million across the years of the pandemic till now. The composer Antonio Brena, born in the province of Bergamo in 1951, began his composition studies at the Donizetti Music Institute of Bergamo and has been active in the town for many years both as a conductor and a music critic. Brena's Requiem, which received its premiere in 2023, on the Day of Remembrance, was now in 2024 apparently becoming part of a recurring ritual for remembering Bergamo's tragic place in the pandemic.

In a church of marble columns, milky white with colored bands, the male chorus began to chant in a monotone—"requiem aeternam" (eternal rest). A harpsichord introduced the movement "Kyrie eleison" (Lord have mercy) with the bass chorus singing repeated descending lines as the sopranos countered with sustained high notes. Brena, conducting, had the sopranos in the next movement singing very high, slow, ghostly lines, a kind of keening, with the uncanny accompaniment of plucked strings. But the trumpet then led a warm chorus of brasses, richly harmonious, the chorus joining to shout out: "Hosanna in excelsis!" The "Agnus Dei" (Lamb of God) movement began in striking fashion with the chorus whispering the Latin text *a cappella*, until a harp finally entered, introducing a solo soprano. She sang, and the chorus responded, repeating her words, and the movement built to a soaring climax and then concluded with the chorus whispering *a cappella* again. At the last movement of the Requiem the children's chorus entered the church, and their child soprano voices picked up the text from the beginning, "requiem aeternam," to ghostly effect, as bells tolled for the dead.

As we traveled around Lombardy in March 2024, the pandemic was still recent enough that every live performance felt like a small triumph, remembering the time when being together was fraught with death and danger. And in the dimly lit Bergamo church dedicated to a martyred Lombard saint, local voices singing a local requiem reinforced the idea that we remember and commemorate best together. Visiting the historic theaters of Milan, Mantua, Pavia, Bergamo, under these circumstances, meant thinking again and again about the long-standing human impulse to build beautiful spaces for the communal experience of music, comedy, tragedy, and remembrance.

PERRI KLASS AND LARRY WOLFF