

# Velvet revolution: inside the arts protests at Rome's Teatro Valle

For months, actors, directors and backstage technicians have turned Rome's oldest theatre into a squat – and all because they want the show to go on

by Tess Amodeo-Vickery

I take my place at the end of the queue, which by this point in the evening wraps around the block. Soon after, a man approaches and tells us our prospects of entry are grim. Nobody blinks – just another maximum-capacity evening at Rome's 18th-century **Teatro Valle**.

Except this isn't just another evening at the theatre. For nearly four months, **Teatro Valle** has been occupied by a large cabal – they refuse to give exact numbers – of actors, technicians, dancers and musicians. They're protesting against arts cuts that have resulted in the abolition of theatre associations such as the **Ente Teatrale Italiano** (ETI) and closure of theatres throughout **Italy**.

On 14 June, the day after Italian citizens, voting in a referendum, **said a decisive no** to water privatisation, nuclear development and legal immunity for acting government officials, the protestors seized the **Teatro Valle**, which had recently been turned over to the state to be sold. Rome's oldest theatre, it is one of many cultural institutions facing difficulties. The protestors have been eating, sleeping and living there ever since. And they're not the only ones: elsewhere in Rome protestors have staged sit-ins at the Teatro del Lido di Ostia, the Teatro Volturmo and the Cinema Palazzo di San Lorenzo, while, over in Venice, the Teatro Marinoni was occupied early in September, to coincide with the city's film festival. Protestors say that there are so many occupations happening, and for myriad reasons, that it's impossible to be sure how many people are involved.

Back at **Teatro Valle**, after the ETI's dissolution, control of the theatre passed nominally to the Ministry of Culture and then to the Town Council of Rome, who initially attempted to sell it to private owners. But the protesters had other ideas. "We want the theatre to be given back to the city – and with the theatre, culture itself," actor Andrea Galatà tells me. But its fate hangs in the balance – and, while it's being squatted in, the city council is unable to plan a programme for next season. Time is pressing, not least because the **Rome film festival begins later this month**. For obvious reasons, the mayor's office is keen to have the issue sorted before the world's entertainment media arrive in town.

"We want the theatre to remain a commonwealth," Galatà goes on. "There's the public sector and there's the private sector. We want to create a third sector that is controlled by no one and everyone." Government officials, perhaps understandably, say that this does not amount to a feasible goal. In a statement issued in July, Italy's deputy culture secretary, Francesco Giro, complained that while the state and city continue to work towards a resolution, they have received no concrete proposals from its occupiers on what should happen next: "I think the time has come for everyone to take responsibility

and action," he said, "so that **Teatro Valle**, which belongs to all of us and not just the protesters, can be freed. All this talking, if not followed by action, is useless."

For all that, though, the theatre appears to be enjoying something of a renaissance, hosting nightly free shows featuring celebrated Italian artists such as [rapper Jovanotti](#) and [singer Edoardo Bennato](#) as well as participatory discussions and workshops. The theatre's 666 seats have become coveted commodities; often, it's standing room only inside.

"Over these three months, everyone who comes to the theatre says that it's better run and in better condition than they've ever seen," Galatà tells me. The protesters have been working in committees to develop a statute under the guidance of heavy political hitters such as [Stefano Rodotà](#), former vice chairman of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, and law professor [Ugo Mattei](#), who collaborated in the writing the June referendum.

They have also been acquiring some big-name cultural support: [director Francis Ford Coppola](#) lauded the protesters during the Venice film festival last month, and [Elio Germano](#), joint winner of last year's best actor prize at the Cannes film festival, publicly announced his support and joined the ranks of those sleeping in the theatre.

Even so, there remain big questions – one of which is money. Although Italy is hardly short of financial problems, the protesters are particularly exercised by what's commonly regarded as insufficient and ineffective allocation of [arts funding](#). This year, a mere €231m was allocated to the Fondo Unico dello Spettacolo, Italy's central arts-funding body supporting theatres, museums and other cultural institutions – just over half the €414m it was allocated in 2010. The protesters are also unhappy about where this money is going. "We recognise that the government does provide funding for numerous theatrical initiatives and art exhibitions, but it doesn't verify the quality of these projects," Benedetta Cappon, of Teatro Valle's press office, tells me. "So we not only need more money, but better governance of how that money is spent."

While some consider culture a luxury – one, somewhat unhelpfully, is Italy's minister of economy and finance, Giulio Tremonti, who famously stated: "Con la cultura, non si mangia" ("You can't feed yourself with culture") – the protesters say this misses the point. "We want to demonstrate that in this country you *can* live on culture, and that art is moving the economy," Valle occupier Giordano Berti tells me. "Art can be used as a tool, as the key to face the economic crisis – in Italy and across the world."

At last, after months of silence, Rome's mayor Gianni Alemanno has finally woken up to what's happening on his doorstep. In [a television interview](#), he suggested that he is open to dialogue, indeed keen to get the situation sorted out as quickly as possible. The protesters, who say they will go public with their proposal in the next weeks, responded with delicate irony, [thanking him "with great love" for finally acknowledging them](#). They insist that he, like any other citizen, is welcome to come to the theatre to discuss the matter.

For now, though, the fate of the majestic **Teatro Valle** remains in flux. Romans will simply have to sit back, relax and enjoy the show.