



ITALY

# EMILIA'S LAST DANCE

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Cavriago (Reggio Emilia). A typical landscape in the province of Emilia. This is where, beginning in the '60s, the passion for dancehalls and outdoor dance floors began.

## The decline of a one-of-a-kind musical genre

by **Ambra Montanari & Pietro Romeo**

- ▶ In the 1970s and early 1980s, the entertainment industry came to life in Italy. This was particularly true of the central region of Emilia-Romagna, where the ballroom dancing phenomenon took root, becoming a national phenomenon in just a short amount of time
- ▶ In Emilia-Romagna alone, ballroom dancing is a multi-million euro business: until the 1990s, the annual turnover was more than 100 million euros
- ▶ Today, the phenomenon is in decline: dance halls are gradually closing their doors and turnover has decreased by more than 75%
- ▶ Ballroom dancing continues to be very popular in Emilia-Romagna, but orchestras are now playing primarily in recreational clubs
- ▶ This musical genre may be in decline but many people still hope to dance to it this summer, even if the season is shrouded in uncertainty, on account of the Covid-19 emergency

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Ozzano dell'Emilia (Bologna). The ticket office of the "Al Camaroun club", in the past considered "the temple of the *filuzzi*", a famous Bolognese variant of classic ballroom dancing. The outdoor dance floor, which was having economic difficulties for some time, closed its doors in January 2019. Sold at auction for 905 thousand euros, it will be converted into a company canteen.



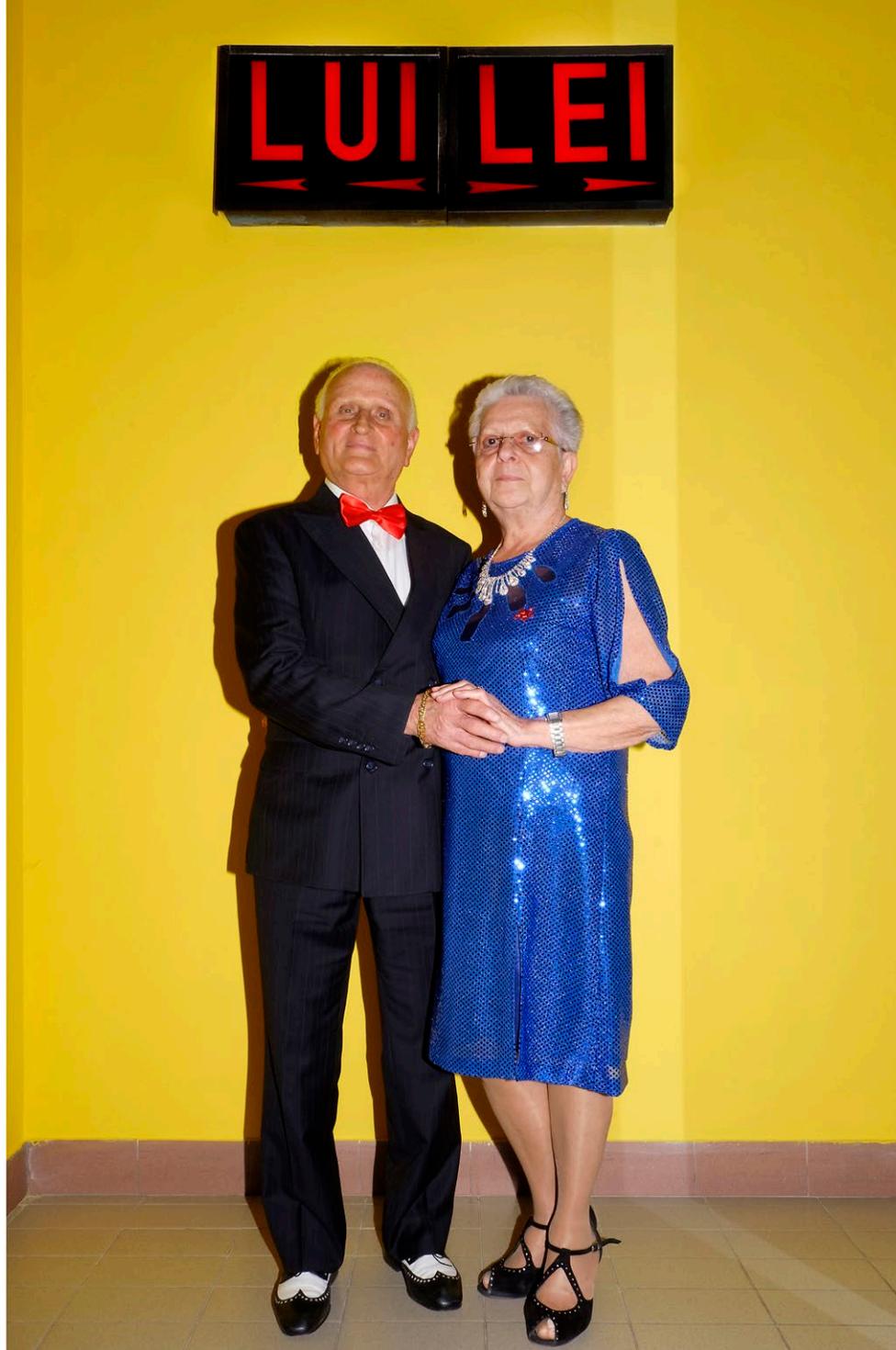
San Lazzaro di Savena (Bologna). A reserved table in the Arci San Lazzaro club's "Sala Paradiso" dancehall. Inaugurated in 1991, it is currently one of the landmarks for Emilia's ballroom dancing, especially after the closure of historic dancehalls such as Ozzano's Al Camaroun.



Montecchio Emilia (Reggio Emilia). A warm-up dance before a concert by the famous Castellina-Pasi Orchestra. Despite the crisis in the sector, about 200 bands are currently active, which adds up to a total of 1,000 musicians, including shift workers.



San Lazzaro di Savena (Bologna). A portrait of Paolo Tolomelli, a waiter at the Sala Paradiso dancehall, prior to an evening of ballroom dancing led by the Emilia Romagna Band.



Ozzano dell'Emilia (Bologna). A couple taking a break during an end-of-the-year party at the "Al Camaroun" club.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, the entertainment industry came to life in Italy. Emilia-Romagna, in particular, became a real leisure hub, with countless clubs and dance halls opening within a radius of just a few hundred kilometres. Along with discotheques, ballroom dancing began to proliferate: this was in the wake of the success of Raoul Casadei, the most famous exponent of the genre. Many orchestras sprang up out of the blue. The Casadei Orchestra performed constantly, often outside the region: in just a short period of time, ballroom dancing, together with its accompanying music, became a mass phenomenon.

Decades after its golden age, however, the genre is in decline: the latest statistics speak of a turnover of just 20 million euros per year, 75% less than in the '90s, when in Emilia Romagna it generated revenues of over 100 million. The dance halls have gradually closed their doors (the most recent examples being the historic "Ciao Estate" in Piacenza and "Al Camaroun" in Bologna, which have been inactive since January 2019). The genre's musical tradition has been heavily influenced by Latin American flavours, while the average age of the dancers has increased.

In Emilia-Romagna (and in some regions of northern Italy), ballroom dancing is still vibrant, but it's mainly confined to recreational clubs for the elderly and the few surviving dance halls that cater to those generations that fuelled its boom. Yesterday's bright young things, who today are in their sixties and seventies, are still on the dance floor: they are the last witnesses to the epic story of a cultural phenomenon that is perhaps destined to disappear.

This musical genre may be in decline but many people still hope to dance to it – and perhaps restore it to its former glory – this summer. This is in spite of the fact that the season is shrouded in uncertainty, on account of the Covid-19 emergency. Indeed, the negative effects on the tourism industry in the Emilia-Romagna region could be enormous.



Raoul Casadei with trumpeter Gil Da Silva, a member of Mirko Casadei's orchestra, during the 2019 *Night of Ballroom Dancing*. The event, organized by the region of Emilia in collaboration with the Regional Agency for Tourism, aims to stem the decline of this traditional folk genre. The festival, inaugurated in 2016, is now in its fourth edition.



Montecchio Emilia (Reggio Emilia). The relaxation area at "Redas" dancehall on a winter night dedicated to ballroom dancing.



Zola Predosa (Bologna). A couple dancing the *filuzzi* at the "Falcone" club. Today, this Bolognese variant of ballroom dancing, originally rather technical and fast, is performed with simpler steps and slower rhythms, suitable for the average age of the audience.



Ozzano dell'Emilia (Bologna). From the left, Mauro Malaguti and Vittorio Cammarata, organizers of dance evenings at "Al Camaroun". The place has long been a reference point for ballroom dancing in the province of Bologna, along with historic dancehalls such as Castel Maggiore's "Harlequin" and Castenaso's "Milleluci".



Cesenatico. (Forlì-Cesena). Mirko Casadei on stage at the 2019 *Night of Ballroom Dancing*. Raoul's son, he took over the orchestra in 2000 and renamed it the "Mirko Casadei Beach Band". Over the years, the ensemble has continued to spread the great classics of the Romagna tradition, while at the same time updating its repertoire by introducing new arrangements and pop, reggaeton, and Latin sounds to suit the taste of a younger audience.



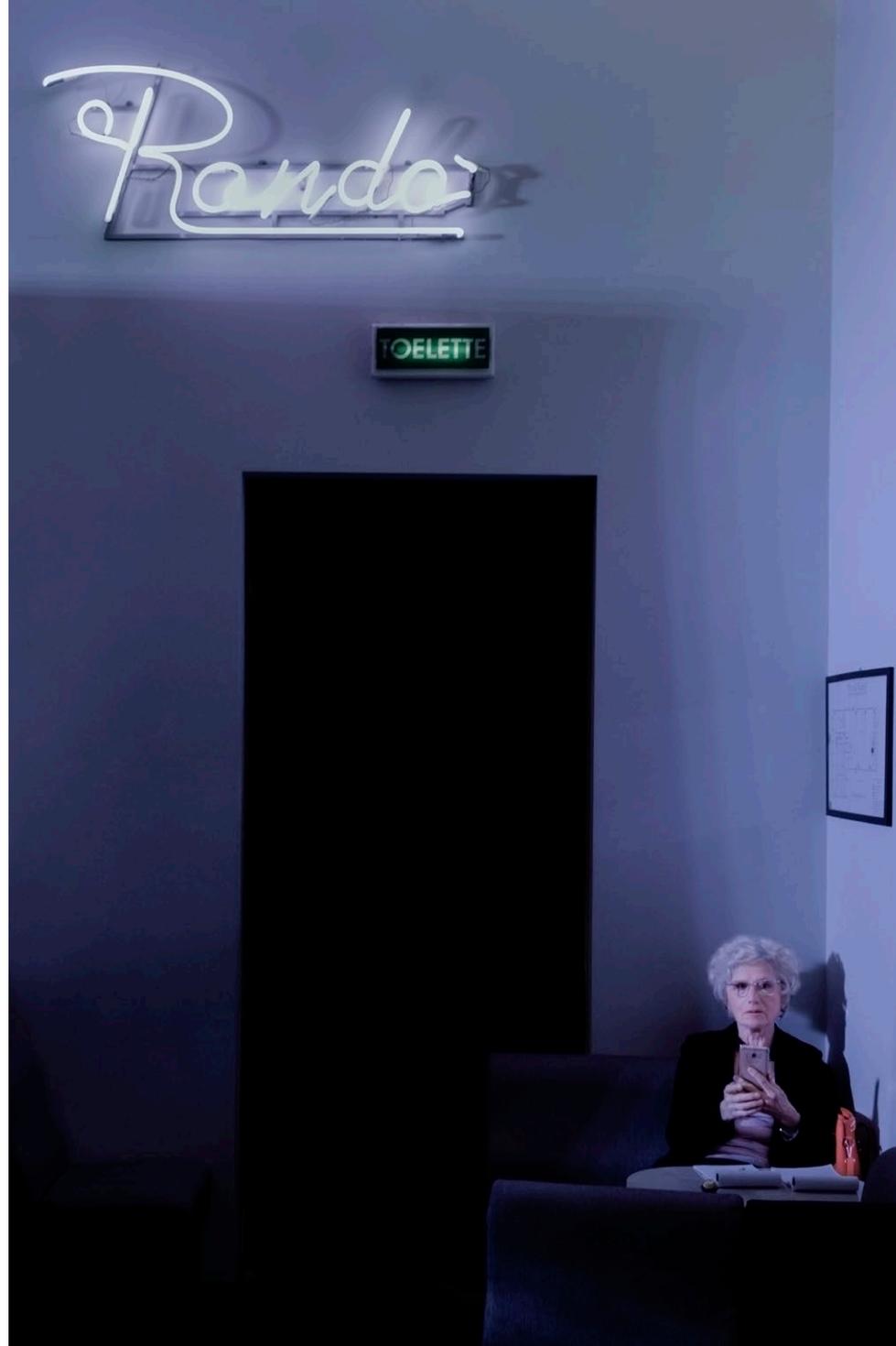
Montecchio Emilia (Reggio Emilia). A couple dances a mazurka at "Redas". Unlike what happened between the '70s and early '90s, today ballroom dancing primarily enjoys an older audience. In most cases, nostalgic people who, when young, experienced its golden age.



Padova. Singer and presenter Sabrina Borghetti introduces a new guest onto *Cantando Ballando*. The television programme, broadcast for more than twenty years on satellite channel Canale Italia 83, is the stage for local Italian pop music and regional ballroom dancing orchestras. Its audience is mainly comprised of the elderly.



Bologna. A portrait of Michele Bianco at the tailoring boutique he took over in 1997. In addition to clothes for the theatre, his staff also makes custom-made dance costumes. Eighty per cent of his clients are tango and Caribbean dance enthusiasts, only twenty per cent order evening clothes or outfits for ballroom dancing competitions.



Cavazzoli (Reggio Emilia). A guest at the "Rondò" club, founded in 1969.



Zola Predrosa (Bologna). A couple on the dance floor during a concert by William Monti and Nicolò at the "Falcone" club.



Borgo Val di Taro (Parma). Omar Codazzi performing in front of his audience. Active since 1998, the singer has already released seventeen albums and one greatest-hits collection.



Padova. One of the cameramen from *Cantando Ballando*, broadcast daily on satellite channel Canale Italia 83, during a live broadcast.



Montecchio (Reggio Emilia). The dance floor at "Redas" during a concert by the Castellina-Pasi Orchestra.



Two students from Gabusi Dance School, founded by Claudia Tavalazzi and her husband Davide Gabusi. The latter, a dancer since the late '70s and an expert on *filuzzi*, is the author of a manual that analyses and codifies the techniques of this famous Bolognese variant of ballroom dancing.



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