

THE LEGENDS AND OGs ISSUE

TOWN & COUNTRY

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SANDRA BERNHARD

Live from New York

Plus

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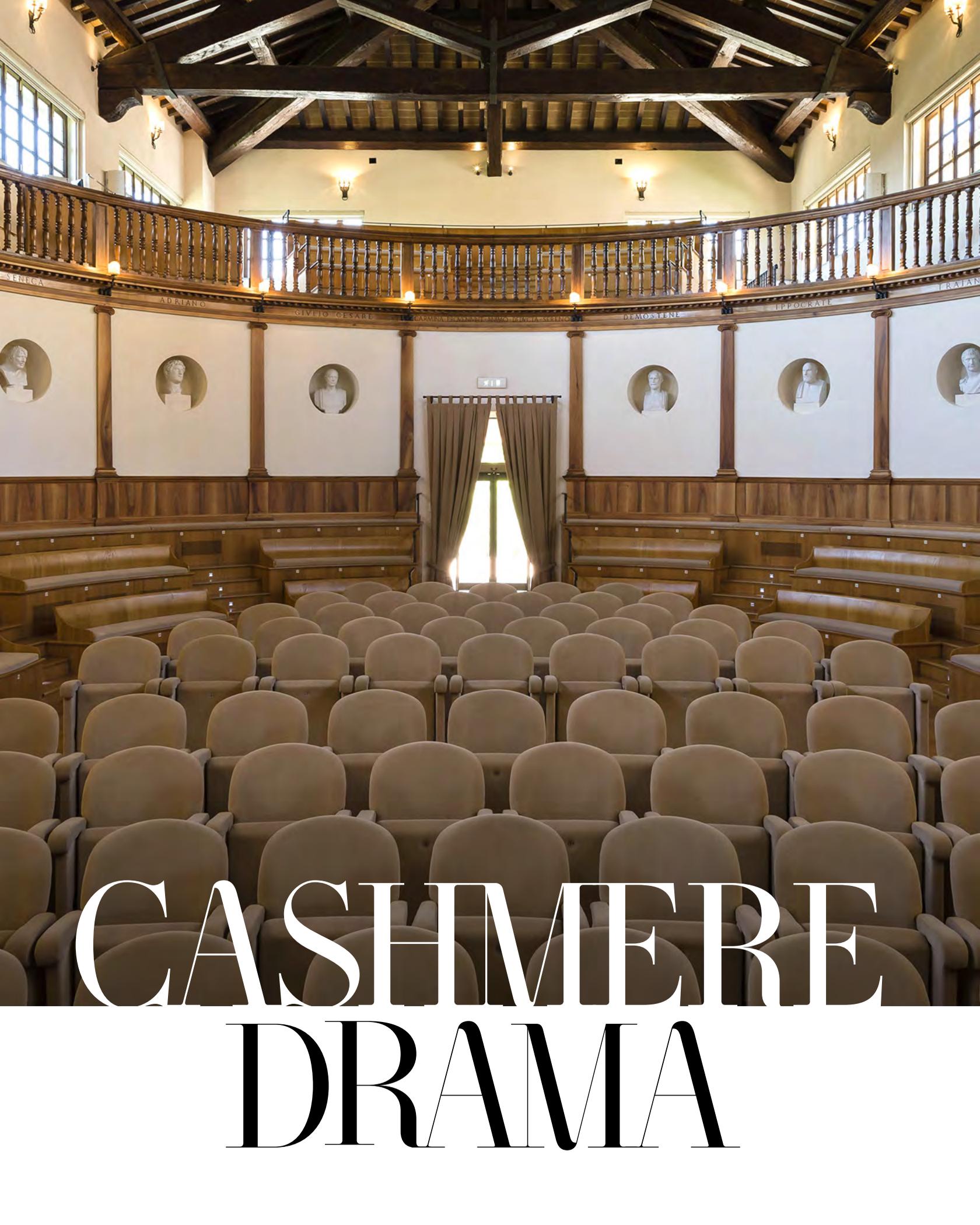
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A User's Guide

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CASHMERE DRAMA



The auditorium of Teatro Cucinelli in Solomeo. Traditional red seats have been swapped out in favor of creamy taupe, to mirror Brunello Cucinelli's signature aesthetic.

The Italian village of Solomeo has become famous for its luxurious textiles. Its cultural programming, however, weaves a different sort of story.

BY MAX BERLINGER

It was early December in Solomeo, Italy, about 20 miles from Perugia, the capital of Umbria, and the night sky was an inky blue dotted with stars. The air was chill and suffused with the earthy fireplace smell of wood burning in steel drums, as cheerful crowds of locals meandered in that distinctive, laissez-faire European way along narrow passageways lined with the booths that make up one of Italy's famed holiday markets. Vendors hawked their charming wares: locally made jams, dark bottles of wine, knit stuffed animals, Christmas ornaments, jewelry, and more. A jolly band danced through the picturesque layout

of buildings, playing carols ranging from "Silent Night" to "Happy Xmas (War Is Over)." In a small bar just off the square, a group of men stood shoulder to shoulder around a television, *birras* in hand, enrapt by a soccer match.

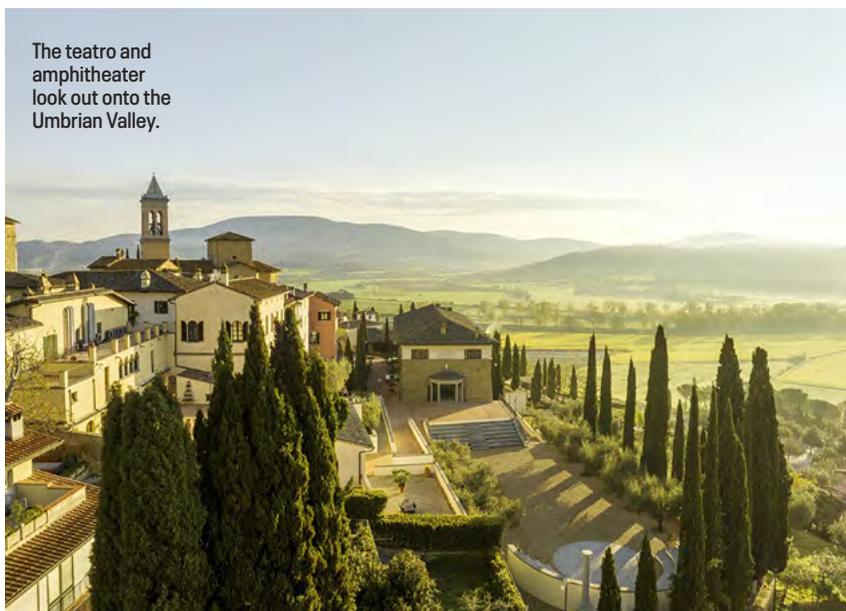
Shortly afterward, and just a stone's throw away, the wild-haired pianist Anna Kravtchenko took the stage at Teatro Cucinelli before an audience of some 200 patrons, all tucked into plush seats and benches rendered in creamy beige. Their fervent applause was rewarded with two encores. Though the theater is adorned with Palladian flourishes that suggest centuries of history, it is in fact a relatively new ➤➤➤

COURTESY BRUNELLO CUCINELLI (2)

Tilda Swinton performed at Teatro Cucinelli in a production overseen by the French curator Olivier Saillard.



The teatro and amphitheater look out onto the Umbrian Valley.



In the summer, two arts festivals offer alfresco performances.



venue, opened in 2008. It stands as one of the most visible expressions of fashion designer Brunello Cucinelli's long-running project to transform this Umbrian hamlet into a living center for art, beauty, philosophy, and humanistic inquiry.

It is here—on stages, in libraries, and in restored civic spaces—that Cucinelli's business success and personal passions most clearly converge. Over the past three decades his initiatives have included the creation of the teatro; an adjacent open-air amphitheater overlooking the valley; a music academy; a humanistic library devoted to classical and philosophical texts; and the restoration of churches, piazzas, and other monuments designed not merely to be admired with the eye but to offer a full sensory experience.

As a result, concerts, lectures, theatrical productions, academic dialogues, and recitals now punctuate the town's cultural calendar, drawing international performers and scholars to a village with fewer than 500 residents. The summer is a flood of cultural entertainment; the town hosts the Solomeo Renaissance Festival, and the torchlit streets overflow with medieval merriment from minstrels, jesters, fire-eaters, falconers, and acrobats. In the same season Solomeo presents its film festival, and arthouse films are given alfresco screenings.

Solomeo has been reshaped by Cucinelli—the man and the company. Roads have been repaved, shabby buildings given new life, vineyards planted, olive oil pressed, and a soccer field built. Rather than locating his headquarters in Milan or Rome, Cucinelli based his operations here, constructing a campus of light-filled industrial buildings arranged around a courtyard of fountains and classical sculptures. Employees work amid views of rolling hills, dine together at a local canteen, and leave promptly at 5:30 p.m.—a policy Cucinelli takes so seriously that he has been known to personally chase away any stragglers.

Cucinelli first encountered Solomeo through his wife Federica, who was born and raised here, when she brought him to the village on an October day in 1970. "I have a very vivid memory of it," he tells me. "I was on my moped, and I crossed a small bridge when suddenly the hamlet appears—tiny and perched on this hill." He returned daily, courting Federica in long, philosophical conversations as they sat atop a small wall opposite a crumbling castle—a story retold with characteristic warmth in *Brunello: The Gracious Visionary*, a documentary directed by Giuseppe Tornatore that was released with great fanfare in Italy last winter and is arriving in the U.S. this spring. The film traces not only the rise of Cucinelli's fashion house but also his belief that commerce, ethics, and beauty can—and should—coexist.

Today the name Brunello Cucinelli conjures images of downy cashmere, rakish tailoring, and elegant women's clothing rendered in shades of beige, oat, and fawn. Oprah Winfrey, Mark Zuckerberg, Martha Stewart, and Marc Benioff are among his customers. Since its founding in 1978, the company has grown into a publicly traded global lifestyle brand valued at more than \$7 billion. It is synonymous with a particularly restrained kind of Italian sprezzatura—luxury at full volume, logos kept to a whisper.

Yet it is the cultural and artistic work—both in Solomeo and in nearby Perugia—that Cucinelli speaks of with the greatest reverence.

Cucinelli's story is told in the film *Brunello: The Gracious Visionary*, which is set for a spring debut stateside.

"There's a saying by Kant that beauty is the symbol of moral good," he says. "Beauty is overencompassing." Unlike fashion collections, released seasonally and designed to respond to the moment, these projects are intended to endure. "Sometimes you build," he says. "Sometimes you keep." His passion for the arts has become a family affair, with Federica and daughters Carolina and Camilla playing active roles in the company's foundation. Carolina is particularly engaged, with a role on the foundation's board and oversight of beloved projects, like the programming of the popular summer festivals.

That ethos has guided restorations well beyond Solomeo's borders. In Perugia, Cucinelli, in addition to serving as president of the city's Teatro Stabile dell'Umbria, has supported the repair of major historical landmarks, most notably the San Lorenzo Cathedral and the Teatro Morlacchi.

"Brunello's vision was to give a second life to this place," says Mirco Petrosi, a longtime collaborator who has witnessed the company's growth from 350 employees to more than 1,700. On my visit Petrosi led me through the sleepy central corridor into a tailoring academy where young pupils sat hunched over half-made suit jackets, learning stitching techniques. Nearby, the plinking of a piano could be heard from the Aurelian Neo-Humanistic Library, home to towering stacks of books and, sometimes, lively talks and lectures. Outside, the amphitheater is the backdrop for the summer's entertainments.

All of this falls under what Cucinelli calls "humanistic capitalism," a model that prioritizes cultural investment and human well-being alongside profit. The philosophy earned international attention when he presented it at the 2021 G20 Summit, and it is furthered through the Brunello and Federica Cucinelli Foundation, which oversees the restoration and arts initiatives.

"At the root of everything lies a profound appreciation for the symbolic value of history," says Massimo de Vico Falani, an architect who collaborates closely with Cucinelli. "We believe the past is an indispensable premise for the future—that architecture transmits meaning, and monuments possess a sacred value."

The project, he explains, is expansive. Beyond restoration, it encompasses enhancement and revitalization—years of reflection, research, and conversation in search of the *genius loci*, the spirit of the place, a pursuit that has continued since 1990 alongside an equally long study rooted in archival documents.

The result is not a museum town frozen in amber but a place animated by music, conversation, and daily life. Thinking about his life's work, Cucinelli recalls a long-ago favorite performance, a production about the Roman emperor Hadrian. One line, he says, echoes his own sentiment: "I feel responsible for the beauty of the world." In Solomeo and beyond, that responsibility has been rendered not as heady theory but as lived experience. T&C



Cucinelli and his family and friends at the film's Rome premiere.



After the premiere some 1,000 guests were treated to a cinematic dinner.