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Playing with language

Bilingual Russian theatre at the University of Oregon

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Abstract

The incorporation of theatre in language learning has long been shown to increase students' sense of belonging and to promote academic and personal success. While previous case studies largely focus on activities and performances that are conducted entirely in the target language, this article discusses the theatre class at the University of Oregon which collaboratively creates and performs a Russian-English bilingual play each year. Following a brief overview of the program, the article examines the winter 2024 production of The Shadow, Julia Nemirovskaya's adaptation of the classic Soviet play by Evgenii Shvarts. The study draws on the text of the play, class activities, interviews with the instructors and students, and the author's own personal experience as a volunteer member of the cast to highlight the unique benefits of a bilingual production. The use of both Russian and English enhances the inclusive nature of the theatrical experience. Students of all levels of experience take away valuable linguistic and cultural lessons; the most valued aspect, however, is the community it builds, bringing diverse students together and strengthening the language community.

1 Introduction

Language programs at institutions of higher education are facing multiple obstacles. In the United States, overall enrolments are down, and foreign language enrolments are falling even faster. According to the Modern Language Association, between 2016 and 2021 college and university enrolments at four-year institutions dropped by 8.0%, while language enrolments fell by 16.6% (Lusin et al., 2023, p. 2). Russian language enrolments have experienced a further hit in both North America and Europe since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Lem, 2022, September 14). Among enrolled students, levels of engagement are low due in large part to the COVID-19 pandemic. Faculty members across the disciplines report common challenges: "Far fewer students show up to class. Those who do avoid speaking when possible. Many skip the readings or the homework. They have trouble remembering what they learned and struggle on tests" (McMurtrie, 2022, April 5). Recent studies in the United Kingdom and European Union have shown the value of student-centred learning and extracurricular activities to combat these trends (UNICOMM, 2023 and Hulene et al., 2023).

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The incorporation of theatre in language learning has long been shown to increase students' sense of belonging and to promote academic and personal success. In her article about the role of performance in task-based learning, Carson (2012) describes drama as "a genre which provides regular and intriguing paths connecting the public and private, the rehearsed and the spontaneous, self and the other" (p. 48). These connections help avoid the lack of communication, engagement, and participation often found in the formal language classroom, aiding in the development of agency, identity, and autonomy. Theatre "increases motivation and self-confidence, decreases language-related anxiety," and introduces a space for play where students "feel unified with the other learners" (Holman, 2022, p. 15 and 18). Linguistically, students improve their pronunciation, increase their vocabulary, and speak with more ease, all while building a sense of comradery (Weygandt, 2024, p. 156).

Previous case studies largely focus on activities and performances that are conducted entirely in the target language (e.g., Fonio, 2012 and Weygandt, 2024). In this article I will discuss the Russian theatre class at the University of Oregon which collaboratively creates and performs a bilingual play each year. After providing an overview of the program, I will examine their winter 2024 production of *The Shadow*. I draw on the text of the play, class activities, interviews with the instructors and students, and my own personal experience as a volunteer member of the cast to highlight the unique benefits of a bilingual production. The use of both Russian and English enhances the inclusive nature of the theatrical experience. Students of all levels of experience take away valuable linguistic and cultural lessons; the most valued aspect, however, is the community it builds, bringing diverse students together and strengthening the language community. While the Oregon Russian theatre program is defined by its director Julia Nemirovskaya's particular vision and talents, aspects of her bilingual approach can be adapted to a wide range of educational environments.

2 The Oregon Russian theatre program

Poet and scholar Julia Nemirovskaya established the Russian theatre program at the University of Oregon in 2000; in 2009 it took its current form – a stand-alone course, supported by the department of Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies (REEES), that culminates in public productions of a bilingual Russian and English play devised by Nemirovskaya. The play is typically a humorous or satirical adaptation of a central work of Russian literature which incorporates elements of contemporary Russian and American culture.

In the fall term (late September-December), Nemirovskaya writes a draft of the play in collaboration with Lara Ravitch, Russian Language Coordinator & Director of Undergraduate Studies of REEES, and other interested faculty and students. Along with their colleagues, Nemirovskaya and Ravitch actively recruit students from REEES and the theatre department

along with native Russian speakers on campus; Nemirovskaya also invites community members, often from the local Russian-speaking population in Eugene, to participate as volunteers. No Russian language or theatrical experience is required to participate. As a result, each year the cast and crew comprise a unique mix of individuals with a wide range of linguistic and theatrical abilities.

The course takes place during the winter term (January-March). In the first weeks, based on the makeup of the class and input from the participants, Nemirovskaya finalizes the script, assigns roles, and begins rehearsals. From the outset, she is careful to devise a script that can be altered to include students of different genders, language and acting abilities; new roles can be added as students join the cast. "Auditions" are held during the first two classes of the term to find the role most suited to each individual student–one that will challenge them yet still feel manageable.

The course officially meets twice a week for 90 minutes in the performance venue, a large multipurpose space with a stage in the university's Global Scholars Hall. As the mid-March performance dates approach, some additional rehearsals are added, and students meet outside of class to practice lines in small groups, work through blocking with Nemirovskaya, practice pronunciation with Ravitch, plan and create props and costumes, and gather socially. Nemirovskaya regularly hosts students at her home, introducing them to Russian traditions and cuisine as they collaborate on the show and come together as a community.

A typical class begins with warmups conducted in Russian; they always include physical movement and often involve simple Russian games and tongue twisters. After the first few sessions, Nemirovskaya invites students to lead the warmups themselves. She then occasionally gives a mini lecture on an element of Russian culture, for example, the literary work on which the play is based, or the distinction between Meyerholdian and Stanislavskian theatre. The lectures are primarily conducted in English, but Nemirovskaya introduces key terminology and concepts in Russian. The rest of class is devoted to blocking and rehearsing the play. Students are invited to propose changes to the script and to help devise the blocking. Nemirovskaya encourages the students to project clearly, maintain an active stage presence, and avoid upstaging other actors. Throughout the term she reinforces basic theatrical ethics: for example, being on time, being responsible for props and other materials, aiding castmates by prompting lines. She writes detailed notes to students in between classes providing detailed feedback.

In addition to acting, students take on multiple responsibilities throughout the term: designing and acquiring costumes and props; developing a musical program including songs performed live onstage and transitional music between scenes; choreographing short dances; advertising

the performance and creating a program. Nemirovskaya guides and inspires them, drawing on the skills students bring to the class and assigning them to particular roles, but she does not provide systematic checklists; instead, she trusts them to work together and seek support as needed. REEES supports the program financially, paying for materials, hiring lighting specialists as necessary; the university facilities department aids with large set elements.

After just nine weeks, the class culminates in two free public performances of an original play co-created and produced by Nemirovskaya and her colleagues and students. Each show brings in hundreds of spectators including students, colleagues, relatives, and community members from across the region. During the final week of the term, immediately following the performances, students gather for class to celebrate, watch recordings, and play Russian games. Nemirovskaya fetes each of the students with an individual poem, highlighting their unique contribution to the play. The students host a cast and crew party and begin planning for the next year's production.

3 2024 Production of *The Shadow*

3.1 The cast and crew

The 2024 Russian Oregon theatre class brought together a cast and crew of 16: twelve University of Oregon students; Ravitch; two elementary-aged community volunteers; and me, an Associate Professor of Russian at Willamette University. Among the students were nine undergraduates including five first-years, three sophomores, and one senior and three graduate students. Their areas of study comprised REEES, History, Art History, Anthropology, Business Administration, Educational Foundations, Geography, Psychology, and Child Behavioral Health. Six of the students were simultaneously enrolled in elementary Russian; four were in third year Russian or higher; one had no Russian language experience; and one was a native speaker. Of the 16 students, six had some Russian heritage.

3.2 The text

Nemirovskaya's *Shadow* is based on a classic Soviet play written by Evgenii Shvarts in the late 1930s at the height of Stalin's purges. Shvarts's play is, in turn, an adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's 1847 fairy tale which itself draws on Adelbert Von Chamisso's 1814 novella Peter Schlemihl's Miraculous Story. This inherited tradition of adaptation lends beautifully to Nemirovskaya's theatre which aims to reinterpret classic pieces of Russian literature by introducing bilingual, intercultural, and contemporary elements.

While Nemirovskaya does not directly invoke Chamisso, her play responds to both Andersen and Shvarts. The nineteenth century fairy tale and Soviet play share magical elements and a skeletal plot: a young scholar travels to a southern clime and falls in love with a princess. The scholar asks his shadow to approach her for him. Ultimately, the shadow deceives his master, takes his place, and successfully woos the princess to achieve power and wealth; no one believes the scholar when he claims his true identity. The plots diverge dramatically in their conclusions, however. In Andersen's tale, the shadow convinces the princess that the scholar is mad and has him executed. In Shvarts's play, the scholar, named Christian Theodore, casts a magic spell, "Shadow, know your place!", which temporarily reveals the shadow's ruse. Nonetheless, the ministers of the kingdom go ahead with the execution. As the scholar is beheaded, the shadow literally loses his head as well; the shadow's minions attempt to rescue him with "the Water of Life," but they must first resurrect his master, the good and true scholar. The princess rejects the shadow and begs the scholar's forgiveness, but Christian Theodore chooses to leave the kingdom with Annunciata, a simple girl who has believed in him from their first acquaintance.

While at first glance, these distinct endings seem starkly opposed–one tragic, one happy–White (1994) has argued that they both contain ambiguity. Andersen's tale leaves key questions unanswered: "Was the scholar's idealist spirit utterly defeated and crushed in the final moments before he was executed? How did the shadow fare after he executed the person he himself recognized as his true identity?" (p. 639). In Shvarts's play should Christian Theodore's resurrection be read "as resurrection back into a mundane mortal existence from which the hero immediately flees, or as resurrection into immortal existence" (p. 652)?

The conclusion of Nemirovskaya's text highlights and increases this sense of ambiguity. After confronting his shadow and claiming his true identity, the hero is abandoned. Alone on stage he holds and ponders an orb that can presumably help him understand the nature of infinity. He recites the final words of the play: "It's really simple. If you turn it slightly, like that, you'll get it. I mean, maybe after two or three failed attempts." He is neither executed nor able to escape; instead he must continue to inhabit and try to understand a dark and complex world.

The world that Nemirovskaya creates in her adaptation is far removed from Andersen's and Shvarts's imaginary southern kingdoms. She sets the action in the very real city of Eugene, home to the University of Oregon. Like Shvarts, however, she populates the city with both humans and magical inhabitants: cannibals, vampires, witches, and even Disney characters. The "scholar" is now a former soldier named Hans Christian studying Russian at the university; the "princess" is a wealthy student named Rori, short for Aurora, the heroine of Disney's Sleeping Beauty. According to a prophecy, whoever marries Rori is destined to become president of the United States.

In the opening scene, an angel and a demon contemplate the nature of good and evil and decide to steal Hans's shadow. Hans replaces it with a Russian-speaking shadow from the local shadow shop run by Fyodor Savelevich, an evil Russian agent infiltrating American society. After the shadows successfully free themselves from Fyodor Savelevich's control, Hans's shadow sets his sights on Rori and the American presidency. With the help of the same magical spell used by the scholar in Shvarts's play, Hans reveals his true identity. Rori initially begs his forgiveness but is later coaxed back into her role as wife of Hans's shadow and the new first lady. Holding hope in his hands, Hans is left to contemplate an uncertain and frightening future.

Nemirovskaya's wildly imaginative adaptation lands neither with the bang of an execution or escape nor with a whimper of despair at the collapse of mankind. Instead, she leaves the audience in a state of ambiguity, linking Hans's tentative position to their own place in a corrupt and troubled society. In her director's note she explicitly poses the play's final questions: "Will citizens refuse to vote for the Shadows in our adaptation? Is the world beyond fixable?" The "adaptation" here is not just Nemirovskaya's literal text, but the world in which her very real actors and viewers live. She concludes her note with a message of hope: "For me, the fact that sixteen young people, who unknowingly signed up for a Russian theatre immersion class and ended up spending many extra hours together writing, directing, practicing, creating art to be able to share this show with our community, is proof that the world is not beyond fixable."

4 Bilingual nature of the text

Nemirovskaya's bilingual texts distinctively serve the linguistic and cultural goals of the Russian theatre course. Students can participate in the course and audience members can appreciate the play regardless of their knowledge of Russian language and culture.

Over the years Nemirovskaya has employed multiple techniques to relay her storylines without resorting to simultaneous translation or supertitles. For example, an American director has staged a performance in Russia, creating a play within a play; two similar stories have unfolded simultaneously in Russia and the United States; foreigners have come to town and interacted with the local population in both English and Russian. In the case of *The Shadow*, Hans and Rori buy Russian-speaking shadows who introduce aspects of the language and culture. The first words Hans hears come from a Russian nursery rhyme: "Тень, тень, потетень, выше города плетень" ("Shadow, shadow, the fence is higher than the town") (Nemirovskaya, 2024). Hans, who is studying Russian at the university, asks his shadow to slow down, claiming that he is just a beginner. Their conversation turns into a mini language lesson:

Shadow: Beginner. Начинающий. [Nachinaiushchii.]

Hans: Bummer! English is the easiest language I know.

Shadow: Because you know it.

Hans: I had no idea you understood English. I thought you were only the Shadow repeating what I was saying.

Shadow: Repeating. Повторяющая. [Povtoriaiushchaia.]

Hans: English is the easiest language…

Shadow: Easiest? Do you know how to say "Russian cabbage soup" in Russian?

Hans: No.

Shadow: Щи! [Shchi!] Just one syllable. Compare it with Rus-si-an-cab-bage-so-oup!

Hans: Ши. [Shi.]

Shadow: Щи! [Shchi!]

Hans: Shchi.

Shadow: Правильно! [Right!].

In these short lines, the shadow highlights multiple elements of the Russian language: new sounds, words, and structures. Students and viewers with varied Russian experience will respond to these elements differently. The words "начинающий" and "повторяющая" befuddle the beginner Hans with their length and many consonants; a more advanced student would recognize them as participles, one of the more dreaded grammatical aspects of the language. The shadow also corrects Hans's pronunciation of "щи," distinguishing between two consonants in Russian ("shch" and "sh") that even lifelong learners of the language struggle with.

The shadow also provides a mini cultural lesson with the inclusion of the nursery rhyme; while it begins with the word "тень" ("shadow"), the title and subject of the play, here it is playful and immersive. Hans and his viewers do not need to understand the words in order to grasp the singsong nature of the nonsense verse. The meaning of the shadow's final line in this dialogue, "правильно!" ("right!") is similarly related by her intonation and expression; no need for translation. Ultimately, this exchange shows that learning a language can be a fun, sometimes instinctual, but complex endeavor. English seems easy to Hans because he already

knows it; learning Russian requires and deserves energy and attention, a fact well appreciated by the student actors.

Later in this same scene, Nemirovskaya employs the "play within in a play" technique. Hans wants to learn more Russian, beginning with the "most useful words." What better place to start than with Adam and Eve. Hans and his shadow imagine what their first words might have been, and two more actors, portraying Adam and Eve, act their suggestions out in Russian. The situation becomes increasingly more humorous and absurd. After Hans suggests that Adam offer Eve chips and a glass of Coke, he wonders if they only had water and if it was safe to drink. Just as chips and Coke are out of place in the garden of Eden, so they are in Adam's Russian rendition of the line in which we can clearly hear the English loanwords: "Пожуй чипсиков с кока-колой!" ("Pozhui chipsikov s koka-koloi!"/"Snack on some chips with Coke!"). Adam still manages to Russianize the "chips," though, by adding a diminutive suffix. In a later Edenic scene Rori's Russian-speaking shadow suggests that Adam and Eve pick mushrooms in the garden, a Russian tradition. Again, they act out the suggestion in Russian, this time joined by the snake who tempts them to try hallucinogenic "мухоморы" ("fly agaric mushrooms"), a classic feature of Russian folklore and literature. The American chips and Coke are replaced by mushroom props which hang from a wooden tree on stage.

This playful language and cultural instruction continues throughout the first act. Eager for Adam to profess his love so that he can get together with Eve, Hans learns the importance of Russian word order when expressing love for another person. A French-speaking shadow objects to the ugly sound "ы" in Russian.

Nemirovskaya also uses language to convey political meanings. The Russian secret service agent Fyodor Savelevich forces the shadows to recite their common objectives in the United States: "Дестабилизация! Депрессия! Индоктринация!" ("Destabilization! Depression! Indoctrination!"). The shadows rebel, revealing truths about their ultimate master, President Vladimir Putin:

> Fyodor Savelevich: Putin has a vision! He wants…
>
> Level-Headed Shadow: To stay in power till he dies. Пока не скопытится. [Till he bites the dust.]
>
> Kind Shadow: To poison his rivals. Чок-чок-новичок! [Chock-chock-novichok!]
>
> French Shadow: To gobble up his neighbor.

Nemirovskaya's linguistic and cultural references here are colloquial and contemporary. The verb "скопытиться" ("to bite the dust/kick the bucket") is part of the nonstandard vernacular.

"Novichok" is the group of nerve agents employed by the Russian security services in multiple assassination attempts, including the poisoning of Aleksei Navalny, the leader of the political opposition, in 2020. The French Shadow's comment refers to Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. These are not the types of words and references you expect to find in a Russian language class, let alone one open to beginners, yet they appeal to students' desire for authentic language and contemporary relevance.

The political intrigue continues as the shadows, wishing to free themselves from Fyodor Savlevich's control, poison him. The angel and demon, speaking alternately in English and Russian, have to decide whether he is destined for heaven or hell. When they ask after his health, he responds: "I'm not sure. I felt really bad, but I guess I'm just fine now. Как огурчик! Огурчики, помидорчики! Сталин Кирова убил в коридорчике!" ["Like a cucumber! Cucumbers, tomatoes, Stalin killed Kirov in a hallway."]

Nemirovskaya uses a colloquial expression, "like a cucumber," to express how fresh and crisp Fyodor feels. She then inserts a Soviet chastushka (folk rhyme) composed in the 1930s which refers to Stalin's assassination of Sergei Kirov, a leading Bolshevik, in 1934. The ironic rhyme equates Kirov with little cucumbers and tomatoes, typical chasers for vodka, which are munched during a drinking bout. Kirov was literally killed in a corridor, and his death was used as an excuse for the purges and terror which followed. Here, Nemirovskaya links the current political situation in Russia, the backdrop for her play, to the Soviet situation in the late 1930s when Shvarts's play was written. Like Nemirovskaya's adaptation, Shvarts's *Shadow* satirizes contemporary politics. In the 1930s Shvarts's scholar was seen as resisting Fascist Germany; in the 1970s and 80s, directors and audiences saw the main target as Stalinist and post-Stalinist Soviet Union. In 2024 Nemirovskaya depicts Hans's struggle against threats from both Russian infiltrators and his own fellow citizens.

In her play's second act, the focus shifts to American politics. Hans's Russian shadow, after freeing herself from Fyodor Savelevich, successfully wooing Rori and emotionally destroying Hans, becomes a candidate for president of the United States. She cynically memorizes the slogans of both the Demonyatic and Reptilican parties, greedily seeking power rather than expounding any genuine ideology. Her opponent is another shadow from the shop in Eugene. The voters, both fearful and brainwashed, are won over by the shadow's charms; only Hans stands his ground, looking to his magical orb for some alternative future.

Nemirovskaya's text functions on many levels: as a madcap adventure with shadows, fairy-tale characters, and university students colliding; as a continuation of the satirical tradition of Andersen and Shvarts; as a commentary on contemporary American politics; as a critique of human nature. Just as student participants and audience members who come into the play

with widely ranging backgrounds in Russian language make distinct linguistic discoveries, they also come away with different degrees of cultural understanding. In individual interviews one month after the performances, I asked eight of the student actors what the play was "about." While many of the first-year students who had little previous exposure to Russian and literary culture largely attempted to retell the magical and romantic storylines, several students grasped the larger concepts. An advanced undergraduate majoring in Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies, described it as a "psychological fairy-tale comedic drama" without a concrete conclusion. It poses a fundamental question: what do we do when we feel helpless? A graduate student of Soviet history who is just beginning his Russian language study noted the different tones of Act I (comedic) and Act II (tragic). He recognized an age-old system of opportunistic, manipulative "shadows" present in multiple eras and cultures. A first-year student, while initially stumped at how to describe the play, emphasized the ambiguity of the ending, asking if we really understand what is happening in the world. Each student could name specific moments and lines in the play that illuminated aspects of Russian language or culture for them. And each student expressed the desire to participate in the course in the future.

5 Writing for and with the cast

Nemirovskaya writes her plays with the cast in mind. While she does not know exactly who will participate in the play until the winter term begins, she and her colleagues actively recruit students in the fall term, and she has a sense of what types of students are interested, e.g. beginning students of Russian; graduate students; heritage speakers. With *The Shadow*, she knew that most of the cast members would be first year Russian language students. As a result, the text is weighted heavily toward English. As the previous excerpts have shown, however, Nemirovskaya does not adjust her Russian to match the students' linguistic knowledge; instead she provides authentic language that they can understand as small, self-contained units within the larger text. Nemirovskaya uses a similar approach in the class itself. When running warmups, giving instructions, and writing comments in emails, she inserts short bursts of Russian that beginning students can absorb over the course of the term. She describes this as her "точечный метод" ("surgical method") (Nemirovskaya, 2020). Distinct from a typical language classroom approach in which carefully curated vocabulary is repeated and drilled, students learn nuggets of living language in a context which is personally meaningful to them.

For more advanced language students, Nemirovskaya creates roles which stretch their Russian skills to new limits. For example, Rori's shadow and Fyodor Savelevich, identified as Russian characters, were played by two graduate students who wanted and needed to make rapid

progress in their language study. Memorizing longer segments of text improved their pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary range, and comprehension of grammatical structures. The two lead roles, Hans and Hans's shadow, were respectively played by the REEES major and a heritage speaker of Russian. The REEES major reflected on his language development in the end of year survey: "In a typical Russian language course, emphasis isn't usually placed on learning colloquial phrases, words, or slang. In this theatre setting, though, not only do we get exposure to what might be considered more natural or informal speech, but we also get exposure to vocabulary that just has to be encountered in 'the wild' rather than in a textbook."

While Nemirovskaya indicates which lines are intended to be delivered in Russian and which in English, she provides a bilingual script of the entire text. Students are invited to take on more of the Russian lines as they choose; in one case a student who was overwhelmed by other obligations decided to replace several of his Russian lines with English. He plans to participate in the course again, taking on a larger Russian role. Students are encouraged to explore the entire Russian text, no matter their particular part. Native Russian speaking students and teaching assistants provide an audio recording of the full Russian script so that actors can practice their pronunciation and immerse themselves in the play outside of class. Students also listen attentively during rehearsals, picking up lines and phrases from their fellow actors. Many favorite lines become shared mementos of the course that help sustain the cast community after the performances.

Nemirovskaya is very open to student input on the text. At the beginning of the term, the cast does a table read, and Nemirovskaya invites students to suggest changes. As a native speaker of Russian, she is particularly receptive to revisions of the English sections, especially those that relate to student life and American humor. In *The Shadow*, for example, a student fleshed out the role of a secondary character, Morton Figues, the star of the Oregon football team and one of Rori's love interests. He adjusted Morton's language to be more idiomatic and gave him a lackadaisical demeanor that highly entertained the university audience. Students regularly improvised lines, particularly in the early rehearsals, as they developed their own interpretations of the characters. Actors with previous theatrical experience appreciated this freedom; previous directors had gotten upset when they "messed up" a line, but here they could experiment and contribute their own ideas.

In addition to adjusting the text during rehearsals, students are invited to help conceive and draft the play before the course begins. Michael Quattromani, REEES major and the actor who played Hans, is credited as a co-writer of Nemirovskaya's *Shadow*. He initially proposed writing a play about a person tortured by their conscience. During the writing process, Nemirovskaya transformed the character into a person tortured by their shadow, basing the play on Shvarts's Soviet text and setting the action in present-day Eugene. Plans for next year's production

began even before this year's class ended. In the final week of class, after the public performances of *The Shadow*, students played the Russian version of the classic detective board game Clue together. They suggested creating the new play in this vein, and Nemirovskaya immediately began digging into Russian detective fiction to see what she might adapt.

Quattromani was a bit bashful when I asked him about his co-writer credit. While he shared an initial idea, Nemirovskaya was the creative force behind the actual writing of the play. Her decision to credit Quattromani, however, demonstrates the extent to which she sees her students as co-creators. Drawing on the work of van Lier, Carson (2012) describes learners in a theatrical setting as "co-agents, visibly interdependent both in the dramatic process and product" (p. 58). In a bilingual theatre course, this is especially evident. Students with even the most elementary Russian language skills can be both language creators and language learners. More advanced students can take on increasingly central roles as co-writers and leading actors. And every participant can and does respond to the contributions of the others.

While Nemirovskaya's *Shadow* is unique due to her unique literary talents, the basic elements of her bilingual approach are transferable to other theatrical productions. Instead of devising their own play, instructors can select a previously published text, providing roles with differing amounts of the target language based on the student's linguistic backgrounds. They can highlight snippets of authentic language to enhance cultural knowledge and improve pronunciation for students of all levels. And they can encourage co-collaboration, allowing their students to alter parts of the text, setting, or stage design to promote cross-cultural understanding.

6 Student feedback and self-reflection

Throughout the semester, I solicited student feedback about the course. In the first two weeks of the term, eleven of the twelve student participants completed an open-ended questionnaire about their goals for taking the class. After the public performances, ten students responded to a follow up questionnaire reflecting on the term, and eight of those students met with me individually for a personal conversation. The students' stated goals at the beginning of the term fell into four main categories: improving their language skills (10/11); doing something different and fun in the theatre (9/11); expanding their cultural knowledge (3/11); and making personal connections (3/11). At the end of the term, they reflected on whether they had met these goals and described unexpected outcomes. Their responses highlighted the importance of the bilingual environment, both in terms of the text of the play and the composition of the cast.

In terms of language development, students mentioned their improved pronunciation and intonation (3/10) as well as gains in vocabulary (5/10). They especially appreciated the mix of language experience in the class. One elementary Russian student wrote, “In addition to learning new vocabulary, I have been able to witness native and fluent Russian speakers using Russian conversationally, which is a useful model for picking up ‘real’ Russian rather than just ‘textbook’ Russian.”

The theatrical environment allowed students to play and have fun. Two students with no previous acting experience described overcoming their stage fright and gaining self-confidence. Another student expressed the pleasure he took in pretending to be another person, especially in another language. Two students particularly appreciated the unrealistic style of the play which allowed them to exaggerate their movements and speech; another student described the class as a “playground.” In his case study of staging Italian comic plays, Fonio (2012) similarly emphasizes the freedom associated with humorous exaggeration, describing laughter as an “inclusive dynamic” (p. 23).

In terms of cultural knowledge, two students highlighted their increased understanding of Russian humor. Several students appreciated the Russian warmups and games that they played together in the classroom, and all the students mentioned the importance of informal gatherings outside of class. Nemirovskaya frequently hosted students at her home throughout the semester, sometimes to work on aspects of the play, sometimes to gather over a celebratory Russian meal. Over traditional dishes of pelmeni and borscht, students learned about customs and superstitions connected with the table.

These informal gatherings also played a large role in creating an inclusive and supportive community for the class. At the beginning of the term only three students (one of whom had participated in the course before) explicitly identified making personal connections as a primary goal. In the final interviews after the performances, however, all eight students described these connections and the class community as their favourite aspect of the course. They appreciated meeting people from different backgrounds and perspectives, including different levels of theatrical and linguistic experience. Two students, one fluent in Russian and the other a beginning student, noted how welcoming the class was to language learners; the humbling nature of speaking in another language “allowed for kindness.” Another student described the “collective responsibility” they shared; everyone did their best individually so that they could succeed together. The energy that they put into the class was “reciprocated and rewarded.” As a result of the class, a beginning student felt that “there’s a Russian community on campus.”

Alumni of Nemirovskaya's theatre program expressed similar positive outcomes in their responses to a short questionnaire in April 2024. Participants still remembered their characters and lines decades later, and they highlighted the importance of the community aspect of the course. A participant in the 2014 and 2015 performances wrote about the inclusive nature of the course:

> "This was one of the most important community experiences of my life. [...] As a queer person studying Russian in 2013, I keenly felt the distance between myself and the person I would be perceived as/expected to perform as in Russian culture. Although this was never explicitly named or acknowledged, Russian theatre was an opportunity to engage with folklore and literature outside of strict gender and sexuality norms. In Russian theatre, you could be a coquette in one scene and a valiant prince in the next. You were allowed to be yourself and explore different personas and roles in a really safe, uplifting way."

Nemirovskaya recognizes the power of theatre to create these communities and memories. When describing her class, she has compared theatre to a butterfly: "theatre is ephemeral, as is an utterance (audio and video recordings are not the same thing). But its power, like the power of the word, is great: it creates memories" (Nemirovskaya, 2020). In the director's note to an early production, she wrote, "Student theatre is an amazing thing, a child of love and, ultimately, a miracle. All of a sudden in this culture of flat screens and fast fixes, something absolutely different emerges -— something full of life, energy and creativity" (Nemirovskaya, 2002). More than twenty years and a pandemic later, this sentiment holds true.

Clearly, Nemirovskaya's course cannot be replicated wholly, but it can be adapted to different environments. For example, language courses of different levels can come together to create a play for one unit of a semester-long course; students from different language programs can potentially create a trilingual play. In place of an original play, classic texts can be delivered in a bilingual format; for example, when Ravitch taught the class in 2018 she directed two short Chekhov plays, giving more Russian lines to the older characters, and more English to the younger characters, simulating the experience of heritage learners. As long as the key elements are maintained–a multilingual text created with the active participation of the students; an inclusive community which welcomes students with widely ranging levels of experience; and the "surgical" incorporation of linguistic and cultural elements both in and outside of the classroom–students can achieve similar benefits in terms of language development, cultural understanding, and community-building.

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