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Theatrical Plots in a Spectacular Setting

An Introduction to the Padua Conference

Nicoletta Marini-Maio

Palazzo del Bo is an impressive historical building that hosts part of the University of Padua. At the Bo, you may walk through the huge Sala dei Quaranta [Room of the Forty], so called because of the portraits of forty famous foreign students, such as Copernicus, who attended courses at this prestigious university. Then, you can stop before the podium from which Galileo Galilei used to teach math and physics between 1592 and 1610. Finally, you may enter the Teatro anatomico [Anatomic theater], the first place in the world where students of medicine could carry out research on dissected bodies: the anatomic table is still there, surrounded by six circular wooden tiers of three hundred seats. This was the spectacular scenario of the international seminar *Plot me no plots: theatre in university language teaching* (Padua, October 14-15, 2011),¹ an inspiring opportunity to compare research findings, methods, and pedagogical perspectives with a very special group of colleagues teaching foreign languages through drama and theater in a number of countries across the world.²

The materials presented were varied as the audience had the opportunity to listen to lectures, watch clips in several languages from actual play productions, and discuss or practice innovative drama activities. Finally, both days a group of international students from the University of Padua directed by Pierantonio Rizzato, actor and director, entertained the participants with dramatic interludes in the style of commedia dell'arte. The combination of research-based and performance-driven presentations in the theatrical setting of Palazzo del Bo permeated the event with an exhilarating theater-within-the-theater feeling, which transpired through the participants' easiness – and willingness – to span from theoretical approaches to class practices and impro sessions.

The ample spectrum of contributions presented in *Plot me no plots* had the impressive effect of putting in perspective the pedagogical discourses and cutting-edge methods that cross the teaching and learning of the foreign language through theater in several countries across the world. I would like to

¹ I would like to thank Fiona Dalziel wholeheartedly for organizing this wonderful seminar, the Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Germaniche e Slave of the University of Padua for sponsoring it, and all the speakers and participants for gathering in Padua to share views on teaching the foreign language through drama theatre. I would also take this opportunity to thank Colleen Ryan for being my long-time companion in the exploration of theatre and drama in the teaching of foreign languages. She could not participate in the conference, and I deeply missed her insightful reflection during this fascinating experience.

² The detailed program of the seminar, with the speakers' names and their talks' titles is available online at <http://www.maldura.unipd.it/theatreandlanguageteaching/> (accessed on June 2, 2012).

draw attention to three main directions of research and pedagogical practices that emerged from the seminar: 1.) the novelty – and necessity – of quantitative research in exploring the potential of theater in foreign language learning, 2.) the perceived effectiveness of theater in embodying and understanding the cultural “other,” 3.) the pedagogical emphasis on a stress-free learning environment, positive group dynamics, and lowering of the affective barriers.

Data collection and analysis was the main focus of a few presentations that illustrated research or case studies of different scope and extent. Lorna Carson shared the outcomes of her quantitative and qualitative investigation on the processes of “designing and delivering dramatic tasks” and the related products of “language output and assessment” within the framework of task-based learning.³ While several scholars have analyzed the notions of process and product in the field of theater in foreign language teaching (cf. Les Essif 2008: 7-12, Marini-Maio and Ryan-Scheutz 2010: 16-17, Moody 2002; Ryan-Scheutz 2010: 295), Carson’s detailed discussion of the structure of a theatrical task-based learning activity and of its assessment – with reference to the psychological and cultural concepts of agency, identity, and autonomy – shed new light on the potential of theater as a pedagogical tool and offered invaluable inputs for further pedagogical experiments. Donatella Mazza’s, Ariel Schindewolf’s, and Michaela Reinhardt’s presentations on theater-based experiments, respectively, in German, Spanish, and English, also had a substantial quantitative focus, showing the growing importance of collecting data in drama-based activity within the field of foreign language acquisition.

Embodying the cultural “Other” has been for a long time the main focus of my own work on teaching and learning Italian through theater, and I was very pleased to be invited to present a paper on the role of theater in intercultural understanding in our “cosmopolitan” world (cf. K. A. Appiah 2006). With specific examples from my *Antigoni* Italian theater project,⁴ I argued that theater allows the members of its community to move between and experience different cultural environments, thus encouraging the appropriation of the Other’s cultural codes (cf. Ryan and Marini-Maio 2012: 1-4).⁵ In the field of Theater Studies, the notion of theater as an intercultural production has been examined extensively, but only recently has it become a central concept in foreign language learning as well. The participants showed great sensitivity to this topic, which was very relevant throughout the seminar. Maryann Henck’s, Elzbieta Szczawinska and Adriana Wojcieszyn’s, and Teresa Zonno’s presentations centered on intercultural understanding as well. Although in different ways, since their projects diverged in their scope and content, Szczawinska, Wojcieszyn, and Zonno interestingly related to the idea of unity – or disunity – in Europe, showing that the pedagogy of theater in foreign

³ The quotes are extracts from the packet of abstracts distributed at the seminar.

⁴ Please see my chapter *Re-Creating Antigoni: Promoting Intercultural Understanding through Empathy* in Ryan and Marini-Maio 2012: 295-326.

⁵ Besides many others important contributions, I would like at least to mention Patrice Pavis’s analytical work (cf. Pavis 2001). Recently, Pavis re-discussed the intercultural role of theater in the globalized world (cf. Pavis 2010).

language learning has strong connections with the real world.

Most of the speakers described case studies illustrating the effectiveness of theater in enhancing foreign language learning by means of specific techniques, such as psychodramaturgy, use of masks, humor, computer games, process drama and other improvisation activities, child imitation, and internet-based theatrical activities. Notwithstanding the great variety of their approaches and materials, they all emphasized the psychological effects that their theatrical techniques had on learners: positive group dynamics, (Maria del Carmen Arau Ribeiro), a stress-free learning environment (Ivan Lombardi, Elzbieta Szczawinska, Adriana Wojcieszyn), the lowering of the psychological barriers (Filippo Fonio, Andreas Häcker, Christopher Mitchell, Erika C. Piazzoli), enhanced bodily communication (Filippo Fonio).

The speakers came from Great Britain, Ireland, Poland, Germany, Italy, France, USA, and Australia. It was extremely interesting exchanging approaches and methods applied in contexts that differ in their pedagogical conventions, economic resources, and other geo-social reasons. *Plot me no plots* clearly showed that theater in foreign language education is becoming a well-established academic field and a specialized pedagogical practice led by experienced instructors. The specialists using theater as a transformative teaching and learning experience have achieved the goal of giving “an authoritative voice to their innovative pedagogical practices,” which was not the case a few years ago, when they were still “reluctant” to stand up as a specialized community in the field of foreign language education (cf. Marini-Maio 2010: 239).

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