Full-Scale Play Production: Filling the "Empty Space" between Language and Literature with Fo and Pirandello

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Instructors of foreign and second languages (L2) who use full-scale play production as a central component of their teaching are a small community with much in common. They share intellectual curiosity for innovative methods, a rich and varied approach to the use of literary texts in the L2 classroom, genuine enthusiasm for theater, and, most of all, the belief that theater can be a transformative experience both personally and pedagogically. In addition, many of them combine the profile of L2 and literature teachers with that of theater aficionados; in most cases they have acted, attended diction courses, or devoted themselves to the study of theater as a literary genre.

Despite their previous experience and passion, the members of this small community generally are reluctant to give an authoritative voice to their innovative pedagogical practices. When asked about their experience in teaching theater performance in the L2 classroom, they typically begin with a disclaimer ("I'm not a theater person, but an L2 teacher!") and then add a justification ("Yet, I have some theatrical experience"). Because of the scarcity of theater-specific theoretical contributions in the field of L2 acquisition, they have had to develop their own teaching methods more from hands-on experience in the classroom and on the stage than from an articulated system of thought. Nevertheless, the linguistic, cultural, and emotional growth their students have shown in their productions have convinced them that the combination of communicative practices, disciplinary competencies, theatrical skills, and socio-psychological processes carried out in their theater performance courses may become a new integrated approach to L2 learning and
teaching. With their performative approach they claim the right of occupying an “empty space” in L2 education.

Such an empty space, on the one hand, is of a curricular nature. This empty space is the gap, highlighted by several L2 teachers and scholars, between lower- and upper-level courses in the L2 curriculum. Les Essif, Margaret Haggstrom, and Francesca Savoia, among many, emphasize the difficulties that students encounter in the passage from language to literature and culture courses, and indicate theatrical workshops and play production as the most effective tools for bridging the gap between lower and upper divisions. In this delicate transition, they maintain, the act of bringing fixed theatrical texts to life facilitates progress in the acquisition of the L2, promotes student-centered teaching methods, and, overall, furthers a more active, effective, and less stressful approach to the study of complex literary texts and cultural topics.

On the other hand, the image of the empty space suggests an analogy with a different kind of emptiness, one that belongs entirely to the world of theater. This metaphor recalls Brook’s paradox of the “bare stage”: “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.” When applied to L2 instruction, the process of theater performance, namely, reading, adaptation, rehearsal, and mise-en-scène of a play, corresponds to the gradual metamorphosis from the “bare” class—if a class may be defined as “bare”—into the vibrant dynamics of a play production team.

This chapter hinges on the twofold notion of the empty space on the stage and in the curriculum. First, it shows how theater performance may be an effective and versatile tool for L2 teaching and learning during that curricular segment in which students face, often for the first time, complex cultural and literary content. In other words, it argues for the adoption of theater performance courses at an advanced level, when students are compelled to acquire sophisticated literacy skills while still needing to develop and enhance their ability to communicate in the L2. Second, it maintains that theater performance is also an area of cultural learning and psychological growth per se because it offers students the opportunity to be fully active subjects of the learning process. Following a constructionist approach, I claim that by enriching the learning experience with theater-specific features, theater performance provides an invaluable
contribution to the field of L2 education: it lowers the communicative and affective barriers in the L2 classroom, promotes students’ creativity, allows for more profound interpretations of the texts’ literary and cultural content, and empowers students with the ability to adapt, re-create, and perform such content for real audiences.

A Holistic Model for Teaching Theater Performance in the L2 Classroom

Since “theater performance” may refer to different approaches, it is helpful to first clarify some terms before proceeding with the three case studies presented in this chapter. On the one end of the spectrum, the performative approach may include the theatrical workshop, a widespread practice in performance studies. The workshop’s methodology centers on the use of theatrical techniques and the free expression of psycho-physical energy. Improvisation is an essential part of this practice and has an intrinsic value as a creative and liberating moment. For its effect on the psychological and corporeal dynamics of individuals and groups, the theatrical workshop is used as professional training for theater practitioners, an extracurricular activity in schools and universities, a means for promoting self-expression and socialization in cultural associations, and even a tool for rehabilitation in psychological treatments. The theatrical workshop does not necessarily lead to the public presentation of a play. On the other end of the spectrum, we find the full-scale play production. This is a team project focusing primarily on the analysis, adaptation, and mise-en-scène of a dramatic text and converging on a public performance of a full-fledged play. It includes the discussion of production issues concerning props, costumes, lights, sounds, publicity, and all the material details necessary to stage a play.

In the belief that the performance component may sustain and advance disciplinary competencies, emotional and cognitive skills, and L2 communicative abilities, I argue that the ideal method to fill the empty space of language learning should harmonize the theatrical workshop with the full-scale play production. The focus on improvisation and performance skills in the theater workshop helps to lower the students’ affective filter, liberating their expressive potential, increasing their spontaneous communication and fluency in the L2, and reinforcing their motivation to proceed further in
the study of the L2. In addition, the intense work of analysis and adaptation of a preexistent text required by the staging of a full-scale play refines students' analytical and critical skills, introducing them to the historical, literary, and cultural complexity of advanced studies in the L2.

What follows is a holistic model. It is content-based and equally product- and process-oriented because it exposes L2 learners to literary, historical, and cultural content while aiming both to meet learning objectives and to stage a final performance. The model is composed of three modules, in which academic content, performance activities, and language practice are equally means and goals of the learning process. The first module focuses on academic content (content-based module), the second one on improvisation and theatrical techniques (theatrical workshop), and the third one on the final performance (performative module). Each module consists of an ensemble of learning experiences with specific requirements, methods, forms of assessment, and short- and long-term objectives. And each module encompasses a specific curricular segment, in accordance with the overall goals of the course.

The chronological division of the three modules may be flexible, but the best results have been achieved following this pattern: the content-based module is conceived as a preparatory phase of about six to eight weeks, in which students acquire familiarity with the cultural, historical, and literary background of the play, depending on the curricular and course objectives. During this phase, they also read and analyze the play. The theatrical workshop introduces students to the many facets of theater as a performative art and emphasizes improvisational activities. It starts at the very beginning of the semester and ends when the most intense section of the performative module begins, usually in the last month of class. The theatrical workshop overlaps with the other two modules, with the goal of facilitating the transition from academic content to the more interactive and creative phase of the production. The performative module is centered on the adaptation and production of the play. It unfolds as a team project, in which learners have a high degree of autonomy. It usually constitutes the sole activity of the class during the last four weeks of the course.

The organization and temporal segmentation of this model are outlined in Table 1, which includes the suggested requirements of the course.
Table 1. Organization and temporal segmentation of the holistic model

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Note: W indicates week; CM, content-based module; TW, theatrical workshop; PM, performative module; H, hour(s).
This chapter illustrates this holistic model through the description of three teaching and learning experiences, two of which culminated in the production of Dario Fo’s *Mamma! I Sanculotti!* (Mom! The Sansculottes!) and one in the public performance of Luigi Pirandello’s *Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore* (Six Characters in Search of an Author). These three examples demonstrate how theatrical performance may draw upon various sources and pursue different learning goals while at the same time eliciting a critical and collaborative approach to the learning of Italian language, literature, and culture. They highlight, too, the development of a teacher, who, thanks to the experience of theatrical workshop and play production, has become progressively more willing and confident in increasing her students’ autonomy and creative participation in the exciting experience of filling the empty space.

The Cultural, Linguistic, and Performative Encounter with Fo’s *Mamma! I Sanculotti!*

Since the 1950s, Dario Fo, actor, director, and political activist, in collaboration with his artistic partner and wife, Franca Rame, has created numerous politically charged plays, among which are the internationally renowned “giullarata” *Mistero buffo* (1969) and the farce *Morte accidentale di un anarchico* (1970). In 1997 Fo was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature for the novelty of his work, which unites political engagement and the artistic tradition of classic and Italian theater in the figure of a modern giullare challenging the arrogance of power. Fo’s and Rame’s theater is well-known in North American universities, and their plays are often used in theater performance courses. The two teaching and learning experiments I now describe were both based on Fo’s *Mamma! I Sanculotti!*, written in 1993–1994 amidst the corruption scandals that led to the fall of the First Italian Republic or Italy’s First Republic. *Mamma! is an outlandish farce that situates the emergence of the newly elected Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, a center-rightwing entrepreneur, the richest man in Italy, and founder of the political party Forza Italia, in the framework of postwar Italian history and culture. The main character, Felice Chiappa, is a public prosecutor whose name hilariously translates as “Happy Butt Cheek” in English. He is reminiscent of Judge Antonio
Di Pietro, one of the principal players in the so-called *Mani pulite* inquiry of 1992–1993 that led to the discovery of *Tangentopoli*, a corrupt political network involving many Italian government and business leaders. *Mamma!* includes a variety of information spanning from biting references to popular culture up to the most obscure events of postwar Italian history, such as the Piazza Fontana massacre in 1969 and its aftermath, and culminates in an imaginary coup leading to the arrest of several center-rightwing politicians, who repent for their mischievous actions alongside the pope. The play demonstrates Fo's ability to incorporate wit, intelligence, humor, and current events into his work in order to criticize the Italian government and instigate in his audiences political awareness and willingness to engage in political action.

*Mamma!* is a versatile and powerful text and provides L2 learners with a great quantity of cultural, linguistic, and theatrical stimuli. As is apparent, American students will need a considerable amount of information concerning Italian history and culture in order to analyze, adapt, and perform this text. Staging *Mamma!* then, becomes an intense learning experience, which may lead L2 learners through an insightful exploration of the Italian cultural context. This theatrical piece also presents students with a vivid expressive mode loaded with a variety of linguistic registers, exceptionally rich vocabulary, and quick-witted humor. Finally, like all of Fo's and Rame's theater, which is profoundly rooted in the Italian dramatic tradition from the medieval mystery plays to the commedia dell'arte, *Mamma!* exposes students to a vibrant component of Italian literature and provides them with a basic knowledge of theater as a performative art. All in all, as Joseph Farrell and Antonio Scuderi argue, Fo's theater is a means for the "decolonization of the mind, of the will, and of the imagination."

The expressive richness of *Mamma!*—and of Fo's entire theatrical production—makes the comprehension of all the nuances and linguistic registers challenging for L2 students. This language is typically anti-intellectual, strongly idiomatic, and often metaphorical. In addition, jargon is repeatedly used to refer to Italian history and politics, including a full range of culturally embedded expressions. Research has shown that reading coherent material extensively improves learners' reading skills and vocabulary and leads to greater content-area learning. However, because of the complexity of the terminology students need to access the historical themes, problems
of comprehension may arise, particularly from a cross-cultural perspective. As Anthony Bernier points out, sometimes students spend more time "trying to decode vocabulary than discussing themes, theses, or their own thoughts about the content material itself." Moreover, in the effort to clarify the historical and political concepts texts convey, the instructors, too, frequently use complex vocabulary and refer to cultural imagery that may confuse L2 learners rather than foster their comprehension of the readings.

With regard to history, in particular, Bernier indicates three categories that challenge students' linguistic skills and, subsequently, their ability to decode the information to which they are exposed: content terms, language terms, and language-masking content terms. According to Bernier's taxonomy, content terms, which regularly recur in the instructor's lectures, in textbooks, and in the assigned readings, define specific historical notions, ideas, and characters. This first category includes historians' jargon, archaic language, foreign language words, obscure acronyms, and technical terminology borrowed from other disciplines. In many cases, such terms are not common knowledge for students even in the L1. Examples of content terms in Mamma! are strategia delle bombe, monocolore, pentapartito, Sismi, coalizione di destra, stato d'assedio, guerriglia, corpi speciali deviati, strage, lotta armata, strategia della tensione, golpe, colpo di Stato, sindacato, esproprio proletario, brigatista, democristiani, 'ndrangheta, patria, movimento degli operai, campagna elettorale, and forza politica.

Language terms are not content-specific and incorporate words that usually do not pertain to history but are persistently used in lectures and academic readings to elucidate historical discourse. Among examples of this second category, Bernier mentions metaphors, colloquial usages, class-based constructions, and cultural idioms: terms and formations that may be fully understood only by individuals already familiar with the L2 culture. In Fo's play, students encountered esercito, pattuglie, sbattere in prima pagina, sbattere in galera, suscitare polemiche, ordine di arresto, attentato, ordigno, dinamitardo, linciaggio dei mass-media, finimondo, la falciatrice di Sapri, custodia cautelare, reparto indagini, inchiesta, inquisito, mandante, infiltrato, indagine, scorta armata, armi da fuoco, in attesa di giudizio, mandato di cattura, soccombere, presidiare, censura, manifestazione, presa di coscienza, sciopero, imprenditore, onorevole, questore, prefetto, magistrato, senatore a vita, and Pontefice.
Finally, in the category of language-masking content terms Bernier includes both language and content vocabulary. These terms have multiple references and may be relevant for historical concepts and ideas while bearing literal and colloquial meanings. Examples from Mamma! include, but are not limited to, strage impunita, appoggio, conoscenze, pezzo grosso, bidone, mazzetta, calare le braghe, saltare in aria, sotto tiro, morire sul colpo, essere in onda, and fare domanda. In Mamma! Fo adopts an ample spectrum of all the linguistic typologies Bernier identifies. In addition, these terms appeared extensively in the introductory readings of the theater performance course, and the instructor most likely used some technical or culturally embedded terminology in her lectures. The linguistic density of the play reverberates through this list of terms, giving a clear idea of its complexity. The theatrical medium, however, has the remarkable effect of endowing this fairly intricate language with a concrete communicative context and extralinguistic evidence, facilitating the students' interpretive task. In other words, theater, and Fo's unique style in particular, brings to life an entire system of references that otherwise might remain abstract or incomprehensible information for L2 learners.

A central feature of Fo's theater, inspired by a Brechtian approach and grounded in a Gramscian perspective to literature, combines naturalistic acting with epic storytelling. That is, while the naturalistic acting shows the dramatic action and revives the intensity of the psychological work of the actor onstage, the Brechtian-like epic register interrupts the action with storytelling, comments, direct interaction with the audience, and subtitles, producing a coming to awareness of the spectator in the light of what he or she sees. The purpose of theater for the epic actor is not to reproduce reality, but to present ideas and invite the audience to make judgments about them. In this sense, a process of "estrangement," or alienation, from the story and from the characters portrayed keeps the audience ever-aware that it is watching a play, while activating critical thought about the action.

A remarkable example of "estrangement" is the shifting to the epic mode that occurs at the end of Mamma! All of a sudden, Judge Chiappa and his first bodyguard disappear as fictional characters and turn into "Dario" and "Franca," harshly arguing onstage about the finale of the play. While Dario defends the comic ending—the anticonservative coup and the politicians' and the pope's repentance
Franca presses for a more aggressive finale. Dario eventually changes the ending of the play, denouncing the alleged plan of Berlusconi and his allies to take control of the country and pursue dirty economic and political interests. This finale aims at waking the audience to political consciousness. The epic mode serves to make this objective explicit and to transform the public into a proactive political subject. This technique recurs throughout the play. The beginning of *Mammal*, for instance, oscillates between the naturalistic and the epic modes, and in several internal segments the main characters leave their fictional identities, becoming the actors "Dario" and "Franca" who perform comic monologues on political and social topics, discuss current events with the audience, or debate the structure of the play itself.

Fo's metatheatrical technique exerts a fundamental role in theater performance. In the 2001 play production class, students interiorized Fo's idea of theater as a tool to promote critical thinking and political criticism. The course unexpectedly coincided with the controversial election of George W. Bush as the president of the United States in January 2001 and with the equally divisive election of Silvio Berlusconi as the prime minister of the Italian government in April of the same year. Stimulated by Fo's provocative arguments, the students observed the essential traits of U.S. and Italian politics with a cross-cultural focus and gradually became more interested in exploring the historical and political contexts of postwar Italy. Furthermore, they soon realized that their audience, mostly composed of L1 speakers, would not be able to comprehend some of the subtle references to Italian politics included in *Mammal*. Therefore, in their adaptation they replaced such references with references to American society, through which the public could make inferences on the Italian context as well as critically reflect on American culture itself. For example, they turned the names of Giulio Andreotti, one of the most controversial politicians of the First Republic, and Gianni Agnelli, the legendary FIAT owner, into those of their U.S. counterparts par excellence, namely, George W. Bush and Bill Gates. In addition, they provided an analogy by associating Silvio Berlusconi, who in Fo's play enters the scene later, to the Bush-Gates duo.

fax che annuncia che Bill Gates ha regalato la Microsoft a Mac e che Bush si è suicidato ingoiando tutte le ricette mediche degli anziani senza assicurazione!

Franca: Let me talk! [To the audience] So, we've created ironic situations, talked about the election and Berlusconi's arrest... After the pope comes Berlusconi... All we need is a fax announcing that Bill Gates donated Microsoft to Macintosh and that Bush killed himself by swallowing all the prescriptions of the elderly people without insurance!

Staging Mamma! A Comparative Look at Two Different Experiences

The cultural and linguistic richness of Mamma! and its performative potential facilitate different approaches to the play, as shown by two very different experiences. Both courses had as a prerequisite the fulfillment of a two-year language program and were designed to perfect students' communicative skills while providing them with the competencies necessary to access literary and cultural content. Class meetings studied Fo's play in lectures, discussions, and demonstrations as well as provided lab time for extended workshops on acting, directing, design, and production issues. In both cases, students were required to read contextual information; analyze, translate, and subtitle the play; participate in the process of adaptation and mise-en-scène; memorize the assigned parts; and stage the production. The final productions took place at the end of the semester in front of a mixed audience of about a hundred people that included students, faculty, and members of the community. However, due to significant differences in students' backgrounds, their linguistic proficiency, and curricular needs, the main focus of the two courses was decisively different.

The 2001 course was established as an alternative to an advanced conversation course and constituted a transition toward subsequent literature courses, while the 2005 course replaced a survey on Italian twentieth-century literature and was the only option offered for fifth-semester students. Furthermore, the 2001 students were particularly heterogeneous in terms of their motivation, background, and communication skills in Italian and did not have significant theatrical experience. Most of them were unfamiliar with literary analysis
(even in English) as well as contemporary Italian culture and history. On the other hand, students in the later course were a more homogeneous group from a liberal arts college, had stronger backgrounds in foreign languages and literary studies, and usually had some theatrical experience—if they were not in fact theater majors. Consequently, the first course focused on the cultural aspects of the play, particularly the history and politics of contemporary Italy, while the second course included a mini-survey of Italian twentieth-century literary texts and centered on the notion of humor as a philosophical, literary, and theatrical category.  

Both courses followed the three modules described above, that is, the content-based portion, the theatrical workshop, and the performative section. In the content-based module of the civilization bridge course, students analyzed the economic, social, and political developments that brought Italy from the reconstruction and the industrial boom of the 1960s through the crisis of the 1970s, the Craxi era of the 1980s, the collapse of the First Italian Republic in 1992 to 1993, and Berlusconi’s abrupt appearance in the field of politics in 1994.  

In the content-based segment of the literature survey course, students focused on literary readings, including excerpts from Pirandello’s “L’umorismo,” Il Fu Mattia Pascal, and Così è (se vi pare); from Italo Svevo’s La coscienza di Zeno, Achille Campanile’s Il ciambellone, and Natalia Ginzburg’s Fragola e panna; and some short stories in Stefano Benni’s L’ultima lacrima. In this phase, both courses greatly emphasized reading comprehension and vocabulary. Students worked on prereading and vocabulary activities, such as trivia quizzes, flash cards, text puzzles and jigsaws, and discussion questions. The instructor provided introductory information in brief lectures, with the support of multimedia resources, facilitating the exploration of the cultural content and encouraging cross-cultural reflection. Students read most of the material individually and wrote brief reaction paragraphs in preparation for class discussions.

The content-based module incorporated information on Dario Fo’s biography and theater, and the reading of Mamma! The analysis of the play was based on a questionnaire, which led students through the “given circumstances,” as defined by Konstantin Stanislavski: the dialogues, the action, the setting, the time, the characters and their relationships, and the language. In fact, the reading of the play and the parallel understanding and practice of its performance qualities in the theatrical workshop provided a hands-on perspective on the
intricate historical and cultural background of postwar Italy, which, otherwise, would have been difficult for students to interpret.

The intersections among language learning, academic content, and performance were the most significant features in these courses. In both cases, the theatrical workshop acted as a parallel segment to the content-based module. It trained students in diaphragmatic breathing, pronunciation (for example, tongue twisters, reading aloud), intonation (for example, rapid and low reading, same texts performed with different tones), and pragmatics (for example, mirror exercises, individual and group physical expression) and allowed plenty of time for improvisational activities and the exploration of different acting techniques. In addition, some brief readings introduced students to the origins of theater, the codifications of this genre, and its ritual function in society.

Even when reading was required, for the most part the workshop was conducted through performance. Students rearranged and acted out in a theatrical fashion excerpts from Fo’s *Manuale minimo dell’attore*, Eduardo De Filippo’s *Lezioni di teatro*, and Emanuele Luzzati’s *Facciamo insieme teatro*. In their performances, they had to demonstrate, for instance, how to establish a relationship with the audience by breaking the “fourth wall,” how to use their bodies in order to have the audience actually “see” actions and objects, how to capture the audience’s attention, how to construct a prologue in order to create a meaningful context before the actual performance, how to refer to current events in order to stimulate the audience’s self-reflection, how to “exit” from and “reenter” a character in order to avoid the process of identification of the “make believe” of naturalistic theater, how to include unexpected events in the performance, and how to interact in dialogues and perform monologues without losing contact with the audience.

Students prepared for these mini-performances by practicing improvisational drama during specific segments of class time and analyzing some parts of Fo’s documentaries and pedagogical video recordings, which were used extensively as tutorials for individual and group activities. Besides being useful instructional materials, these videos also had the interesting effect of familiarizing students with the live figures of Fo and Rame, who amplified with their performances the emotional effect and communicative potency of their texts. In the advanced stages of the performative section of the course, when students were discussing production issues or rehearsing
parts of their adaptation of *Mamma!*, the recourse to Fo's authority was not unusual, and such statements as “Dario farebbe così” (Dario would do it this way) or “A Dario questo non piacerebbe!” (Dario would not like this!) were frequently heard among students. This happened, in particular, when technical issues arose during the staging of the play.

The performative module incorporated several small tasks, namely, the auditions and role assignments; the adaptation, translation, and subtitling of the play; the rehearsals; and the mise-en-scène, which eventually converged on the larger task of the final production. This process required many extra hours (see Table 1), during which the instructor and the teaching assistant were not constantly present. A variety of activities, moreover, took place at the same time, and the teacher could not simultaneously be in control of all the groups. In order to optimize their time and performance, therefore, students gradually increased their autonomy and during the last three weeks they worked almost independently in managing the acting, scene design, production issues (lights, audio, props and costumes, playbills, and publicity), translation, and subtitling.

Not only the composite nature of these tasks, but also the necessity for students to make common decisions about them entailed a great deal of meaning and language negotiation, which led to consistent “scaffolding.” In other words, as stated by sociocultural theory, learners showed the tendency to co-construct the activities they engaged in, and their relationships with the tasks were more conducive to learning than the inherent features of the tasks themselves. All in all, the intense social interaction that occurred in this phase involved students in a close-knit, collective participation in the undertaking of the play production and led to the gradual transformation of the class into what Robert Di Pietro defines as “a speech community where students cooperate with each other in the work of learning.”

In this modular, holistic approach to theater performance, assessment may take place in different forms, with more emphasis on contextual and language competence during the first module, on language and task performance during the theatrical workshop, and on collaborative projects during the performative module. In the content-based sections, the instructor administered two quizzes with multiple-choice and open questions to test the knowledge of the historical background, in the case of the 2001 course, and literary
background, in the case of the 2005 course. An oral exam tested students’ ability to present and discuss the topics explored, using specific terminology. In addition, in the civilization course learners wrote a midterm paper of six to eight pages in which they explored some specific aspects of the play concerning the characters, the relationship of the play with the historical and political contexts, or Fo’s theatrical techniques. In the literature course, besides the midterm paper, students were also required to write two three- to four-page mini-papers on specific literary topics. The evaluation of the oral presentations assessed the two central elements of the theatrical workshop, that is, learners’ performance competence and language fluency. In the last module, students’ performance was assessed in the small tasks described above, according to heterogeneous indicators such as commitment, teamwork, creativity, and linguistic skills. Both individuals and teams were evaluated on their preparation and the final performance. To this end, the instructor administered a survey in which students anonymously assessed their classmates’ contribution to the whole group.

All in all, both courses achieved very positive results. Not only did students undertake advanced cultural, historical, and literary readings with sincere interest, but they also brought this content to life through the experience of the theater performance. They appropriated Fo’s play with intellectual curiosity and intelligence, infusing American humor in their adaptations, following Fo’s precepts on epic theater and on breaking through the “fourth wall.” Their language skills in Italian advanced dramatically, and both their productions of *Mammal* were enthusiastically received by the local community, the faculty, and fellow students. Obviously, if compared with professional theatrical productions, the public performances were small undertakings, but they were invaluable results for those students who, at the end of their first semester of advanced studies in Italian, had elected the empty space of theater as their own vibrant area of self-expression. And all in Italian, of course.

**The Literary and Pedagogical Challenge of Pirandello’s* Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore***

Compared with Fo’s amusing and politically engaged play, Luigi Pirandello’s *Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore* (Six Characters in Search
of an Author), or the commedia da fare (play to be done), with its multiple points of view and metatheatrical questions, its intricate structure and conflicts of meaning, and its complex cultural and literary background, is a particularly challenging work for nonnative speakers to analyze and comprehend. However, the philosophical complexity and linguistic and stylistic difficulties of this polyphonic drama may, paradoxically, have a primary role in determining the high quality of the course and the final play production. As shown by the 2003 theater performance course held at the University of Pennsylvania, when academic content merged with social interaction, replicating the learning conditions of a full-immersion environment in which language is used as a means to pursue a collective goal and students are the active subjects of the learning activity, the cultural and literary implications of the text may reverberate positively on learners, determining a significant change in their aptitude toward complex academic content and dramatically advancing their language and disciplinary skills. In other words, like the experiences of performing the Fo plays, the 2003 reading, adaptation, and performance of Pirandello's *Sei personaggi*, too, showed the transformative power of theater and its effectiveness in filling the empty space.

With *Sei personaggi*, Pirandello brings to maturity his long experimental phase initiated with the disintegration of the essential elements of bourgeois theater. In this play, the Sicilian playwright endows the characters with artistic autonomy, submits the authorial process of creation to radical critique, stages the philosophical correlation between art and life, and shows the inconsistency of language as a tool of communication and reciprocal comprehension. Moreover, the mise-en-scène of the play reveals the artifices of the theatrical machinery, demystifying the traditional function of the stage as a barrier between performers and public.

The plot of *Sei personaggi* is well-known. Six characters—the Padre, the Madre, the Figlio, the Figliastro, the Giovinetto, and the Bambina—cannot live their fictional story because the author did not finish writing it. In allegorical terms, the lack of the authorial logos has deprived the characters of their drama as well as of any ideological or aesthetic value. Their subjective and artistic egos are fragmented and incomplete; they can acquire an identity only by reconstructing themselves and enacting their story in the illusively immutable world of theater. This is the reason why they materialize in an actual theater, where a group of performers is rehearsing
Pirandello's play *Il gioco delle parti (The Rules of the Game)* directed by an ambitious *capocomico* (director). After some hesitation, the director invites the six characters to act out their *dramma doloroso* (painful drama) and encourages his company of players to imitate them and practice for a future performance. Actions, monologues, dialogues, byplays, and metatheatrical considerations arise on the stage, which turns into a *stanza della tortura* (torture room) where each character's unsettling truth gradually takes shape. The characters' subjective and relative points of view show irremediable conflicts while they recollect the *dramma doloroso*, which pivots both on classic themes (adultery, incest, repentance, vengeance, and death) and modern themes (family, love triangle, and generational conflicts) of the tragic universe. Private dramas and harsh recriminations eventually lead to a melodramatic finale—the *Bambina* dies and the *Giovinetto* commits suicide—which provides the characters with their aesthetic and existential completion.

A multifaceted drama takes place in front of the audience, featuring the *dramma doloroso*, namely, the narrative antecedent reduced to improvised fragments, which are partly narrated, commented on, or enacted on the stage; the drama of the six characters as such, whose fictional nature condemns them to an unsolvable tragedy of identity, only partially relieved by the aesthetic form they can acquire in theater; and the interpretation of the director and the company of players, faithful to the mimetic conventions of nineteenth-century acting. They live the theatrical dimension as a transitory, contingent moment of their existence and cannot comprehend the six characters' irreversible tragedy. Their performances, therefore, ironically result in improvised commedia dell'arte pieces, stemming from the involuntary *canovaccio* (outline) sketched out by the six characters. The final element played out during the performance is the conflicting relationship among the characters, the plot, and the authorship, introduced in the preface by the author-narrator and resurfacing on the stage. Intersecting with the others, each layer creates additional dramatic subtexts and establishes an oblique form of communication with the audience, which is called on to witness the "actual" occurrence of an ongoing drama.

In the 1925 edition of the play, Pirandello includes clear elements of disintegration of the so-called fourth wall, the virtual barrier that conventionally separates the performance from the public. For instance, in this version he differentiates more clearly the two groups...
present on the stage: the company of actors wear bright clothes, talk cheerfully, sing, and dance, while the six characters wear not only dark clothes—like in the 1921 edition—but also masks and enter the stage from the side of the public.

Remarkably, the *demone dell’esperimento* (demon of the experiment) that delineates the characters in *Sei personaggi* captivated the students of this course, instilling in them the desire to rework the text and create their own original adaptation. They constantly revised the script, discussing the roles of the characters and their relationships with each other, the company of players, the director, and the public. They were particularly intrigued by the authorial issue emerging in *Sei personaggi* and wanted to explore it themselves, integrating Pirandello’s text with passages from Edoardo Sanguineti’s *Sei personaggi.com*; excerpts from American popular music and film, such as Madonna’s *Like a Virgin*, sung by the stepdaughter, and Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*, executed by the company of players; and original parts that they created.

The rewriting of the text brought significant changes to the development of the characters and to the drama itself. This process stimulated long discussions on the role of the director, the relationship between author and text, and the question of intertextuality as well as some controversial aspects of contemporary culture. In the students’ adaptation, for example, expanding from Sanguineti’s interpretation, they transformed the stepdaughter into a provocative Lolita, who morbidly alludes to the sexual abuse she experienced as a child:

*La figliastra:*

Eh, come no... Ero piccina piccina, sa? con le treccine sulle spalle e le mutandine più lunghe della gonna—piccina così—Veniva a scuola, a prendere me, all’uscita, a guardarmi. Veniva a vedermi come crescevo. Mi aspettava lì, dove c’è il cancello, lì, nel casino delle auto, e quando pioveva, con l’ombrello nero. Non diceva niente: mi faceva un segno, con la mano, un ciao, dietro un albero, mi salutava... mi veniva dietro, faceva come... delle smorfie, rideva, sorrideva... ma no, ghignava, ecco. Avevo quel giacchino Miss Sixty, finta pelle, non so, pelle vera, forse, avevo la mini, una volta, forse, due, mi ha pure come toccata, ma appena, mi ha preso per le trecce...
The Stepdaughter: Uh, sure . . . I was little, so little! With my hair in pigtails and my panties hanging out below my skirt. Little like this—He would come to school at dismissal to watch me. He wanted to see how I was growing up. He would wait for me there, by the gate, among the mess of the cars, and when it was raining, he had with him a black umbrella. He never said anything, he would wave at me, from behind a tree, making like . . . faces . . . laughing, smiling . . . no, he sneered, yes, he did. I had that Miss Sixty jacket, fake leather, I don’t know, real leather maybe. I had a mini skirt. And he touched me once, maybe twice, but only a little bit . . . he took me by the braids . . .

Seeking to express the legitimacy of his sexual drives, the stepfather attempts a justification:

*Il padre:* (speaking to the Director)

Il dramma scoppia, signore, al loro ritorno, quando io, purtroppo . . . lei capisce . . . sono un vecchio, cioè un uomo maturo, un anziano, uno da terza età, da università per anziani: entro gratis nei musei . . . ho lo sconto al cinema . . . mi chiedono la carta d’identità . . . sono vecchio . . . ma non abbastanza . . . sa, l’erotismo senile . . . ha letto le statistiche, signore? Ci stanno, le ragazze, ci stanno e noi . . . l’erotismo senile . . . si ha voglia, si capisce! Si ha voglia! C’è la voglia, ecco! Non potevo farne a meno, però mi vergognavo, a cercarle io, le ragazze, signore, le donne . . . le ragazze . . . però, ci stanno, ecco, ci stanno. È così per tutti! Manca solo il coraggio di dirle, certe cose!

Our drama broke out, sir, upon our return; when I, unfortunately . . . you must understand . . . I am an old man, that is to say a mature man, a senior, one in the third phase of life, of the university for senior citizens: I enter for free in the
museums, I get a discount at the movies, they ask me for my i.d. card ... I am old ... but not old enough ... you know, that senile eroticism ... have you read the statistics, sir? They are easy, girls, they are easy and we ... that senile eroticism ... we get horny, you understand! We get horny, of course, you know! I couldn't do without them, but I was ashamed to look for them, for girls, sir, women ... girls ... yet, they are easy, sure, easy ... And it's the same for everyone! But no one has the guts/courage to say these things! everyone lacks the courage to say so, these certain things!

Their gradual metamorphosis into authors allowed students to become the active and central subjects of the learning process and progressively led them to use the L2 as an interactive tool for working collaboratively toward the common goal of the final performance. From a learning objective, the L2 turned into a natural means of communication despite the inevitable differences in language proficiency and background within the group. Thanks to their involvement in the various activities of the theatrical workshop, in which they invested a considerable part of their spare time, the students evolved from the "bare" class—as Brook might put it—into a unique micro-society. In the fluid space of the theatrical workshop, students modeled their roles and behaviors on the basis of the linguistic norms mediated through Italian language and culture.

It is exactly in this in-between space, a sort of elsewhere detached from the outside world (the empty space of theater), that the potential of Pirandello's text had full expression, generating an unexpected excess of interpretations. In fact, students experienced in first person the uncertainty of the condition of the six characters, for whom the stage becomes "la sede dei loro vizi, dei loro peccati segreti, delle loro piaghe che solo a teatro possono essere scoperte, contemplate, giudicate" (the place of their vices, their secret sins, their wounds, which can be exhibited, contemplated, and judged only in theater). In their adaptation of Sei personaggi, theater performance students staged a sort of mise en abîme of Sei personaggi the very play, in
which they did not pretend to be but really were characters in search of an identity, a role, and, most of all, words that could express their communicative imperfection. In other words, empathizing with the six characters’ condition of incompleteness, lack of communication, and search for identity, students translated their own insecure and unstable status as L2 learners into the Pirandellian stanza dell'essere (room of being). On the other hand, the metatheatrical experimentalism that originated from their exploration of the text allowed the critical interpretation of the text and led to the creation of a new commedia da fare.

Like the other two courses treating Fo's plays, the 2003 theater performance course, too, had a three-module structure. The primary objective of the content-based section was to provide learners with a general understanding of Pirandello's work and lead them through the reading and analysis of Sei personaggi. In this module, extracts from "L'umorismo," Il fu Mattia Pascal, Uno, nessuno e centomila, and Così è (se vi pare) were read. Prereading, guided reading, and postreading activities facilitated students' approach to the philosophical and linguistic density of the text. In particular, the prereading activities aimed to activate the mental processes that Claire Kramsch categorizes as "predicting topic development" and "schema building," which allow learners to construct information about the content of the text and develop contextual references, particularly concerning the rhetorical (ironical, metaphorical, hypothetical) and linguistic (description, comparison, hypothesis) functions of the text. These activities promoted the use of specific linguistic functions: describe; hypothesize; express opinions, wishes, agreement, and disagreement; compare different ideas. Obviously, these functions required the use of the forms most commonly reviewed in advanced courses, such as the subjunctive mood, the modal use of verbal tenses, and conditional sentences. For the analysis of Sei personaggi, students used a questionnaire to help them gain a greater understanding of the environment of the play. At the end of the content-based module, they took an oral exam that tested their comprehension of and critical reflection on the main themes of Pirandello's work. They were also required to write an analytical midterm paper on specific literary topics.

The theatrical workshop constituted an essential component of the 2003 course, perhaps its most original part. Parallel and complementary to the other two, this module had the same objectives and
structure as the other courses. Interestingly, Fo's pedagogical readings and taped demonstrations were used as tools to clarify the theatrical style of *Sei personaggi*, to provide specific terminology, and to experiment with the effects of epic versus naturalistic theater on the performance. In addition, Fo's techniques shed light on the contrast, both ontological and aesthetic, between the six characters and the company of players, who take turns acting out the drama and commenting on the others' performances. In other words, Fo's theater was instrumental for introducing learners not only to theatrical techniques, but also to Pirandello's aesthetics of "theater within the theater" and metatheatrical discourse.

The students' commitment and enthusiasm in facing the difficult task of the production of *Sei personaggi* demonstrated one more time the positive pedagogical effect that the combination of the theatrical workshop with academic content and full-scale production may have on students' motivation and learning. Since the play included many long and difficult monologues, the main parts were split and assigned to different performers. Those who executed secondary roles had substantial functions as members of the crew as well. As a result, all contributed to the production in a substantial way, and the opportunities for linguistic interaction intensified. The public performance took place in front of an audience of about 150 people, within the framework of a Pirandello two-day event organized by the university. Besides the students' production of *Sei personaggi*, the Pirandello celebration included a lecture held by the president of the Pirandello Society of America and the screening of the 1976 cinematic adaptation of *Sei personaggi* by Stacy Keach. This context particularly gratified the students, making them feel part of a greater community composed of literary scholars and theater enthusiasts. In the end, the 2003 theater performance course provided learners with a multifaceted, highly fruitful learning experience that impelled most of the students to continue their study of Italian.

Overall, the three teaching experiences described in this chapter led students through the gradual metamorphosis from the "bare" class into a vibrant community of a theatrical team. The reading, adaptation, and staging of Fo's politically engaged satire and Pirandello's metatheatrical drama profoundly influenced students' communication skills in Italian, literary and cultural competencies, and psychological attitude toward Italian. The performative approach to theater offered students the opportunity to develop as active subjects
of the learning process, lowered the communicative and affective barriers, promoted their creativity, led them through a deep interpretation of literary and cultural contents, encouraged their looking at the texts with a cross-cultural focus, and gave them the opportunity to adapt, rewrite, and perform such content for real audiences.

Essif suggests that theater may influence L2 pedagogy. I could not agree more. The performative approach to theater may claim a primary position in that delicate stage of the Italian curriculum in which students initiate the exploration of sophisticated literary texts while still needing to enhance their communicative competencies and develop literacy skills. In the field of Italian pedagogy it may indeed provide an invaluable contribution by filling an empty space, a space of cultural transformation, linguistic, and psychological growth.

Notes

1. In this chapter, the abbreviation L2 will be used for both foreign and second language. L1 refers to the native language.
4. In my experience, students' reactions to theater performance courses has always been enthusiastic. After the 2001 production of Dario Fo's *Mammal I Sanculotti!*, for instance, a business major at the Wharton School of Economics wrote: "I thank you for the most interesting, creative and possibly challenging class I have taken at Penn. I thoroughly enjoyed it and am sure that the class can only go on to even bigger and brighter things in the future." Mark O'Rorke, personal correspondence, 30 April 2001. O'Rorke and two other 2001 students in this course requested authorization to attend the course again in 2002. Several 2002 students repeated the course in 2003 and one of them even in 2004 as an extracurricular activity for no credit. Thanks to their experience in the original course, three of these students declared Italian as their major. Obviously, each year the theater course was based on a different play.
7. For the definition of affective filter, see Krashen, *Principles and Practice*, 30–32 and 73–76.

8. For a full description of modular pedagogy, see Baldacci, *La didattica per moduli*.

9. See Fo, *Mamma! I Sanculotti*, and Pirandello, "Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore." A more detailed discussion of the teaching and learning experience developed through the performance of Pirandello's *Sei personaggi* has been published in Marini-Maio, "I Sei Personaggi siamo noi."

10. As Scuderi highlights, in his theatrical productions Fo has used numerous genres but mainly two modes of performance: the one-man play, which Fo named giullarata, and the satirical farce. Fo derived the term giullarata from the Italian word giullare (approximately translated in English as jester), which in the Middle Ages indicated roving performers of this popular tradition. The giullarata is a unique mode of performance that combines popular and oral traditions, storytelling, and acting and relies on Fo's extraordinary talents as a comedian. Fo's satirical farces, instead, are performed with other actors, although Fo's role on the stage is prominent. Satirical farces are translated and performed all over the world by independent theatrical groups. For more detailed information about Fo's modes of performance, see Scuderi, "Unmasking the Holy Jester Dario Fo."

11. For a thorough discussion of Fo's and Rame's theater in North American universities, see Chapter 6 of this book.

12. I have taught two courses based on Fo's *Mamma! I Sanculotti*: "Italian Play Production" (Spring 2001, University of Pennsylvania) and "Riso amaro" (Fall 2005, Middlebury College).


15. Bernier, "The Challenge of Language and History Terminology," 96. Although Bernier's article concerns the difficulties of L2 students in L1 history instruction, his argument can be easily transferred to L2 content-based instruction.

16. According to the theory of naturalistic acting developed by Stanislavski, actors must strive for absolute psychological identification with the characters. See Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*. For a discussion of the Stanislavskian method, see also Chapter 2 in this book. For the notion of epic acting, see Brecht’s theory of “estrangement” in Brecht, "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting."

17. For the use of humor as the thematic center of the theater practicum in the L2, see Ryan-Scheutz and Colangelo, "Campanile's Comedic
Theater." Walter Valeri, too, emphasizes the pedagogical effect of Fo's humor on L2 learners in Chapter 6 of this book.


20. For information on Fo's biography, political activism, and theatrical productions, students read excerpts from Valentini, *La storia di Dario Fo*, and Behan, *Dario Fo*.

21. The complete Italian version of the questionnaire, adapted and translated into Italian from Ingham, *From Page to Stage*, is in Marini-Maio, "I Sei Personaggi siamo noi," 470–471. For a concise definition of given circumstances, see Moore, *The Stanislavski System*, 26–27.


23. Brief excerpts from Alfieri, Campo, and Lozio, *Teatro*, provided basic information on theater as a cultural production and performance genre.


25. For ideas and discussion about these theatrical techniques, see Fo and Rame, *Manuale minimo dell'attore*.

26. See Piscopo and Luciano, *A Nobel for Two*, and Miti and Fo, *Dario Fo*.

27. In sociocultural theory, *scaffolding* refers to the interactive, social, and affective support that one learner gives to another. See Donato, "Collective Scaffolding."

28. For a full illustration of sociocultural theory, see Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*.


30. See Pirandello, "Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore," 622.

31. For the notion of allegory in Pirandello's work, see Luperini's essays *L'allegoria del moderno*, and "L'atto della significazione allegorica."

32. See Macchia, *Pirandello o la stanza della tortura*.


34. The 1925 revision appears in the Italian edition of Pirandello's plays. In the United States, the 1921 version, included in the English edition
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*Naked Masks*, trans. E. Storer (New York: Penguin Books, 1957), has been the only one known for many years.

35. See Sanguineti, *Sei personaggi.com*.
37. Ibid., 15.

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