

The power of theatre in the foreign language classroom

An Italian Workshop

By

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There are different forms of drama (educational drama, psychodrama, intercultural drama, corporate drama) that are being used successfully for a variety of purposes, ranging from building community to increasing self-esteem. In this article I will be addressing educational drama, specifically the use of theatre in the foreign language classroom.

Three main reasons led me to this project: a) my passion for theatre and a desire to combine my experience as an actor with the teaching of language to show how students in both classes—the acting class and the language class—go through a similar learning process with a shared common goal, to communicate; b) a belief in a humanistic affective education; and c) the need for theme-based, student-centered instruction.

As I begun working on the project, I found myself reflecting on a few burning questions:

1. How do we, as lecturers of language, help students acquire the necessary analytical and interpretive tools necessary to transition into more challenging upper division literature classes?
2. How do we help students develop a pragmatic awareness that goes beyond the functional and communicative approach?
3. How do we help students probe the values and beliefs that make up culture?

4. How do we infuse learning with the emotional dimension needed to remember and retain information? (We do remember better when we associate emotions with the experience.)

It seemed to me, as I got going on my project, answering the last question would provide a good starting point in answering all the others. So, my project became **an exploration of the tight connection between language and emotions** through the analysis, interpretation, and dramatic enactment of a play.

These questions tie directly into the notion of the kind of transcultural, translingual, or intercultural competence that students in the coming decades need to truly understand a foreign culture, to be able to exchange meaning with educated speakers of the L2 on a deeper level, to make connections, to draw inferences, to weave in and out of the two speech communities—in other words, to think critically in the L2 as they would in their own native language in any core subject at the college level, in the context of a liberal arts education.

Some of the answers to these questions would require a longer paper, and a rethinking of curricula in which language, culture, and literature, as stated in the 2007 MLA recommendations, are taught “as a continuous whole from the beginning, and where interdisciplinary collaborations are encouraged.”

One answer I am offering is a **theme-based, student-centered, hybrid** course (half theatre, half language) that would be a prerequisite to the first literature class that minors and majors take, and an elective for everybody else. Students taking this course will have had four semesters of Italian. It would meet three times a week for a total of three in-class hours and two rehearsal hours a week. In designing this

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course, I have used two complementary approaches—**performative** and **humanistic**—using both acting and affective techniques.

The pedagogical decisions I have made are based on a list of theoretical articles and books I have read, a survey on the use of theatre I conducted in Foreign Languages, Drama, and English departments at Berkeley, Notre Dame, Chicago, Columbia, NYU, Northwestern, Middlebury, and the University of Toronto, and my own teaching experience.

Why a humanistic approach? What is a humanistic education? Why is it important in the L2 classroom?

As a consequence of this overstress on the cognitive and of the avoidance of any feeling connected with it, most of the excitement has gone out of education.

Karl Rogers, Psychologist

The aim of a humanistic/affective education, as Gertrude Moscovitz explains, is “*combining the subject matter to be learned with the feelings, emotions, experiences, and lives of the learners*. Humanistic education is concerned with educating the whole person—the intellectual and the emotional dimension.” To this end, it is crucial, especially in the foreign language classroom, to build a non-threatening climate of trust and acceptance where students feel free to make mistakes, to share their feelings, to express their emotions, to talk about their strengths and weaknesses—in short, a safe environment where students open up, vocally and physically. This requires empathy on the part of the instructor, and a willingness to be vulnerable, to take risks, to share ourselves through story telling and active listening. As Moscovitz further explains, “by sharing ourselves, others get to know us. When we don’t know what others are like, rather than feeling

acceptance towards them, we are more likely to feel indifferent, mistrustful, or disinterested. There is a relationship between sharing, being accepted by others, and self-acceptance. Learning cannot be carried out in an emotion-and-value-free environment. In any learning situation feelings are always present and should be drawn upon, as they exert an influential role.” Abraham Maslow, one of the fathers of humanistic psychology regarded satisfying the basic psychological needs of people as vital. Among these needs are respect, belongingness, dignity, and esteem. Self-actualization and self-enhancement is the “all inclusive human need which motivates behavior at all times in all places.” Humanistic practitioners believe that the more time we spend getting to know our students and letting them know us, the more readily and easily they will participate as active learners in their education.

Why a performative approach?

If *drama is*, as John Rassias states, *the artistic expression of empathy*, then a performative approach naturally follows a humanistic approach. Drama deals with emotions. It is the ultimate interactive experience. It is all about being connected to oneself and to one another. The first lesson one learns in Acting 101 is to be in the moment, stay connected to the person you are talking to and simply listen, react, and respond to the other person’s words/moods/feelings/movements. It is an exercise in listening. You have to pay attention to the information given to you, you have to process it, and you have to respond, in the same way as you would in a real-life situation in the L2 culture.

A theatre production offers students a journey of self-discovery, an opportunity to experience a truly collaborative effort, a window into the historical and social context in which the play has been written, a way

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into the inner life of a character, a chance to witness the power of words from page to stage. And all of this in a language other than their own.

The experiment: the theatre workshop

This is a sample theatre workshop, a much shorter version of the proposed course which I tried out in my two Intermediate Italian classes this semester, where students have only had two semesters of language. The whole experiment was done over the course of five weeks. I explained to the students the nature of the experiment, and reassured them that no acting experience was required. A few of them were excited, a few apprehensive, a few indifferent. And here is an analogy between acting students and language students: in both cases they convene on the first day in a room with a group of strangers who have different degrees of shyness, exhibit different levels of apprehension, carry with them different personal histories, with a different set of expectations, but with the same goal in mind—to communicate something to an interlocutor, whether that be another actor in a scene, an audience, or the local butcher in Italy. They both need to get their message across, and they do it with words, with facial expressions, with gestures, with the intonation of their voice, their posture. In other words, they both act, they perform a role.

Week one

- **Establish clear goals and assessment strategies.** Given the hybrid nature of the course, goals and assessment had to be hybrid also.

Goals: Goals had to take into account both the language and the theatre component. The fundamental question for me was: What do I want students to retain two, three, or four years after they

graduate, beyond the “understand and remember” kind of learning? Is it the correct use of the subjunctive or a certain character in a story that inspired them, touched them deeply, and caused them to think differently about themselves and others? I wanted students to retain the latter. The primary goals then became:

- Developing an appreciation for theatre, the power of language and emotions
- Learning to analyze a dramatic text and a character
- Developing self-confidence in speaking
- Learning about 18th century Italy
- Discovering something new about yourself and others

Assessment (How do you give an objective evaluation of a creative process?)

Again, given the nature of the course, assessment had to be both process- and product-oriented. A combination of more traditional discrete-point testing on vocabulary and grammatical structures in context, essay writing, journal entries, online research, pronunciation, and diction (the language component); character study, text analyses, memorization, rehearsal process, performance, and individual effort (the theatre component). Assessment had to be frequent and immediate, conducted throughout the semester. It had to include self-evaluation and peer assessment.

Learning activities connecting goals to assessment: the workshop

In order to reach these goals and do well in the assessment, I used what Dee Fink calls:

Rich Learning Experiences in which students achieve several kinds of significant learning simultaneously (the actual production of the play).

In-Depth Reflective Dialogue, opportunities for students to think and reflect on *what* they are learning, *how* they are learning, and the *significance* of what they are learning (journal entries and essays).

Once goals and assessment were in place, we were ready to go.

- **I introduced the idea of theatre.** We brainstormed the topic: What is theatre? Is theatre relevant in today's society? How does it compare to movies? Do you go to the theatre? If the answer is yes, what kind of experience are you looking for? If no, why? The following is a summary of students' answers:

I go to the theatre

- because I like live performances
- because it makes me feel part of a collective experience
- because I feel strong emotions
- because it's a sensory experience like no other
- because it causes me to think in a way that film doesn't

I don't go to the theatre

- because I have never been exposed to it
- because it's expensive
- because the closeness makes me nervous
- because it's too physical and too loud
- because theatre actors are weird

- because it actually requires an attention span longer than five minutes

- **We took a field trip** to see Dario Fo's *We won't pay, we won't pay* – the original version followed by an adaptation set in 2010 [at the core of this farce are the serious themes of hunger for food, dignity and justice seen through the story of a couple of anarchic working-class housewives] Students had to write a short summary of the play, and their impressions of the adaptation, which they reported to the class the next day. This was an opportunity to introduce the famous playwright, Nobel prize winner, and master of farce and comedy [excommunicated by the pope and banned by Prime Minister Berlusconi from ever working in TV because of his relentless criticism of the church, of certain political practices, and of hypocritical bourgeois morality - topics that we discussed in class]

- **The viewing of this play raised the question: what is comedy?** What is a satire? What is a farce? What purpose does comedy serve? Is it pure entertainment or escapism? Is it meant to raise political and social awareness? Can you think of an American comedic writer?

- **This was also an opportunity to discuss with the student the idea of adaptation.** What is an adaptation? Why do we have adaptations? Do they always work? Have you seen any modern adaptation of plays or novels? Can you think of a modern adaptation of a classic you would love to write? Students came up with *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Tale of Two Cities* and many others.

- The rest of the week was spent doing **humanistic exercises** to get to know each other, and get in touch with our feelings through **story telling** and **story writing** (first written assignment: An

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original autobiography), and **acting exercises** to learn to stay in the moment and stay connected, through **improvisation** and **association** games.

Week 2

- **Introduction of the play and author:** La locandiera (the Inn Keeper) written by Carlo Goldoni in 1752 is still today his most performed comedy in Italy and abroad.



I chose this play for very specific reasons:

a) the text alone provides a wealth of opportunities to explore the history, the literature, the language, the social mores, and the class and gender issues of the 18th century. Goldoni's reform of theatre is crucial in understanding the demise of The Commedia dell'Arte, a theatre form based on improvisation, stock characters/masks, and fixed plot situations. With Goldoni we witness the birth of La Commedia di Carattere as opposed to the Commedia all'Improvisato. The figure of the playwright and the idea of a script emerge. Goldoni wrote the first fully scripted text – *The servant of two masters*. **So, we talked about Commedia dell'arte.** Goldoni was dreaming of a new theatre, an expression of the rising bourgeoisie, and the declining aristocracy that emerged with the Enlightenment. **So, we talked about class issues** and their **second written assignment** was: What does the word Aristocracy evoke for you? What is aristocracy in your country? Students gradually learned that there was a need for a theatre that reflected the new times not just in terms of class but also of gender. The role of women was becoming visible in academies and universities across Italy in art, poetry, journalism, and the sciences. The title *La Locandiera* is a tribute to the rising power of women. The main character is *Mirandolina*, an independent, entrepreneurial woman who runs his own business by herself, who doesn't want to get married and needs no man to be happy, who uses all her artful skills and wit to manipulate the three boastful nobles so that they would continue to spend money at her locanda. Revolutionary. This is the century where women could have a "cicisbeo", a professional lover, younger in age, and at their service. **So, we talk about cicisbeismo, love, and marriage in the 18th century.** Why did people marry? For nobles it was for political alliances, and to preserve lineage. What about

Mirandolina? She married for practical reasons. This led to a discussion on the idea of marrying to have a family as a bourgeois construct. **Their third written assignment** was: what is the role of women and men in today's society? What was it like in your parents' and grandparents' generations? What do you think of the institution of marriage and the idea of family?

b) I chose a comedy because, by its very nature, it is more physical, more immediately understandable for an audience with little knowledge of Italian, and because laughter lowers apprehension, mitigate embarrassment, and establishes a kind of intimacy, a sense of community. Also, comedic plays “lend themselves to literary and cultural analyses since, as per the comedic tradition, they also examine and critique societal norms with a focus on class and gender differences.” (Colleen Ryan-Scheutz, 302)

c) The language of the text, although challenging, was important in understanding the way aristocrats spoke – through their choice of words, and specific grammatical structures, which then informed their gestures. It was more a question of understanding the register, and the class differences rather than the regionalism or the dialect being spoken.

- **Close reading**

There are different ways to analyze a text. In a literature class, you would probably analyze the text in terms of genre, narrative voice, and categories of time and space. It would be a more structural, technical analysis. I explained to the students that we were going to approach the text from a dramatic point of view. Our analysis was going to be character driven, very much like we would approach it in an acting class. This is a text that was written to be performed.

As we read it, I instructed the students to keep in mind 4 questions: who are the characters, what do they want, what are the obstacles preventing them from getting there, what are stakes (what happens if they don't succeed).

During our **first reading** we focused on specific words, many wonderful idiomatic expressions and interesting grammatical structures that informed us immediately of the power relationships between the characters. We focused on formal addresses, imperatives, and titles.

Examples: the names of the nobles– Marchese di Forlipopoli, Cavaliere di Ripafratta, Conte d'Albafiorita (Count of “blossomed dawn” – when in fact he should have been called the opposite, “Tramontoappassito” which means “withered sunset” a more fitting name for a declining aristocracy). Are these characters to be taken seriously? What do these outlandish, exaggerated names tell you about their status? The name Mirandolina means “worthy of admiration”: what does this already tell you about her? The word Locanda: these were family run inns that sprung up everywhere in the 18th century because of the Grand Tour that English, French and German nobles and artists took as part of their education. (Dumas and Goethe were regular customers at Italian locandas) The words decoro, contegno, gentilezza: three qualities women had to exhibit that have to do with countenance, attitude, traits. What about today? How are these words used? Do they still refer to women? What is today's decoro? Plastic surgery? The word arte (art) in Goldoni's play means wit, treachery. What do we make of that association? These are just a few example of the kind of rich opportunities for discussion that simple words in the text provided.

Throughout the week we practiced vocabulary and idiomatic expressions in context by playing such games as “18th century hangman” and “whose line is it”, and writing cloze passages.

During our **second reading** we proceeded with the actual breakdown of the entire text in terms of **beats** and **as ifs**. In acting terms, a *beat* is a single unit of action (the intention of the actor in a particular line or sequence of lines). An *as if* is an hypothetical situation drawn from experience (the actor would perform the action based on the *as if* situation chosen)

[**Example** of an *as if*: think of a situation in which you knew you were better than the other person *as if* you were in competition with an arrogant friend for a position. Convince him/her you are a better candidate. Use strong action verbs such as: to persuade, to mock, to cajole, and to reject...]

For reasons of space, I will only illustrate one *beat* and *as if* taken from **Mirandolina’s monologue**:

Beat:

È nemico delle donne? Non le può vedere? Povero pazzo! Non avrà ancora trovato quella che sappia fare. Ma la troverà, la troverà. Con questi per l'appunto mi ci metto di picca.

Action/Intention: to challenge, to defy authority

As if: I was trying to get an arrogant, egotistical boss to see the value of an important business plan I proposed.

Stakes (what happens if I don’t succeed): my self-esteem would be crashed, and the company would lose the deal.

Students would perform their *as ifs* first for a few minutes, then they would immediately transition into the actual beat, keeping the same action/intention in mind throughout the scene.

Once the entire text was broken down and analyzed in terms of *beats* and *as ifs*, students had gained a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the characters.

Week 3

- I divided each class into 3 groups of 4. Students chose their parts.
- I gave students a vocabulary list with theatre terms (script, line, beat, action, objective, blocking, turn...)
- Students started to write journal entries
- **Fourth written assignment:** students had to write a back-story of their character – they had to invent, create a detailed life for their character. They also had to write a list of 10 adjectives and 10 active verbs that described the personality of their character as a vocabulary building exercise.

Example: Mirandolina is witty, sly, determined, sensual, and independent... Mirandolina manipulates, mocks, seduces, confronts, rejects, taunts...

The exciting part had began: students started to experience what happens when you speak the words you have read as if they were your own, when you breath life into the characters on the page, when you give them arms, legs, hands, and see them move across the room, when you put on that feathery

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hat, when you embody the character, and it takes a life of its own...

- We worked on **diction, pronunciation, rhythm, pitch, intonation, register** (we practiced specific tongue twisters, I taught students how to speak with a pencil in their mouths to raise the palate for clarity)
- We worked on **body language, gestures** (what happens if you add a gesture to an utterance? How does it make you feel? How does that inform your character?)
- We worked on **memorization** (the hardest part) doing the kind of “as if” exercises described earlier.
- We did **online research** for costumes (how did nobles and bourgeois dress? We looked at wigs, shoes, tights, ruffled shirts...)

Week 4

- We rehearsed scenes
- We video-taped the performance
- We took photographs.
- We looked at students’ videos in class as well as online performances currently shown at theatres in Italy, Ireland, Poland, and in the United States (Mirandolina’s Milwaukee Repertory Theatre)
- We read articles on current Goldoni’s productions in Italy and abroad to see relevance and modernity of the play
- We concluded the workshop with a round table discussion and final thoughts
- **Fifth written assignment:** a review of peers’ performance

Week 5

Borrowing a phrase from Gian Giacomo Colli, “**what begun as an act of memorization ended with an act of imagination.**”

- We worked on the **written modern adaptation** – I wrote my own adaptation first, which the students read and critiqued. Students then worked in the same groups, and created completely new scenarios: strip clubs, corporate offices, hospitals, and cafés. The new Mirandolinas were bartenders, interns, nurses, strippers, actors, drag queens, and shopkeepers. Our aristocrats were lawyers, doctors, producers, directors, pimps, the Kennedys, and Haas business students. In terms of the language, students wanted to use modern slang, so I compiled a list of expressions based on their dialogues.
- The next two steps would have been a) a performance of the adaptation and b) the analysis of a completely new dramatic text, following the same journey embarked with *La Locandiera*. Given the tight schedule of the experiment, I had to leave this phase to a future project.

Students’ final reflections on the experience coincided with intended goals. Here are a few of their thoughts, which I grouped into humanistic, acting, language and culture goals.

Humanistic

- Made strong connections with classmates
- Discovered myself (an assertive side I didn’t know I had...a sense of humor I thought I lacked...I was able to tap into emotions hard to reach)
- Became a better team player and a better listener
- Increased self-esteem, (I felt good about my role in the project)

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- Felt empowered (embodying my character made me feel powerful and in charge)
- Felt of sense of accomplishment

Acting

- Gained an appreciation for theatre, and a new respect for actors
- Learned how to analyze a text and a character
- Gained a better understanding of the text through acting
- Discovered a creative side
- Inspired me to take a theatre class

Language and Culture

- Increased appreciation for the power of words and gestures
- Increased self confidence in speaking
- Better pronunciation and enunciation
- Built a richer vocabulary
- Learned about 18th century Italy
- Heightened awareness of class and gender differences in Europe and in America
- Inspired to know more about Italian culture, history, literature

In conclusion

Theatre works! A theatrical component in language departments would enrich and reinvigorate curricula. The theatre workshop that I propose which requires students “to put it all together” (knowledge and skills) on a regular basis in a variety of assignments and assessments that emphasize both the process and the products of their learning

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constitutes one of the most holistic and memorable learning experiences a foreign language educator can provide. Will the students who worked in this workshop remember the subjunctive? Probably not. They will remember Mirandolina's speech though, and all the engaging conversations we have had. They will remember how they became actors for five weeks, and how incredibly empowering and humbling at the same time the journey has been.

The next steps for me is writing a complete syllabus for this course, and hopefully teach it. Language departments who are interested and new to this approach could start with the production of selected scenes from different plays. Then, the semester after they could progress to one act plays, and then to full blown plays. In term interdepartmental collaboration, I would love to work on a project where a theme is suggested by the different language departments, and then we can see how that theme is explored by various playwrights in different countries. As an alternative, we could choose a well-known American play, and do a modern adaptation in different languages to be presented as part of a World Languages Day at Berkeley.

Here are a few photographs of the cast during dress rehearsal

[insert photos]

Here is a video of students rehearsing a scene

[insert video]

Synopsis of the scene (in the video)

The Marquise and the Count are competing for Mirandolina's love – the Marquis offering his title and protection, and the Count offering his wealth – meanwhile a misogynous Cavaliere mocks them both stating that a hunting dog is four times more useful than a woman, at which

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point Mirandolina launches into a wonderful monologue in which she rejects the Marquis's and the Count's help, puts the Cavaliere in his place, and claims her freedom and independence. Slightly different from Kate's final monologue in Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* almost two centuries earlier where Kate tells her girlfriends:

“place your hands below your husband's foot, in token of which duty, if he please, my hand is ready; may it do him ease.”

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