

**Stages of History:  
Performing 1970s Italy with Narrative Theater**

by

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This work is dedicated to  
Joshua Yumibe  
and  
Stella Antonia Guzzetta Yumibe

## **Acknowledgements**

When I was 25 and beginning to think about graduate schools, I envisioned staying on the East Coast in part so that I could be in close proximity to my mom with whom I was very close. She was my confidante, oracle (a game we played) and protector, one of my favorite people to laugh with, make fun of other people with, and chat with (like a best friend). Given that before I was born she had lost a daughter who was four, and that my father died when I was four, my mom and I cultivated a particularly intense bond. In my vision of zipping back to the City at any time from school, sparkling along the coast in an Alfa Romeo Spider (that I have never owned, nor do I drive stick, nor do I enjoy driving), I had no premonition that by the time it came for me to take those GREs my mom would have died (cancer in six weeks).

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## Table of Contents

Dedication .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
List of Figures .....	x
List of Appendices .....	xi
Abstract .....	xii
 Introduction: Distinguishing Narrative Theater .....	 1
The Poetics of Narrative Theater .....	4
Genre, Quasi-Genre, and Epic Theater .....	8
The Lingering 1970s .....	11
Chapters .....	13
 Chapter 1: History and Genealogy of Narrative Theater .....	 18
The “Leaden” 1970s .....	19
Beginnings .....	21
Italian Theater History and New Performance Methods .....	45
 Chapter 2: Autobiography of a Culture Worker .....	 71
<i>Impegno</i> and the Intellectual .....	75
Autobiography and Ethnography: The Personal Terrain of Public Events .....	88
Guide for a Plural History .....	105
 Chapter 3: The Degrees of Orality and Language that Convey Experience .....	 119
Historical Connections: The Language of the 1970s .....	123
Physical Language .....	139
Regionalism, Testimony, and Investigative Journalism .....	155

Chapter 4: Locating Community .....	173
Early Endeavors, 1978 -1982 .....	176
Notions of Community: Revisiting Animazione .....	190
Sites of Performance.....	201
Chapter 5: Media that Plays a Supporting Role.....	215
Multiple Media Performance: Curino's <i>Santa Bàrbera</i> (2005).....	219
Translating Theater onto Television.....	230
Translating Narrative Theater onto Television.....	243
Conclusion: The Many Platforms of Italian Performers.....	259
Appendices.....	265
Works Cited .....	274

## List of Figures

Figure 1 Laura Curino in <i>Camillo Olivetti</i> .....	4
Figure 2 Laboratorio Teatro Settimo's <i>La Storia di Romeo e Giulietta</i> (1991).....	22
Figure 3 Laboratorio Teatro Settimo's <i>Le affinità elettive</i> (1992).....	37
Figure 4 Ascanio Celestini in <i>Radio Clandestina</i> (ca. 2005).....	40
Figure 5 Marco Baliani in <i>Corpo di stato</i> (2009) .....	74
Figure 6 Marco Baliani in <i>Corpo di stato</i> .....	96
Figure 7 Ascanio Celestini in <i>Appunti per un film sulla lotta di classe</i> (ca. 2009) .....	129
Figure 8 Marco Paolini in <i>Vajont</i> (ca. 1993) .....	150
Figure 9 Davide Enia in <i>I capitoli dell'infanzia</i> (ca. 2009) .....	157
Figure 10 Photos of Settimo Torinese from Progetto Città Laboratorio (1980/1981)....	185
Figure 11 Laura Curino in <i>Santa Bàrbera</i> (ca. 2005) .....	221
Figure 12 Marco Paolini in <i>Vajont</i> televised by RAI (1997).....	248
Figure 13 Marco Baliani in <i>Corpo di stato</i> televised by RAI (1998) .....	253

## **List of Appendices**

A. Teatrography .....	265
Marco Baliani .....	265
Ascanio Celestini .....	268
Laura Curino .....	269
Davide Enia .....	270
Marco Paolini.....	271
 B. Filmography .....	 272
Marco Baliani .....	272
Ascanio Celestini .....	272
Laura Curino .....	272
Marco Paolini.....	272

## **Abstract**

Emerging from the unrest of the 1970s in Italy, a minimalist one-person performance genre, later known as Narrative Theater, shifts the focus from dominant national allegories to the experiences of individuals and what they can reveal about society at large. Through a combination of research, ethnography and storytelling, narrators such as Ascanio Celestini, Laura Curino, and Marco Paolini resuscitate the local, shedding light on unknown and underrepresented narratives in Italian history. With these techniques the genre not only supports the subaltern perspectives of factory workers, for example, but also dialectically layers private and public memory to construct a more comprehensive and collective history. I begin my analysis of the genre with a genealogical account of its historical and theatrical influences. Following this is an examination of the role of the narrator (chapter two), orality and language (chapter three), the importance of space both in terms of stage and geographic territory (chapter four) and, finally, the migration of Narrative Theater into contemporary visual media (chapter five).

The project deploys historical, critical, and performative methods to examine the cultural environment in which this type of theater developed. The historical lens is crucial not only because of the varied connections between the 1970s and Narrative Theater, but also historiographically for how it uncovers the ways in which narrators developed rigorous strategies for performing history in their plays. Specifically, the founders of the

genre intertwined microhistory as conceived by Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi with oral history in light of the works of Luisa Passerini and Alessandro Portelli. In addition to a more traditional dramaturgical examination, I draw on performance studies to analyze the extra-textual dimensions of narrative practice. Erving Goffman's concept of social dramaturgy, along with Victor Turner's notions of community, are particularly helpful in negotiating Narrative Theater's efforts to both counterpoise and interrelate individual experience within the broader socio-political context. Ultimately, Narrative Theater fuses the practice of microhistory with a political consciousness derived from the social conflicts of the 1970s to produce an innovative style of community-theater that serves as a form of historical recuperation.

## Introduction

### Distinguishing Narrative Theater

In the opening sequence of her exceptionally successful play *Camillo Olivetti: Alle radici di un sogno* (Camillo Olivetti: At the Roots of a Dream, performed in repertory since 1996), Laura Curino declares, “This work is dedicated to Adriano Olivetti.”<sup>1</sup> Her insistence upon the word *work*, she clarifies, stems from a memory of her parents when, in their native Piedmontese dialect, they complimented a performer by noting that he *worked* well, and not that he *acted* well. Their comment, she says, helped her to recognize a connection between art and work, which is a dominant theme in the play as well as a reflexive statement regarding her own art and work. Maintaining this sense of duality, she remarks that the play actually concerns two dreams. The first is the dream of Camillo Olivetti, founder of the company that engineered typewriters, a company that he and later his son Adriano would grow into an endeavor that not only made the laptop of yore, but that also sustained an ethos of employee benefits beyond the imagination of any Fortune 500 today.<sup>2</sup> The other dream is by the children of Fiat workers, of which she is one, who wished that their fathers worked at Olivetti.

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<sup>1</sup> “Questo lavoro è dedicato ad Adriano Olivetti.” All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. Laura Curino and Gabriele Vacis, *Camillo Olivetti: Alle radici di un sogno* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 1998), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Some of those included indoor and outdoor recreation spaces, cafeterias with notable chefs, libraries, buildings designed by award-winning architects, temporary housing with architectural advice centers for

This dissertation, which is both genealogical and critical, examines Narrative Theater (*teatro di narrazione*), a minimalist genre characterized by a single narrator who both writes and performs her material. Stemming from and responding to various social and political controversies of the 1970s, Narrative Theater's founders, including Curino, began to experiment with ways of challenging hegemonic notions of national memory by discovering and performing stories that focus on the lives of ordinary people. Through a combination of research, ethnography and storytelling, narrators reorient traditionally dominant perspectives of the Italian nation toward individual experiences and ask what these can reveal about the broader society. Even in the first few minutes of *Camillo Olivetti*, Curino deploys several key techniques to accomplish these aims: autobiography, regional linguistic cues such as a dialect, and references to specific communities. As these are all paramount to Narrative Theater, they correspondingly shape the chapters of this dissertation.

While Narrative Theater plays often contain important socio-political discourses and critiques that emerge from the everyday domains of factory work and state-run mental asylums, others engage specific events that occurred during the 1970s directly, such as the 1978 assassination of former Prime Minister Aldo Moro. The main trait that Narrative Theater embraces, however, is a mechanism popular in the academy—itsself in dialogue with the times—that deals with minor works. Several disciplines from literature to anthropology and, above all, history, shifted during the 1970s from the canonical to the experimental, from major voices to the subaltern. Microhistory, in fact, is a central

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private housing, health care, child care, summer camps, and even cultural hours with some of the nation's leading artists and intellectuals such as Vittorio Gassman and Pier Paolo Pasolini.



methodological influence to the formation of Narrative Theater. By tracing its approaches within this genre, I demonstrate how exploring the complex dynamics of individual lives leads narrators to compose a multivalent experience of the past. Further, in arguing that narrators deploy a microhistorical methodology in their creative processes, I also embrace a historical framework that aims to open a more pluralistic reading of the genre's development than have previous scholarly accounts.

I use three main methods—historical, critical, and performative—as I ask which key events created the environment where this type of theater could have developed. The historical lens is crucial not only because of the many and varied connections between the political events of that decade and Narrative Theater, but also in how the narrators develop strategies for performing history in front of audiences. Historical perspectives also intertwine with critical theory as I examine microhistory as conceived by Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi, oral history in light of the works of Luisa Passerini and Alessandro Portelli, and the function of both in the formation of Narrative Theater. Michel Foucault's writings on the rapport between power and knowledge help to illuminate the bridge between history, narrative, and the power dynamics therein. Finally, my method draws on performance studies by analyzing both extra-theatrical influences and the embodied aspect of the narrators' works as a form of live art, in addition to a more traditional dramaturgical study that takes into account Italian theatrical traditions and textual analysis. Since autobiography is an element of almost every Narrative Theater piece, Erving Goffman's work, along with Victor Turner's notions of community, is particularly helpful in negotiating Narrative Theater's efforts to both counterpoise and interrelate the individual experience within the broader socio-political context.



Figure 1 Laura Curino in *Camillo Olivetti*  
 L-R Comune Occhiobello, January 2013. Photo: Stefano Padovani; Location unknown, ca. 1996. Photo: Paolo Rapalino; Grenoble, November 2011. Photo: Olivier Favier

## The Poetics of Narrative Theater

In terms of style, comparable to some solo performances in the United States, Narrative Theater avoids the techniques of traditional stage productions that employ elaborate costumes, set design, and character development. Its most common incarnation is a one-person show, written and performed by the same *auteur*. Even while I argue that the impetus for Narrative Theater came from the political and social events of the 1970s, performers explore a wider range of topics than just that decade. Their subjects range across the history of post-*risorgimento* Italy and confront issues of local and national importance, many of which can also take on an international weight. They include episodes from the Allied liberation of Sicily and the 1963 landslide at the Vajont Dam in Northeastern Italy, to the hardships of temporary workers on short contracts at a contemporary call center in suburban Rome. While usually structurally linear, occasionally a Narrative Theater piece might have the feel of fragmentary epigrammatic prose, though the overarching narrative is always clear.

Another way to think about Narrative Theater is through its performers. Although some act in films, television dramas, and conventional stage plays, others operate almost exclusively within the contours of Narrative Theater. Critics consider Marco Baliani (b. 1950, Verbania, Piedmont), Laura Curino (b. 1956, Turin), and Marco Paolini (b. 1956 Belluno, Veneto) to be “first generation” narrators, while Ascanio Celestini (b. 1972, Rome), Davide Enia (b. 1974, Palermo) and Mario Perrotta (b. 1970, Lecce, Puglia) are “second generation.” This division along generational lines is most useful for understanding how the genre developed genealogically. Across generation, narrators approach their stories through seemingly ordinary or minor characters, as opposed to the well-known historical or fictional characters, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of an event. When Curino performs *Camillo Olivetti*, for example, she tells the entire play through figures of his mother and wife, never Camillo himself. Giving voice to these women not only serves to restore two valuable figures left out of historical accounts but also performs the value of restoring them. As the audience begins to know Elvira and Luisa, they also see the rapport between subaltern and major figures. Curino presents a vision that argues that the Olivetti enterprise would never have been what it was, had it not been for the influence of these two women.

This enriching of history through the performance of subjugated figures is one of the defining characteristics of Narrative Theater, echoing the fact that many of the key discourses of the 1970s, such as those on women’s rights, which led to the legalization of divorce, began among ordinary people. In fact, one of the attributes that unites most Narrative Theater pieces is this recasting of moments of violence and struggle in Italian history into much more malleable and complex narratives instead of ones that only

contain tragedy. Through performances that merge microhistory and journalistic exposé, Narrative Theater turns the political discourses of the 1970s into a method for making theater out of populist history and stories about everyday life. Narrators do not offer just *another* perspective on these events, but a *plurality* of them.

While there are some significant formal differences amongst different narrators' poetics and performative styles, I will argue throughout this dissertation that Narrative Theater was highly influenced by, and indeed largely emerged from, a single theater group that formed in 1974 just outside of Turin. The place was a small industrial town called Settimo Torinese, after which the artists named their company—the Laboratorio Teatro Settimo, later shortened to Teatro Settimo. Several of the most prominent first generation narrators founded Teatro Settimo, including Laura Curino and Gabriele Vacis (b. 1955, Settimo Torinese), who directed many of the company's shows, and continues to direct Curino and Paolini frequently.<sup>3</sup> In fact, I helped Curino to build an archive of Teatro Settimo's materials, which include original meeting minutes, workbooks, and project notes, largely enabling me to develop this project.<sup>4</sup>

Their works loosely fall into two categories, both of which would appear to have little in common with Narrative Theater: (1) adaptations of classical or canonical literary texts from authors as diverse as the Greeks to Shakespeare to Gabriel García Márquez,

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<sup>3</sup> Paolini, for example, collaborated extensively with Teatro Settimo about ten years after its creation, and continues to work with Vacis on many projects. Baliani is the only main narrator from the first generation who did not work with them, but he knew of their work, and vice-versa, and corresponded with several company members. In terms of the latter generation, Enia was Curino's student at one point and thus has a direct lineage from training with her. Celestini has not worked with former members of Teatro Settimo (the group dissolved in 2002), but he is still very much a part of the Narrative Theater practice that they devised.

<sup>4</sup> I note materials from these sources as being from the Curino Private Collection.

and (2) plays collectively composed by the group that are based off of interviews and historical research. While these early works are not Narrative Theater *per se*, they do contain characteristics that would define the genre—namely the emphasis on storytelling through minor characters. They are also important for the ways in which they engaged their local community. In addition to creating and producing plays, many of the artists developed cultural initiatives for Settimo Torinese that included youth- and elderly-related activities. It was only in the late 1980s and early 1990s when these artists began to branch out with individual works that critics later named Narrative Theater.<sup>5</sup>

For a stripped-down type of theater that minimizes the elements of spectacle, the genre has been surprisingly successful across Italy—from Palermo to Turin, Rome to the Veneto—where narrators have presented their works on urban stages as well as in the small town squares of rural centers. Some, if not most, of their success is due to the ways that narrators have disseminated their practice beyond the stage, through other modes of distribution. Many works are also adapted into published scripts that sell with DVDs and are widely distributed by major publishing houses such as Einaudi. Some pieces are even nationally televised, and there are also instances in which major leftist weeklies such as *L'Espresso* have sold series of Narrative Theater DVDs over several months in their (slightly pricier) papers.<sup>6</sup> This level of popularity indicates that Narrative Theater's

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<sup>5</sup> Those artists include Curino (*Passione* 1987); Mariella Fabbris (*Il mestiere dell'attrice*, 1993), Lucia Giagnoni (*Modelli* from poems by Amy Lowell 1992); Eugenio Allegri (*Novecento* from Baricco's novel 1994), Paolini (*Adriatico*, 1987; *Tiri in porta*, 1990; *Liberi tutti*, 1992 based off of several works by Meneghello) all of whom worked with Settimo.

<sup>6</sup> Marco Paolini, Laura Curino, and Marco Baliani have all had works nationally televised, while Ascanio Celestini has appeared regularly as a series guest on various variety programs where he often performs short excerpts from full length pieces, or other vignettes. Regarding weeklies, in February 2006 *L'Unità* released six DVDs with each issue under the series *Teatro Incivile* organized by Mario Perrotta and

rigorous critical inquiries into Italian history and everyday have developed considerable public esteem both with the masses and the educated elite.

### **Genre, Quasi-Genre, and Epic Theater**

As I analyze the elements of Narrative Theater, I refer to it as a genre though there has been some resistance to categorizing it as such. Both Gerardo Guccini and Simone Soriani, two leading scholars of Narrative Theater, consistently refer to it as a “quasi-genre” with little explanation as to why they insist on such a hesitant qualification.<sup>7</sup> Guccini gathers many other types of theater under the quasi-genre category including children’s theater, dance theater, and experimental theater though he does not embellish upon what would actually be a full genre.<sup>8</sup> More recently though, at a 2011 conference, the theater scholar Marco de Marinis noted that while referring to Narrative Theater as a movement was not appropriate, classifying it as a genre was acceptable because its form has endured for more than a decade.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, literary scholars Ellen Nerenberg and Nicoletta Marini-Maio also assert that “the number of productions, their

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Rossella Battista, the journal’s dance and theater critic. The series included plays in DVD by narrators Perrotta, Celestini, Enia and Giuliana Musso. In January 2010, *L’Espresso* (in collaboration with the Rome-based newspaper *La Repubblica* as the same company owns both media) released seven plays in DVD all by Marco Paolini, and then in 2012 released 10 issues with works by Ascanio Celestini.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Gerardo Guccini, *La bottega dei narratori: Storie, laboratori e metodi* (Rome: D. Audino, 2005); Simone Soriani, "Dario Fo, il teatro di narrazione, la nuova performance epica: Per una genealogia di un 'quasi-genere'," *Forum Italicum* 39, no. 2 (2005); Simone Soriani, *Sulla scena del racconto* (Arezzo: Zona, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Guccini, *La bottega dei narratori*: 11.

<sup>9</sup> Marco de Marinis, "Discussions at end of session 2," in *International Theatre Conference: Empowering Marginalized Voices in Theatre. The Case of Italy and Beyond* (Warwick University, UK 2011).

specific features, and their civic and their collective nature” provide grounds for establishing Narrative Theater as its own genre.<sup>10</sup> Even Guccini has admitted that the vitality of Narrative Theater and its capacity for self-renewal can be attested to by its evolution across generations.<sup>11</sup> This dissertation considers Narrative Theater as a genre because, in the end, I accept the criterion of these more recent evaluations; that is, I agree with the argument that Narrative Theater has existed long enough and produced enough shows that it merits this distinction.

Part of the early resistance to the genre classification relates to the hybrid multi-textuality that underscores Narrative Theater. As Guccini explains, various layers of comedy, cabaret, musical performances, political and social theater, and the dramatic monologue add the needed dimensions to create Narrative Theater. On the other hand, performers also stretch it far across all these styles, as well as others from slapstick to civic oration, that to encapsulate it under the rubric of another more encompassing name might do it justice.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps as a result of this line of reasoning, Guccini, along with his colleague Claudio Meldolesi in 2004, coined the umbrella term “epic performance” as a way of referring to the many types of solo performances that include Narrative Theater in

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<sup>10</sup> Marco Baliani, *Body of State: The Moro Affair, A Nation Divided*, trans. Nicoletta Marini-Maio, Ellen Victoria Nerenberg, and Thomas Simpson (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012), 20 fn 20.

<sup>11</sup> Gerardo Guccini, "Racconti della memoria: Il teatro di Ascanio Celestini," *Prove di Drammaturgia* 2 (2003): 20.

<sup>12</sup> Gerardo Guccini and Michela Marelli, *Stabat mater: Viaggio alle fonti del teatro di narrazione* (Bologna: Le ariette libri, 2004), 17.

addition to monologues (in itself somewhat of an umbrella term), monodramas, storytelling, etc.<sup>13</sup>

One key characteristic of the epic performance is the extra-textual dimension brought by the many non-professional actors who explore their work on stage. Though some are more known than others, there is a significant group of people who are not trained as actors, but who have embraced this mode of productivity. In fact, the diversity in disciplines is notable ranging from mathematicians and astrophysicists (Piergiorgio Odifreddi, Margherita Hack), to journalists and former judges (Marco Travaglio, Gherardo Colombo).<sup>14</sup> Epic performance would, for example, include the writer and journalist Roberto Saviano, famous for his reportage against the Neapolitan mafia, the Camorra. Saviano now regularly appears in television specials in which he describes his investigations, and also places himself, as a Neapolitan and as a journalist, at the center of his works. Similar to the question of genre specificity, teasing out the distinctions between these different modes of performance, and the different backgrounds of those who perform narrative works, is not my aim. I do, however, wish to contextualize Narrative Theater within a broad performance-based category of contemporary practices in Italy and various umbrella terms including “solo-performance,” “monologist theater” and indeed “epic performance” accomplish that.

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<sup>13</sup> Gerardo Guccini and Claudio Meldolesi, "Editoriale: L'arcipelago della 'nuova performance epica'," *Prove di Drammaturgia* 10, no. 1 (2004): 3-4.

<sup>14</sup> Gerardo Guccini, "Recitare la nuova performance epica," *Acting Archives Review: Rivista di studi sull'attore e la recitazione* 1, no. 2 (2011): 65-67.



## The Lingerings 1970s

When discussing the 1970s, a few literary critics and cultural historians, including Marco Belpoliti, Enrico Palandri, Ruth Glynn, and Adalgisa Giorgio, argue that much perspective on that decade is contaminated by the present political situation. The result, they claim, is that there has yet to be a thorough and thoughtful analysis of that time.<sup>15</sup> Yet, recently there is a clear interest among many to better comprehend those years. As Glynn points out, scholars, artists and activists have published a wide range of histories, memoirs (many by ex-terrorists), and films that contemplate the 1970s signifying the growing interest in memorializing individual experiences, in investigating the motivations behind the era's violence, and especially in creating a coherent version of this variegated past.<sup>16</sup>

This new interest also signals the extent to which that time continues to haunt the collective conscious today in some of the many cultural representations that directly confront the decade. Films such as *Buongiorno notte* (dir. Marco Bellocchio, 2003, loosely based on the 1998 memoirs of *ex-brigatista*, or ex-Red Brigade member, Anna Laura Braghetti), *La meglio gioventù* (dir. Marco Tullio Giordana, 2003) or *Romanzo criminale* (dir. Michele Placido, 2005, based on the 2002 novel by Giancarlo de Cataldo) not only deal with specific terrorist events from kidnapping to bombs in piazzas, but they contemplate the political ramifications of those occasions too, which some argue

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<sup>15</sup> See for example Anna Cento Bull and Adalgisa Giorgio, eds., *Speaking out and Silencing: Culture, Society and Politics in Italy in the 1970s* (London: Legenda, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Ruth Glynn, "Trauma on the Line: Terrorism and Testimony in the *anni di piombo*" (paper presented at the Proceedings of the International Conference: The Value of Literature in and after the Seventies: The case of Italy and Portugal, Utrecht, 11-13 Mar 2006), 317-18.

contributed to the end of the radical left and the eclipse of communism as both a viable political party and philosophy.<sup>17</sup> This continuing relevance of the 1970s in other cultural productions is particularly important for Narrative Theater in the subtle suggestions that such a time still bears a psychic proximity to the present. It is also valid to assert that the decade lingers today in part because of the many parallels between then and now. When Curino, for example, honors the working conditions in Olivetti factories, she implicitly questions labor rights today.

This persistence of the 1970s brings with it a particular challenge, which concerns not only how to remember that decade but also how to remember more broadly. As the cultural historian John Foot stresses, reconciling public memory with subjective recollections has been a particularly fraught effort in Italy. In each statue or plaque that the state erects, it draws the line on what to remember and what to forget.<sup>18</sup> Memory is a force that can color these markers of the past, and indeed the subjectivity of memory, as a tool for historiography, is a paramount concern of Narrative Theater.

One of the more subtle benefits of Narrative Theater's work on history and memory is how it helps to cast 1970s Italy in a different light than the dominant historiographical and media focus on political violence. Such a task has grown more

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<sup>17</sup> With these films I am referencing two major efforts in the decade known as the "strategy of tension" and the "historic compromise." The former refers to an attempt to control the masses through the use of fear, propaganda, and disinformation and is largely associated with right-wing institutions. The latter reflects the attempt to find common ground between the major parties of the Christian Democrats and the Communist Party (PCI). Moro was heavily involved in these talks but when he was kidnapped they eventually crumbled. Antonio Negri argues that the PCI suffered considerably due to these two situations as it fractured ties with social movements since they had become politically marginalized, and it morphed into the bureaucratic power-hungry organization that it never intended to be. Antonio Negri, "Reviewing the Experience of Italy in the 1970s" *Le Monde Diplomatique* (1998), <http://mondediplo.com/1998/09/11negri>.

<sup>18</sup> John Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2-3.

difficult because of the reiteration of this singular perspective, which is encapsulated by the ubiquitous moniker, *anni di piombo* (years of lead).<sup>19</sup> Writer and literary scholar Enrico Palandri points out that confronting that period from today is a deeply political act, and one that is nearly impossible. He declares that Italians today have been brainwashed by a “cheerful violence” in which “telequiz” and Saturday night shows outshine accounts of the current political climate rife with xenophobia and other exclusionary practices. Ordinary people face a propaganda barrage when they attempt to examine the present, let alone the past, honestly.<sup>20</sup> Those programs might be more regular than the televising of Narrative Theater, but the very existence of this genre of performance for more than thirty years all over Italy is a testament to the many opportunities in Italy to address the exclusionary practices to which Palandri eludes. Narrators work against these trends in order to offer multiple views of historical events while cutting through dominant streams and prevailing accounts.

## **Chapters**

Rather than by text or by narrator, I have arranged this project by paramount characteristics that define Narrative Theater, though I address specific plays and personae

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<sup>19</sup> The idea of “lead” dredges up the violence of the time in a metaphor of bullets, though it was originally coined in German for the purpose of emphasizing weight in order to underline the heaviness of the decade. It appears that translations into Italian and English might exaggerate the play on words beyond the original intention. For a more detailed explanation of the term, see Pierpaolo Antonello and Alan O’Leary, *Imagining Terrorism: The Rhetoric and Representation of Political Violence in Italy 1969-2009* (London: Legenda, 2009), 11n1.

<sup>20</sup> Enrico Palandri, “The Difficulty of a Historical Perspective on the 1970s,” in *Speaking out and Silencing: Culture, Society and Politics in Italy in the 1970s*, ed. Anna Cento Bull and Adalgisa Giorgio (London: Legenda, 2006), 115, 19.

in each chapter, revisiting some, introducing others. This type of organization is most suitable to exploring the broader implications within the genre in part because Narrative Theater does not, as some scholars suggest, emerge from a linear practice of performance histories such as the tradition of *affabulazione* (spirited story-telling), *commedia dell'arte*, or Dario Fo's theater. While it indeed contains aspects of those, it intersects and overlaps with social movements, academic debates about narrative, and other styles within performing arts. Therefore an examination that intermingles and teases out the central features of Narrative Theater does more justice than dividing chapters in linear or by traditional methods.

I begin with a genealogy of the genre accompanied by a thorough contextualization of historical and theatrical influences. Following this is an examination of the role of the narrator (chapter two), orality and language (chapter three), the importance of space both in terms of stage and geographic territory (chapter four) and, finally, the migration of Narrative Theater toward visual media (chapter five). My sources include a diverse array of materials from secondary texts such as monographs, essays, and popular criticism to primary ones from published plays, performances and televised productions on DVDs to original scripts, personal journals, and meeting minutes, many of which come from the Curino Private Collection.

My first chapter lays the groundwork by establishing the role of the 1970s in Narrative Theater, and why historiography, particularly microhistory, is one of the main methods of analysis. I also construct a genealogy of the genre in terms of Italian theater history and performance art with some cross-references to other, simultaneous, forms of Western theater. In these sections, I demonstrate the hybridism of the genre, bringing to

light how narrators draw upon many theatrical traditions in their engagement with a variety of social issues. Paramount to the successful communication of these social issues is the rapport between the narrator and audience. In my second chapter, I examine how narrators have defined their work, arguing that they see themselves as an artistic version of civil servants, at times even referring to themselves as “culture workers.” Using themselves as examples, the narrators demonstrate for the audience the ways in which many voices, including their own, influence local and national memories. Experiencing this chorus is a way to construct a more multilayered history.

With the 1970s as a background, in chapter three I examine the way in which various politicized constituencies, such as students and feminists, mobilized and shifted language from the formality of the public to the accessibility of the private. As in other countries, this was the decade of “your body is a battleground” and Narrative Theater’s linguistic dexterity reflects the multi-dimensionality of multiple subjectivities. Analysis of language is an important point of entry for examining the ideological tensions characteristic of this period, therefore I demonstrate that the narrators created their own linguistic methods in a manner similar to the ways that activist groups experimented with language. *Orality*, by which I mean the dimensions of verbal communication, is critical here. Through methods including the use of colloquial expressions, dialects, and physical language, narrators embrace an orality through which they communicate diverse perspectives of their stories. In a style reminiscent of investigative journalism, their performances resuscitate a people’s history, often in opposition to official accounts, which they then redistribute to their audiences.

In my fourth, and penultimate, chapter I examine the issues of geographic territory and performance site, which are fundamental to Narrative Theater in their ability to underscore the local politics that inspired some of the earliest productions, as well as formulate broader notions of national identity through the re-telling of local events. The venues in which narrators perform range from traditional proscenium stages to abandoned train stations, and these speak to concrete questions of distinct locality and geographic variance. Completing my analysis of Narrative Theater, my fifth chapter provides an examination of how the genre interacts and experiments with other media, particularly visual. I am especially interested in how they translate their projects into a language beyond the stage. Since the mid-1990s narrators have televised certain productions on national channels, radio stations, and, more recently, in separate feature-length film productions. My concluding chapter addresses how these developments in exhibition alter or evolve the original texts.

The main elements of Narrative Theater are rooted in an atmosphere in which ordinary people began to take stock of the prior decade's economic boom and wonder what its price was. By the 1970s, the alienation and exploitation of industry was met with the desire for communities in which the individual mattered. Italian society was beginning to shift largely because individual voices rose above the fray to create concrete changes ranging from women's rights to labor conditions within the legislation. Narrators build on the momentum that brought about these changes, incorporating autobiography as they strive to tell the stories of those who have fallen out of history, while also re-examining the stories of those who history has preserved. Now, more than ever, a theatrical practice that concerns the working and middle classes has taken on a new

urgency in an era of neoliberalism and political-economic domination by transnational conglomerates. Ultimately, Narrative Theater fuses the practice of microhistory with a political consciousness derived from the social conflicts of the 1970s to produce an innovative kind of community-theater that also serves as a form of historical recuperation.

## **Chapter 1**

### **History and Genealogy of Narrative Theater**

One of the main characteristics of Narrative Theater is its stance on history. Whether a production concerns a fantastical excursion or a reassessment of a national tragedy, in the vast majority of Narrative Theater performances history is not permanent and reliable. Rather, it is a chain of memories where links can be broken or removed based on both new evidence and new perspectives on the same facts. As history is, according to this perspective, always about recuperating what has been lost or discovering what has not been thought, I approach Narrative Theater by focusing on different pressure points than have many previous analyses, altering its own story in the way that its performers do with their histories. Rather than crediting Dario Fo as the grandfather of the genre, or following the professional development of individual narrators, I read the movement through two main lenses that will constitute the two main sections of this chapter. First, I aim to identify and explore the aspects of Italian culture and society in the 1970s that influenced the creation of this genre, and second, I seek to show how new performance methods and Italian theater history inspired specific aspects of the genre.

Quite simply, these inquiries, which reach vertically along a historical axis and horizontally through contemporary trends in performance, constitute my search to identify the ingredients in the potion that brewed this theatrical practice. My aim for this



chapter is to better understand the poetics of Narrative Theater and offer a flavor of the practice by demonstrating how several intellectual trends from the 1970s, particularly the method of microhistory, coalesced into the articulation of this new genre. Since hybridity is such a key element of Narrative Theater, both technically, given that some productions include live music or media, and thematically with topics from the Second World War to state-run insane asylums, it is important to recognize the underlying threads that connect such a diverse array of subjects. I will make the case that Narrative Theater, with all its many variations in performative approaches and subject matters extending now for two generations, largely emerged from the early work of a single company called Laboratorio Teatro Settimo based just outside of Turin where many of the first generation narrators developed their craft. Although I will at times demonstrate the links between the two generations, I will focus the majority of this chapter on establishing the links between the first generation and the surroundings in which they began to work.

### **The “Leaden” 1970s**

Lead is an attractive bluish white metal when freshly cut. Only when exposed to air does it turn into the dull gun-metal grey for which it is more widely known. While the dominant view of the 1970s in Italy is notoriously the *anni di piombo* tarnished with bullets and blood, a more varied perspective has increasingly begun to emerge in recent scholarship and cultural representations. Certainly it was a combustible and unpredictable time with extra-parliamentary groups from both the extreme left and right tugging for power through legal, illegal and sometimes terrorist means. Moreover, many of these groups, both right and left, wanted to destabilize and overthrow the state itself. They were

not only jockeying for power *within* the state, but also in direct confrontation with it. Sheer numbers will attest to that.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars, however, have begun to reflect more favorably upon the decade by considering it as a time when previously marginal groups such as women and factory workers created a space for their own voices amidst repressive and hierarchical socio-political dynamics.<sup>2</sup> While political violence was a constant shadow, great musicians, writers, and filmmakers were in the light, and many communities strove for better ideals from equal rights in terms of gender and sexuality to equitable labor practices in Italian factories. I argue that it was not only or even mostly the acts of violence that influenced Narrative Theater, but rather the modalities and mechanisms of the period that helped shape the practice. In this way, I aim to make a fresh cut through this discolored decade by contextualizing Narrative Theater within some of the many fruitful conversations that echoed among alternate public spheres. The notorious images of revolt and destruction from the 1970s are concurrent with hopeful dreams for a different kind of society, and exploring these other layers is crucial towards understanding the genealogy of Narrative Theater.

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<sup>1</sup> Between 1969-1980 there were 12,690 incidents of terrorist violence in Italy, which had no fewer than 597 terrorist groups engaging in radical activity. Extra-parliamentary groups also organized political activism well within legal and peaceful parameters, but in extreme cases, on both the left and the right, the lines between terrorism and activism at times blurred. See: Charles Townshend, *Terrorism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 68-69.

<sup>2</sup> For one of the seminal books in Italian offering more varied perspectives of Italy in the 1970s with texts ranging in levels of critical analysis between scholars, journalists, and artists, see: Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni, *L'orda d'oro, 1968-1977: La grande ondata rivoluzionaria e creativa, politica ed esistenziale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997).

## Beginnings

In 1974, several high-school students living in a suburb of Turin called Settimo Torinese began to meet each other at the local library with increasing frequency. Through these happenstance encounters they soon discovered that they were all working on different theater projects. One was part of a Brecht production staged by a local priest. Another had begun meeting with Gian Renzo Morteo, the university professor who wrote about a then-popular pedagogical theater movement called *animazione teatrale* (theatrical animation) that created productions through community service often involving children of underprivileged backgrounds. Most of them decided to attend university in Turin the following year and even though one studied architecture and another literature, they decided to arrange regular gatherings to discuss and debate theater. Within two years, even while they also worked on separate projects and continued their academic studies, the students formed the Laboratorio Teatro Settimo.

Charting the work of this company as a foundation to the study of Narrative Theater is vital to understanding some of the most prominent narrators since most of them worked with the company in varying capacities. Both Laura Curino and Gabriele Vacis were among the initial group of students who met at the Settimo library while Marco Paolini performed and wrote with Teatro Settimo in the mid-1980s, also working with them on his first solo show *Adriatico* (1987, debuting in Settimo Torinese as the first of several pieces in the series called *Gli Album* to which Paolini added other vignettes until 1999) and later working with Vacis who co-authored and directed the pivotal Narrative Theater piece *Il racconto del Vajont* (The Story of Vajont, 1994).



**Figure 2** Laboratorio Teatro Settimo's *La Storia di Romeo e Giulietta* (1991)  
 With Laura Curino and Marco Paolini as the Nurse and Friar,  
 Courtesy Curino Private Collection

Marco Baliani is the only leading narrator from the first generation who did not work closely with Teatro Settimo, though he did correspond with them. Still, his early projects have significant commonalities with the company, namely collaborative efforts and performances in children's theaters. Even today, Baliani's theater is as much in conversation with the 1970s as Teatro Settimo's theater then, and as Paolini's or Curino's works today, and perhaps even more so thematically with two of his most famous pieces, *Corpo di stato* (Body of State, 1998) and *Kohlhaas* (1990) that explicitly echo rhetoric and leitmotifs of the decade. In the so-called second generation, Davide Enia was a student of Curino's and thus learned the Teatro Settimo techniques in direct lineage, while Ascanio Celestini's civic theater embraces the more politically charged discourses of Paolini's.

The vast majority of cultural productions that depict the atmosphere of 1970s Italy typically offer portrayals that include many reforms, protests, strikes, and indeed terrorism for which the decade is derisively called *gli anni di piombo*.<sup>3</sup> Some of the more violent acts are clouded in conspiracy theories involving the CIA and the USSR vying for control of the Mediterranean by way of Italy, while others are purely attributable to student militancy or the neo-fascist far right.<sup>4</sup> Much of the violence was due to revolutionary extra-parliamentary groups in crisis with the fracturing of leftist parties such as when the Communist party, or PCI, cut itself off from the *Autonomia Operaia*, a leftist political and cultural movement. In most other European countries, the activity of terrorist bands declined, while in Italy they were reorganizing and recruiting.

The culminating event of the decade was the assassination of former Prime Minister Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades, a violent leftist group, who viewed Moro's attempt at a partnership between the PCI and the Christian Democratic Party as too conciliatory. The day after Moro's death, many journalists wrote that the first republic of Italy was killed with him and there was a clear sense that change was necessary, if also imminent.<sup>5</sup> Even while there is a sense of defeat, frustration, and indeed peril in such memories, there is also a hint at an undercurrent of something more pure and dignified—

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<sup>3</sup> To name just one event, there have been countless representations of the former Prime Minister Aldo Moro's kidnapping that range in analysis and seriousness from the conspiracy theory thriller film *Piazza delle cinque lune* (dir. Renzo Martinelli, 2003) to the melancholy *Buongiorno notte* (dir. Marco Bellochio, 2003) as well as memoirs and accounts of the actual Red Brigades directly involved in the ordeal.

<sup>4</sup> The most infamous acts include the Battle of Valle Giulia in Rome in 1968, the bombing in Piazza Fontana in Milan 1969, and bookending the decade with the Moro Affair of 1978, and a bomb at the Bologna train station in 1980.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ginsborg, *Storia d'Italia, 1943-1996: Famiglia, società, stato*, trans. Marcello Florese and Sandro Perini (Turin: Einaudi, 1998), 477.

a cause for which to fight. Still, the dominant public memory, one that is continually emboldened in the ubiquitous photograph of Moro as a prisoner in front of the Red Brigade's banner, reinforces a chronicle of violence.

Then, and now, narrators involve themselves with lesser-known characteristics of the 1970s. Their connection to the decade is one of gradations that resonate in their work in different ways. Their relationship follows three distinct directions. The first category encompasses works that directly confront episodes that occurred during the 1970s.

Baliani's *Corpo di stato* (*Body of State*, 1998), which contemplates violence by interweaving personal memories with the public event of Moro's kidnapping, is the clearest example of this. Even so, the piece is not principally concerned with the actual incident. Rather, Baliani returns to the months surrounding Moro's death more as a framework to recall his own place as a youth during those years instead of attempting to rethink that particular event. In the second group, other Narrative Theater pieces conjure the 1970s by way of theme, such as Curino's Olivetti plays (debuting in 1996 and 1998, respectively) that contemplate the struggles of factory workers by way of allegory in her descriptions of a humane labor environment. There is no direct reference to the 1970s, and yet the leitmotifs indelibly intertwine the period to the piece.

Finally, in the third category, I interpret the relationship of Narrative Theater to its formative years by way of modalities. The mechanisms at play in the post-1968 environment were ones that challenged not just conceptions of democracy but also individual experiences of daily life. The instruments of analysis were constantly zooming in and out of focal points. To vote for the legality of divorce (permissible only in 1970, and challenged again with a referendum introduced by Catholic organizations which was

finally defeated four years later) was to gain awareness that actual individuals—friends, family members—were no longer legally bound to remain in an environment of which they did not want to be a part. In Italy, as in other Western nations, the 1970s was the decade when the ‘personal became political’ and intimate matters involving divorce, reproduction, and others were thrown open for public debate and even conflict.

One of the more meaningful attributes of Narrative Theater is its ability to help people situate their own personal experiences within the broader national dialogue. In nearly every piece, the narrators question both authority, and why circumstances unfolded in the ways that they did. They ask how the ordinary individuals remember, whom they privilege, and why they choose certain perspectives, delicately suggesting alternative readings. The narrators do this with the same zoom-in/zoom-out mechanism that shares commonalities with the private/public perspective. As I examine later in this essay, Celestini’s *Radio clandestina* (2000) chronicles a brutal moment during World War II by invoking memories that incorporate his grandfather, and thus from a very personal and singular perspective as well as through public memories. In this way, through minor and private stories, he approaches a broader understanding of what happened that led to the Fosse Ardeatine massacre at the old mining caves in south central Rome in March of 1944 when Nazi forces slaughtered 335 Italians in retaliation for the deaths of thirty-three Nazis in a partisan attack the day before.

This third category, which reflects aspects of Narrative Theater’s relationship to the 1970s, refers to the intellectual theories and methodologies that occurred in tandem with developing political stances. Although Narrative Theater works do not always employ these mechanisms to examine contemporary concerns, their emergence as

products of the political and cultural ferment of the 1970s reflects the decade's influence in their discourses and modes of presentation. I am thinking here of the turn towards criticism of minor authors and particularly the use of historiographical alternatives such as microhistory with influence from the *Annales* school and their notions of history "from below."<sup>6</sup> Even though the *Annales* school was macro-historical in its orientation, looking at long-term processes of historical change, the emergence of microhistory along with social history in the 1960s is related to *Annales* in the sense that it was a reaction against its tendency to favor large structures. Perhaps some of the beauty of these practices is that they have the flavor of early attempts towards more interdisciplinary endeavors, an effort that continues in its popularity even today. Making connections across fields and reaching across boundaries characterizes this era and certainly resonates in Narrative Theater as narrators embrace storytelling with ethnographic research, or include the voice of the farmer next to that of the politician.

The literary critic Marco Belpoliti offers a helpful explanation of these narrative mechanisms in his creative portrayal of the environment at the University of Bologna in the 1970s. In an almost performative gesture, he connects the disciplines of literature, history and sociology in his reading of the city's intellectual environment when he analyzes the work of the Bolognese scholar Piero Camporesi who focused on minor authors. In particular, he praises Camporesi's 1970 introduction to Pellegrino Artusi's

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<sup>6</sup> The *Annales* school refers to a style of historiography first practiced by Lucien Febvre (1878–1956), Marc Bloch (1886–1944) primarily in the journal *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations*. Furthered by the second generation of historians, led by those such as Fernand Braudel (1902–1985) and included Georges Duby (1919–1996), the school promoted replacing the study of leaders, politics, and wars with inquiries on the lives of ordinary people, agriculture, commerce, communication and the like. This turn towards the social came to include history from the point of view of mentalities, or cultural history.



1891 *La scienza in cucina e l'arte di mangiar bene* (The Science of Cooking and the Art of Eating Well) not only for his sound argument that it represented a unifying text for the (then) new nation in terms of language as much as gastronomy, neither only for the resurrection of this turn-of-the-century text from a minor author, but Belpoliti especially praises Camporesi's introduction for his ability to incorporate elements of the contemporary cultural climate. He believes that Camporesi was responding specifically to Asor Rosa's 1965 *Scrittori e popolo* and, moreover, that he conjured something of the atmosphere of the late 1960s when young people occupied the piazzas with their slogans and the buzz of their excitement and energy.<sup>7</sup> The actual political criticism that Belpoliti argues in Camporesi's allusions to Asor Rosa's is not only what reverberates into Narrative Theater. What also echoes is the resourceful thinking that allowed Camporesi to interpret a cookbook as an important instrument in the national/regional discourse of the post-unification years in the late 1800s, while using it to engage debates on the reconstruction of populism in literature that Asor Rosa had recently introduced.

These are important connections that characterize some of the intellectual developments during this period that were in dialogue with another burgeoning genre: that of microhistory, which emerged from the pages of the scholarly journal *Quaderni storici* through the work of its editors including Carlo Ginzburg, Edvardo Grendi, Giovanni Levi, Edward Muir, and Guido Ruggiero. As mentioned, to some extent, their insights are a response to other historiographical trends across Europe including the *Annales* scholars in France, and social Marxist historians in the UK. All three schools share the agenda of examining marginalized groups and bringing the common people of

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<sup>7</sup> Marco Belpoliti, *Settanta* (Turin: Einaudi, 2010), 287-88.

Europe into history.<sup>8</sup> It is more than a coincidence that a key Narrative Theater attribute is to engage these same questions about under-represented members of society. While pieces vary in their intensity of civic engagement, one of the aspects that sets Narrative Theater apart from storytelling or other entertaining one-person shows is the commitment to uncovering silenced perspectives, much in the way microhistory does, though this methodology has other reaches as well.

The influence of microhistory in Narrative Theater emerges in four ways: regard for narrative, the researcher's (or narrator's) involvement in the story, the so-called "method of clues," and the emphasis on marginalized people that reflects the growing interest in literary analysis for minor authors as much as it does the bottom-up accounts of social history. The return of the narrative was widely discussed in history circles beginning with a much-cited article published in 1979 by historian Lawrence Stone who attempted to trace these developments, while also noting interdisciplinary influences, most notably from anthropology.<sup>9</sup> As Belpoliti points out, both Camporesi and Ginzburg took delight in the pleasures of narration, particularly in crafting their own voices via literary technique.<sup>10</sup> In reflecting upon his oeuvre, Ginzburg himself recalls that he had taken great care in considering the relationship between research hypothesis and narrative

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<sup>8</sup> Matti Peltonen, "Clues, Margins, and Monads: The Micro-Macro Link in Historical Research," *History and Theory* 40, no. 3 (2001): 352.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History," *Past & Present*, no. 85 (1979): 3-24. Notable responses or later references to the article include: Carlo Ginzburg, "[The Possibilities of the past]: A Comment," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 12, no. 2 (1981): 277-78; James West Davidson, "The New Narrative History: How New? How Narrative?," *Reviews in American History* 12, no. 3 (1984): 322-34; E. J. Hobsbawm, "The Revival of Narrative: Some Comments," *Past & Present*, no. 86 (1980): 3-8; Sarah Maza, "Stories in History: Cultural Narratives in Recent Works in European History," *The American Historical Review* 101, no. 5 (1996): 1493-515.

<sup>10</sup> Belpoliti, *Settanta*: 295-96.

strategies, and that, as an example, his most well-known study, *Il formaggio e i vermi* (The Cheese and the Worms, 1976) “does not restrict itself to the reconstruction of an individual event; it narrates it.”<sup>11</sup> Given the name of the genre, it is obvious that narrative is an essential component of Narrative Theater, but this fact should not be readily overlooked. Taking into account a survey from the very first gestures of Teatro Settimo, through to the second-generation narrators in Rome and Palermo, the narrators constantly question and experiment with this most fundamental aspect of their practice. There is no fixed definition for “narrative” from one play to the next.

This is largely so because, similar to microhistorians, the Narrative Theater artists read storytelling in a continual relation to history. As early as 1982, seven years after their serendipitous encounters at the public library, after having created several shows for children and street theater pieces, Teatro Settimo premiered their first production for adult audiences, *Signorine*. Although there is no extant script, one can still glean various details about the piece thanks to secondary sources left by the company’s main director Gabriele Vacis, the narrator Laura Curino, and the theater scholar who has followed Teatro Settimo’s work since the beginning, Gerardo Guccini. In a 1982 chronicle of Teatro Settimo, the authors state that starting with the history of their hometown Settimo Torinese, the company sought to unravel the discrepancies between “the history books and the stories that people live.”<sup>12</sup> In a similar vein, specifically reflecting on *Signorine*,

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<sup>11</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, "Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It," [Microstoria. Due o tre cose che so di lei.] *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (1993): 22.

<sup>12</sup> “Partendo dalla storia di Settimo, si cercava di farsi il problema della differenza che intercorre fra la storia che raccontano i libri e la storia che vive la gente.” Laboratorio Teatro Settimo, "Qual'è la storia del Laboratorio Teatro Settimo?," *Narrative resume for LTS*, 1982, Box 1982, Curino Private Collection: Settimo Torinese, Turin.

Vacis recalled that the company wanted to reconstruct the memory of the city where they were born and in which they continued to live. For them, it was a city with no memory.<sup>13</sup>

Vacis continues by explaining that there was a loss of a unified collective history since those industrial towns could not produce a synthesis of memories.<sup>14</sup> In his reflections, what he is really asking is: which stories get told? Which stories become History?

Inherent in the actual narratives Teatro Settimo chose to convey is a meditation on how one changes history as one remembers it. The story itself conjures the tension between narrative and history that microhistorians also confront in their work.

In *Signorine* the relationship with memory was conveyed through a strong sense of nostalgia for the 1940s and 1950s. In a published letter that Guccini wrote to Teatro Settimo, he recalled that the play's subject was a mosaic of short private stories collected from people around Settimo deriving from an *animazione* exercise at an elderly center. With their minimal set design and lighting, Guccini concluded that it was obvious that the artists wanted to connect with the public by telling them their own stories.<sup>15</sup> Another theater critic interpreted the play as a more personal exercise in which the artists were trying to connect their own experiences to the lives of their parents when the latter were in their twenties. In order to accomplish this, they built upon memories their parents had

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<sup>13</sup> “*Signorine* voleva ricostruire la memoria della città dove siamo nati e in cui continuiamo a vivere... Settimo Torinese la memoria non ce l’ha.” Gabriele Vacis, “Il disegno e la casa,” *Prove di Drammaturgia* 1 (1996). All issues of *Prove* are available in either PDF (in this case page numbers are given) or HTML at: <http://www.muspe.unibo.it/wwcat/period/pdd/annate.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> “Perché era evidente che le città in cui viviamo, tutte, non solo la disperata Settimo, raccontano un’infinità di storie, ma tutte separate. Non ci sono più caratteri così forti da unificare, non c’è più un’unica storia collettiva, non si producono più sintesi di memoria.” Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Gerardo Guccini, “Lettera a Laboratorio Teatro Settimo sull’esplorazione e le carte,” *Prove di Drammaturgia* 1 (1996).

shared of themselves as young adults, and created a play that integrated some of the central struggles of those times.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the narrators were trying to connect with other members of their community by using their stories, as well as those of their own parents. One of the main leitmotifs is that the piece is clearly a reflection on how history, particularly oral history, is constructed through memory, which inevitably privileges certain stories over others. Part of their goal in performing the piece locally was to show their parents' generation how their stories had changed through repeated telling. Their work is not only aimed at recovering forgotten or dismissed histories, but also at showing their malleability.

Such a meta-dialogue, in which the narrators also include themselves, their city, their parents, is also fundamental to microhistory. Ginzburg described the dawning of this relationship while reading what others wrote of his main figure, Menocchio, in *Il formaggio e i vermi*. During his research he realized that his perspective was handicapped irrevocably by subjectivities that included those judging Menocchio, but also his own as a historian reading the notes of Menocchio's inquisitors who were asking similar questions about this person and thus identifying with their positionality.<sup>17</sup> In a separate reflection, fellow microhistorian Carlo Levi also explains that "the researcher's point of view becomes an intrinsic part of the account... involved in a sort of dialogue and participates in the whole process of constructing the historical argument."<sup>18</sup> An obvious parallel in

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<sup>16</sup> Roberto Canziani, *Dedica: Laboratorio Teatro Settimo* (Pordenone: Associazione Provinciale per la Prosa, 1995), 14.

<sup>17</sup> Ginzburg, "Microhistory: Two or Three Things," 21-22.

<sup>18</sup> Giovanni Levi, "On Microhistory," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 106.

Narrative Theater is the extensive use of autobiography in the majority of plays, but the stakes are theoretical too. Vacis' comments on *Signorine* suggest that Teatro Settimo members were working through what it meant to be a part of the stories they told. He explained that for the company, little by little, they understood that to create reasons for living in a place like Settimo, which they did by telling stories about Settimo and giving it "a memory" as Vacis calls it, was to create the place itself.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately to construct history, to furnish memories for a city, is to become intertwined in those memories, since, like Ginzburg, who ultimately had to select which texts would tell the story of Menocchio, the narrators must choose which stories will be the blocks on which their city is built. Perhaps tacit, Teatro Settimo exhibits political intent in this gesture, which for them was largely the act of creating a people's history. To an extent, this was also Ginzburg's goal. With Menocchio, the reader sees how a single person can force many to articulate and even question the experience of everyday life.

Regarding the notion of construction, another key dynamic to microhistory is what historian Matti Peltonen considers Ginzburg's and Levi's most important contribution; the "method of clues," an investigation based upon an element that does not seem to fit, or seems odd, causing the researcher to take it as a sign of a larger unknown structure.<sup>20</sup> Peltonen refers to a 1978 article, revised a year later, in which Ginzburg argued that as a result of this *paradigma indiziario*, which required a catholic assessment of texts and methods ranging across centuries, "Reality is opaque; but there are certain

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<sup>19</sup> "Piano piano capivamo che costruire le ragioni per vivere in un luogo era costruire il luogo." Vacis, "Il disegno e la casa."

<sup>20</sup> Peltonen, "Clues, Margins, and Monads," 349.

points—clues, signs—which allow us to decipher it.” In a gesture that today one might read as interdisciplinary he acknowledges that this is not a new idea since psychoanalysis is “based on the hypothesis that apparently negligible details can reveal deep and significant phenomena.”<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, he still views it as crucial to microhistory.

Fifteen years later Ginzburg references this method by noting that these lacunae, which had led him to focus on a particular area, actually became a part of the story he wove together. The clues become an intricate part of the research, and meaningful parts of a narrative. In fact, Ginzburg hypothesizes that the more improbable the documentation, the richer the yield, allowing any hidden social structures to emerge from the interaction of numerous individual strategies.<sup>22</sup> In some ways, this *paradigma indiziario*, or “method of clues,” brings together several other features of microhistory. It is the reasoning behind the wager that smaller units can inspire large questions, and it also implicates the researcher in her own investigative approaches. Finally, Ginzburg’s reference to social structures underlines the importance that these discoveries can have for explaining the emergence of more heterogeneous communities. The implications of diverse perspectives also influenced the development of Narrative Theater, where plays envelop a plurality of voices.

Vacis echoes these shades of the *paradigma indiziario* when he describes how his company created *Signorine*. For them, what was missing was a history of Settimo. In

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<sup>21</sup> Translation modified to change “symptoms” for “signs” from Carlo Ginzburg, “Clues: Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes,” in *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Pierce*, ed. Umberto Eco and Thomas Albert Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1983), 109. For the Italian, see: Carlo Ginzburg, “Spie. Radici di un paradigma indiziario,” in *Crisi della ragione*, ed. Aldo Giorgio Gargani (Turin: Einaudi, 1979), 28. Available at: [http://www.dic.units.it/perspage/barillari/Storia%20Tecnica/spie\\_note\\_pag.pdf](http://www.dic.units.it/perspage/barillari/Storia%20Tecnica/spie_note_pag.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Ginzburg, “Microhistory: Two or Three Things,” 28, 33.

order to retrieve memories attached to their town they began by talking with older residents about their experiences of living in one of Italy's industrial peripheral town. Suddenly, he recalls, the Teatro Settimo artists were considering the hydro-geological arrangements of the country, the huge events in postwar Italy, and the "biblical migration" from the south to the north. "What was surprising, however, was that the epic scales were not in opposition to the smallest details of private memories, but co-existed peacefully, even proudly, thanks to the strong network of relationships that we wove."<sup>23</sup> Similar to Ginzburg's descriptions, Vacis defines the creation of this early play through a search for something that was missing and did not seem right; the lack of a collective history for Settimo. Along the way, they listened to individual stories that then, for them, represented much larger circumstances in postwar Italy. Finally, he acknowledges "the strong network of relationships" that emerged from their efforts.

Around 1981, Teatro Settimo wrote a research proposal for Settimo's Department of Culture that reads like a methodological blueprint for what would later become *Signorine*. They describe Settimo Torinese as a place where its habitants were violently rocked by the economic boom and bust. Though they never mention the play by name, they articulate their intention to create a theatrical production that revisits the history of Settimo based upon research that would include an analysis of publications, photographs, and above all, oral testimony from the 1950s and 1960s, including several groups based

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<sup>23</sup> "Partivamo a fare uno spettacolo sulla storia di una cittadina di periferia e arrivavamo a parlare dell'assetto idro-geologico della nazione, dei grandi eventi che coinvolsero l'Italia del dopoguerra, delle migrazioni bibliche che seguivano la ricostruzione... Quello che però ci sorprende era che il racconto epico non si contrapponeva all'intimismo della piccola memoria personale ma conviveva tranquillamente, anzi gagliardamente, grazie alla fitta rete di relazioni che noi intessevamo." Vacis, "Il disegno e la casa."



on the age of interviewees.<sup>24</sup> One of the more important points that this document reveals is the depth and the longevity of the group's engagement with Settimo's community. In the four or five years between those early articulations of how the rhetoric of the economic boom promoted a false identity of their town and its inhabitants, through the creation of *Signorine* and Vacis' own recollections nearly 15 years later in 1996 of why they created the piece and what was important to them, the discourses that emerged in the 1970s, with their left-leaning ideologies and concern for individual experience, were the driving forces behind their efforts.

Teatro Settimo members boast of their diversity of disciplines with two trained architects, one sociologist, and literature concentrators, making it perhaps unsurprising that prominent historians who favored interdisciplinary approaches were influential upon the group. Throughout Teatro Settimo's eight page research statement the authors reference novels by Umberto Eco and Heinrich Böll, as well as scholarly works by Bloch, Foucault, Celine, Baudrillard, and of course, Ginzburg. While they cite Ginzburg's 1976 *Il formaggio e i vermi* in their bibliography, they proclaim his superior articulation (over Bloch) of "signs" (*spie*) quoting the same passage from his 1978/1979 essay that I pointed out earlier: "se la realtà è opaca, esistono zone privilegiate – spie, indizi – che consentono di decifrarla." (Reality is opaque; but there are certain points—clues, signs—which allow us to decipher it.) They continue their discussions by proposing that the *paradigma indiziario* (method of clues) serves as a key concept in their research as it has the potential to uncover complex social structures. Their goal, in fact, is to formulate

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<sup>24</sup> Laboratorio Teatro Settimo, "LTU3: Appunti per l'avvio del terzo laboratorio di trasformazione urbana. La ricerca storica," *Research Statement*, 1981, Box 1981, Curino Private Collection: Settimo Torinese, Turin, 5.

hypotheses and dramatic projects on the basis of clues, and “micro-news” that is seemingly insignificant but in reality can reveal profound phenomena of considerable importance.<sup>25</sup> In the late 1970s and early 1980s the members of Teatro Settimo were clearly in dialogue with some of the main tenets of microhistory, a practice itself rooted in academic discourses themselves interacting with different social and political dialogues of the times. The “method of clues” in particular slowly began to emerge as one of Teatro Settimo’s key techniques for creating new plays.

In the three plays that followed *Signorine*, the company continued to develop these methods and began to interpret other materials through the lens of the *paradigma indiziario*. What eventually turned into a trilogy first began as *Esercizi sulla tavola di Mendeleev* (Exercises in Mendeleev’s Table, 1984), followed by *Elementi di struttura del sentimento*, (Structural Elements of Feeling, 1985, in which the actors give voice to the servants of Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, and which they redeveloped seven years later using Goethe’s title) and ultimately *Riso amaro* (Bitter Rice, 1986). Over a decade since that first production, Curino clearly recalled what the company was attempting: to create a play in the same way that Mendeleev conceived his periodic table.<sup>26</sup> She goes on to explain how the nineteenth century Russian scientist risked his reputation by asserting that certain aspects of his table did not yet make sense because science had yet to fulfill the discoveries he hypothesized, and not because the table was flawed. She paints the image of a table partially completed with empty squares that only twentieth-century scientists would be able to fill in. She thus articulated another dynamic related to

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Laura Curino, “La vicenda del testo,” *Prove di Drammaturgia* 1 (1996).

Ginzburg's "method of clues." Mendeleev's technique recalls the same spirit of research, led by circumstances that did not quite fit. Rather than scrapping the idea for the table of elements, Mendeleev embraced the lacunae, a method that was particularly resonant with Narrative Theater. The empty spaces intrigue. The barely existent voices, like the servants in Goethe's tale, who somehow manage to leave an echo, are the ones that attract narrators.



**Figure 3** Laboratorio Teatro Settimo's *Le affinità elettive* (1992)  
L-R Mariella Fabbris, Lucilla Giagnoni (both of whom later joined Curino in *Adriano Olivetti*) Anna Coppola, Laura Curino, Paola Rota, and Benedetta Francardo. Photo courtesy of Curino Private Collection

The final aspect of microhistory that I would like to consider concerns what one could call Mendeleev's empty squares, except that they do not here deal with elements, but with people. Fellow microhistorian Giovanni Levi interprets close ties between microhistory and the socio-political shifts of the 1970s. He states quite plainly that the "unpredictable consequence of political events and social realities," which rendered many revolutionary efforts inadequate, also led to "redefining concepts and profoundly

analyzing existing tools and methods.” In part, those changes grew out of Marxist tendencies in the sense that the study of an ordinary person recognizes a certain freedom within oppressive and normative systems.<sup>27</sup>

This method was both a political and intellectual divergence from nineteenth century historiography that promoted an exclusionary logic. “The affirmation of a national identity, the advent of the bourgeoisie, the civilizing mission of the white race, and economic development furnished a unifying principle to historians of both a conceptual and narrative order.”<sup>28</sup> Microhistory, in conversation with ethnography, broke away from this tradition by looking not only at subjects widely-considered unimportant, but also themes that were previously ignored or dismissed as inferior, such as local history. In doing so, they concentrated on the contradictions and plurality of viewpoints. Narrative Theater also considers stories that still need to be told from a variety of sources, and indeed microhistory as a methodology greatly serves the study of Narrative Theater as it provides an approach to deeply engage with and interpret the genre.

In the preceding paragraphs I have highlighted several ways in which aspects of the 1970s impacted Narrative Theater. A few plays directly engage with that decade’s specific events, while many contain important socio-political discourses from factory working conditions to the interaction between local and national governmental bodies. Finally, I argued that above all else, the main trait that Narrative Theater took from the 1970s was a methodology popular in the academy—itsself in dialogue with the times—

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<sup>27</sup> Levi, "On Microhistory," 93-94.

<sup>28</sup> Ginzburg, "Microhistory: Two or Three Things," 21.

that deals with minor works. While this trend is evident in several disciplines from literature to anthropology, the most influential writings on Narrative Theater came from history, based on early documents from Teatro Settimo. In considering the impression left by microhistory, I identified four major areas that surface in the creation of Narrative Theater: affinity for narrative, the researcher's (or narrator's) involvement in the story, the "method of clues," and the emphasis on marginalized people. In order to illustrate the link between the two, I focused my evidence on research statements or published recollections by members of Teatro Settimo that reveal the ways in which they approached their early plays, the way territory in particular raised questions for them about memory and history, and how they developed their own methods that mirror microhistorical ones to confront those questions and create a theatrical production out of their findings. Now I would like to examine a play by a younger second-generation narrator to see the ways in which all of these aspects both evolved within and remained central to Narrative Theater from the early works of the Teatro Settimo to contemporary productions in the new millennium.

After performing in street theater and with four full-length plays behind him, Ascanio Celestini premiered *Radio clandestina*, based off of Alessandro Portelli's book *L'ordine è già stato eseguito* (The Order Has Been Carried Out, 1999) in 2000. Like several other of his early works, World War II plays a major role. Consistent with the genre, the contemplation of history is a continuing force. In some plays, as with this one and clearly with *Signorine*, it propels the narrators to ask questions about how one remembers, which serves as an impulse to narrative, an obvious key element to the genre. In reflecting upon Portelli's book, Celestini writes that what was different about it was

not so much the history that it told, but the stories it told. “He [Portelli] reminds us that history is about everyone because everyone has her own perspective on history. Because everyone lives in stories, even if only on the periphery.”<sup>29</sup> In the book, as in the play, Portelli reflects upon the Fosse Ardeatine massacre at the old mining caves in south central Rome in March of 1944 when Nazi forces slaughtered 335 Italians in retaliation for the deaths of 33 Nazis in a partisan attack the day before. Portelli’s primary method of analysis is through oral history as he recounts stories told by the relatives of those that were murdered.



**Figure 4 Ascanio Celestini in *Radio Clandestina* (ca. 2005)**  
**Photo Maila Iacovelli – Fabio Zayed/Spot the Difference. Courtesy of**  
**<http://www.ascaniocelastini.it/categorie/immagini/>**

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<sup>29</sup> “Il libro di Portelli non agginuge molto a quello che già sapevamo, ma con lui alla storia si aggiungono le storie... ci ricorda che la storia riguarda a tutti, perché tutti hanno una propria prospettiva sulla storia. Perché tutti vivono nella storia, anche se ne abitano solo la periferia.” Ascanio Celestini, *Radio clandestina: Memoria delle Fosse Ardeatine* (Rome: Donzelli, 2005), 24.

Perhaps most obviously, Celestini confronts minor histories in the same way that the first generation narrators do, and in the same way that Portelli does with respect to oral histories, which is to shade an understanding of a big event like the massacre at the Fosse Ardeatine with human dimensions through the stories of ordinary citizens. Similar to how *Signorine* was a play about the nature of memory as much as it was about specific memories, *Radio clandestina* is also a play about the telling of history. Celestini provides the narrative framework in his recounting to the audience how he meets a little old lady, *una bassetta*, who asks him to read the posted rentals as she is in search of a home, and is clearly illiterate. The fact that she cannot read is something he ignores for a while, but it finally fascinates him. She is from another time; a time when his grandfather who owned a cinema house used to read the posters of occupied Rome with their instructions to his fellow neighbors who were illiterate and would ask him to interpret the directives.

From here, Celestini recalls the one strange poster informing the people that 335 Italians would be killed. He continues his story to the audience as though he were telling the story to the *bassetta*. In his preface to the play, Portelli acknowledges that this framework and the invention of the *bassetta* are entirely Celestini's contributions. He praises the *bassetta* as a concentrated metaphor of a wartime Roman populace, but also as a narrative function as her presence puts the very act of storytelling on stage.<sup>30</sup> Even more, I would add, by highlighting oral traditions, Celestini also raises many questions about their place today. He uses the construction of the *bassetta* to reflect upon the function of narrative in contemporary Italy in a number of ways. Her lonely search for a

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<sup>30</sup> Alessandro Portelli, "Preface," in *Radio clandestina: Memoria delle Fosse Ardeatine*, ed. Ascanio Celestini (Rome: Donzelli, 2005).

home symbolizes the scarcity of oral traditions in the present. The opening scenes with Celestini reading the rental advertisements is also about reading aloud and the spoken word, and the fact that the *bassetta* never finds a home begs the question: What place do oral traditions have in today's industrial-paced cities?

Throughout the piece he raises more questions about narrative and history, sharing this dynamic with other narrators, and with the microhistorians who, according to Levi, were first and foremost concerned with the historian's procedures, and not the scale of its subject-matter.<sup>31</sup> As Celestini approaches the Fosse Ardeatine massacre, he pauses, reflecting on how to tell this story. It's one of those stories, he tells the *bassetta*, that people think they know, that they only take a minute to tell, but to really tell it, you'd need a week. He decides to start out with the one-minute version:

March 23, 1944, at four in the afternoon the bomb that the Roman  
partisans put in via Rasella explodes, and the next day in retaliation the  
Germans kill 335 people and this is known as the Fosse Ardeatine  
massacre. Period. End of story.<sup>32</sup>

This version shows how brisk history can be, glossing over a huge event without ever stopping to really listen to the voices of those times. He goes on for about 100 minutes to share a fuller account of those events, insisting that one must begin not with the war, but almost 70 years prior with the situating of Rome as the capital city in the recently unified nation. He works with dramatic distances up close as he quotes his grandfather and then

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<sup>31</sup> Levi, "On Microhistory," 93.

<sup>32</sup> 23 marzo 1944, alle quattro del pomeriggio scoppia la bomba che i partigiani romani mettono a Roma in via Rasella e il giorno appresso per rappresaglia i tedeschi ammazzano 335 persone e questo è conosciuto come *eccidio delle Fosse Ardeatine*. Punto. Fine della storia. Celestini, *Radio clandestina*: 38.



back out to the construction of the newly capital city in that zoom-in/zoom-out mechanism present in many social movement of the 1970s that I mentioned earlier. Even though the plot has nothing to do with the 1970s, the questions he raises about history and narrative, about incorporating personal accounts into public narratives, are coming out of questions rigorously posed during that decade.

Even today these questions are still relevant. In a 2011 interview Celestini admitted that he has come to believe that in Italy, “we’ve passed from a nostalgic view of history to a comforting view of the past” ignoring the horrors that persist today. “It’s become the new rhetoric... [since Italy] has been anesthetized by years of misrepresentation and disenchantment.”<sup>33</sup> In *Radio clandestina*, Celestini dramatizes the sentiment when he speaks of how people change their memories to mask the harsher realities. In an especially poignant moment, he unravels the myth that there were warnings about the massacre. People created a story that the Nazis had made posters warning that if the perpetrators of the via Rasella bombing would come forward, they would not go through with the threat of taking ten Italian lives for every German one. Celestini summarily dismantles this by quoting from court proceedings after the war in which a judge asked a Nazi defendant if they had printed any such warning, and he said they had not.

And yet still today many people say, ‘my grandfather, he saw the posters... my uncle saw them... there were posters...’ because people saw the posters even if no one had ever printed them... because in this lie that

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<sup>33</sup> Elisabetta Povoledo, “Italian Monologues with a Message,” *International Herald Tribune*, 16 Mar 2007, 9.

people have carried forward for more than fifty years, there was hope for those 335.<sup>34</sup>

But the truth is there was no hope. And is there not more dignity, asks Celestini, in remembering the way things really were, even if they steal hope? With this sad perspective, he performs the link between narrative and history again, and emphasizes the danger in constructing false histories since that bind is so powerful.

In a final gesture, he admits that some stories are such that they seem impossible to tell. For several minutes he keeps coming back to the same question, “How is one supposed to tell this type of story?”<sup>35</sup> Most people do not want to hear it. People go out of their way to make sure that they do not, he explains, as when owners of a local bakery let relatives of those that died in the massacre pass ahead of others. It is not because they are being honored in some special way, but because people want them to buy their bread quickly and leave so that they do not have to hear their stories.<sup>36</sup> And yet, Celestini is there trying to tell the *bassetta*, and us, about these pasts. He reflects upon the dearth of oral traditions in contemporary Italian society, the rapport between narrative and history, the intertwining of private and public, and the privileging of plurality, inviting the audience to contemplate with him. While his work might not discuss events from the 1970s, there are echoes in a piece such as *Radio clandestina*. Although each artist has carved out and defined his or her own poetics, the core of his or her work, of Narrative

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<sup>34</sup> Eppure ancora oggi tanta gente dice: <<Mio nonno li ha visti i manifesti... mio zio li ha visti... c'erano i manifesti>>... perché la gente i manifesti li ha visti pure se nessuno li ha mai stampati... perché in questa menzogna che si porta avanti da più di cinquant'anni s'è trovata speranza per questi 335. Celestini, *Radio clandestina*: 74.

<sup>35</sup> Lo vedi che questa è una storia strana? Una storia che uno come fa a raccontarla? Ibid., 90, 91.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 92.

Theater, embraces the overarching poetics that Teatro Settimo worked out in their early years: a commitment to local stories, plurality of voices, and an inclusivity where the narrator is aware of her relationship to her stories and involves the audience to some extent as well.

### **Italian Theater History and New Performance Methods**

I would now like to consider how Italian theater traditions as well as trends in performance art were influential to Narrative Theater. I first situate its genesis within a traditional perspective of Italian theater history and then focus on a reading that encompasses performance movements, particularly in the 1970s. As one theater scholar notes, Narrative Theater places itself at the crossroads of many fundamental theoretical questions such as the primacy of the text, the crisis of representation, the responsibility of the actor, new performance spaces, different ways of interaction with the audience and the deconstruction of temporal, spatial, and ideological coordinates of performances.<sup>37</sup> From these two directions—Italian theater history and new modes of performance in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—I offer a more complete understanding about where Narrative Theater fits within the larger scopes of theatrical and performance-based practices.

One of the main challenges in tracing Narrative Theater's genealogy is the question of how far back into history one should reach. Epic poetry, for example, is

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<sup>37</sup> Pier Giorgio Nosari, "I sentieri dei raccontatori di storie: Ipotesi per una mappa del teatro di narrazione," *Prove di Drammaturgia* 1 (2004): 11-12.

closely linked to oral poetry going as far back as Homer or Virgil where the line between written and spoken narrative is indistinct. Narrative Theater strikes some similarities to a Platonic reading of epic poetry, which consists of a combination of mimesis (imitative) and diegesis (narrative).<sup>38</sup> Yet, beyond a general familiarity, I have not discovered any evidence that the founders of Narrative Theater explicitly engaged with epic poetry practices, or were negotiating a dialectic approach to performance through a synthesis of imitation and narrative, despite the rather interesting formal similarities. On the other hand, linking mimetic and narrative techniques to ancient traditions in orality does lend this very recent practice an important depth. While a new form, calling upon ancient traditions highlights the breadth of methods that the narrators employ.

From the Renaissance period, one can see several important trends in Italian theater that differ from other European practices, and resonate with that of Narrative Theater. Throughout much of its development, Italian theater was largely actor-centered, while most European theaters were author-centered.<sup>39</sup> The great exceptions are Carlo Goldoni and Luigi Pirandello who were both playwrights that had no prior experience as actors. Narrators, however, are both authors and actors, without exception, those who perform also write or co-write their pieces. This fact also resonates with Renaissance-era traditions. Particularly with respect to comedies, enough remains of the author-actor tradition that a case can be made for its indirect influence on Narrative Theater. If one

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<sup>38</sup> Simone Soriani, *Dario Fo: Dalla commedia al monologo, 1959-1969* (Pisa: Titivillus, 2007), 18. Plato explains in the third book of the Republic that in a dialectical reading, tragedy and comedy are wholly imitative types (mimetic); the dithyrambis (hymns sung to Dionysus) wholly narrative (diegetic); and their combination is found in epic poetry.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Farrell and Paolo Puppa, *A History of Italian Theatre* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1.

concedes, as performance scholar Elin Diamond asserts, that “every performance... embeds features of previous performances...” and that “each performance marks out a unique temporal space that nevertheless contains traces of other now absent performances...” one must acknowledge these prior forms to better understand how far back into cultural history Narrative Theater resonates.<sup>40</sup> In this spirit, I would like to take a closer look at the presence of Renaissance traditions in the development of Italian theater through the twentieth century, particularly the presence of the actor-author.

### **The Manifestation of Renaissance Theater Techniques**

From the days of Ruzzante (1502-1542), who some believe is the father of the *commedia dell'arte* and the *capocomico* (the name for the lead actor in *commedia dell'arte* performances), until well into the twentieth century, with artists from Eduardo De Filippo (1900-1984) and Carmelo Bene (1937-2002) to Franca Rame (b. 1928) and Dario Fo (b. 1926), writing and performing one's own work, much as in stand-up, has a significant presence in Italian theater, chiefly comedy.<sup>41</sup> The *commedia dell'arte* and especially its improvisational nature play a large role in the dominance of an actor's theater in Italian tradition. Literally unfolding the words *commedia dell'arte* as “comedy of the profession” helps to better understand the impetus of the genre. While *commedia all'italiana* refers to aristocratic players of early Renaissance drama, *commedia dell'arte*

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<sup>40</sup> Elin Diamond, *Performance and Cultural Politics* (London: New York, 1996), 1.

<sup>41</sup> By contrast, the dramatic performance in which Italy excelled at was opera, where it was possible to capitalize on the lyricism associated with tragic plays by writing elegiac musical scores to accompany the stories. The Renaissance was generally an important period for the rediscovery, reinterpretation and reinvention of both comedic and tragic classical drama. Terence, for example, was published in 1471, Seneca a decade later, and Aristophanes by 1498. Particular to Renaissance drama was the production of commentaries, studies, theories of the nature of tragedy and comedy. Farrell and Puppa, *A History of Italian Theatre*: 2-3.

is more concerned with the artistry and craftsmanship of comedy. Even while *commedia dell'arte* artists played specific characters who they ripened with their own quirks that became comic types (the Servant, the Doctor, the Merchant), and even while the artists specified the *canovacci* (or plots) for their skits, they still left room to experiment by way of improvisation. They wrote sketches for routines in order to have a basic map of the beginning, middle, and end in a particular scene but how they arrived at each of those moments could change with every performance.

The practice of improvisation is important in both dramatic and comedic theater, but is particularly popular in comedy and in Narrative Theater where it is common practice for several narrators. Celestini, for example, prefers the “dirtiness” of improvisation that can lead to more direct encounters with the audience.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the ability to react to something that might occur offstage, whether it is a cell phone or thunder when performing outdoors is a useful, even necessary, skill for any capable actor. Here, however, Celestini refers to more intimate moments of engagement with audience members. Narrators will orchestrate their parts in different ways. Paolini frequently passes a microphone around his audience at the end of his shows, allowing them to engage and comment directly on his performance, but also he incorporates them and what they choose to share into his show. When those performances air on television, as was the case with the November 2009 viewing of his play *Io e Margaret Thatcher*, the stations also air these audience participatory scenes as part of the performance. Curino will literally include audience members in her actual performance by asking them simple

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<sup>42</sup> Oliviero Ponte di Pino, *Il nuovo teatro italiano, 1975-1988: La ricerca dei gruppi, materiali e documenti* (Florence: La Casa Usher, 1988), 7.

questions like their names and professions. In a 2010 production of *Passione* in Milan, affectionately in character as a local know-it-all from her childhood, Curino began introducing audience members to each other. *Oh, Marco, you're an engineer? Meet Cristina. She's studying engineering at the Politecnico.* Besides joining the audience in a collective laugh, in these types of improvisational gestures she creates connections between audience members. People that are nameless become known as she, like Paolini and Celestini, fosters a sense of community through these techniques.

More directly similar to the *commedia*'s method, Celestini and Paolini will loosely improvise their entire shows. As Celestini has said, "I don't have a script I know by heart, but I know the character's story, and I tell it in the same way that someone can describe the details of a car crash they've been in."<sup>43</sup> Only after many performances of *Radio clandestina*, did Celestini decide to write a script for publication. In discussing the published version, he articulates this method once more, of following a general idea but adding and cutting as he goes along. In fact, even though the DVD that accompanies the book is an hour and twenty minutes long, he remarks that performances varied as much as twenty to thirty minutes either way.<sup>44</sup> Paolini also articulates his improvisational methods in a similar fashion:

"I always have a rhythm in my head," explaining that by moderating the tone and volume of his voice he sought to capture the flow of music in words, using the stories as a "canovaccio ..." Parroting a script... didn't

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<sup>43</sup> Povoledo, "Italian Monologues with a Message."

<sup>44</sup> "Conosco la vicenda e la ri-racconto cambiando le parole, aggiungendo e togliendo... Lo spettacolo del video [che accompagna il libro] dura un'ora e venti, ma ricordo repliche che sono durate venti minuti di più o mezzo'ora di meno." Celestini, *Radio clandestina*: 27.

leave him much room to reason "along with the spectator," which is why he doesn't commit any of the texts to fixed memory.<sup>45</sup>

This idea of making space for the spectator is important to Narrative Theater and relates to the desire for more inclusive histories that came out in part through techniques shared with microhistory. Their craft technique, where they employ improvisation by following a mental sketch, or even stepping out of the show to directly address the audience as in the example with Curino above, owes much to *commedia* practices. Paolini acknowledges this direct link, revealing that those old Renaissance styles are part of Narrative Theater's genealogy.

### **The Twentieth Century and (Mostly) Solo Performers**

The twentieth century saw a constellation of great satirists from of Ettore Petrolini (1884 – 1936, Rome) to Franca Valeri (b. 1920, Milan), Luigi (Gigi) Proietti (b. 1940, Rome), and, more famously, Franca Rame (b. 1929, Milan) and Dario Fo (b. 1926, Varese). In the latter half of the twentieth century one-person shows grew evermore common with work by such artists as Paolo Rossi (b. 1953, Friuli), Daniele Luttazzi (b. 1961, Rimini), and Roberto Benigni (b. 1952, Arezzo) who, despite sharing some techniques with their Narrative Theater contemporaries, perform more in the comedic genre. A number of contemporaries also overlap with narrators as performers in the epic mode, though they do not invest in narrative in the way that narrators do, favoring short stories as opposed to an over-arching one, and are much more overtly political such as

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<sup>45</sup> Elisabetta Povoledo, "In Italy, Memories are Made of This: Theater," *International Herald Tribune*, 13 Sept 2005.



Beppe Grillo (b. 1948, Genoa), or more interested in film careers like Benigni. Grillo, for example, frequently set ups a stage and performs in piazzas as Enia and Baliani sometimes do, but he passionately discusses contemporary politics and does not express himself through a form of storytelling, or play characters beyond comedic impersonations.<sup>46</sup>

Benigni, on the other hand, apart from his internationally renowned films, is known for playing classic stand-up in his stage productions. He spends the entire second-half of his well-toured *Tutto Dante* detailing the first five cantos of Dante's *Inferno*, finishing off with a dramatic reading of the fifth, but uses the entire first hour to create a rapport with the audience by way of stand-up comedy routines, mostly mocking political figures. Certainly Paolini exaggerates several of the older political figures in his piece *Vajont*, for example, but he still uses them to further his narrative. While Benigni's, or any stand-up's, work consists of several largely unrelated routines, Paolini or Curino may mix elements of stand-up or slapstick, but they are always ancillary to the story.

Lella Costa (b. 1952, Milan) is another important figure in contemporary Italian performance who veers quite closely towards Narrative Theater insofar as she too has authored and performed several pieces, though they tend to be more in a cabaret style. She has also dedicated a significant portion of her work to television and film and is very active with social-political organizations such as "Emergency," a coalition that helps to build hospitals in various developing countries. Mario Perrotta (b. 1970, Lecce), also a close contemporary to the narrators, follows a similar stripping back of theatrical *mise-*

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<sup>46</sup> Grillo recently has taken the space where performance overlaps with politics to a whole new level in his creating and running a political party, a point that I discuss in the conclusion.

*en-scène* and of emphasizing storytelling over stand-up, but he too engages a very different aesthetic, which is more experimental. Nonetheless, in order to map out where Narrative Theater is situated within Italian theater, it is important to consider the extent to which it overlaps with various other modes of performance.

The performers that I have just noted share an important common source with Narrative Theater. The strongest thread to past traditions, as several of the leading scholars on Narrative Theater have explored, is the work of Dario Fo (as well as Franca Rame, both of whom I discuss shortly.) Some critics have dubbed him the grandfather of the genre, drawing stylistic parallels with minimalism, even while acknowledging the very different acting techniques (Fo is much more animated and physical than the narrators), and citing instances where narrators have publicly acknowledged his inspiration. Further, it is through the many attributes of Italian comedic traditions in Fo's works, which include *affabulazione* (spirited story-telling), improvisation, and the loose sketch techniques of the *commedia dell'arte*, that scholars have extended the influences on Narrative Theater back to the Renaissance-era traditions.<sup>47</sup> Along with his portrayals of the *zanni* (servant characters in the *commedia dell'arte*), and excerpts from Ruzzante, Fo also reinvented aspects of *giullarata* or *giullaresca*<sup>48</sup> for a modern audience.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See, for example: Concetta D'Angeli and Simone Soriani, eds., *Coppia d'arte, Dario Fo e Franca Rame: Con dipinti, testimonianze e dichiarazioni inedite* (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2006). Soriani, *Sulla scena del racconto*. Gerardo Guccini, "Teatro di narrazione," *Hystrio* 1 (2005).

<sup>48</sup> *Giullarata*, a derivative of the Latin *ioculator* (joker, jester) is a popular style from the Middle Ages, where the *giullari* were itinerant players, mostly of the lower classes, who worked within oral traditions. They included a wide variety of performers such as musicians, dancers, acrobats, jugglers, and actors. Traditions of the *giullari padani* (from the Po region) often created pieces that were meant to be told by one person. Simone Soriani, "Mistero buffo, dal varietà al teatro di narrazione," in *Coppia d'arte: Dario Fo e Franca Rame con dipinti, testimonianze e dichiarazioni inedite*, ed. Concetta D'Angeli and Simone Soriani (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2006), 108.

While Fo and Rame were influential for Narrative Theater, other figures such as Jerzy Grotowski (1933 Poland – 1999 Italy), with his inventions of a “poor theater” that dialogue with social issues from the 1970s, had an equal if not greater impact, which I discuss at greater length later in this chapter. In the postwar crisis of Italian theater there was a profound need for renewal by the late 1960s, which gave birth to what is called *il teatro nuovo* (the new theater), a close cousin of Grotowski’s Poor Theater and Barba’s “third theater,” largely led by Carmelo Bene, Carlo Quartucci, Mario Ricci, and Franco Quadri. They saw their work is neither traditional nor avant-garde and thus “new.” Additionally, Giuliano Scabia, a leader in the *animazione* experiments, shares the exploration in narrative that Celati and Ginzburg explored in their respective disciplines.<sup>50</sup> The *animazione* movement, examined at the end of this chapter, is at least as much if not more of an influence on Narrative Theater as Fo. Still, since Fo was such an influential twentieth century artist, and since so many Italian theater scholars tie him to the origins of Narrative Theater, it is worth taking a closer look at his work.

One critical oversight that many theater scholars commit when studying Fo is that they do not give much consideration to his co-collaborator, and spouse, Franca Rame, especially as there are far too many instances when Fo is credited for projects on which they worked together. Rame’s work, as well as its absence in the vast majority of critical texts that examine Fo, especially those published in Italy, is worth some reflection. Laura Curino, who often incorporates a consciously feminist approach, directly references Rame at the end of her 1992 play *Passione*, a connection largely unexplored by scholars

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<sup>49</sup> Ronald Scott Jenkins, *Dario Fo & Franca Rame: Artful Laughter* (New York: Aperture, 2001), xi.

<sup>50</sup> Belpoliti, *Settanta*: 306.

who make many references to Fo. In fact, Curino's homage to Rame is far greater a link to the couple's theater than any implicit references to Fo that so many scholars underline. I suspect that this scholarly lack of acknowledgement is due to Fo's principal authorship in the Fo-Rame companies, while she was more often artistic director and actor, although she did write several of her monologues and was always as, and sometimes even more, politically engaged than Fo.

By way of introduction, Fo and Rame represent a long artistic evolution that traverses several media from television and radio to writing and theater, and also includes the creation, dissemination, and recreation of several theater companies with performances ranging from satire and political commentary to serious dramatic topics.<sup>51</sup> The 1970s are a vivid background in much of their work from that time, though they engage with that decade in a very different manner than do Narrative Theater artists. The main contrast is the directness with which Fo and Rame approach current events, and their overt political ideologies. In monologues such as *Lo stupro* (The Rape, 1975), for example, Rame drew on her traumatic personal experiences after she was kidnapped, tortured, and gang raped in 1973 by a neo-fascist group that was discovered to have been commissioned by several high-ranking Milanese police officials. Since Rame herself was brutalized in an act of political revenge after she and Fo, card-carrying communists, were vocal about their politics, the level of drama in her performance is inherently heightened in a way that is rarely present in the autobiography of Narrative Theater. Another notable piece that speaks directly to a contemporary controversy when it was first performed is

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<sup>51</sup> Many of the earlier plays, including the more famous *Gli arcangeli non giocano a flipper* (Archangels Don't Play Pinball, 1959), *Chi ruba un piede è fortunato in amore* (He Who Steals a Foot is Lucky in Love, 1961), *La signora è da buttare* (Throw the Lady Away, 1967), are very political company pieces with several actors, always Fo and Rame among them.

*Morte accidentale di un anarchico* (*Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, 1970) based on the probable defenestration of Giuseppe Pinelli that the Milanese police claimed was an accident while he was a suspect in the December 1969 Piazza Fontana bombing. Both Rame's monologue and *Morte accidentale* hold a direct dialogue with that time period, but are much less nuanced, and more overtly political, than are Narrative Theater productions.

In his solo work, particularly in monologues such as *Mistero Buffo* (Comic Mystery, 1968), and *Johan Padan a la scoperta de le Americhe* (John Padan and the Discoveries of the Americas, 1991) Fo synthesizes popular legend, comic entertainment and counter-information, mixing collective ritual and contemporary chronicle. Various aspects of his one-person shows are relevant to Narrative Theater because of his use of techniques based on oral traditions and various forms of *teatro minore* ("minor theater" or "secondary theater" such as circuses, popular farces, and street theaters). In addition to traditional theater spaces, Fo and Rame also performed in the streets and squares as did many narrators in their early works. The ability to tap into the rich heritage of folk and oral culture has played an important role in Fo's technique as an actor, at times incorporating mime, mimicry, music, acrobatics, and other visual devices. As Fo explains, the very idea of narration came from everyday experiences. He cites his main storytelling influences to be the fishermen, glassblowers, and itinerant vendors that he affectionately refers to as the "*fabulatori* of my childhood" who lived where his family had settled near Lake Maggiore in northern Italy.<sup>52</sup> Much of the scholarship that

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<sup>52</sup> Antonio Scuderi, "Dario Fo and Oral Tradition: Creating a Thematic Context," *Oral Tradition* 15, no. 1 (2000): 26-27.

addresses the influence of Fo on Narrative Theater focuses largely on these *affabulazione* traditions. Second generation narrators, who have less experience in acting in conventional plays than most first generations narrators, might identify with this. On the other hand, most actors would cite inspiration from real life acquaintances in order to craft a character, so I do not find the fact that Fo mentions this, and that narrators also mimic people from their childhoods, a particularly persuasive argument for Fo's influence on the genre.

When scholars connect Fo to Narrative Theater, they largely credit *Mistero Buffo* as the critical work. As with Narrative Theater, there is barely a set or costume (usually Fo is simply dressed in black), the piece contains political satire, and audience interaction occurs through eye contact and direct address. In this way, the audience is integrated into the performance itself, making the event an opportunity for dialogue, debate, and even confrontation.<sup>53</sup> This is also an important aspect of Narrative Theater, and the use of improvisation is another strategy that both Fo and the narrators use to bring audience members closer to the material as well as the performance itself. Scholars also cite *Mistero Buffo*'s form, which consists of monologues linked by didactic commentaries (descriptions, analyses) that create a continuous, dialectical exchange between the past and present, history and the present moment, culture and politics. It consists of 12 *minicantovacci* divided into two sections of commentary and then biblical accounts of the Passion. By including a meta-narrative where Fo connects medieval fiction and

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<sup>53</sup> Mario B. Mignone, "Dario Fo, Jester of the Italian Stage," *Italian Quarterly* 85, no. Summer (1981): 47.

contemporary realism in today's world, he emphasizes the relationship between the past and present, an effort shared with the narrators as well.<sup>54</sup>

This is true, but the mechanisms with which Fo and Rame and Narrative Theater consider the past are very different. *Mistero buffo* is more like a montage of scenes with staccato switches between the Passion tales and commentary. Narrative Theater prefers a much smoother experience in which scenes flow from one to the next in a single overarching story. Fo's is not a cohesive narration, but a collection of excerpts and heterogeneous chapters that are discretely autonomous, even if under the framework of the project.<sup>55</sup> Unlike *Mistero buffo*, Narrative Theater pieces do not contain a series of free-standing sections; they are stories, and whether they veer towards realism or *affabulazione*, and whether or not time and space are fixed or flexible, they still have a beginning, middle, and end. While the physical presentation with its one-person aspect and Spartan *mise-en-scène* is shared between *Mistero buffo* and Narrative Theater, the structure of the text is quite different. Rather than one of content, the most persuasive argument regarding the influence of Fo on narrators is the similar versatility of performance techniques ranging from slapstick comedy to didactic oratory. Just as Narrative Theater has paved the way for the solo, or "epic," performance in Italy, so too did Fo and Rame inspire the narrators on a broad level. There were solo performers such as comedians and satirists before Fo and Rame, but the mix of those elements with serious, indeed dramatic, moments of political allegory was something new.

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<sup>54</sup> Soriani, "*Mistero buffo*, dal varietà al teatro di narrazione," 104.

<sup>55</sup> Soriani, *Dario Fo*: 265.

Fo's influence on Narrative Theater could have been made more persuasively had theater scholars drawn the link back not only to him but also to Rame's monologue in *Mistero buffo* that Curino references and then actually performs herself in her first Narrative Theater piece, *Passione*. Although she does not mention the couple by name, Curino, playing a Spanish immigrant who lived in Settimo at the time when Curino was a child, recalls the moment when the two actors came to Settimo to perform *Mistero buffo*. The room was

... full of communists, priests who had misinterpreted the title and came to hear about the historic compromise [between the Christian Democrats and Communist political parties], and even two bishops who came to excommunicate the priests for coming... and the two performers from Milan; the man with the teeth that stick out, who always makes you laugh even when there's not much to laugh about, and his wife, the brunette (who I know is now blond, but I think she tints her hair) who played the Madonna reciting in an antique dialect...<sup>56</sup>

Gently poking fun at the actor with the big teeth and his wife, who now dyes her hair, and also noting that the Church found many of their works scandalous, often blacklisting their plays, Curino mentions them as a way to honor the influence that they had over her and Narrative Theater's creative development.

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<sup>56</sup> "Buono, la Casa del Popolo era tuta piena de comunisti... Poi era piena de preti che avevano capito male il titolo ed erano venuti per via del compromeso istorico, c'erano anche due vescovi che erano venuti para scomunicare i preti... dopo sono arrivati i comici, il capo era el de Milano, alto con i denti en fuori che fa ridere... Ma attento che c'è poco da ridere... Poi è apparsa sua moglie, la mora (lo so che adesso è bionda ma yo credo che se tinge) che ha fatto la Madonna: parlava en un dialetto tan antico, ma tan antico..." Laura Curino, Roberto Tarasco, and Gabriele Vacis, *Passione* (Novara: Interlinea, 1998), 59.



That they were performing in Settimo, the industrial working class suburb of Turin, and not in the big city itself is another key point in Curino's *Passione*. For Fo and Rame, who was in the audience was among their utmost considerations. By the 1960s, largely thanks to their work on television, they were familiar names and popular with the middle and upper-middle classes. They were not pleased about this, having aimed to create a didactic and subversive form of theater by using comedy to engage with the working class.<sup>57</sup> Part of the problem was that they suddenly began to lose the camaraderie with their targeted audience. Success, they began to realize, had co-opted them. Rame notes that by the end of the 1968 season it dawned on them that without meaning to, they had become the "jesters at the court of the fat and intelligent bourgeois."<sup>58</sup> The bourgeois was making fun of itself by allowing Fo and Rame's mockery, which significantly lessened the political punch in their work. In order to address this, they looked for "a new public, the workers, the proletariat, in order to demonstrate an exercise in the corruption of the 'system' with the obvious intention to solicit change."<sup>59</sup>

An important quality of Fo and Rame's rapport with the audience, and one shared by the narrators, is how they integrate spectators into the performance itself, turning the event into a moment of collective debate and confrontation. In *Passione*, when Curino expresses her awe for the performers, she also underlines the cultural importance of their

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<sup>57</sup> Antonio Scuderi, "Dario Fo and Performance Theory," *Italian Culture* 12 (1994): 244.

<sup>58</sup> Insomma eravamo identificati i giullari della borghesia grassa e intelligente. Dario Fo, *Le commedie di Dario Fo* (Torino: Einaudi, 1975), vii.

<sup>59</sup> ...un nuovo pubblico, quello operaio, il proletariato a cui offrire un esercizio di corrosione del 'sistema' con l'intenzione evidente di sollecitarlo a cambiare le cose. G. Br., "Nel <<Mistero>> di Dario Fo sete di giustizia sociale: La forza rivoluzionaria di un Vangelo interpretato dagli umili," *Gazzetta del Popolo*, 14 Jan 1970, 6.

type of theater in working class towns like Settimo. Today, both the narrators and Fo and Rame are widely popular, but still make efforts to reach populations for whom theater is less accessible by performing in small rural towns outside of the larger cities and in public venues like the *piazza*, offering free shows at festivals, and airing plays on the state-run television channels.

Fo and Rame's popularity produced an ideological clash since their theater is very deliberately and consciously political with many themes that follow a Gramscian-derived view of popular against official culture. Their work was becoming a textbook example of Gramsci's thesis of cultural hegemony in which the dominant capitalist class reinforces the system by coercing the under-classes to accept ruling class values and in so doing the retelling a history that coheres its own sense of purpose. Fo (and Rame)'s career is looked upon as an ongoing invention of new tools to engage the working class.<sup>60</sup> Their success not only risked their ability to reach their target audience, but to undermine the actual principles on which they built their work. These challenges became so apparent that they were forced to confront and work through them, which they did in a didactic text on the eve of *Mistero buffo*, which was surely the creative counterpoint to the goals they articulated.

In the manual for their second theater company, the Associazione Nuova Scena, which Fo and Rame began in August 1968, they reflect upon Marx, Gramsci and Lenin largely agreeing with them that the bourgeoisie manages culture. They articulate that in their work they aim to create not just artistic entertainment for the working classes, but a

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<sup>60</sup> Paolo Puppa, *Parola di scena: Teatro italiano tra '800 e '900* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1999), 296.

type of Gramscian cultural activity.<sup>61</sup> To this end, whether Fo and Rame address the recent history of an anarchist in *Morte accidentale di un anarchico*, or interpret biblical texts from the thirteenth century in *Mistero Buffo*, they work with history from a subaltern perspective, representing a specific group of individuals and presenting their theater to the masses. They outlined their goals clearly:

1. Methods & scope: theatrical initiatives in the service of the struggles of the working class; contain a dialectical force that incites action from the audience; new texts.
2. Organization: political associations that also believe in something other than “killing” free time, and serving the interests of the working class for how to spend free time.
3. Continued growth of participants: after showing its possible, to have other groups join or implement similar projects especially local groups.<sup>62</sup>

These objectives share affinities in the work of the narrators who also produce and perform histories of the subaltern. Originally a term for subordinates in military hierarchies, Gramsci elaborated “subaltern” to include groups that are outside the established structures of political representation. The narrators seek to return the agency of recollecting and writing history on behalf of these marginalized groups. They draw upon discourses from the 1970s, but also are clearly aware of how Fo and Rame address political corruption in a “...veiled attack against the antidemocratic and repressive nature of Italy’s ruling institutions in general, and exhibit a genuine concern for the conditions

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<sup>61</sup> Dario Fo and Vittorio Franceschi, *Compagni senza censura* (Milan: Mazzotta, 1970), 7.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

of the common people who are the victims of economic and social injustices,” not just through the content of their plays, but in their dedication to make them more accessible to the masses.<sup>63</sup> Narrators make the same effort when they present their shows in small villages, and apply a similar poetics that gives voice to many yet unheard. The political edge, the fearlessness in using theater to challenge social policy, and the monologue experiments in Fo and Rame’s theater surface in the work of the narrators, even if their methods and styles are quite different.

Other trends in the late twentieth century were also important in developing Narrative Theater. Part of the legacy of the 1970s is that they brought a number of originally marginal practices to central stage, so that by the 1980s performance art and avant-garde theater were popular in Italy. While those movements opened up different avenues for art, there was also a sense that theater was losing a vital part of its potency during this time. Theater scholar Paolo Puppa believes that two of the most significant aspects of the final fifteen years of twentieth-century Italian theater are its progressive marginalization, followed by the return of the “dramaturgy of the word.”<sup>64</sup> By this term he means that the word, and not the action, is the focal point of the piece. Theater scholar Pier Nosari takes this assertion a step further, asserting that not only had theater estranged itself from the broader culture but it had also abandoned its own roots in storytelling. He goes on to say that the narrators, however, fix this double break.<sup>65</sup> With respect to

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<sup>63</sup> Mignone, "Dario Fo, Jester of the Italian Stage," 49-50.

<sup>64</sup> Paolo Puppa, *Il teatro dei testi: La drammaturgia italiana nel Novecento* (Turin: UTET libreria, 2003), 159.

<sup>65</sup> Nosari, "I sentieri dei raccontatori," 11.

Narrative Theater, the growth of performance art is relevant to this act of repair, and ultimately played a role in the return to the word.

Emerging from a union between the theater and the visual arts, performance art pieces were infamous for their use of raw materials that sometimes included every somatic substance from earwax to urine, with the body as the focal point by way of anything from painting to starvation.<sup>66</sup> Using the body as the site of intervention brings into focus its materiality, its desires, illnesses and pains. Beyond that, performance art made an impression in its revolutionary predilections related to a history of cultural resistance that asserts an often radical political agenda. Combining these intentions with a privileging of the body, the performance artist transforms herself into a social critic in that she shows how public laws and policies influence personal decisions.<sup>67</sup> Broadly speaking, these notions reverberate in the aforementioned academic discourses in which the role of the public in relation to the private spheres is disseminated in the classroom as much as in social-political movements in piazzas. To some extent performance art is a different type of response to these same issues, as much as Narrative Theater grew to be, although in a less polemical register. Performance artists were free to invoke personal memories, engage in storytelling, perform testimonies, or essentially “remember,

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<sup>66</sup> Some of the more famous examples of performance art might be Chris Burden’s piece “Shoot” (1971) where he videos a friend of his shooting him in the arm; Carolee Schneemann’s “Interior Scroll” (1975) in which, towards the end of the piece, she extracts a scroll from her vagina and then reads from it; or even various “happenings” perhaps most known from Allan Kaprow in which people gather together to partake in a performative event that intentionally blurs the line between art and real life.

<sup>67</sup> Norman K. Denzin, *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and The Politics of Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003), 21-22.

misremember, interpret, and passionately revisit the past and the present.”<sup>68</sup> In many respects, Narrative Theater works through histories in relation to the narrator and the world around her. Just as Narrative Theater did not directly emerge from Fo and Rame, it was not born from trends in performance art, but it did develop in an environment rich with experimentation, contemplating similar ideas and ideals.

Beyond the specific developments in Italy that I have outlined, Narrative Theater emerged toward the end of the cultural ferment of the mid-twentieth century which saw the emergence of the Theater of the Absurd (Beckett, Ionesco), to the social dramas of Pinter and Osborn, to Brecht’s experiments in distancing audiences from the action, the latter of which had a particularly profound effect in what would become the major theatrical institutions such as the Piccolo Teatro in Milan founded by Giorgio Strehler. The birth of the avant-garde in Italy produced artists such as Carmelo Bene and the popular “new theater,” as well as the “third theater” from different parts of the world including Julian Beck and Judith Malina’s Living Theater, in addition to the Theater Laboratory by Grotowski, and the Odin Teatret by Eugenio Barba, who were particularly influential during the 1960s and 1970s. Narrative Theater was able to meld aspects of these mid twentieth century theatrical currents through Grotowski, Barba, Brecht and Beck, and even the *post avant-garde* in terms of its frequent use of meta-dialogue.<sup>69</sup> This new genre needs to be contextualized during this period of new art forms, one inspiring the other. This frenetic atmosphere speaks to the hybrid dynamic of Narrative Theater in addition to its symbiosis with other contemporary performance practices.

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<sup>68</sup> Diamond, *Performance and Cultural Politics*: 1-2.

<sup>69</sup> Guccini, "Teatro di narrazione," 4.

Similar to the dialectic in epic theater, and arguably adapted from Brecht's view of theater as a mix of entertainment and education, narrators ultimately create plays that aim to interweave themselves into the Italian (national/local) social fabric while also seeking to view it from a distance. They might tell an entertaining story, but they also comment on present day circumstances. In this way, they are neither above society as "high art" would be, nor are they outside of it as avant-garde is. Instead, Narrative Theater reveals not just the potential to engage social politics, but articulates an actual need for social change, through the performance of stories about regular people with whom the audience is able to identify. It has the capacity to both witness and communicate a living history.<sup>70</sup> Its founders explicitly explored different ways in which they could create a theater with those possibilities, and their self-awareness and their dedication to those issues links them to artists such as Brecht and Meyerhold, and also situates them amidst both Western and Eastern Europe forms of performance art. While Narrative Theater evokes less of the visual dynamic integral to performance art, it shares a similar *meta* between the artist and her audience.

Grotowski, and his student Eugenio Barba, deserve special consideration as they, more than Fo and Rame, influenced Teatro Settimo artists with the two main characteristics of their work: the rapport between the actor and spectator and their leftist political undertones, also largely grounded in the post-1968/69 moment. As a matter of fact, the theater scholar Guccini and Teatro Settimo founder and director Gabriele Vacis first met each other at one of Barba's workshops in the early 1980s thereby initiating an important professional relationship that would greatly influence the work of both artist

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 3.

and scholar. As Grotowski explains, the two principal questions that haunted him were: what is unique about theater and, what can it offer that new technologies (film and television) cannot? His response was to create the Poor Theater, an effort to determine the most organic form of theater. In seeking the fewest requirements needed to make a production, he discovered that “theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc.” What it cannot exist without, however, is an actor and a spectator in “perceptual, direct, ‘live’ communion.”<sup>71</sup> By Grotowski’s definition narrative theater is also a Poor Theater. One of the main benefits about this technique is that it provides access to culture for people that might not normally have such. Since there are few production costs, tickets are not prohibitively expensive, providing an opportunity for individual enrichment for those with little means. That in turn furthers a sense of community.

As Guccini himself notes, the “experimental” theaters of Grotowski and Barba were founded through working with actors or performance groups, and Narrative Theater built upon that in its actors’ practice of incorporating the public in their articulation of society and politics.<sup>72</sup> Vacis, for his part, characterizes Grotowski’s impact as “revolutionary” in theater, particularly noting his focus on the centrality of the actor-spectator relationship, without the mediation of other technologies. In a book reflecting upon a 1991 ten-day Grotowski seminar in Turin that Teatro Settimo, the University of Turin and the Teatro Stabile of Turin organized, Vacis emphasizes that the theater is one

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<sup>71</sup> Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 18-19.

<sup>72</sup> Guccini, "Teatro di narrazione," 5.



of the few contemporary places where one must physically exist. He defines theater as the space between the actor and spectator in contrast to television and film where the actor and spectator are always in different spaces and different times.<sup>73</sup> Sharing present space is intimately linked to the rapport between performer and spectator, which narrators acknowledge when they directly engage audience members, pointing to a conceptualization of performance not as an instrument that mimics reality, but as a method of communication with didactic intentions. That very idea in turn reverberates with philosophies of performance art.

In addition to Vacis' book, a transcript from a 1976 Grotowski interview in the Curino Private Collections further serves as testament to the group's interest in the artist, which spanned from Barba's workshop circa 1980 to the Turin seminar. In the 1976 transcript, the interviewer identifies part of Grotowski's significance as having created a theater that had "a sense of liberation, of the search for truth."<sup>74</sup> For a group like Teatro Settimo, who sought to create a collective memory for their hometown, their attraction to Grotowski's views is evident. Just as Narrative Theater is not as overtly political as Fo and Rame, however, it is also less focused on challenging conventional theater than Grotowski and Barba. Their narrators aim less to revolutionize theater practices, and more to locate an effective mode of communication with popular audiences even though the presence of a didactic examination persists in both genres.

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<sup>73</sup> Gabriele Vacis, *Awareness: Dieci giorni con Jerzy Grotowski* (Milan: BUR, 2002), 5.

<sup>74</sup> "...la sua testimonianza, anche quando era tutta collegata alla parola teatro, ha avuto per molti nella cultura, nella nostra cultura occidentale, un significato di liberazione, di ricerca delle verità..." Teatro Odin, "Transcript from Interview of 'Un'ora con Jerzy Grotowski'," (Denmark 1976), 5. In box #1976, Curino Private Collection, Settimo Torinese.

The final influence on the development of Narrative Theater is a pedagogical theater movement called *animazione teatrale* (“theatrical animation”), which preceded Narrative Theater in creating productions through community service often involving children from poor backgrounds. It challenged the received view that theater is simply dramaturgical literature that was broken into conventional areas of study such as the text or acting technique. *Animazione* encouraged an approach that focused on theater as a socio-political tool. Most prominent during the 1970s in urban and suburban areas, it encouraged working with the community, particularly in schools, and resonated most profoundly within the early works of Teatro Settimo in their commitment to their own localities. Although *animazione* was popular in both Northern Italy and France,<sup>75</sup> it was very much an Italian phenomenon since it was only there, when cued by social conflict, that it took the leap from a more generic mixture of education and performance to a practice with overt didactic and pedagogic relevance at, and that became a part of the political and cultural movements towards, the end of the 1960s.

Several of the leading *animators* include actor and director Giuliano Scabia, Loredana Perissinotto, who went on to teach pedagogy at the University of Turin, and Pierantonio Barbieri, who in addition to acting, spent much of his later career as a director. In 1969 in Turin, these three artists formed a company called *Il Gruppo di ricerca dell’animazione italiana* (The Research Group for Italian Animation) and as such, along with scholar Gian Renzo Morteo, largely influenced the direction that *animazione*

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<sup>75</sup> For information on this movement in France see "Formations des Animateurs," *Association technique pour l'action culturelle (Atac)* 74 (1976); Raymond Toraille, *L'animation pedagogique* (Paris: Editions Esf, 1973); Frédérique Letourneux, *Les métiers de l'animation* (Paris: L'Etudiant, 2007).

would take. Members of Teatro Settimo, including Curino and Vacis, first met Morteo at meetings and seminars at the Settimo library in 1974 when they had first met each other.

Similar to Narrative Theater, the task of articulating what exactly *animazione* is grows cumbersome thanks to the several hybrid qualities it embodies. As Morteo notes in his manual on *animazione*, part of the pleasure and satisfaction of the practice is *not* strictly defining it. The phenomenon, Morteo asserts, developed from a social necessity for cultural interventions on a local level where the action in a play is no longer a “representation” from “real life” but rather is an event in itself.<sup>76</sup> The idea of creating an event suggests the desire to solicit action on a public level that stretches beyond the boundaries of a dramatic representation, which is similar to the experience that Narrative Theater aims to generate. As with those who practiced *animazione*, it is not enough for narrators to inform their audiences about a particular historical event with contemporary parallels and reverberations. Rather, they aim to inspire dialogue between the ordinary citizens and performers, their theater thus acting as an aid for social communication.

*Animazione* itself is intimately linked to the post-1968 atmosphere in Italy with respect to the state of theater arts in addition to the fractious political climate. The events of 1968 spurred many to think of theater as a pedagogical tool, and not just as a cultural entertainment or mode of representation.<sup>77</sup> In several working class quarters of Turin, the first experiments used techniques that emphasized the elimination of the text, improvisation, structural intermittency, audience participation, gestural expressiveness,

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<sup>76</sup> Gian Renzo Morteo and Anna Sagna, *L'animazione come propedeutica al teatro* (Turin: Giappichelli, 1977), 3, 5.

<sup>77</sup> Anna Stomeo, *Intrecci: Teatro-educazione-new media* (Lecce: Amaltea Edizioni, 2006), 109.

lucidity (transparency), and “poor” materials for scenery and technology such as lighting.<sup>78</sup> To some extent, narrative theater is a natural progression, at least technically, from *animazione*, insofar as it too embraces the Grotowskian-inspired notion of a “poor theater” where shows are not dependent upon large budgets, and aim to create an intimate rapport amongst audience members and back to the performer herself.

Narrative Theater is a complex performance genre because of the many theatrical, methodological, and political influences from which it draws. Building upon intellectual trends including the attention to minor authors, microhistories, and subaltern narratives, and combined with performance practices that also sought to reinvigorate popular political awareness and a renewed sense of community, Narrative Theater shows how ideologies can operate across systems of discourse and artistic expression. Understanding Narrative Theater through the 1970s demonstrates the extent to which this performance practice works to bridge collective and personal histories. The narrators have taken it upon themselves to guide their audiences along this journey, which they also encourage their audiences to consider on their own, in terms of their own lives. The following chapter will address the persona of the narrator in this endeavor to redefine the past.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 115.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Autobiography of a Culture Worker**

The figure of the narrator commands the audience's focus for the vast majority of Narrative Theater productions. As the sole inhabitant of the stage, or at least the primary one in the event when musicians are present, and given the minimal set and properties, there is little else on which the audience can focus. While narrators often take measures to allay some of the inherent power dynamics that accompany this kind of attention, for example, performing in the round with house lights on enabling audience members to see each other, talking with audience members during a show, or even venturing out into the aisles and performing scenes literally amongst the audience, they are nonetheless in a position of leadership.

There is range of ways that narrators could handle the politics of this role from the more authoritarian position of direct proselytization to a more service-oriented and diplomatic role of offering a variety of perspectives. In this chapter, I argue that the narrator opts for the latter, viewing herself as a culture worker, or as a type of civic employee. Regardless of the degree of political commitment, she openly acknowledges the dynamic between herself and the audience, and cultivates this rapport so that she is several steps ahead—a Virgilian guide—as the audience follows her along a journey that is at once intensely personal and eminently public. In order to better examine this persona of the narrator as culture worker in action, I will analyze two foundational texts by first

generation narrators Marco Baliani and Laura Curino while situating this specific performative technique within the broader post-1968 Italian historical context.

The first section of this chapter addresses how contextual influences surrounding Narrative Theater, including early iterations of *impegno*, or political engagement, from the late 1960s and 1970s, influenced popular notions of the public intellectual. Ideas from a wide array of writers from the fringe to the canonical influenced many discussions, particularly on the role of the intellectual and artist in society. Following this, I will investigate how narrators negotiate the personal terrain of very public events with a particular focus on how they use autobiography. This genre also reflects back to several aspects in microhistory, and is further complicated by Erving Goffman's influences regarding the self in performance theory. Finally, I examine the ways in which narrators serve as guides through a more pluralistic journey into history. Considering their complex subjectivities, which are largely mobilized in dialogic portions of their plays, several works of the oral historian Luisa Passerini help to decipher some of the tensions between these myriad voices and positions. While there are many different acting styles in one-person shows, the solo performer in Narrative Theater highlights a unique balance between social-political commentator and theatrical entertaining performer.

I have chosen Curino's *Passione* (1992) and Baliani's *Corpo di stato* (1998) as case studies to explore the role of the narrator because these are two fundamentally autobiographical pieces, foundational in the genre, that the artists still perform in repertory today, indicating their continued relevance. They are also two very different pieces, offering distinct ways in which the narrators link private experiences to public memories within the narrative. *Passione* is Curino's great homage to her hometown,

Settimo Torinese, that she introduces through her eyes as a young child having just moved there from Turin on account of her father's work. Curino is sometimes already in place when the audience begins to trickle into the performance space, but seems to be in character praying, a position which ties into the last sequence of her performance. She transports the audience through the prism of her own memories by affectionately rendering this abhorrent, industrial suburb. While it was only half constructed when she moved, it was the reason that she met a slew of colorful women who shaped her youth, and it was also the site where she first encountered what would be her lifelong passion; the theater.

Through portraying many characters, including the curious women in her town who both intimidate and intrigue her, and ones that she has invented in plays that she wrote with Teatro Settimo, she recalls her own personal history as a conduit through which to explore and better make sense of a national identity in a quickly industrializing society and amidst a growingly diverse constellation of regional cultures. Perhaps better than any of her other theater pieces, her one-woman *Passione* embodies the autobiographical yet highly politicized potential in her poetics. She offers a varied performance haunted with the people of her life, characters she has previously portrayed in other Narrative Theater productions, and references to the literature of Pasolini, Goethe, and Allende. The fact that she is alone on the stage yet somehow amidst all these pasts is striking, and sets the tone for a complex interweaving of a cultural past.

In *Corpo di stato*, Baliani also revisits his late teens and early twenties, when he was an active protestor in the many movements that challenged the status quo, showing how a formerly leftist student made sense of two climatic event of the decade; the

kidnapping and assassination of former Prime Minister Aldo Moro and the Mafia-led murder of Peppino Impastato.<sup>1</sup> Baliani stands downstage for most of the performance addressing the audience directly, though he occasionally sits on a bench, particularly during moments of silence when he shows black and white photographs depicting several protests and clashes with the police. Baliani's text is a visual arrangement reminiscent of cinematic montage through his weaving together of different memories from his more revolutionary past in a charged and emotional register.



**Figure 5 Marco Baliani in *Corpo di stato* (2009)**  
At the American Association for Italian Studies XXIX Annual Conference in New York, St. John's University.  
Photo courtesy of <http://www.i-italy.org/9154/corpo-di-stato-il-rapimento-di-moro-marco-baliani-e-gli-italiani>

In his preface to the English edition of the play, theater scholar Ron Jenkins compares Baliani's work in this piece to that of Spalding Gray, particularly *Swimming to*

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<sup>1</sup> Giuseppe ("Peppino") Impastato (1948-1978, Cinisi, Palermo) was a political activist who fought local mafia crime through political and cultural means, and also fought for the rights of peasants and unemployed. He was murdered by the mafia on the same day that Moro's body was discovered.



*Cambodia*, about Gray's experiences filming *The Killing Fields* (1984). Gray refers to himself as a "poetic reporter" in that he does not emphasize facts but rather how to process them once they have settled with time.<sup>2</sup> This description is apt for narrators as they guide audiences through their histories. Rather than simply confronting the past, however, they emphasize the process by which to confront it. They demonstrate the mechanisms that one can use to encourage a reconciling with the past. Both *Passione* and *Corpo di stato* are as much endeavors to understand a more diverse account of history, as they are performative events that create a space of forgotten histories. Through private stories, Curino and Baliani invite the audience to consider the self as a dynamic negotiation between private and public identity.

### ***Impegno and the Intellectual***

Many of the narrators grapple with social equality in their works by aiming to uncover the untold stories surrounding national tragedies as specific as the 1963 Vajont landslide, and the 1980 plane crash off Ustica, in addition to broader social issues such as mental health asylums or factory environments.<sup>3</sup> They use Narrative Theater as the

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald Scott Jenkins, "Preface," in *Body of State: The Moro Affair, A Nation Divided*, ed. Marco Baliani (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012), ix.

<sup>3</sup> Paolini's *Il racconto del Vajont* (1993) and *I-TIGI Racconto per Ustica* (2000) concern two controversial events in Italy's recent history. The first refers to the hasty construction only a decade after World War II of (at the time) Europe's largest dam in the Vajont valley of the region Friuli-Venezia-Giulia in northeastern Italy. In 1963, a landslide from one of the adjacent mountains resulted in a tsunami in which the wave of water caused by the mass falling in the pool near the top of the dam, spilled over its brim, washing out several surrounding towns and killing over 2000 people. The other text considers the 1980 disaster when an airplane en route from Bologna to Palermo suddenly exploded near Ustica, an island off of Sicily, killing all 81 people on board. Shrouded in mystery for more than 30 years, it was only in January

vehicle to confront the struggles for social justice, treating their role as a cross between public intellectual and civic servant. It is important to contextualize this sense of social responsibility within the decade of the 1970s. The cultural historian David Forgacs articulates one of the main oppositional forces of this decade as the development of counter-cultures, particularly radical groups that decentralized power.<sup>4</sup> The idea of decentralization and redistribution of authority is fundamental to Narrative Theater particularly as the narrators do not stack polarities against each other, but rather confound them by showing the contradictory responses that these strong forces sometimes elicit. Sometimes those with great power and capital, such as the Olivetti family, are immensely positive figures in Narrative Theater depictions.

In terms of social dynamics, the 1970s witnessed a particularly interesting and complex relationship between students and workers. The cultural historian Robert Lumley, for example, has argued that both groups began to transfer their identities onto the other, as both desired new social identities in order to escape the pre-existing ones imposed upon them. Broadly speaking, students held utopian ideas of community environments in factories, with Maoist Chinese models in mind, which to some extent lead to Marxist fantasies of revolt.<sup>5</sup> The performative implications of this Maoist idea, where students live out a fantasy of worker revolt, embody several scholarly assertions regarding the theatricality of the decade as a primary modality. Baudrillard considered

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2013 that a court decided the cause of the explosion was a misguided Italian missile and ordered the State to pay remunerative damages to the victims' families.

<sup>4</sup> David Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era, 1880-1980: Cultural Industries, Politics, and The Public* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 130.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Lumley, *States of Emergency: Cultures of Revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978* (London: Verso Books, 1990), 112-15.

the exhibitionist temptations of terrorists surrounding the Moro capture as not so unlike those of establishment politicians, to say nothing of the reporting of what some have called “melodramatic situations.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, the literary scholar Jennifer Burns has argued that several major writers and intellectuals in the twentieth century—and I would add filmmakers and playwrights—responded to the terrorism of the 1970s as a fantastical larger-than-life occurrence, reading it as though it were fiction.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, this characterization of an atmosphere loaded with hysterical drama combined with something close to role-playing across many groups, including students, terrorists, and politicians, may be exaggerated. After all, students and workers were responding to real tangible problems, not just embarking on idealist adventures. Speaking from his personal involvement with Marxist-oriented collectives, the oral historian Alessandro Portelli saw that while the radical youth movements of that decade changed the perception of working class culture, most educated youth still rejected identification with working classes. In addition to those that frequented leftist and union clubs, many university students preferred to identify with and meet in groups of “young people” rather than with groups of workers, distancing themselves from capitalist domination in the workplace that risked corroding the private life into a sphere of mere consumption.<sup>8</sup> The fact that Portelli’s observations are so different from Lumley’s speaks to the intensely

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<sup>6</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, trans. Philip Beitchman and W. G. J. Niesluchowski (London: Semiotexte/Pluto, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Burns, “A Leaden Silence? Writers’ Responses to the *anni di piombo*,” in *Speaking out and Silencing: Culture, Society and Politics in Italy in the 1970s*, ed. Anna Cento Bull and Adalgisa Giorgio (London: Legenda, 2006), 89. For further articles on interpretations of violence surrounding Moro see Antonello and O’Leary, *Imagining Terrorism*; Ruth Glynn and Giancarlo Lombardi, *Remembering Aldo Moro: The Cultural Legacy of the 1978 Kidnapping and Murder* (London: Legenda, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: The Art of Dialogue in Oral History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 232-33.

variegated directions of the movements of the 1970s. On the one hand, the students and workers were united, on the other, oppositional. These extremes are noteworthy because they underscore the very unpredictability that Narrative Theater embraces. The narrators juxtapose the calmer rational desire for certain goals with the virile fighting passion that such desire can flame. In *Corpo di stato* Baliani wonders how so much violence was born out of what was for him a search for a better way of life, while Curino marvels at the brash priorities of capitalism when factories first moved families into barely-built housing units in an industrial town. This sense of retrospective bewilderment, of *how could this have happened*, pervades these works, directly linking them to the 1970s, whether or not their stories are actually about that decade.

Curino, the daughter of a FIAT worker and a seamstress, whose family moved from Turin to Settimo in the 1960s to live in company housing writes about factory-related themes in several plays, including *Passione*. Even more than Celestini who also writes about factories and grew up on the outskirts of Rome, her plays are invested with a strong personal stake. Autobiography here is important because she is talking from the inside, a child who grew up in a factory-town, who moved into that town before it was ready for inhabitants. Before looking at the memories that she shares of this peripheral industrial town, I would like to emphasize how high the stakes are in these discourses for those who perform them.

Many of the social movements of the 1970s were fueled by the consequences of Italy's monetary deflation policies and post-Fordist industrial restructuring where the status and security of industrial workers was eroding. For the Marxist sociologist Antonio Negri, the "historic compromise" itself, which officially unraveled with Moro's death,

was built precisely around these austerity policies against which the social protest movements fought. In fact, Negri argues that the Red Brigades, the group that kidnapped Moro, were mostly northern factory workers who had submitted to “savage restructuring” and thus began to practice “proletarian justice.”<sup>9</sup> Although *Passione* is not overtly political, and does not confront actual working or wage conditions, it does give the impression of a situation that is not far from “proletarian justice.” In some ways, the narrators themselves are taking matters into their own hands, but as artists. They share this yearning for agency, and enact it through research and performance.

To return to the example of *Passione*, Curino introduces a Settimo in the 1960s that was a melting pot for Italians from all over the country, especially the influx of central and southern Italians who moved north to work in the factories. When they arrived, however, they found what Curino depicts as a dystopic industrial would-be metropolis where not even fireflies roamed since the fields to where they once flocked no longer existed. Instead, the air was choked with waste clouds of benzene and nitroglycerine and the landscape was cluttered with factories such as the tire company Pirelli, the antibiotic firm Farmitalia, the coffee company Lavazza, and even the French cosmetics firm L’Oréal. Though ripe with the great economic potential, the streets did not glisten. Instead, Curino derides the atmosphere as a world of “sickness,” “stench,” and “ditches” (*malattia, puzza, fossati*). The environs were so polluted that women were barren.<sup>10</sup> Such descriptions are in stark contrast to the myth of the metropolis, which focuses upon a systemic urban splendor that sparkles with efficiency and productivity.

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<sup>9</sup> Negri, “Reviewing the Experience of Italy in the 1970s”.

<sup>10</sup> Curino, Tarasco, and Vacis, *Passione*: 35-36, 39.

Part of the narrator's task is to explore what really takes place around these moneymaking factories, and to depict what the actual daily existence of someone from Settimo Torinese was like. Farmitalia pharmaceuticals might have provided important public services from jobs to medicines, but Curino, and generally the Narrative Theater process, chases a concrete understanding of the quality of the everyday. The description of a rotting toxic atmosphere is not only about environmental politics, but it also gestures towards a stance on the quality of public life.

Autobiography here becomes an essential tool of communication since Curino's personal comments about the physical ambiance of Settimo melds into a personal *and* collective public memory of this factory-land. As the former mayor of Settimo Torinese, Aldo Corgiat, attests, the factories of Settimo might change names "...but the people of Settimo know that the broth is always brewing, a bit toned down because it doesn't smell anymore...." The factories loom as symbols of the town, and the products themselves "represent an olfactory stain that is difficult to erase (or forget)" that became a fundamental part of the culture and politics of the city.<sup>11</sup> All Curino must do is mention a few adjectives to recall those scents, and she has brought forth both the cultural memory and the politics. As putrid chemicals corrode the air of early 1960s industrial Settimo when her play begins, Curino depicts the city as she herself knew it, from the perspective

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<sup>11</sup> "Schiapparelli, Carlo Erba, Farmitalia, Antibioticos... Cambia il nome ma i settimesi sanno che il brodo è sempre lì, un po' addomesticato perché non puzza più... la Farmitalia – Antibioticos per Settimo è qualche cosa di più di una fabbrica, è una centralità, un simbolo, un'identità... I miasmi prodotti [la Cefalosporina la base per antibiotici noti in tutto il mondo, essenziali per debellare infezioni e malattie mortali] dalla fermentazione hanno rappresentato per decenni un marchio olfattivo difficile da cancellare (o dimenticare). Dentro quelle mura negli anni '60 e '70 si sviluppava una parte importante e fondamentale della cultura sindacale e politica della città." Giuseppe Caramellino, *Oltre il viale di Tigli, la fabbrica... Testimonianze e ricordi di dipendenti della Farmitalia-Antibioticos di Settimo Torinese* (Settimo Torinese: Fondazione Esperienze di Cultura Metropolitana, 2007), 4.

of a family who moved there for work opportunities. As one scholar notes, the motivation to tell a story stems from one of the traditional instincts of narration: the handing down of memory. In times of chaos when things are in flux, the desire to preserve a collective memory can be strong.<sup>12</sup> Curino and the narrators, however, do more than preserve memories. They design them. Indeed she tells the story from below presenting a perspective from inside that world, as though she were reporting from it.

Of course memories are largely the substance of autobiography. In Narrative Theater they work to foster a common ground between the narrator and the audience, but they are also paramount to the success of the one-person strategy. The narrators recall not just their past but their past opinions as former selves. Today Settimo does not connote sickness and stench, but Curino's childhood self shouts forth such a description, which, as Corgiat attests, lingers in the atomic make-up of the city. This is one of the ways in which Narrative Theater's orality is dialogic. The present day narrator indirectly performs a rhetorical exchange with her former self from a prior time thereby questioning what once had existed. If Curino's younger self does not speak up, was Settimo ever a desultory zone? And if it was not, if the public only knows Settimo by how it is today, then is its transformation, its development, irrelevant? These are the questions implicit in Curino's recollection of the less savory aspects of the town, and ones that she does not answer, but asks the audience to consider.

In *Corpo di stato*, Baliani also poses many questions to the audience that stem from the convergence of his personal history with the greater history for which they will

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<sup>12</sup> Stefania Stefanelli, *Va in scena l'italiano: La lingua del teatro tra Ottocento e Novecento* (Florence: F. Cesati, 2006), 32.

have their own private memories. His approach is more direct, but has the same effect that Curino's does.

How had it come to this? How'd it happen that friends, comrades from my political group, from the marches, had suddenly started talking about weapons... But what could you do, if the police went around dressed as students during the protests, holding pistols in their hands to provoke the crowds? What could you do if they shot tear gas canisters at your head during the marches? Isn't that how they killed Francesco Lorusso in Bologna? And Giorgiana Masi in Rome, on the Garibaldi bridge...What were we supposed to do? When did the clash turn so harsh, when did it get out of control, when?<sup>13</sup>

The naming of Lorusso and Masi is important as it calls forth the memory of two protestors who were killed during demonstrations. Baliani also evokes the "strategy of tension" when he recalls undercover police provoking crowds so that they could use force in suppressing them.<sup>14</sup> In doing so, he recalls the confusion and tensions in the atmosphere, and the difficulty of wading through them as an ordinary person. Through this rhetorical questioning, Baliani guides the audience along a people's history of that

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<sup>13</sup> Baliani, *Body of State*: 31-32. In original: "Ma come si era arrivati a tutto questo? Com'era successo che amici, compagni di gruppo, di corteo, improvvisamente s'erano messi a parlare di armi?... Ma d'altronde che si doveva fare se i poliziotti giravano travestiti da studenti durante le manifestazioni, con le pistole in mano, per provocare? Che si doveva fare se sparavano lacrimogeni ad altezza d'uomo nei cortei? Non avevano ammazzato così Francesco Lo Russo a Bologna? E Giorgiana Masi, a Roma, a ponte Garibaldi?... Che dovevamo fare? Quand'è che lo scontro s'era fatto pesante, senza più controllo, quando?" Marco Baliani, *Corpo di stato: Il delitto Moro* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2003), 28-29.

<sup>14</sup> The "strategy of tension" refers to the ways in which the far right, possibly including parties in both the Italian and foreign governments such as the United States who feared leftist platforms, manipulated and controlled the public through fear especially during terrorist attacks such as the 1969 bombing of Piazza Fontana in Milan.



era. Both Curino and Baliani describe a time and place that belong not only to themselves, but also to the masses: the public, the workers and the students. With their personal memories, they reclaim the 1970s, and the city of Settimo, for themselves and their audiences who follow them there.

One of the main tasks of the narrator is to approach history from the perspective of one in a crowd. Since some of Foucault's ideas on subjectivities in historiography compliment the emphasis on the undervalued in microhistory, and since the Teatro Settimo cites Foucault as an early theoretical influence, his work is worth considering here. When narrators recall and relate local experiences they are clearly opposing the "hierarchization of knowledges," as Foucault defined it. The fact that Curino and others in Narrative Theater often invoke stories of lesser known histories is one of the ways in which they make visible what went previously unseen—a task that for Foucault, requires a methodological magnifying instrument that shares the magnifying effect of microhistory. In *Passione*, the grim depiction of Settimo functions synecdochically to render a broader history that had been forgotten through improvement. The smaller events such as a morning in school, or attending a play, signal an epistemological change because they address material which hitherto had no pertinence for bourgeois-made history and which had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic, political or historical value. The telling of these histories endorses what Foucault called an "insurrection of subjugated knowledge." As he explains, "historians... have been accustomed to a history which takes in only the summits, the great events. But today...

historians are becoming more willing to handle ‘ignoble’ materials.”<sup>15</sup> Paying attention to the micro-level of the everyday enacts a process of rediscovery not only of the previously overlooked histories, but also of the ruptured outcomes of conflict and struggle. Local or regional knowledges are not only about the events that have been overlooked, moreover, but are ultimately replete with “historical knowledge of struggles.”<sup>16</sup> *Passione and Corpo di stato*, like the students’ or workers’ efforts, work to broaden knowledge of experiences in the process of uncovering these struggles.

Notions of agency are at play here since the narrators take an active role in disseminating a subaltern history. Returning to the discussion earlier, one of the main tenets of the 1970s-era student revolts was based on the desire for a system that was more responsive to their social needs and experiences instead of an institution in which they were essentially held accountable for attending school and “receiving” knowledge through grandiose lecturing.<sup>17</sup> The students, like the narrators, wanted to change a system that presumed mere compliance with authority. They wanted more control over the practice of acquiring knowledge, which would have distributed power more equitably within the educational system.

The narrators also exercise a specific performative power that connects to the multiple efforts of power contestation in the classroom, the factory, or in marital/sexual relations. To some extent, the narrators rearrange the audience’s “structures of knowledge” because they ask them to think about their own memories and private

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<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, trans. Colin Gordon (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980), 37, 50.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-83.

<sup>17</sup> Lumley, *States of Emergency*: 63.

struggles. As theater historians Guccini and Mariella have written, after every narration, the story dissolves into a residue of signs made newly available for one to interpret, encouraging the individual memory to exert its own obscure power of creation.<sup>18</sup> Indeed they do return a power to the people, and with that, they corroborate Foucault's idea that the type of order imposed by functionalist or systematizing thought is essentially designed to mask popular history. In order to combat this, narrators empower their public by engaging with the subaltern history of those in their audience. Considering their level of civic engagement, their roles as artists are not so different than that of the intellectual.

The concept of political engagement, or *impegno*, is fundamental to the definition of an Italian intellectual, particularly from the 1960s through the 1980s. Certainly many Italian theorists, philosophers, and artists have considered what it means to be an intellectual from the careers of Antonio Gramsci and Norberto Bobbio to Italo Calvino and Pier Paolo Pasolini. For the purposes of this study, I wish to consider only some of the broad strokes that many have drawn in their attempts to articulate this somewhat elusive construct. During the 1970s, the many social movements implicitly commented upon, reflected, and shaped the role of the intellectual in Italian society. The rapport between students and intellectuals, for example, was sometimes contradictory. On the one hand, there was tension since the students viewed intellectuals as living complacently within the bourgeois system, which compelled them to react in ways that injured dominant literary culture. One of those was their rejection of the novel. On the other hand, it is important to remember that many intellectuals were persuaded by the students'

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<sup>18</sup> Guccini and Marelli, *Stabat mater*: 14.

call to alter aspects of the university experience and joined their cause through various ways of artistic production and outright propaganda.<sup>19</sup> While the narrators are first and foremost theater artists, I would like to explore the ways in which they adopt a persona that overlaps with that of the politically-engaged intellectual. Their embrace of this role is important in terms of their relationship to the audience, and is also meaningful in what it says about the loss of the public intellectual in the 1980s and 1990s, an idea connected to the heavily mediated world of today.

Literary scholar Vincenzo Binetti has argued that the mass-mediated system and the continued growth of technology imposed an irreversible process of decentralization and redistribution that problematizes the role of the intellectual in society. Gone are the postwar intellectuals in the Maldonado sense in which they served as the moral conscience of a nation, supreme judges of historical developments, and passionate guardians of civil and human rights.<sup>20</sup> As Binetti notes, after fascism and the war, it seemed likely that leftist intellectuals would emerge to publicly re-evaluate society via culture. Being an intellectual in the postwar climate meant being a cultural ambassador or interpreter, rather than being an ideologue.<sup>21</sup> This suggestion proposes a component of public service that is only degrees away from the *animazione* movement that was popular during the 1960s and 1970s, and that the Teatro Settimo artists studied with one of its key advocates, the theater scholar Gian Renzo Morteo.

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<sup>19</sup> Monica Francioso, "Impegno and Ali Baba: Celati, Calvino, and the Debate on Literature in the 1970s," *Italian Studies* 64, no. 1 (2009): 109-10.

<sup>20</sup> Vincenzo Binetti, "Marginalità e appartenenza: La funzione dell'intellettuale tra sfera pubblica e privato nell'Italia del dopoguerra," *Italica* 74, no. 3 (1997): 360.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 362-63.

In many respects what it means to be a narrator combines the civic responsibility of the intellectual and with the dramatic/narrative imperatives of a storyteller, and the use of autobiography plays a large part in this. The narrators balance a delicate neutrality in their work with the implicit decision to disseminate new information, but once they tell their story they do not condone any political position or even overtly suggest specific action. They are not impartial, however, because the narrator is aware of the ways in which her story is relevant today. She is not simply recounting facts, but also relaying their persistent significance through a critical perspective.<sup>22</sup> In this way, the narrators promote a sense of responsibility by exploring events from many angles, highlighting those that official history has repressed, and helping to contextualize their importance for the audience. This sense of civic duty is to some extent why the Teatro Settimo was involved with schools and taught classes to those in the community who were also interested in being “cultural workers” (*operatori culturali*), which is how they referred to themselves.<sup>23</sup> This identity, which connotes solidarity with manual laborers, is not only related to the social discourses of the times, but also to *animazione*.

Morteo explains that the *animatore* is not someone who executes a project, but is a worker (*operatore*) who, in consultation with her group, produces interventions suitable to particular situations.<sup>24</sup> This simple description provides a flavor of the 1970s through the identity of the individual with the group, and the reverent invocation of the union. The idea of the artist as worker reinforces the distinction between pure and applied art,

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<sup>22</sup> Ponte di Pino, *Il nuovo teatro italiano, 1975-1988: La ricerca dei gruppi, materiali e documenti*: 7.

<sup>23</sup> Settimo, "LTU3: Appunti per l'avvio del terzo laboratorio di trasformazione urbana. La ricerca storica.," Curino Private Collection.

<sup>24</sup> Morteo and Sagna, *L'animazione come propedeutica al teatro*: 5.

where the former reflects art for art's sake, and the latter is meant to serve a specific purpose. With the choice for "worker" instead of "artist," Morteo suggests that *animators* create something of an "applied" art. The notion of a worker implies a specific end goal or product, as well as being part of a service industry. This is very similar to the beginning of Curino's 1996 *Camillo Olivetti* that I invoked in my introduction. She opens the production with a declaration that:

This work is dedicated to Adriano Olivetti. I say *work* and not *play* in the memory of an expression that my parents used... They would talk about going to the theater to see this particular artist because... the actor works well. Works, they said, not performs.<sup>25</sup>

She credits her parents, a seamstress and a Fiat worker, with this notion that art and work had something in common, but such an idea was also all around her, in her coming of age during the 1970s, in her introduction to *animazione* where Morteo uses *operatore* to describe the performers, and it travels on as the narrators bring to light different perspectives of their regional and national histories, working for the everyman, helping to carve out and better define a place in society.

### **Autobiography and Ethnography: The Personal Terrain of Public Events**

While the narrators pose large philosophical questions that reflect broad debates concerning political engagement and the role of the intellectual, they also demonstrate

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<sup>25</sup> "Questo lavoro è dedicato ad Adriano Olivetti. Dico *lavoro* e non *spettacolo* nel ricordo di una espressione che usavano i miei genitori... dicevano di andare [al teatro] a vedere quel tale artista perché... quell'attore lavora bene. Lavora, dicevano, non *recita*." (Original emphasis.) Curino and Vacis, *Camillo Olivetti: Alle radici di un sogno*: 23.

what it means to reflect upon such great public issues within the private chambers of one's own mind. An important aspect of their productions is the performance of this negotiation. Through confessional interior monologue sequences, or even more humorous self-deprecation, they lay bare their own vulnerability through autobiography. In this section I continue to examine several passages in *Passione* and *Corpo di stato* that bring the larger polemical issues with which the narrators grapple back to a personal level. Two strains of performance theory, concerning Victor Turner's anthropological perspectives as well as Erving Goffman's sociology, will help to explain the dynamics of autobiography in performance.

In *Corpo di stato* Baliani frames the deaths of both Impastato and Moro as well as the social and political unrest of the later 1970s from the perspective of the student movements that occupied Italian universities, particularly La Sapienza in Rome. Although his account is not objective he still offers a clear depiction of the main events that defined his early adult life, as they did many at that time. Amidst all the conspiracy theories and mysteries surrounding Moro's death, he admits plainly that he is not concerned with discovering what actually happened. Rather, he wants to confront what was happening inside him during these times.<sup>26</sup> He quickly switches registers to a very private, even confessional, tone in which he shares with the audience the inner conflicts these traumatic events brought forth. He even cues the audience that he is about to reveal something very delicate:

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<sup>26</sup> "Di questo vorrei raccontare, di quello che accadeva non solo nel mondo là fuori, ma anche dentro di me." Baliani, *Corpo di stato*: 17.

“I know, I could tell you something completely different, it wouldn’t take much, with the wisdom of hindsight I could tell you I got angry when I heard the announcement on the radio, that I immediately condemned the action of the Red Brigades. No, that’s not true, it didn’t go like that.”<sup>27</sup>

Here Baliani is showing his audience that he has a choice in what to say, in how to construct that narrative of his innermost feelings. He could pretend to the audience, and maybe even to himself, that he felt a certain way, a way in which the audience would readily consider honorable, but instead he is choosing to acknowledge something closer to the truth, however unglamorous it might be. He admits plainly that when news reached him of the kidnapping he “felt a sense of exhilaration.” Although he defends himself by saying that he had never endorsed the extreme measures of the Red Brigades, he still bravely acknowledges this initial reaction, wondering how and why he felt a sense of euphoria over the kidnapping as though he belonged to the cause. In a way, he *did* belong to the cause, and the piece is largely about figuring out what that “belonging” means. How can you share much of what people fought for in those days, while also stand ethically against this act of barbarism? How can you betray one without the other? Baliani does not answer these important questions, but by asking them he demonstrates how one person, in his lonely singularity, can confront events that upset so many.

Curino also utilizes autobiography to demonstrate how individuals can confront large narratives from the past. She emphasizes the necessary incompleteness in

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<sup>27</sup> Baliani, *Body of State*: 27. In original: “Lo so che potrei raccontare tutt’altro, non ci vuole molto, col senno di poi potrei dire che all’annuncio della radio provai sdegno, che condannai immediatamente l’azione delle Brigate rosse. No, non è vero, non andò così. Provai un senso di esaltazione.” Baliani, *Corpo di stato*: 13.



challenging an accepted construction of the past, and seeks to fill in crucial gaps missing in the historical record. In positioning herself within this radicalized history, Curino performs a self that is critically pedagogical in the way she activates memory. In Curino's employment of autobiography there is an unwavering, albeit subtle, call for resistance against comforting constructions of the recent Italian past. This is most evident in her depictions of Settimo, the city that for the artists of Teatro Settimo was bereft of memories. While the city represented the industrial growth of a northern Italy that crowded its towns with immigrants from the south looking for work, and outpaced the psychic effects that would accompany the rapid growth of capitalism, its squalor was personal for her as it housed her childhood.

Although her depictions are bleak, she also encourages a sense of humor, in contrast to the more confessional (usually dubbed more "female") tone of Baliani's process of recollection. The industrial firms tried to make their new employee housing units sound sleek and modern, she recalls, when they moved in to their new home. There was even a centralized garbage system *all'americana*. She recalls the cheerful agent that showed them around who bragged that after you clean a zucchini, or peel a potato, wrap up the baby's diaper, all you need to do is toss it into the gutter via this system. Back in a matter-of-fact tone Curino dryly remarks that the centralized garbage system *all'americana* didn't last three months, thanks to insects followed by cockroaches and eventually rats.<sup>28</sup> These episodes of humor, exaggerated in performance through her characterizations and her use of the Piemontese dialect, show a way to be clear-headed, while also forgiving, about the realities of one's past. She depicts this unsavory

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<sup>28</sup> Curino, Tarasco, and Vacis, *Passione*: 29.

recollection but can laugh about it, without changing what it was to her then. This ability also demonstrates similar conflicts to Baliani's in attempting to authentically recollect the past in which the individual must find sturdy ground in the mists of fleeting memory.

Keeping in mind the overall presence of microhistorical tendencies in Narrative Theater, I would like to consider several key ideas by the anthropologist Victor Turner whose theories have been adopted in performance studies. He recognized the conception of culture as an uncontrollable plurality incapable of containing meaning, but he also understood people as active agents in the historical process.<sup>29</sup> This is a helpful way to think about how the narrators acknowledge the inherent tensions — Baliani in his exhilaration when he should have felt anger or sadness, Curino's laughter at the squalid environments that characterize parts of her childhood—in their attempts to provide a more authentic people's account of particular moments or places. The fact that they incorporate personal experiences underscores the reflexivity in being subject *and* object, interviewee *and* interviewer, in dialogue with themselves as much as with others. Autobiography allows the narrator to be the focus of her own story, certainly, but also to pull back and comment on that story, almost as if the historian were able to report back from the actual event that she investigates.

In a way, they are similar to anthropologists who interpret stories as units of meaning that provide connections amongst people, except that the narrators do not only read stories from the outside, but from within them. Turner described the work of the ethnographer as an endeavor that required him to be "half in/half out" in order to

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<sup>29</sup> Edward M. Bruner, "Experience and Expressions," in *The Anthropology of Experience*, ed. Victor Witter Turner and Edward M. Bruner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 12.

maintain an analytical distance.<sup>30</sup> The intermingling of subjectivity and objectivity can be challenging, but they do not have to be mutually exclusive. Autobiography then allows the narrator a certain amount of agency in constructing collective histories through personal narrative, while also providing a method through which she can be both a part of a story, and still reflect upon it with distance.

This duality through autobiography/ethnography allows the narrator to create a play-world heightened by the ability to attest to its former existence as a real space. Different from an actor playing a character, or a historical account based off of someone else's representation, the narrator's descriptions are her own which, in turn, invigorates the overall dramatic experience. In *Passione*, Curino recalls the evening when a neighbor brought her to see Fo and Rame's *Mistero Buffo* (1968), a collection of provocative and linguistically creative medieval-jester-style monologues inspired by various accounts of the life of Jesus. The penultimate scene of *Passione* is of a young Curino as a spectator in the audience just before this particular performance begins. It is a virtuoso moment including southern dialects, touches of Spanish, and slang expressions. Curino reminisces about the locals completely filling the piazza, full of joyous energy, where husbands, wives and lovers alike merrily awaited the event. "And you laugh, laugh so hard that your heart takes off, it flies, until you don't know where your heart is anymore," she recounts.<sup>31</sup> Via her own memory, she portrays the small-town local production as a liberating moment for many in Settimo.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>31</sup> "Y tu ridi, ridi che il cuore ti va via, vola, e tu non sai più dov'è questo cuore." Curino, Tarasco, and Vacis, *Passione*: 59. The "Y" here is in place of "e" for "and," as she is in character of a woman from Spain and colors the language with a Spanish accent even in written form.

Looking out into her audience, she reconstructs looking from another audience when she was watching Fo and Rame. Of all the details that she could have gathered, she assembles the joyous laughter that she shares both with that earlier audience and with the audience presently before her in that anthropological style of half in/half out. Straddling time, she address both these groups directly with *you* (*tu ridi*), purposefully confounding them; one as she remembers them, the other as they are actually before her. Then, she breaks away from her memory to address the audience before her to say that she wishes they could have been there. In that hope, there is the reminder that the audience will never know for themselves, only through her guidance, what being a part of that play was like, and yet they are a part of her play in that moment as they listen to her.

Returning to the relationship between agency and autobiography, Baliani also highlights aspects of his own past that allow him to operate in this half in / half out mode, but differently than Curino and her emphasis on creating characters. Generally associated with women's writing, Baliani's tone suggests a diary-like confidential exchange with the audience, as he openly acknowledges his conflicted feelings over the political activism surrounding him. Backtracking from Moro's kidnapping, Baliani reflects upon his own role in protests and demonstrations. There was one particular event in early 1971, though he confesses that it felt more like 1968, which started out as relatively peaceful, but slowly escalated into violence with the crowd chanting "Polizia assassina! Polizia assassina!," and then throwing Molotov cocktails at the police, who then fought back with full force. Baliani recounts his effort to escape the police in and out of the small Roman streets and how he became an impromptu leader of a crowd trying to escape tear gas, flares, and batons. Yards in front of him he watched a "comrade," as he calls his

pals, kicked and beaten to the point of vomiting, spurring an almost uncontrollable rage in him. Apoplectic and screaming, he grabs a Molotov cocktail himself and launches it at a police jeep though it falls a few feet short.

I'm just sorry I didn't hit the jeep. I should have hit the jeep, a few more meters and I would have... but at the same time this anger rises up in me, anger against those with the Molotovs who threw us into the middle of it and left us there like this. Fuck them and what they call their "leap forward in the quality of the struggle." Eh, but the next time they wouldn't screw me, the next time I wouldn't show up unprepared at a demonstration, the next... What was I thinking? Now I had to get a gun too?<sup>32</sup>

In this short excerpt exists the range of Baliani's autobiographical technique that jumps from existing as his present self to looking back on his past himself. He starts with the internal monologue as though the Molotov had just left his hand, lamenting to himself that he missed his target. Swiftly he comes back out to an external position in his ability to acknowledge and to analyze his feelings instead of just expressing them. Then, back in character as it were, he shows the duplicity of his emotions, turning his wrath from the

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<sup>32</sup> Baliani, *Body of State*: 33. In original: "Mi dispiace solo di non aver preso la camionetta in piena. In pieno la dovevo prendere, bastavano solo pochi metri... ma ecco che al tempo stesso ma sale dentro una rabbia, una rabbia contro quelli delle molotov che ci hanno messi in mezzo e ci hanno lasciati lì così. Ma che vadano a fare in culo loro e i loro "salti di qualità nella lotta", come dicevano. Eh, ma la prossima volta non mi fregavano, la prossima volta non ci sarei andato così impreparato a una manifestazione, la prossima volta... Ma che stavo pensando? Che mi dovevo armare anch'io?" Baliani, *Corpo di stato*: 33-34.

police to his fellow protestors. It switches back quickly to the cops, and ratcheting up his wrath another notch he vows that he will have a gun the next time. Finally he breaks with the character once more, looking back at himself from the outside and not within, wondering how he could have even thought of carrying a weapon.



**Figure 6** Marco Baliani in *Corpo di stato*  
Photo courtesy of <http://www.marcobaliani.it/corpodistato.php>

Throughout this performance, Baliani demonstrates the complex and variegated reactions one can have to both important causes and events, but also how those causes and events are multifaceted as well. How do you negotiate an uprising as a pacifist? What do you do when you discover yourself thinking about weapons and committing political violence? Where do you draw the line? This excerpt, as with the entire piece, shows how Baliani establishes multiple positions (past/present, reactive/introspective) to show and to critique the complexities of political action and the nature of agency. Autobiography is

agency because the narrator not only chooses what to share, but can testify in a way that second-hand storytelling cannot.

The agency that is afforded through personal accounts is also linked to the efforts of a more diverse people's history common in Narrative Theater. Different narrators focus on different, often regionally-based, groups or individuals that are seldom a part of conventional national histories. Paolini, for example, privileges the farmers and small-town mountain families in his home region in Friuli Venezia Giulia. Enia addresses Southern and especially Sicilian pasts while Curino and Celestini generally focus on factory workers in Italy's industrial belt. Baliani has actually created plays with sub-Saharan orphans and has had them perform on stage, rendering them visible and creating awareness about their lives.

One of the ways that both Curino and Baliani use memories from their own lives to create a space for others is in identifying people who had an impact on them, and pausing for a scene to relate to the audience their importance in the narrator's life. In *Corpo di stato*, Baliani spends more than a third of the entire show speaking about three people who were in many ways just average citizens, but had strong beliefs and suffered consequences for their political commitments and actions during the 1970s. They were not heads of state or leaders of extra-parliamentary groups. Their actions were decisive, but not extraordinary, and yet they paid dearly for them.

The three men, each given their own sequences in the show, were named Giorgio, Riccardo and Armando. Giorgio was a few years younger than Baliani and many of the other senior protestors, who were in their twenties. As some of these groups began to steer towards more hostile and violent action, the younger ones, Baliani says, often felt

that they needed to prove something. In 1977, Giorgio and some others were caught by the police after an attempted bank robbery. Though he was unarmed, he reached into his pocket for an ID card when one of the cops, probably as young as Giorgio, shot and killed him. While Baliani explains what happened to Giorgio, he also shares more intimate moments such as looking at a photograph of Giorgio where someone snuck his hand behind his head, giving him bunny ears. At other moments, Baliani even veers upon the sentimental in his depiction of Giorgio as “one of those people whose eyes sparkle when they talk, always full of enthusiasm, always ready to give his all for others.”<sup>33</sup> Baliani explores other dark sides of other acquaintances, like Riccardo and Armando, who were involved in armed causes and who both wound up in jail.

Armando’s situation is particularly provocative for Baliani and one that he uses to construct a reflexive world of what-ifs. What if he had been in a similar situation, what would he have done? After giving up much of his political affiliations with groups who had grown more and more violent, Armando had a wife and young daughter by 1978 and spent much of his time working in the hospital. One evening an old friend rang his doorbell and begged him to hide a package that he was carrying. Armando’s wife was not home and he eventually conceded to his friend’s pleas, never telling his wife what occurred. After two days passed during which the friend was supposed to return for the package, finally, on the third, the building was surrounded by police who found it: a gun. Armando ended up with a three-year prison sentence. His wife, who Baliani says has

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<sup>33</sup> Baliani, *Body of State*: 34. In original: “Giorgio era uno di quelli che quando parlava gli brillavano gli occhi, sempre pieno di entusiasmo, sempre pronto a farsi in quattro per aiutare gli altri.” Baliani, *Corpo di stato*: 36.



never forgiven him, also spent three months in jail trying to prove that she did not know anything about it.

These memories of visiting Armando in jail, of his unfortunate story, stir in Baliani many mixed emotions from guilt to gratefulness and even to paranoia. He wonders what he would do if an old beauty from his youth who was prominent in the revolutionary groups and whom he always tried (and failed) to impress, showed up at his home one day asking for the same favor. Like many (presumably) in the audience, Baliani depicts Armando as a good person, fighting “the good fight,” who turned his back on it when it grew too violent, became a family man and then, maybe out of nostalgia, or maybe without any real reason, made a bad decision for which he suffers the consequences.

Giorgio and Riccardo are also similar in this “good person gone astray” anecdote. In part, Baliani is clearly asking the audience, how do you step back and realize things have gone too far when you are in the middle of something? And he also suggests, with humility, that luck plays a role. Thankfully, while his partner and son were out one day, Sara never did show up on his doorstep. The use of his own emotional conflicts in connection with stories about his friends reduces the distance between the audience and him. By portraying ordinary people who were very much a part of the fabric of these times, Baliani offers a much richer and more intimate account of this period than what is generally found in published historical accounts. Here again, then, by linking autobiography (Baliani’s personal experiences and his mental/emotional reactions to them) with ethnography (a depiction of the social life-worlds of a group of individuals at a specific historical moment), Baliani is able to perform an act of historical recuperation

that simultaneously reaches out to the audience and enjoins them to think through what they are experiencing.

I would like to conclude this section by returning to Curino's homage to Franca Rame in *Passione*. While Curino employs autobiography in her considerations of Rame in a way that supports my assertion that the narrator negotiates her own subjectivity with a more objective account of the larger politico-historical context, she also complicates autobiography in her portrayal of Rame's monologue of the Passion of Mary before the Cross. Taking into account the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, who has influenced sociological and psychological approaches to performance theory, permits a unique position from which to process this other aspect at work in Curino's use of autobiography. His theories of dramaturgical sociology, or a practice that analyzes the construction of the self in 'every day life' offers rich angles with which to pursue the interactive dimensions of narrative within autobiography and to highlight the complex relationship of the performer to her audience that dramaturgical sociology stresses.<sup>34</sup>

For Goffman, the self is not a stable entity since one must act differently in different settings. This led to his theory of "frames" where he argues that actions are dependent upon time, place and, importantly, the presence of an audience. Frames are the boundaries that orient people to a collective understanding of behavioral norms.<sup>35</sup> Curino is always the narrator, speaking to an audience, but by inhabiting different characters, and by playing herself at different stages of her life, she constantly switches the multiple

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<sup>34</sup> An earlier version of this argument was published in an article: Juliet F. Guzzetta, "A Presentation of Herself: Laura Curino's Passions in Everyday Life," *Spunti e ricerche* 25 (2010 publ. 2011).

<sup>35</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), 238-39.

individuals behind that first person. In *Passione* the “I” is at once herself, her mother, Franca Rame, Mary, and others. Even if she could never literally bring the audience back with her to Fo and Rame’s performance, the intricate layering of her performance personae allows the audience to interact with multiple sides of Curino. She shows them the facets of herself that reflect her mother, Rame, and even Mary through a combination of memory-sharing, storytelling, and character work. The overarching framework of performer and audience (the intention of simply telling a story) joined to the complexity of her multiple “selves” allows her to do so. Goffman might have called this an ease within different frames. Her behavior is different when she directly addresses the audience than when she describes the environment, yet her overarching framework is still a performance event.

Part of the function of autobiography is to provide fluidity between the narrator’s jumps across past and present, allowing her to remain a sturdy constant. In fact, Curino’s play articulates an ability to be fractured across time and place in the same way that Goffman points towards a fluid self that is always in conversation with the framework in which one exists. Curino emphasizes the dynamics of this framework when she performs the last scene. At times it is even unclear whether or not Curino recites Mary’s lines as Rame acts them, or entirely of her own interpretation. There are several subversive strands among the dexterous shifting of frames that Curino creates, from layering the performance space of postwar suburban Turin over the one she is currently in, to challenging not only the traditional practice of theater, but even that of storytelling in her vacillation between her characters and herself. Further, the very subject material of the Mary scene dramatically shifts attention from Jesus to his mother. The result matches

Curino's use of autobiography to the flexibility with which she complicates notions of self. Curino's practice thus both shifts constructions of memory (what she *remembered* of Rame's performance) and challenges what in history should be privileged (what she, Curino, *decided* was worth relating to the audience). As is common in Narrative Theater, Curino chooses her own history and those of other ordinary people that she knew to create a space for a people's history. Particularly powerful in the case of Rame, Curino re-writes a performance history that includes a diverse working-class audience but also, and finally, one that allows Rame to share a spotlight that is always aimed at Fo.

An analysis of the feminist politics that Curino subtly puts forth shows a different way to create a more inclusive public historical record through one's private experiences. It is noteworthy that *Mistero buffo*, the performance Curino credits with making her want to pursue theater, does not only present a female perspective of the Catholic ritual of the Passion, but in fact borders on the sacrilegious. In this script, as Mary watches Jesus slowly die, she viciously curses and swears at the Roman guards, eventually trying to bribe them to let her dab her son's bleeding skin. After they refuse, she condemns the archangel Gabriel for having visited her in the first place which, of course, has provocative implications if one interprets her wails as a wish that Christ had never been born. Certainly, this portrayal of Mary is not the patient and understanding woman who accepted her fate and continually recognized the honor of her role in Jesus' life. She is a weeping human, a mother helplessly watching her child die a gruesome death, a tangible human Mary who protests until the bitter end. Curino's very presence as a female solo artist introduces an implicit story of resistance in this version of Mary. As the scholars and performers Lynn C. Miller and Jacqueline Taylor have written, women's

autobiography in performance must confront the disembodied, traditionally masculine, “universal subject” that constrains so many as “others” bereft of voices or physicality.<sup>36</sup> Curino honors Rame’s Mary as a representative figure of women’s courage and resistance under extreme duress and physical threat (here by the Roman soldiers). At the same time, she also embodies the intellectual and creative passions of a female artist whose project is largely independent, presenting her work in a traditionally unwelcoming space to such individuals.

Even today, the theater has been particularly unwelcoming to Italian women with barely a handful of female directors, playwrights and working actors. Among the most well-known female playwrights are Natalia Ginzburg and Dacia Maraini, who are also and perhaps primarily known for their prose. Rame is among the most influential women based solely in theater, but it is impossible to say if she would have received the attention she has were it not for her more famous and critically lauded partner, Dario Fo. Women have had a more lasting theatrical influence in fringe endeavors rather than within the mainstream, but even here there is little credit or sustained criticism. I am thinking here of some of the ways that women used performance during the 1970s when the women’s movement was at its strongest. Judith Malina of the Living Theater recorded an emblematic instance of this in her “Italian Diaries” when she and her company were based in Rome and traveled around Europe. In November of 1976 she performed a piece with ten women in a Faenza factory in northeastern Italy. It was based on earlier discussions amongst the actors that are reminiscent of French feminist theory, particularly

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<sup>36</sup> Lynn C. Miller, Jacqueline Taylor, and M. Heather Carver, *Voices Made Flesh: Performing Women's Autobiography* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 4.

Cixous, concerning, according to Malina, “the inability to speak—and even the unwillingness to speak in what [one woman] called ‘the male rhetoric.’” Their performance begins in silence.

At a sound cue we raise our arms in the Delta symbol of the feminists: We are silent, a tape speaks for us. It’s a tape of women’s stories, complaints, abuses... We do not speak—cannot, will not, do not speak... Tape speaks... And then the tape stops and we strain in a course of nonverbal sounds, we stretch forward, and our mouths move and our faces are contorted with the years of our oppression and we want to speak—but we have no voice.<sup>37</sup>

This example is more akin to performance art, or even a happening, but it shows the ways in which performance could, in some instances, proffer a feminist voice distinct from “male rhetoric.”

Curino herself, along with other female and some male members of the Teatro Settimo, were active in aspects of the feminist movement in the late 1970s, but her more lasting contribution is in such gestures as honoring Rame in her own performances. To borrow again from Miller and Taylor, Curino’s multivalent autobiography “reclaims, celebrates, and complicates the construction of the female self.”<sup>38</sup> She takes control of what she puts forth, making a new space for female stage artists in recalling Rame’s

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<sup>37</sup> Karen Malpede, *Women in Theatre: Compassion & Hope* (New York: Drama Book Publishers, 1983), 216-17.

<sup>38</sup> Miller, Taylor, and Carver, *Voices Made Flesh*: 4.

performance and offering her own renditions. Curino thus complicates Goffman's model by introducing an agency that has control over the framework. The fact that Curino is able to perform this dance between storytelling, acting, private remembrance, and shared histories takes precedence over her frame, which is a physical space where she performs her show. Curino adjusts her presentation of selves to emphasize the aspects and details that best serve her history. She thus breaks from a gendered marginalization in the way that she actively engages with the audience, suggesting that one refashions oneself based on audience, an observation that Goffman includes in his understandings of frames. In this way, Curino also demonstrates how powerful Narrative Theater can be as a vehicle for ideological dispute. The strength of her efforts is not so much how she makes use of cultural frameworks to construct herself and her social world, but how her individual constructions of many different selves give rise to cultural and social change.

### **Guide for a Plural History**

Given the overlaying of voices in much of Narrative Theater, from the author's own to that of people she has interviewed, knew, or read about, I would like to analyze the construction of pluralistic histories as it encounters subjectivity. After all, these are not comprehensive autobiographies insofar as there is no sense of completeness to the narrators' stories. At best, a handful of them, such as the two that take center stage in this chapter, offer stories framed by autobiographical references, but they only cover a small period of the narrators' lives and examine the themes that spin out from personal experience, rather than the personal value of those experiences to be considered autobiographies. The self can be both stable and linear as well as multiple and

fragmented in postmodern theory. On the one hand, the narrators present a notion of subjectivity that is fragmented since they inhabit multiple perspectives and sometimes multiple characters. Yet the self is a stable and even centrifugal force from which the story strays and returns. Their plays establish connections between events, people, ideas, and struggles, and they operate in several registers in order to distill a perspective that is difficult to approach through more conventional forms of reflection. By engaging the audience with their own histories, the narrators bridge the gaps between the private and public, showing how subjectivities that confront issues of national interest has radical potential for shifting approaches to understanding the collective past.

The practice of oral history shares some commonalities with the ways the narrators cull firsthand information. Keeping this practice in mind will be useful to examine subjectivity and the construction of more heterogeneous histories through Narrative Theater. With autobiography as a framework, and the engagement of other perspectives as a means towards a more complete and multi-dimensional history, the next step is to recognize that many stories are not only about crystallizing aspects of the past, but also about *how one makes sense of those events* in personal and collective ways. As I examine, some of these tendencies emerge from Narrative Theater's proximity to oral history in the directions that historians Luisa Passerini and Alessandro Portelli have taken. In their understanding of oral history, inaccuracies, such as misremembering an event, are read like Freudian slips that nonetheless provide a key meanings.

Although *Passione* contains some high and low points from Curino's childhood, she also performs a few sections that glimpse daily life, providing a further opportunity for her to incorporate traditionally overlooked narratives. In one of the earlier sections



entitled “The Substitutes,” Curino recalls her early school days. In a comic portrayal she speaks to the audience as one of the teachers, talking to them as though they were her classroom of forty-one elementary students whom she can barely see. After directing a student to raise the blinds, she holds her nose. “Children! Haven’t you washed yourselves today? What was that, hon? The smell is coming from outside?” The blinds must remain open, however, as the electricity has not been hooked up and they would otherwise have no light. Ready to begin, she has a few false starts.

Now, children, who can be so kind as to... sorry my stockings are slipping... Here we go. Who would be so kind as to tell me where we are in our mathematics... Just relax, blondie, pull this zipper up for me and I’ll give you a kiss... I was saying, our mathematics, where are we with that?<sup>39</sup>

Switching back to adult Curino speaking frankly to the audience, her memory of the teachers is stark and gender specific. “So many of them, the poor things, did what they could. The girls came, they stayed fifteen days, and then they were transferred. All young, newly graduated, pale, thin, uprooted, innocent and utterly without children.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> “Non ci siamo lavati oggi, ragazzi? Come dici Lomutolo? È l’ambientesterno?... Mo’ ragassi chi di voi vuole essere così zentile... scusate mi si è ammollato il collant. Ecco, chi vuol esser così zentile da dirmi a che punto del programma di insciemistica, abbi pazienza biondino tirami su la lampo che ti do una bacino, dico insciemistica, siamo arriavati.” Curino, Tarasco, and Vacis, *Passione*: 31.

<sup>40</sup> “Tant’è, poverine, facevano quello che potevano. Arrivavano, restavano quindici giorni e poi le trasferivano. Tutte giovani, appena diplomate, pallide, magre, sradicate, nubili, e rigorosamente senza figli.” Ibid., 32.

Before long, she moves on to another section of the play, and the audience hears no more of these teachers.

This technique of only briefly introducing the audience to certain characters or conditions relates to the *paradigma indiziario* in that Curino offers only glimpses of these personages. It only takes a few specific details for her to design a sketch that is actually quite revealing in its unfilled spaces. With the stale factory air that surrounds this classroom where the lights do not work, and the disheveled teacher barely put together, she uses specifics to create a commonality that many in the audience can access in their own memories, especially when she performs the play in industrial locales. The specificity of her memory creates a space that is accessible to a much broader group of people than only those children with whom she shared the classroom. This method is also reminiscent of collecting oral histories, which shares certain theoretical ground with microhistory. The historian Joan W. Scott describes Passerini's model:

She uses interviews not to collect facts, not to clarify what did and did not happen in the past, but to explore the ways in which the relationship between private and public, personal and political is negotiated. It is this negotiation that produces identity, the sense of membership in a collective... Memory, Passerini suggests, sustains identity through its invocation of a common history.<sup>41</sup>

Scott continues to explain how for Passerini, one of the most valuable aspects of oral history is what goes unsaid. She reads the pauses, hesitations, and discrepancies of her

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<sup>41</sup> Joan W. Scott, "Foreword," in *Autobiography of A Generation: Italy, 1968*, ed. Luisa Passerini (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England [for] Wesleyan University Press, 1996), xii.

interviewees analytically, providing insight into the complexity of their subjectivity. This notion of the unsaid is similar to the detective work upon which microhistorians embark, but rather than leading the historian to new discoveries, in oral history, the caesuras *are* the discoveries. In the above example, Curino is able to sketch a history of her old teachers, and especially her old town, with only a few reference points. That Narrative Theater shares these traits with historiography speaks to a rigor and depth that goes beyond the need to entertain and that uses oral memory to bridge the private and public.

Celestini has also reflected upon the mechanisms at play in storytelling and has commented that oral memory occurs in a certain moment of the present, even if always linked back to the past. For him, memory is so much a part of the present that recalling specific events will actually change or efface parts of the past.<sup>42</sup> This idea invokes the role of anthropology in performance studies, which recognizes that the inherent problem in memory recollection is that while interviewees may be willing to share their experiences, they haphazardly censor or repress different aspects of an event because they are not fully aware of or able to articulate a vision beyond their own subjectivity. One can see this in the framework of *Corpo di stato*, for example, in Baliani's efforts to consider perspectives other than his own, even if that includes the kidnappers. He imagines them at the moment in which they shot and killed Moro.

Did the first one to fire squeeze hard on the trigger? Could he have stopped himself in that moment, not gone through with it? Or not, or is it

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<sup>42</sup> Ascanio Celestini, "Il vestito della festa: Dalla fonte orale a una possibile drammaturgia," *Prove di Drammaturgia* 2 (2003): 23.

always the same, that by that point in the game the hands move on their own, like machines?<sup>43</sup>

Here he reconstructs a psychological drama of an action that had huge consequences for a nation, narrowing that focus to one person, wondering, if by the time the gun was raised, Moro was as good as dead, or if there was still a glimmer of hope. What is interesting about this scene is what Baliani says next

But they [the hands] tremble, they tremble! So you have to make them stronger, harder, you have to steel yourself, until you see before you not a man, but a mere figure, a function of something, a thing.<sup>44</sup>

Baliani has now suddenly shifted to the point of view of the actual kidnappers confessing what one needs to do in order to carry out this task. Even though Baliani is only imagining the scenario and not quoting from one of the kidnapper's memoirs, he is still offering some type of insight into unsympathetic people, making them weaker, trembling. He humanizes them by depicting ordinary people who attempt to grapple with moral choice, rather than affectless ideologues. Baliani goes well beyond his autobiography but his perspective is still restricted by the scenario.

Similar to Celestini's recognition of the present, Baliani makes the case that subjectivity is a key concept in the construction of history. Celestini's argument is about the relationship between the present and one's point of view from the present. It is not

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<sup>43</sup> Baliani, *Body of State*: 25.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. Quello che ha sparato per primo ha premuto con forza il grilletto? Avrebbe potuto in quel momento fermarsi, non farlo? Oppure no, oppure è sempre così, che a quel punto del gioco le mani si muovono da sole, come fossero meccaniche. Eppure tremano, tremano! E allora bisogna farle diventare più forti, più dure, ci si fa di corazza, fino ad avere di fronte non più un uomo ma soltanto una figura, una funzione di qualcosa, una cosa. Baliani, *Corpo di stato*: 13.

just the present that influences memories of the past, but the perspective that the present affords. Subjectivity is paramount. Portelli takes this in a different direction by introducing the possibilities of mis-remembering and even fantasy when recalling the past. With respect to oral history, he has written how the role of the imagination in the construction of history might be as equally important to what we consider fact. “‘Wrong’ statements are still psychologically ‘true,’ and that truth may be equally important as factually reliable accounts.”<sup>45</sup> Here he specifically refers to actual oral testimony, which is not the case when Baliani conjectures the emotional state of the kidnappers, but Portelli’s logic is still useful. Maybe the kidnappers’ hands did tremble. Maybe there was a moment of hesitation, maybe not. What Baliani shows, however, is the actual mechanism that confronts these public events. By tinkering with his subjectivity, and flirting with that of another, Baliani demonstrates the relationship between the private and the public. In this example, he is saying that, possibly, in order for the kidnappers to kill Moro, they had to strip him of his status as a leader of the nation, even has a human being, and think of him as some worthless entity. The key in carrying out their action was their viewpoint.

By presenting different perspectives, one of the narrator’s functions then is to dramatize the connection between who is remembering and what is being remembered. As mentioned in my discussion on Goffman, Curino destabilizes her account as she switches between many characters. Besides the obvious postmodern tendency that these multitudes conjure, it is worth considering these structural choices in light of the social

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<sup>45</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1991), 51.

climate in Italy, particularly in the latter 1970s. Though more broadly, Passerini intuitively links this link as well. In one of her early works, she explicitly makes the connection between subjectivity, autobiography, orality and history and then links this four-part group to the events from 1968 through the early 1980s. She credits the women's movement for making personal narratives relevant in public and on political platforms, and also acknowledges the post-1968 student movements for attempting to create a historical subject based on everyday conditions that affirmed a double right: to be in history, and to have a history.<sup>46</sup> As she describes the process of recognizing one's own subjectivity through autobiographical narrative, she speaks to the necessity of alternating between subjective and objective positions, adding that, through these exchanges, a different type of discovery of self takes place.<sup>47</sup> These are helpful parallels toward seeing what takes place in Narrative Theater as similar elements to subjectivity, autobiography, orality and history collide. Part of the performance is not so much concerned with the different selves that intersubjectivity can reveal, but rather the actual performance of how these multiple selves are mutually shaped and re-shaped through their juxtaposition and interaction.

Performance scholar Deidre Heddon has noted that most American and British solo artists are marginalized subjects, namely minorities, citing Lisa Kron, Holly Hughes, Annie Sprinkle, Alina Troyano, Peggy Shaw, Kate Bornstein, Tim Miller, Ron Athey, Luis Alfaro, and finally Spalding Gray as the only straight white male exception in her list. By contrast, in Italy the vast majority of solo performers are heteronormative white

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<sup>46</sup> Luisa Passerini, *Storia e soggettività: Le fonti orali, la memoria* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1988).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

males with the exception of a handful of women including Curino, Luciana Littizzetto, and Lella Costa. They all address topics of equality, justice and human rights that Heddon names as a dominant feature of solo performances. She further notes that these issues lead the artists to question the role of those themes in the future.<sup>48</sup> In the context of Narrative Theater, what is particularly useful about Heddon's observation is her nod to the future. Even though the narrators concern themselves with stories from the past while highlighting the mechanisms at play in their present subjectivities, they also gesture towards the future. This occurs partially in their recognition that one of the ways in which the past travels forward is precisely through the selectivity of memory, since future occurrences will determine which details of the past remain the most salient in one's mind and how they will reverberate with different luminosity.

As Guccini and Marelli point out, the narrators implicate the audience in this process as well. After every narration, the story dissolves in a residue of signs newly open to interpretation that consent the individual memory the opportunity to exert its own obscure power of creation.<sup>49</sup> During a performance, this process can intensify the relationship from narrator to audience member since those who listen can identify their own personal relevance in the stories. Later they might inject their own autobiographical elements if they share the story with others. Meanwhile, by incorporating her experience, the narrator asserts that her life also has a right to historical existence, and this right thus naturally extends to the audience. Their lives, like the narrator's, matter. This joint

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<sup>48</sup> Deirdre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 2.

<sup>49</sup> Guccini and Marelli, *Stabat mater*: 14.

valorization of individual experiences forms the possibility of a collective memory that also allows private stories to resonate within multiple layers of consequence.

Naturally, one of the essential qualities of most performances is the instigation of a relationship between performer and audience. In Narrative Theater, however, there is first the relationship of the performer to both her private self and her public self, and then her rapport with the audience. Returning to Goffman, he offers a theatrical metaphor to explain the private and public self by describing one's behavior as either backstage or front-stage. The front-stage behavior concerns the various affects that one acquires while in the presence of others in order to come across in a particular way, while the backstage self does not behave according to perceptions, but is casual as opposed to formal, and acts on its own volition.<sup>50</sup> With respect to narrators, they must negotiate their tone with the audience. The backstage and front-stage self are in a continual dialogue constantly checking in with each other. In another variant on the dialogic system within Narrative Theater, communication with the audience depends upon the narrator's ability to read the audience and to calibrate or tune her behavior to its responses, but also to engage them via the material. She shares a history with the audience, shares a nationality, and works with them to develop new tools to explore those dimensions. She offers her dialogic practice as an example for how audience members can communicate with each other and their own fractured selves in the way they act differently in different circumstances.

Acknowledging the complexity of the dialogic system can help to illuminate both the private and public stories that people narrate but also *how* they do so through intimate and direct modes of communication. Narrative Theater allows the audience to change

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<sup>50</sup> Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*: 128.



aspects of the story to which the public performer will adhere. The performer maintains an awareness of her audience and can push one moment further if that audience is strongly reacting to it, or conversely, she can snip parts of her story that do not seem to be working. As Celestini has explained, narration is not a solitary adventure even if there is only one performer because the performer narrates for a group of people.<sup>51</sup> His vision references the interactive relationship during the performance between the narrator and audience. What he leaves out, however, is that the performer also conjures a similar relationship between herself and the people *about* whom she is talking, not just *to* whom she is talking. This is especially true during *Passione* with Curino's summoning of her younger selves, as much as she interacts with and performs her memories of people she encountered, all the while maintaining a rapport with the audience. An exchange takes place even from the inchoate moments when Curino first begins to recall her past. Narrative Theater is then something even rawer than the typical theatrical experience because of its permeability and solicitous interaction stretching from the very beginning of any project to the ongoing interactions with audience members who, perhaps unbeknownst to them, influence what the narrator reveals.

Behind the interactivity between audience and performer is the knowledge that there is both a trust and distrust of self, which is implicit in autobiographical endeavors due to the subjectivity of private recollection. According to director and performance theorist Eugenio Barba, however, a certain tension overshadows any possible minor errors in memory. Influenced by the psychological exercises in Stanislavsky's acting technique known as "method acting," Barba notes that there is a conversation between

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<sup>51</sup> Celestini, "Il vestito della festa," 21.

the actor's outer presentation of self and the inner life, and that this exchange, this tension, is what the spectator experiences.<sup>52</sup> Guccini has identified this mechanism in Narrative Theater when he distinguishes between the overt presentation as the story the narrator delivers, and an inner story that takes place simultaneously where the narrator has a particular relationship by way of autobiography.<sup>53</sup> This autobiographical element is essential to Narrative Theater because it fuels the underlying tension of the narrator who wrestles with a private and public past. Hearing the narrators' experiences, the audience member both identifies with them and situates them against her own experiences. The narrator incorporates herself reflexively in the story by sharing her memories, and grows closer to the audience members as they layer and interweave their experiences with hers.

The role of the narrator then is fundamentally to guide the audience through a journey that contemplates a multitude of perspectives, including the audiences' own. Just as the actual words that describe acts of memory indicate the fragmentary and even involuntary way in which the past breaks down (and is imperfectly reconstructed), the narrators thus are tasked with both dismantling and rebuilding. Remembering something suggests that it was first dismembered, which is often a position of victimhood. There is a strong somatic relevance giving a weight to that which is intangible, such as experience (or memory). As moments break down in the past, as time and space disrupt them, they are left there, dismembered until future circumstances re-member them through recollecting and recalling them. In order to re-member that experience, to put it back together again, narrators must re-collect it. In order to gather it they begin to re-call it, or

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<sup>52</sup> Eugenio Barba, "An Amulet Made of Memory: The Significance of Exercises in the Actor's Dramaturgy," *TDR* 41, no. 4 (1997): 130.

<sup>53</sup> Guccini, "Racconti della memoria: Il teatro di Ascanio Celestini," 20-21.

name it, in the way that it resonates with the present. Naming the memory gives it form, a body again, and so the past begins to resurface in the present, put back together again, with some parts missing, others exaggerated.

Through autobiography narrators reach beyond personal experience to situate themselves upon the greater stage of Italy's recent history, but they also construct multiple subjectivities by inventing a new equilibrium. They purposefully create tension amidst various voices so that even when strong emotions divide the self, as Baliani and Curino confess, the act of communicating private experiences can build to a shared existence. This multivalency allows for a layered identification process with the audience as well as a dialogic practice as though there were more people on stage than just the narrator. This dialogic dimension assumes a civic responsibility as Curino and Baliani evoke the subaltern history of postwar Turin and 1970s Rome. They hold themselves and the audience members accountable for their roles in maintaining an inclusive history by encouraging them to interweave their own personal memories and experiences within a common historical framework. They embrace the spirit of anthropologist Edward M. Bruner when he acknowledges, "Stories may have endings, but they never end."<sup>54</sup> Rather, they are told and retold, and reconfigured and rethought. When private identities surface within a context of public sharing, they can shed new light on events that had become distorted in hegemonic histories. If, however, the stories remain untold, then they remain unknown, and once stories enter the realm of the forgotten they cease to exist, or worse, they cease to have ever existed in the first place. The next chapter demonstrates some of

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<sup>54</sup> Bruner, "Experience and Expressions," 17.

the main ways in which narrators, as cultural workers and civil servants, teach their audiences how to ensure their stories live on.

## Chapter 3

### The Degrees of Orality and Language that Convey Experience

In his famed essay, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” Walter Benjamin laments the diminishing ability of people to tell stories “properly” and states that the reason for the lack in skill relates to experience. He expresses a sense of unexpectedness and surprise along with his dismay that people are simply unable to convey experiences with each other as though such an exchange had lost its intrinsic value. Part of the problem lay in the role that modern technologies had in fostering a thirst for information at the expense of more timeless modes of social interaction whose content and scope often moved beyond immediate concerns. To some extent, however, his explanation focuses more on the listener, or lack thereof, than it does on the storyteller. Technology may have corrupted the ability to tell a story, but, perhaps more importantly, does anyone care to hear one?<sup>1</sup>

These are relevant questions for Narrative Theater when the same irreversible process of an even more hyper-mediated decentralization problematizes the role of the contemporary intellectual. As in Benjamin’s logic, the assault of a cacophony of voices across multiple media can overwhelm the ability to hear a single one. In part as a reaction to this reality, Narrative Theater’s orality aims to and succeeds in recovering ground lost

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 83-109.

to information overload and aural fragmentation. This theater is specifically about making a harmony out of many voices while synthesizing how large events affect ordinary people. Paolini has told of receiving copious amounts of correspondence from fans asking him to incorporate their experiences into his work which he interprets as a sign that modern society has little faith in institutions amidst a dwindling historic memory.<sup>2</sup> While that might be a rather large conclusion to draw, at the very least it does indicate an awareness on the part of his audience that Paolini tells the stories of ordinary folks, and that those people are thinking about ways in which their own histories interact with the events that Paolini describes. There is an implicit admission at least on the part of Paolini's fans that Narrative Theater provides a way of combatting the silence surrounding the experiences of ordinary people through nontraditional, and non-institutional, practices. This work then demonstrates not only that experiences matter, but also that they can be shared through utterly unspectacular means, in a genre that privileges the spoken word over any other performative convention. Perhaps most importantly, there is indeed an audience for the story.

This chapter focuses on how narrators use orality to share their own experiences, and those of others, as a means of encouraging their audiences to reproduce the same modes of oral transmission of everyday histories in their own lives. Although their practice is more formalized than Benjamin's vision of the itinerant or local storyteller, the narrators create an atmosphere of inclusivity where people from many walks of life converge in the semi-public sphere of the theater. Here I analyze the orality and language of Narrative Theater in order to unpack the ways in which this genre appeals to popular

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<sup>2</sup> Povoledo, "In Italy, Memories are Made of This: Theater."

audiences. As it is deployed in this chapter, I define ‘orality’ to mean, fundamentally, giving human voice to (hitherto written or unspoken) words. The narrators express themselves minimally or elaborately, using sophisticated diction or colloquial parlance, and ultimately develop their own styles. I analyze several linguistic choices and what they bring to a production as a whole. Rather than articulate the differences amongst the narrators, I pay particular attention to their commonalities in order to develop the key terms that help demarcate the boundaries of Narrative Theater as a specific genre of theatrical performance.

My analysis begins with productions about the 1970s, whose rhetoric is distinguished by their anti-establishment subaltern spirit. To this end, I draw upon Celestini’s fantastic rendering of the lives and experiences of temporary employees or “temps” on short-term contracts. His *Appunti per un film sulla lotta di classe* (Notes for a Film on Class Struggle, 2007) demonstrates how even a second generation narrator can embody the zeitgeist of the 1970s. Narrative Theater plays often do not read as traditional or even experimental scripts intended for performance, but rather as something between a manifesto, a public speech, and a novella. This affects their orality since, as texts, the works read fluently and are not necessarily presumed to be spoken; thus, when the narrators do utter their words, the event itself produces a radical nuance. Linguist Giovanni Nencioni’s scholarship on the gradations of written to spoken text will be useful here in working through the implications of such a wide range of media. In Narrative Theater, the act of speaking can take on an almost revolutionary quality because the works do not read as though they were meant for the theater, even though they were. Narrative Theater productions aim to create a corporeal dimension to their

productions not only interaction of story and voice, through the seemingly prosaic accounts of everyday experiences and the manner in which these are delivered by the narrator.

Another form of narrative language that I focus on is that of performance by which I mean their physical (bodily) language, not just their utterances. As is common practice with actors, narrators sometimes also plan each gesture with incredible exactness and with specific intentions in mind. Focusing on the performing *body* enables a consideration of a seeming contradiction that emerges through a consideration of only the voice: certain narrators like Celestini and Paolini improvise much of their work, while others, like Baliani, plan out every gesture. In the second section I examine the relationship between performative choices and the story, and how different performance languages, including moments of silence, just like different verbal preferences, enhance the narrator's ability to communicate with the public.

Finally, I investigate one of the most important commonalities among the narrators' use of language: the frequent use of dialect and regional terms. An analysis of Enia's recent piece *Mio padre non ha mai avuto un cane* (My Father Never Had a Dog, 2010) demonstrates both the centrality of dialect in Narrative Theater and its power in terms of artistic integrity. It is also an important tool for earning the audience's trust and establishing an intimate rapport between performer and public since both exist fundamentally in the same world, and speak the same language. To varying degrees, all of the narrators employ at least some dialect whether they are performing in its native region or in another part of Italy altogether. It is one of their strongest tools in creating a space that emphasizes inclusivity and shared experience.



## Historical Connections: The Language of the 1970s

Since the ideological struggles that exploded in '68 continued well into 1970s, the very language of that decade echoed the principles and demands of feminist, labor, youth and other movements largely through such print media as magazines and journals. Sound bite slogans were aplenty from *l'utero è mio e lo gestisco io* (it's my uterus and I manage it) to *fascisti, borghesi, ancora pochi mesi!* (fascists, bourgeois, only a few more months!). Many political and social-political groups had their own journals from the "Trotzkjisti" ("Trotskyists" in journals such as *Quarta internazionale*; *Bandiera rossa*; *Falcemartello*) and workers (*Quaderni rossi*; *Potere operaio*; *Classe operaia*) to the many cultural-political journals from *Aut aut*, which focused on class history and awareness, *Fuori!*, which addressed issues of the gay liberation movement, *DWF* for "donna woman femme" confronting women's issues, and finally the Marxist *Contropiano*, and *Ideologie* that emphasized recent history and current events. Though some were ephemeral, many survived to contribute to the political and cultural climate of the 1970s. The very existence of such varied sources speaks to the complexity and heterogeneity of the many different voices that distinguish the political debates of the time.

While the political and cultural tenor of the period was immortalized in these journals, other, more conventional forms of literature were also evolving. The youth movement's rebellion against tradition manifested itself in the rejection of the novel, though even in the early-mid 1960s with literary circles like the Gruppo '63 experimental prose was more and more frequent. As the cultural historian Jennifer Burns points out, by the 1970s, political protest occupied the space of the novel through linguistic choices in

works by marginal writers.<sup>3</sup> The works even reproduce some of the language used by militants as when Vincenzo Guerrazzi focuses on graffiti sprayed by workers in his novel, *Nord e sud uniti nella lotta* (North and South United in Struggle, 1974), or Nanni Balestrini's novel about industrial protest *Vogliamo tutto!* (We Want It All!, 1971), the title itself a popular slogan from the era. This last example is of particular interest to Narrative Theater as it demonstrates the relationship, or the discovery and experimentation of the relationship, between the written word and oral expression. The particular relationship between performance and text—which I define as *orality*—was thus borne out of, and was designed to express, the political fractures deriving from this period.

Before addressing the dimensions of what Nencioni called the *parlato*, it is important to contextualize the relationship between communicative methods within the charged political and cultural atmosphere of the 1970s. Burns also invokes the importance of testimony as a conceptual framework for many writers of the time, citing *autocoscienza*, literally “self-consciousness” but also with a subtext of “consciousness-raising” when applied to feminist writers seeking to voice their politics and experiences. This practice ultimately led to explorations of different narrative modes including confessional, autobiographical, diaristic, or epistolary.<sup>4</sup> With respect to Narrative Theater, what is most noteworthy about this movement is the passage from silence to spoken word

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<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Burns, "Facts, Fictions, Fakes: Italian Literature in the 1970s," *New Readings* 6 (2000): 4.

<sup>4</sup> For more on *autocoscienza* see Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp, *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991), 9-11; *Non credere di avere dei diritti: La generazione della libertà femminile nell'idea e nelle vicende di un gruppo di donne*, (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1987), 32-35; Balestrini and Moroni, *L'orda d'oro, 1968-1977: La grande ondata rivoluzionaria e creativa, politica ed esistenziale*: 479-88.

and also to written word in their many published texts. Related to the social history studies of the time, the heretofore largely ignored stories of women had also been lost amidst the din of louder voices. *Autocoscienza* contributed, if not always directly, to the atmosphere of consciousness raising and historical reclamation from which Narrative Theater was born both in terms of substance (concern for a people's history) and method (the stages of communication). With respect to writers during the 1970s such as Balestrini and Guerrazzi, the desire to challenge and transform conventional forms of society and politics led many to claim to be the spokesperson of certain movements, thus arrogating to themselves the plural, heterodiegetic voice of the protestors.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, most narrators do not attempt an overt challenge against convention or behave as spokespeople, though a narrator might occasionally fit that description, particularly Paolini and Celestini, in some of their more civic-oriented pieces. They do, however, regularly embody a "heterodiegetic voice," presenting different viewpoints.

Comparable to the orality that Burns identifies in 1970s literature, Narrative Theater shares many similarities with, and takes its mechanisms further into the realm of, performance. The linguist Giovanni Nencioni distinguished two main categories of spoken Italian (*la grammatica dell'italiano parlato*): colloquial conversation (*parlato-parlato*) and theatrical dialogue based on a written text (*parlato-scritto*). The latter also encompasses two subcategories that differentiate between written texts. One lies within the frame of a short story or novel such as dialogue, and the other is a type of written text meant to be read out-loud (*parlato-recitato*) as is the case with theater.<sup>6</sup> Nencioni works

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<sup>5</sup> Burns, "Facts, Fictions, Fake," 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> Giovanni Nencioni, *Di scritto e di parlato: Discorsi linguistici* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1983).

through various distinctions between conversational and written Italian, considering, for example, the place for the possibility of spontaneity and improvisation with all the inherent moments of self-correction, interruption, inarticulate sounds in written dialogue. These impulsive articulations that can so enrich communication, but that are difficult to convey in active (as opposed to descriptive) language, lead him to conclude that spoken language is “dirty” whereas its written equivalent, even with the intention of vocalized utterance, is a “clean” language.<sup>7</sup> Narrative Theater does not fit neatly into either of these categories, in part because the techniques of individual narrators differ. Curino and Baliani tend to follow their scripts quite closely, while Paolini, Celestini, and Enia will use their texts as guides and improvise shows in the *commedia* style.

Nencioni does, however, articulate various circumstances that affect linguistic directions and to which Narrative Theater is also sensitive. He argues that, to a certain extent, spoken language can never really be written in its entirety or comprehensively because the context is constantly in flux. Context here is a variable that is always based on who is in the audience, or the location of a production, which then alters the principal characteristics of spoken language to reflect the rapport between the speaker and the listener. It is the dynamic between the two that informs the speaker of what (and how) to say next.<sup>8</sup> This thinking resonates with Erving Goffman’s theory of frames discussed in the previous chapter, even though he used a theory of performance to interpret behaviors in everyday life. Just as Goffman’s notion clarified the strategies embedded in the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 131, 33.

narrator's actions, Nencioni's linguistic systems allow a consideration of the development and role of orality in Narrative Theater.

The form of the Narrative Theater genre offers the type of contextual flexibility that Nencioni discusses, stretching beyond what actors can normally accomplish when they cannot deviate from texts. Even though the actor can make adjustments to her performance based on how she reads the audience, a narrator can literally add or cut from a script in real time. This goes somewhat beyond Nencioni's scope since he focuses on conventional productions with multiple characters. In those instances, he asserts, between the costumed actors and their dialogue against a decorated set on one side of the stage, and then the public on the other, the theater is not really an authentic method of communication in the technical sense.<sup>9</sup> Narrative Theater is closer to that authentic ideal, however, in part because of the flexibility and improvisation that the practice affords, but also because of the direct mode of address with which the narrators communicate to the audience rather than other characters.

In this section so far I have suggested a link between the experimental prose of the 1970s and Narrative Theater that suggests variations on orality, rather than theatrical performance as a mode of simple delivery, or the way in which authors transfer language from the written to the oral and back again. Nencioni's distinctions between various spoken communication and their different relationships with texts offer a framework in which to consider these experiments. I would now like to examine an actual Narrative Theater text to demonstrate both some of the linguistic choices that share the rhetorical

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 135.

tenor of the 1970s, and the way that the concept of orality can help to understand how such texts permit a flexible and dynamic interaction between narrators and audiences.

Although the subjects of Narrative Theater pieces vary greatly among the narrators, even while their styles and rhythms are unique, and even while they often insist on regional signals in works with national resonances, one commonality is precisely this civic aspect that echoes the idea of political commitment, or *impegno*, of the 1970s, and the way in which narrators communicate it.

Returning to a second generation narrator, I examine Celestini's work on what I call the "Temps Projects," a series in various media that explores the stories of temporary employees at the Atesia call center near the periphery of Rome. This was an extremely vast and versatile effort on Celestini's part, and ultimately included the publication of several varied texts, a performance, and a documentary film interspersed with short clips of Celestini sharing anecdotes where employees explain their situation in monologues or respond to interview questions. The texts include a book called *La lotta di classe* (Class Struggle, 2009) that consists of four chapters, some fantastic and some realistic, told by different characters who live in an apartment building on the outskirts of Rome, one of whom is a "temp" at a call center named Miss Patricia. The other text, *I precari non esistono* (Temporary Employees Do Not Exist, 2008) comes with the DVD of his documentary *Parole sante* (Holy Words, 2008) and is an explication of the film's creation featuring excerpts from interviews, several articles on the film that Celestini published in newspapers and magazines, excerpts of recent laws regarding temporary work standards, photocopies of documents from the government inspection of the Atesia call center, and even the transcript of introductory comments from the public debate

where Celestini previewed the film in January 2008. Finally, this project also includes Celestini's Narrative Theater performance, which he calls *Appunti per un film sulla lotta di classe* (Notes for a Film on Class Struggle 2007) where he, dressed casually in a pair of jeans and a button-down shirt, sits in a chair or stands to a raised microphone and tells several stories about Atesia's temporary workers interspersed with autobiographical accounts. He also reads and sometimes sings parts of his narration, accompanied by a live band on stage with him. Similar to several recent works by Paolini and Enia, three musicians here accompany Celestini, playing music during some of his stories, but also playing and singing with Celestini during the intervals as well.



**Figure 7** Ascanio Celestini in *Appunti per un film sulla lotta di classe* (ca. 2009) and musicians Gianluca Casadei, Roberto Boarini, and Matteo D'Agostino. Photo by Maila Iacovelli – Fabio Zayed/Spot the Difference. Courtesy of <http://www.ascanioclestini.it/categorie/immagini/page/3/>

The Temps Projects expand beyond performance where, unlike the vast majority of Celestini's other works which begin on the stage, the research and writing first developed into a filmed documentary, then to a written assembly of promotional materials, many of which became a performance piece, and finally the crafting of a book

that reads like a novel. Celestini does not forget the potential of new media either, since many excerpts from the project are available online. The expansive methods of expression across text, film, and performance are impressive, in part because of the consistency of Celestini's investigative focus. His mission is to share the unjust experiences of workers in what he refers to as a modern factory, and he tackles an array of media in order to do so. With the exception of the actual performance, it seems imprecise to call these other endeavors such as the film or the novel, "Narrative Theater," and yet, besides influencing the distribution and exhibition of Narrative Theater, they are gradations of the orality that narrators have developed. They also represent another dimension within Nencioni's framework, one that comes after the passage between the written and spoken text, and that enters into the realm of filmed or digital media. According to Nencioni, spoken text can resonate as authentic speech, or conversely as an oral delivery of previously written work. In this sense orality also includes additional kinds of writing where spoken text can emerge from journalistic essay pieces like those of Celestini in *Appunti per un film*, in addition to variations of spoken language such as film and theater.

Paolini's work has also developed into a similar multi-media enterprise. He now airs almost every new piece on television, and sells many of the scripts with a DVD of the performance. For the most part, unlike *Parole sante*, Paolini's films and television stints are live tapings of his shows. Both Baliani and Curino have also aired work as live tapings on state channels. Similar to Celestini's packaging of miscellaneous production and promotion pieces into the book, *I precari non esistono* that comes with the film *Parole sante*, Baliani and Paolini have also released texts that are a mix of journals,



rehearsal and performance notes, and research from when they devised the piece.<sup>10</sup> All of the supplementary materials that surround the productions, and yet stand on their own, have become a part of the extra-textual layers of Narrative Theater. They also present highly original gradations from pre-text to written text to spoken text. What ends up as the spoken text can be closer to either the written text as with the example from *La lotta di classe*, or can assume a more chatty confessional tone with Baliani's *Corpo di stato* in the preceding chapter.

Continuing with the Temps Projects, a closer reading of the written text will allow for an analysis of both the orality in the Narrative Theater style, and the language with its civic resonances. Celestini often ends the theatrical production by reciting the same story at the finish of the book *La lotta di classe*, which is about a temporary worker (named Miss Patricia in the book) closing down her workstation at the office and walking away from, essentially, all that is unjust on a grandiose scale. Celestini dramatizes this in a fantastical rendering of the work environment spilling into urban space. In the voice of the employee he describes leaving his bureau:

I cross through the walls of anti-missile glass... Now on the street, I cross through the little anti-theft gated communities with their anti-gypsy alarms, protected by the anti-black people iron bars with their anti-rust varnish where anti-Semitic owners who wear anti-wrinkle cream make their anti-allergy antipasti in their atomic bomb shelters. I cross through

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<sup>10</sup> Paolini, for example, released *I Quaderni del Vajont* (The Notebooks of Vajont), which is a thin volume of materials and progress reports during his research for the piece, and for the release of the DVD on the twentieth anniversary of the production, Baliani wrote an entire book called *Ho cavalcato in groppa ad una sedia* (I Rode on the Back of a Chair 2010) about his experience creating *Kohlhaas*.

the banks under video-surveillance. I walk through the government mints where the machines print money. Every tick registers a new bill. And it's right to measure the bills with ticks because like the insects these ticks also suck the blood of the people. I cross through the walls of the barracks, the insane asylums, the prisons... Meanwhile a guard tries to stop me because I cross through her and her uniform too. She will then turn towards her superiors and say, "Captains, what should we do? This is witchcraft!" And I will turn and respond to her, "No, this is class struggle."<sup>11</sup>

Though Celestini delivers essentially the same version of the above text in performance, with the possibility for some slight unremarkable variation in diction, he clearly uses a type of spoken word that connotes a written literary text. It does not exactly trip off the tongue or have the feeling of spontaneity. What is interesting about Celestini's delivery is that he does not attempt to hide that fact in any way. He does not perform the lines as though he were inventing them then and there. Rather, he speaks very quickly, almost in a flat monotone register, contrasting the grandiosity of the magical realism with a direct and matter-of-fact delivery. By the time he hits the last few words—"this is class struggle"—they resound with an unexpected weight. Preserving the pristine form of what

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<sup>11</sup> "Passo attraverso i muri di vetro antiproiettile... Scendo per strada, attraverso le recinzioni di villette antiladro controllate dagli allarmi antizingaro, protette da inferriate antinegro con vernice antiruggine dove antipatici padroni antisemiti con crema antirughe fanno antipasti antiallergici in bunker antiatomici. Attraverso le banche videosorvegliate. Attraverso i muri delle zecche. E fanno bene a chiamarle zecche perché l'hanno inventate per succhiare il sangue alla gente. Attraverso i muri delle caserme, dei manicomi, delle galere... mentre una guardia prova a fermarmi, perché attraverso anche lei con la sua divisa. Lei che si girerà verso i superiori e dirà <<Brigadiere che facciamo? Questa è stregoneria!>> E io le risponderò <<no, questa è lotta di classe.>>" Ascanio Celestini, *Lotta di classe* (Torino: Einaudi, 2009), 228-29.

Nencioni called “clean language” through delivery lends a formality to Celestini’s work that the rest of the presentation (casual clothing, no set piece or props) contradicts.

The theater’s ability to offer constant renewal to a narrative piece with each performance can also work to the narrator’s benefit on a more political level. While Celestini’s play version of the Temps Projects uses anecdotes from the book and film as a base, he sometimes changes the protagonist depending upon the location of the performance. As he explains, he adapts each show according to the public decrees, government inspections and legal disputes surrounding temporary work in a given area so that they are current and relevant on a local level.<sup>12</sup> In Rome he might reference the Atesia employees whereas in Bari he might invoke workers in the Barilla factories or in Faenza the conditions in the garment industries. In doing so, he takes advantage of the author-actor dimension of Narrative Theater that allows him to change the script at will. In terms of form, such decisions underscore the flexibility of the genre, while with regard to content, they speak to the range of his political commitments. Celestini thus takes a local issue and highlights its national relevance, constantly balancing his performance between the two while focusing ultimately on the experiences of individuals.

The verbal choices in the above quote from *La lotta di classe* demonstrates how Narrative Theater evokes the contentious political environment of the 1970s through, in this case, the clashes with state police and the fight for legal and cultural representation for marginal groups. As the employee walks through “the walls of anti-missile glass” and then through the gated communities with all their anti-everything gadgets to anti-wrinkle cream and “anti-allergy antipasti,” Celestini depicts an intensely controlled military

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<sup>12</sup> Ascanio Celestini, *I precari non esistono* (Rome: Fandango, 2008), 107.

environment full of phobias and aggression. The world through which the audience or reader accompanies him is home to people who are so paranoid that they are resolutely anti-everything from other types of people (gypsy, black, Jewish) to aging, allergies, and, humorously, even food in a pun on the word for the first course, “antipasto.” The temporary worker in this final sequence does not only renounce her job, but all of these conditions of contemporary life. Such totality is particularly reminiscent of the 1970s in that people pursued many different angles of addressing the establishment in an effort to confront a multitude of unacceptable issues.

Celestini continues to evoke institutional exploitation by suggesting that financial establishments both materially and morally enervate the common people. As the employee walks through the state mints, Celestini broadens his original starting point from the corporate factory environment of the work space to state organizations from asylums to prisons which exist to control people, in his Foucauldian rendering. She passes through them, allowing her both to acknowledge and to renounce them. If she were to pass above them, it would be a denial of them, but walking right through them suggests more of a dismissal. Even though she does not stay in each place, she does occupy them, and that is important because Celestini places the employee face to face with the law at the climactic moment. In the book, he incorporates the other main characters from previous chapters when Miss Patricia runs into them as they too are escaping the dystopia by walking through walls, marble columns and fire doors in an en masse revolt. Despite the fanciful sorcery of people unaffected by the physical borders that divide a city or the social borders that divide a population, Celestini is clear about the main feature of their lives: class. This leaves the audience with the memory of what they

have heard about Miss Patricia earlier in the piece. In her job, where she earns 500 euro a month, she lives by three-month contracts with zero benefits. In simpler terms, the piece becomes a tale of fairness. What is the base line for workers' rights? What is the relationship between one's dignity and economic necessity? Why are they benefits and not just what society accepts as normal?

As many different groups from workers to students began to examine their relation to political power structures in the 1960s and 1970s, so many leading artists rethought the place of their work within, and the very nature of, contemporary society. Amidst those voices were some of the most influential theater artists in the postwar period. It is worth acknowledging the revolutionary tone of the narrators' predecessors who were in dialogue with current events. The development of Narrative Theater is directly tied to both the socio-political struggles that emerged in '68, but also to the national crisis in theater that I discussed in chapter one. The 1960s witnessed the struggle of theater artists against the inertia in their profession with gusto and verve. These efforts to define and reinvent the state of postwar Italian theater reached a climax with the November 1966 publication of a manifesto called, "Per un nuovo teatro" (For a New Theater) in the journal *Sipario*, still among the most important theater journals in Italy today. Many leading actors and directors from Carmelo Bene and Giuliano Scabia to Carlo Quartucci and Franco Quadri were contributors. The manifesto also inspired a cross-disciplinary call to action with signatures from musicians like Sylvano Bussotti and film directors such as Marco Bellocchio and Liliana Cavani. It is particularly noteworthy that this piece emerged before 1968 because it underlies the extent to which culture, and theater in particular, was in dialogue with the radicalizing political climate.

The language in the manifesto, perhaps even more than the concepts the authors convey, reveals this combative climate. They open by stating, “The battle for theater is something much more important than a question of ethics,” and denounce the “timidity of theater” which is “subordinately” hidden under an “apparent state of flourishing” when it is, in fact, the exact opposite: moribund. They continue to lament the

“...aging of and lack of adequate structure; the growing interference of political and administrative bureaucracy within the public theaters; the monopoly by powerful groups; the deafness regarding the most significant international repertoire; the total inattention for the experimental initiatives that have tried to breathe life [into the theater] over the course of these years...”<sup>13</sup>

The stridency of such prose is reminiscent of the rebellious language in popular texts later in the 1970s. The accusatory rhetoric underlines the argument that quality state-run theater is suppressed under government bureaucracy and that an aggressive denial of this state of affairs blocks the creation of new work. This type of anti-establishment tone is prevalent throughout much of the *contestazione* or the struggles of '68, which turned into a longer march throughout the 1970s. Narrative Theater came about on the heels of these types of debates, and reproduces the discursive environment of the period, including

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<sup>13</sup> “La lotta per il teatro è qualcosa di molto più importante di una questione estetica... in questi anni si è assistito all’inaridimento della vita teatrale, resa ancora più grave e subdola dall’attuale stato di apparente floridezza. Appartenenza pericolosa in quanto nasconde l’invecchiamento e il mancato adeguamento delle strutture; la crescente ingerenza della burocrazia politica e amministrativa nei teatri pubblici; il monopolio dei gruppi di potere; la sordità di fronte al più significativo repertorio internazionale; la complice disattenzione nella quale sono state spente le iniziative sperimentali a cui si è tentato di dare vita nel corso di questi anni.” Corrado Augias et al., “Per un nuovo teatro,” *Sipario* 247 (1966): 136. Available as “Il documento: Ivrea 67 Convegno per un nuovo teatro”, <http://www.trax.it/olivieropdp/mostranew.asp?num=44&ord=4>.

within theater arts circles, which were also in conversation with politics and culture. The dexterity and inventiveness that the narrators embrace in terms of their orality that runs across media echoes the call for ingenuity in the November 1966 *Sipario* manifesto, which resounds with the demands that many groups voiced in 1968. In terms of the evolution of twentieth-century theater in Italy, Narrative Theater is not a part of that experimental avant-garde movement to which the authors of the manifesto allude, but rather evolved slowly over the next forty years. Still, even in Celestini's text published more than forty years later, is a similar tenacity, this time not against the state-run theatrical establishment, but against an increasingly oppressive surveillance state, from gated-communities to insane asylums and prisons.

The linguistic rapport between Narrative Theater and the political movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s is particularly significant considering that the Left slowly lost its facility with language as the decade pressed on. To say that Narrative Theater recuperates that language would be to overstate the case, particularly since most narrators do not align themselves with a specific political party, but part of the success of Narrative Theater is in its ability to restore the oppositional voices of the 1970s, but were eventually drowned out in the neo-liberal corporate tide of the 1980s and into the Berlusconi era. As cultural scholars Antonello and O'Leary have argued, during the 1970s the Left was extremely loquacious. One need only recall the many journals (dailies, weeklies, monthlies, quarterlies) that sprang up during the decade. Yet it ultimately failed to provide a new and sustainable political vocabulary.<sup>14</sup> A large part of the problem was the descent into terrorism characterized by the Red Brigades as Baliani

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<sup>14</sup> Antonello and O'Leary, *Imagining Terrorism*: 2.

demonstrates in *Body of State*. In the piece, the idealism is palpable as he faithfully attends meetings, watches his baby while his partner goes to pro-choice rallies, and constantly refers to his old friends as “comrades.” He also demonstrates how, even before the kidnapping of Moro, his enthusiasm waned as the violence increased. This portrayal conforms to Antonello and O’Leary’s assessment. While not overtly emphasizing the issue of language, Baliani subtly peppers his text with words like “comrade” that sound so anachronistic today, indicating this type of revolutionary language did not survive.

At the heart of this idea of “the failure of the word” is the failure of language in a broader sense that connotes political and cultural communication with words as much as through ideas and actions. Enrico Fenzi, who was formally involved with the Red Brigades, also concedes this when he explains that

Certainly there was also this enormous and, in my opinion, decisive failure of the word, of communication on the cultural level... Like all great revolutions do, [the revolutionary movement in 1970s Italy] needed to invent a new language, new dress codes, new expressions, new ideas, new images. This did not come to pass with the volume that it should have and that was the most atrocious failure.<sup>15</sup>

Certainly, new ideas and modes of expression *did* increase and permeate during moments of that decade, which Antonello and O’Leary identify with terrorism. Extremism sacrificed the very domain in which leftist contestation was at first quite effective:

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<sup>15</sup> “C’è anche stata certamente questa enorme e, secondo me, determinante sconfitta della parola, della comunicazione, sul piano culturale... [Il movimento rivoluzionario] avrebbe dovuto inventare, come le grandi rivoluzioni inventano, un nuovo linguaggio, nuovi costumi, nuove espressioni, nuove idee, nuove immagini. Ciò non è avvenuto nella maniera più clamorosa e questa è stata la sconfitta più atroce.” Sergio Zavoli, *La notte della Repubblica* (Milan: Mondadori, 1992), 218.



shaping a new language and providing a creative vocabulary that was widely available via print media. As the presence of radicals increased, the increasing isolation and self-referentiality of leftist terrorism grew apace along with the increasing separation of its jargon from everyday language.<sup>16</sup> Where Narrative Theater enters this dynamic is through its embrace of verbal language associated with the left from “comrade” to “class struggle,” that travels in the way that Fenzi describes. It has its own method of communication, which includes the ability to morph from text to live performance to film. Its orality is part of its language.

### **Physical Language**

Narrators privilege the spoken word in their performance and, in so doing, construct a very laconic physical language, which nonetheless speaks volumes about their stories. In contrast to their spoken language, in most cases they keep their physical language—gestures, the amount of stage space they occupy, physical transformations—to accommodate character to a minimum, sometimes even confined to a chair. As I examine below, Dario Fo, who is famous for his *commedia* style physicality, is in this respect the antithesis of the narrators.<sup>17</sup> In this section, I approach the narrators’ physical choices as they relate to the text from two main perspectives. The first investigates theater scholar Paolo Puppa’s idea of the “dramaturgy of the word,” in which the text is given a full analytical priority, though it still remains squarely in the post-modern practice of

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<sup>16</sup> Antonello and O’Leary, *Imagining Terrorism*: 2.

<sup>17</sup> Soriani, “Dario Fo, il teatro di narrazione, la nuova performance epica: Per una genealogia di un ‘quasi-genere’,” 623.

performance theory rather than traditional textual analysis. Although I examine text, I do so from the multi-dimensional perspective of performance, always situating the word within its orality. The second approach that I use to examine the narrators' physicality extends back to the ancient tradition of oratory. In a brief consideration of these classical practices, I demonstrate the breadth of the narrators' physical language, which relies on many techniques that accrue to their poetics.

### **Dramaturgy of the Word**

When scholars credit Dario Fo as the grandfather of Narrative Theater, they are often quick to point out a major exception in that Fo's theater is very physical, whereas Narrative Theater is in many ways the exact opposite. Fo maintains several somatic traditions associated with the court jester and *commedia dell'arte* including dimensions of pantomime and even an exaggerated and even grotesque performance style.<sup>18</sup> In fact Fo is largely known for the elasticity of his facial expressions with which he endows his characters, and his full body physicality of flailing arms and leaping across the stage. Verging on slapstick, he calls upon traditions that invoke "vulgar" Roman comedies and the *commedia dell'arte* where physical expression is so heavily relied upon that improvisation takes the place of the script. There are correlations between his work and the Italian dance comedies of the 1950s, bits of American silent film, the entertainment acts called *avanspettacoli* that were performed before film screenings, parodies, and even mixtures of futurism, surrealism and absurdism that flirt with modern French works by

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<sup>18</sup> Simone Soriani, "In principio era Fo," *Hystrio* 1 (2005): 17.

Ionesco and Anouilh and later with street theater and groups such as the Bread and Puppet theater.<sup>19</sup>

In short, Fo reinstates the hegemony of the action over the word. Fo's "Gammelot" language is the perfect example. Speaking complete gibberish, he is able nonetheless to communicate an entire story through intonation and physical expression. Words are rendered unnecessary. In this way, Fo's technique challenges Nencioni's theories on the gradations of orality. Fo exemplifies something of a "pure state" of orality in which sounds do not accrue to words, and yet meaning is still communicable. Further, Fo's rejection of the sacredness of the text puts him squarely in the realm of performance theory, which embraces analysis of the three-dimensional stage world over a singular focus on the script.<sup>20</sup>

Narrators, on the other hand, barely use the stage in their performances. Enia and Baliani most often remain seated in a chair the entire time. Curino, Paolini, and Celestini will stand at a podium or in front of a raised microphone, and if they do use more of their performance spaces, they simply go to different parts of the theater, including where the audience is, and stay in that spot for a sequence of the story. Occasionally, there are large gestural interpretations as when Paolini and Curino briefly inhabit one of their characters and alter their physical and vocal performances, but Narrative Theater is very subdued physically. Clearly, narrators emphasize the value of the spoken word and concentrate the attention of the listener on what they are saying, not what they are doing.<sup>21</sup> I would only

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<sup>19</sup> Puppa, *Parola di scena: Teatro italiano tra '800 e '900*: 295.

<sup>20</sup> Scuderi, "Dario Fo and Performance Theory," 241.

<sup>21</sup> Soriani, "In principio era Fo," 18.

add that they are not just privileging the word, but the *spoken* word. Such a key difference is closely related to the widespread appeal of this verbal practice and requires an interpretation of the significance of the narrators' choice to navigate physically restricted presentations.

For Puppa, one of the most significant changes in the last fifteen years of contemporary theater has been the return of what he calls "the dramaturgy of the word."<sup>22</sup> This term interestingly pairs together traditional dramatic analysis, which is based on the script along with performance theory to analyze what takes place on the stage. In my understanding of his phrase, he underscores not only the art and technique of dramatic writing, but also its orality. The term is also closely related to Guccini's concept of "epic performance" that he uses to refer to a variety of solo performers. The dramaturgy of the word speaks to the inner workings of Narrative Theater in that its form draws attention to itself precisely because the stories' content does not hide behind the spectacle of performance. The audience never forgets that the narrators are just people telling a story. Even when they portray characters, which the first generation of narrators tends to do more frequently, they are still clearly themselves impersonating someone. They make no effort to conceal their identity even if their impression is pitch perfect creating nuances that call to mind the original.

In this way their actual physicality provides an analytical distancing effect to the presentation of the story. Through their laconic movements, they signal the audience to listen more than to watch. From the narrators' perspective, even in storytelling, while the written text is not the most important element, neither is the physical action. Rather, in

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<sup>22</sup> Puppa, *Il teatro dei testi*: 159.

their lack of physicality, they give room to the inherent performativity in the words. In this way, they create a new gradation to Nencioni's idea of *parlato-scritto*, in which theatrical dialogue is based on written text. Narrative Theater is more dynamic than Nencioni's subsets of dialogue and the *parlato-recitato*, or text meant to be read out loud. As the dramaturgy of the word would suggest, narrators work with an element of orality that allows exterior circumstances or simply the will of the narrator to change the story in real time, while at the same moment emphasizing the text over any form of spectacle, whether or not that text pre-existed. Even when extemporaneous, their orality privileges the word.

The strategy of physical simplicity functions on several levels from the aesthetic to the political, but minimalist movements also reinforce a specific method of exploration through the lens of popular history. As I have argued, narrators investigate lesser-known stories, and like microhistorians they interpret universal concepts through small events. Thus, Narrative Theater's methodology is consistent with a physical language that embraces minimal movement and enables the narrator to concentrate the audience's full attention on the *spoken* act of historical recuperation. Like the butterfly in Argentina whose flap of the wings creates a hurricane in Spain, Constantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) believed that the slightest movement of the body riveted its entire system. Although he might be most well-known for emphasizing the emotional connections between actor and character, his acting technique was also largely based on the specificity of gestures. An actor who curls in his shoulders and blows on his hands conveys that he is cold in different ways than one who jumps up and down trying to create warmth. The inner impulse matters. Eugenio Barba expands upon this notion when

he writes that inner action is essential to the connection with the physical action or movement.<sup>23</sup> Through those small gestures, what the actor experiences in her inner life becomes what the spectator experiences. In the same way that the narrators choose smaller and secondary histories, their physical process emphasizes the subtle over the obvious.

Returning to Puppa's notion of the dramaturgy of the word, the words in Narrative Theater take on their own performativity since there is such minimalist physical action on the stage. In relative stillness, the events of the story, what could be the onstage action in a conventional production, come to life through words. Besides providing a method for allowing the text to take center stage, the physical language of Narrative Theater conveys a level of authority in its subtlety. Foucault's ideas on the relationship between bodies and power are helpful here. Drawing upon the Leviathan analogy, he argues that bodies, like the king's body in seventeenth century France, are not a metaphor, but a political reality in their physical presence, necessary for the functioning of the monarchy.<sup>24</sup> On an individual level, one can acquire a mastery and awareness of her own body through investment in its power: exercise, muscle-building, glorification of the body as beautiful, etc., but there are also societal counter attacks such as health or moral norms including sexuality and decency. He also urges that one must set aside the thesis that power in bourgeois capitalist society has denied the reality of the body in favor of the soul, consciousness, ideality since nothing is more material, physical, corporal than the exercise of power. Bourgeois capitalist states, he argues, produce power at the level

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<sup>23</sup> Barba, "An Amulet Made of Memory: The Significance of Exercises in the Actor's Dramaturgy," 128.

<sup>24</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*: 55.

of desire as well at the level of knowledge. Despite such preventative measures as censorship, exclusion, or repression, power creates knowledge much more than prevents it.<sup>25</sup> This circular system of relationships between the body, power, and knowledge resounds within Narrative Theater in surprising ways. The body in Narrative Theater is not weak, but quieted, which serves a specific function: it allows the words to take on their own corporeality. Lifted off the page, or improvised in real time, and uttered without many distractions on the stage, they become a political reality that alters national narratives as they are uttered.

If the narrators have a unique body/power relationship when they exercise a level of precise performative mastery, then knowledge is connected to their body language because their physical minimalism allows the text to resonate with greater emphasis. The privileging of concise language demands a focus that transmits authority and power. If Celestini had had an optically sophisticated set piece that enabled him to appear as though he were walking through gated communities and stately banks and even through another actor, it would have been an entirely different play. He would not need to describe the scene since it would happen before us, and thus the only words spoken would be those of the police officer asking her supervisor what to do, and declaring “This is witchcraft!” followed by Celestini’s corrective response, “This is class warfare.” In that case, the audience members would identify with the police officer as indeed everything before them would be some magic trick. Listening to Celestini alone with his descriptions, the audience is with him. The sorcery of his scene is more mysterious and poignant when he narrates it.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 57-59.

Just as Barba noted when drawing upon Stanislavsky, the actor's inner life is deeply connected to physical choices, which she can convey with precise gestures, thus in Narrative Theater, with its large absence of characters, the inner life of the actor must connect to the text in the same way that the audience member does. Celestini's more modest choice to tell rather than show actually reveals a lot, but it conveys different ideas. Rather than in awe of the spectacle, the audience hangs on to the ideas inherent in his tale, of the isolation produced by contemporary capitalist society with its gated communities. The lack of an elaborate set, and the choice to deliver the text in a rapid nearly monotone voice shows that connection to the inner emotional state, which flickers with both the urgency of someone ready to fight, and the weariness of someone who is tired. In favoring the communication through their own delivery, narrators do not inhabit the text as much as they allow it its own life, as though the story were itself a character. This is the dramaturgy of the word, a technique that affords the text its own space, indeed, most of the performative space. More than the narrator and her autobiographical anecdotes, the text, the story, is the protagonist. In keeping with Foucault's body/power/knowledge system the narrators are also playing with this relationship and using their bodies in a restrained form in order to empower the text.

### **Classical Oration**

As the narrators stand at a podium or calmly walk across the stage addressing the audience, they conjure specific and often multiple identities such as a professor or a politician. Regardless of what he says when Paolini stands downstage center speaking



directly to the audience and then casually walks to a chalkboard in *Vajont*, he could be a lecturer in a classroom. When Curino stands at the podium for most of *Santa Bàrbera*, the matter-of-factness in her tone, her focus on the audience, and her professional poise convey the image of an important presentation. Although the narrators also break away from those moments when they portray different characters and employ a different physicality, I identify this formal mode of delivery with classical oratory. Looking at classical oratory provides another way of understanding how narrators use orality to convey their meaning and involve their audiences.

One way to consider oratory in the late Roman Republic is through a tripartite system of narration from the Ciceronian rhetorical tradition that consists of *historia*, *argumentum*, and *fabula* (history, argument and fable). With *historia* Cicero means to evoke a truth, whereas an *argumentum* is juridical since the veracity of claims must be established. *Fabula* plays upon this doubt, introducing an element of imagination that remains ever-hypothetical, since circumstances are presented as though they actually happened whether or not they actually did. In addition to these three elements, there is also the poetic convention, closer in form to Horatian *ars poetica* and analogous to the epideictic branch of rhetoric that involves praise or blame of well-known characters. Similar to satire, this practice functioned as both rhetorical exercise and popular entertainment.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, such a tripartite system, complete with satirical embellishments, has many similarities with the performative structure in Narrative Theater. To understand this, one does not need to listen to *what* the narrators say to decipher the language and

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<sup>26</sup> Päivi Mehtonen, "Poetics, Narration, and Imitation: Rhetoric as *ars applicabilis*," in *The Rhetoric of Cicero in its Medieval and Early Renaissance Commentary Tradition*, ed. Virginia Cox and John O. Ward (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 295.

tone of their physical gestures. The overarching structure of many narrative pieces adheres to this arrangement where *historia* and *argumentum* favor a presentation that tends towards the formal, while *fabula* and its interspersing moments of satire assume a more complex, and often comical, tone.

In classical oratory, the comic aspect of *fabula* is unique to specific circumstances and not just as a form of diversion; as a practice in extemporaneous speech, it allows orators to deviate momentarily from their main arguments. Such a digression also relies heavily on the listener's imagination.<sup>27</sup> In Narrative Theater, both humor and improvisation assume the same function as the *fabula*. Similar to contemporary public speeches, whether encouraging fantasy and metaphors through a *fabula*, making the audience laugh, or using direct address and breaking from the script, connecting with the audience is of paramount importance. Since the stark, minimalist space severely restrains any form of visual spectacle, the rapport between narrator and audience is one of the central experiences in Narrative Theater. Humor plays an important role not only in how it gives pause to dramatic tension, but also in how it breaks the terse physicality of the narrators. In their comedic moments they use their bodies much more than during serious sequences, momentarily drawing attention away from the words, and focusing on the physical communication of details.

While the narrators maintain the classical formula of *historia*, *argumentum*, and *fabula*, the generally comic *fabula* sequences comprise anecdotal moments sometimes laced with impersonations. The purpose of comedy in the retelling of a drama parallels its role in classical oration to offset the seriousness, affording the audience a pause to digest

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 301.

the material, and to enhance the rapport between narrator and spectator. For example, Paolini's *Il racconto del Vajont* is a serious piece based on the infamous 1963 disaster in the province of Belluno, between Veneto and Friuli, when a landslide provoked by the construction of the (then) world's largest dam caused a mega-tsunami that swept away five small towns, killing approximately 2000 people, in a matter of five minutes. In 1993 when he first presented his piece, much of the inquiry regarding the circumstances of the tragedy had similarly been swept out of public consciousness. Paolini points out that even in 1963 the press had so sensationalized the events into a lugubrious hysteria that they circumvented a responsible journalist-driven investigation into the contributing factors. In his three hour story he attempts to compensate for these lapses by questioning what led to the tragedy and by conveying the history from heretofore silent perspectives that include the people from the region as well as the engineers and government officials who contributed towards the construction of the dam.<sup>28</sup> Comic anecdotal moments somewhere between the truth and hyperbole offset the ominous tragic ending to which the audience continually moves closer and closer as the play progresses.

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<sup>28</sup> As with many of Paolini's plays such as *I-TIGI Canto per Ustica* (2000), *Gli album* (1987), and *Il sergente* (2004), *Vajont* was not only taped, but aired uninterrupted on national television in Italy. Several stations have shown his plays including Rai2, Rai3 and Canale Sette, to great critical acclaim and in the case of the *Il sergente* premiere, over 1,200,000 or 5.5% of viewers on the night it aired watched his show, which was a record for Canale Sette. See Rita Celi, "La7 sorprende nella sfida degli ascolti con 'Il Sergente' di Marco Paolini," *La Repubblica*, 31 Oct 2007. Available at [http://www.repubblica.it/2007/10/sezioni/spettacoli\\_e\\_cultura/sergente-paolini/ascolti-la7/ascolti-la7.html](http://www.repubblica.it/2007/10/sezioni/spettacoli_e_cultura/sergente-paolini/ascolti-la7/ascolti-la7.html).



Figure 8 Marco Paolini in *Vajont* (ca. 1993)  
 Photo Marco Caselli Nirmal. Courtesy of [http://www.jolefilm.it/files/index.cfm?id\\_rst=19&id\\_elm=853](http://www.jolefilm.it/files/index.cfm?id_rst=19&id_elm=853)

Of course there are many different styles of comedy, from ironic to romantic to satirical, and scholars have investigated them in different ways. Pirandello's famous essay *L'umorismo* revolves around the assertion that humor must exist to say something. In other words, there is an inherent message within humor.<sup>29</sup> Aristotle's *Poetics*, however, offers a very different reading. He describes comedy as base, vulgar and as a form that does not have the potential, like tragedy, to inspire or to produce catharsis.<sup>30</sup> Comedy, thus, is a puzzling part of the dramatic genre because some consider treatment of the comic as the litmus test of credibility of any theory of dramatic genre.<sup>31</sup> If the artist can employ comedic elements, it will ultimately deepen the tragic quality of the entire work. Indeed, the comedy in *Vajont* works in all of these ways; it has an inherent

<sup>29</sup> Luigi Pirandello, *L'umorismo e altri saggi* (Florence: Giunti, 1994), 3-150.

<sup>30</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Matt Heath (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1996), 9; Matt Heath, "Introduction," in *Poetics*, ed. Matt Heath (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1996), lxii-lxiv.

<sup>31</sup> V. Ulea, *A Concept of Dramatic Genre and the Comedy of a New Type: Chess, Literature, and Film* (Carbondale: Southern Ill. Univ. Press, 2002), xiii.

message, its humor is at times vulgar, but it also serves to deepen the tragic aspect of the events portrayed. The presence of comedy also demonstrates how the tropes of classic oratory produce a dialectical tendency in Narrative Theater that intersects rhetorical skill with actor-centered improvisation-oriented performance styles (most famously employed in the *commedia dell'arte*).

Some have read instances of physical humor in Narrative Theater in comparison to Fo, but a reading that accounts for the moments of comedy seen from within the larger project demonstrate a strategic use of physical humor, far beyond a tribute to the Nobel laureate. Throughout *Vajont*, Paolini carefully places comedy in the traditions of the stand-up comedian, slapstick and Aristotelian base humor. Some of the roots of the stand-up comedian lie in the figure and practices of the court jester.<sup>32</sup> Since the sovereign did not want someone who would challenge his authority, this stock character dressed his wisdom and criticism in humor. Paolini embraces this aspect when he impersonates the locals of Belluno. As a native son, he has additional license to do so because his humor will be seen as self-deprecating. Celestini, a Roman, mimicking the people of Belluno, would strike a very different tone unless he first established himself from an equivalent socio-cultural background. Here, Paolini depicts grandmothers with guns threatening to shoot if people try to take away their land. When the water in the valley rises over what used to be their homes, Paolini depicts the citizens of Belluno running to save what they can—furniture, mattresses, and eventually door frames and roof tiles. When their old town was finally submerged, he describes how they canoed back to the site to catch any

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<sup>32</sup> Don L. F. Nilsen, "The Evolution of Stand-Up Comedy: From the Middle Ages to Post-Modernism," *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* 21, no. 1-2 (2000): 35.

glimpses they could of the former town. He asks the audience to imagine “Some guy with a hat singing *la biondina in gondoletta*...” He conveys their desperation in the face of adversity with great delicacy, balancing the tragedy and absurdity of the situation. They are victims in Paolini’s story, but this slightly facetious suggestion of a lone ranger singing to himself is playful and even affectionate. In fact, part of Paolini’s success is in combining a mournful tribute to those who perished with a celebration of them, their routines and way of life, the local culture, and the local dialect.

In contrast to the staid poise of the orator, and the more limited movements normally exercised in Narrative Theater, Paolini embraces a more rigorous physical comedy during the comic interludes. Paolini signals these shifts partly by altering his physicality from more laconic gestures to flamboyant ones. When he recounts the first geological research on the mountain, he moves around the entire stage, hunched over to imitate scientists who are out of place in these mountains. He flails his hands when referring to the instruments the scientists are carrying, “maybe there were two passengers, with baggage strapped on behind, in front, all over the thing... this overloaded [car] is pumping up the military road, barely making it... they have valises, leather packs, picks, surveyors’ gear, specimen cases, topographical recording tools... long red and white measure sticks fanning out on the back of the sidecar like tail feathers on a turkey’s ass....”<sup>33</sup> Paolini uses physicality to enhance the farcical—even *fabula*—qualities of his

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<sup>33</sup> Marco Paolini and Gabriele Vacis, *The Story of Vajont*, trans. Thomas Simpson (Boca Raton, Fla.: Bordighera, 2000), 9. “Forse a bordo c’erano due passeggeri. E dietro, di fianco, davanti alla pancia, i bagagli... È stracarico il Gilera che spompetta su per le carrozzabile... E sopra ci sono bagagli, zaini in pelle, piccozze, stumenti di rivelazione, un teodolite lucido... E paline bianche rosse, di quelle che da misurazione, piantate sul culo del sidecar a fare la ruota come le penne sul culo del tacchino.” Marco Paolini and Gabriele Vacis, *Il racconto del Vajont*, 1. ed. (Milan: Garzanti, 1997), 16.

material. In the televised version, the camera switches to the audience members occasionally, offering proof that these interludes are successful in the way the audience laughs and applauds. Akin to classical oratory, even within an eloquent delivery of speech, the juxtaposition of humor with foreboding tragedy affects the relationship between the narrator and the audience as well as the overall emotional impact.

Paolini is cautious, moreover, not to divide his depictions into political binaries. He does not utilize comedic elements to mock the officials that he holds responsible for the disaster and more tragic/dramatic elements to display his reverence for the locals, the victims. While he is wary of positing such simple oppositions, he is still able to privilege the local everyman over the modernist government planner. In one early scene he impersonates both a local, and a managerial type who has come from Venice to observe the progress of the geological research. The joke is a play on words, involving the actual name of the town, Casso, and the vulgar name for the male genitalia, *cazzo*, which also functions in Italian as a multi-purpose swear word. Paolini starts his impersonation with the cantankerous Venetian, tired from his windy trip up the mountainside, rudely asking the local, “What’s the name of this town, *cazzo*?”

LOCAL: Casso.

VENETIAN: What are you a parrot? I asked you what the *cazzo*’s the name of this town, *cazzo*?

LOCAL: Casso.

VENETIAN: *Cazzo*? You calling me a *cazzo*? No, you hick, I’m calling you a *cazzo*...

LOCAL: No, *cazzo*, that's the name of the town, Casso. Calm down, *cazzo*!<sup>34</sup>

During this sequence Paolini offers a very physical performance largely through facial gestures, shrinking his height to depict the local as meek, and turning from side to side to play the Venetian facing stage-right and the local stage-left as though the two were facing each other. This is much in the vein of stand-up comedy where the actor also solicits reactions from the spectators by occasionally looking out towards them, before returning to impersonate a character through exaggerated facial and bodily expressions. In this scene, it would appear that the local is the subordinate character because the Venetian—already with more political and cultural authority since he is from a larger, famous city—is there to destroy his town and take his land. Paolini has the Venetian crudely put the local in an inferior status by treating him disrespectfully from the beginning, leaning forward in his stance, whereas in his portrayal of the local he leans back and throws up his arms defensively.

Yet, by the end, the tables have turned and Paolini endows the local from Casso with a stronger stance, and more height and balance, than the Venetian *cazzo*. That the Venetian does not even know the name of the town that he will obliterate, combined with Paolini's contrasting physical embodiments of the two, dramatizes the larger historical point about the cruel and unfair ways that rural localities and their peoples have been sacrificed throughout Italian history. This summons the more polemical task of re-writing history from the perspective of the masses, not the city-dwellers or engineers who have no personal connection to these towns that perished in the Vajont tragedy. Paolini might

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<sup>34</sup> Paolini and Vacis, *The Story of Vajont*: 22. "Ciò com'è che si chiama 'sto paese, casso?" "Casso." "Ciò pappagallo! Te g'ho dimandà come che se chiama 'sto paese, casso." "Casso." "Casso? Ciò belùn, casso te lo digo mi..." "No, casso, el paese se chiama Casso! Casso..." Paolini and Vacis, *Il racconto del Vajont*: 30.



be making a joke out of the town's name, but he also enunciates it. He creates a brief routine around it with a seemingly juvenile play-on-words that function mnemonically to re-place Casso on the Italian map and within the minds of his spectators.

Understanding the history of oratory through this tripartite method thus provides a means of unpacking the different rhetorical strategies of Narrative Theater, and also strengthens its links to the classical tradition. In both cases, the function of *historia*, *argumentum*, and *fabula* serves to shift one's focus from persuasion to narration; from civic to personal contexts; and from discourse to literature. The "dramaturgy of the word" and the physical restraint of the narrators also guide the audience's attention constantly back to the story and layers it within spoken text. While an actor's physical choices have been seen traditionally as enhancing the written text, here multiple layers of performative strategies illuminate new dimensions of a text. The orality of the text is the performance.

### **Regionalism, Testimony, and Investigative Journalism**

Heretofore I have highlighted the ways that narrators relate to various dimensions of language from the 1970s *impegno*, or political commitment. Further, in practicing the "dramaturgy of the word," I argued that narrators privilege speech over action through subdued physical choices. Nencioni's theoretical development of the spoken word in relation to the text is helpful in considering its orality through physical language. I also considered the legacy of classical oratory, particularly in terms of traditions in satiric commentary. In this final section, I turn more directly to the words themselves, rather than their performative aspect. The history of the modern Italian language is fairly unique. Standard Italian was especially pronounced in Tuscany and Rome, particularly in

writing, whereas local dialects were more ubiquitous throughout the land.<sup>35</sup> This began to change, first under the nationalist educational imperatives of both the liberal republic and the Fascist state, and then with the postwar introduction of mass media. Historically in Italy, speaking in dialect did not necessarily connote a lower class or less-educated background. The royal family of Piedmont, for example, often chose to speak in dialect rather than Italian amongst themselves.<sup>36</sup> What, then, is significant about the fact that narrators often include dialect in their plays if it does not suggest class distinctions? This section examines those aspects of textual language that narrators employ, particularly dialect, testimony and journalistic tendencies, and how those choices affect the works and their reception by the audience, to demonstrate the extent to which they are in conversation with other cultural movements.

### **Dialects**

The presence of dialect in Narrative Theater is so great that it is one of the hallmarks that define the genre. Some scholars have acknowledged its importance with respect to Paolini, claiming that his works, particularly the *Bestiario Veneto* series (Venetian Gladiator, 1998), constitute a tour of the linguistic heritage of the region<sup>37</sup> and that Paolini himself is a “Gramscian surveyor of linguistic cultural origins.”<sup>38</sup> It is also true more generally that narrators embrace acts of national-cultural politics because they

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<sup>35</sup> Brian Richardson, “Questions of Language,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Italian Culture*, ed. Zygmunt G. Barański and Rebecca J. West (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 63.

<sup>36</sup> John Haycraft, *Italian Labyrinth: Italy in the 1980s* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1985), 14.

<sup>37</sup> Farrell and Puppa, *A History of Italian Theatre*: 383.

<sup>38</sup> Puppa, *Il teatro dei testi*: 206.

challenge people to think about society and history first in terms of their own lives. Within this process, dialect becomes a strong tool for enabling these connections. Here I will investigate Davide Enia's *Mio padre non ha mai avuto un cane*, (My Father Never Had a Dog, 2010), a short piece published by the small Sicilian press Due Punti in a lightweight pocket-sized edition. Enia uses this relatively unknown local publishing house rather than the Rome-based Fandango Libri, for example, with whom he published his previous works as it seeks to support local business and to reach the local inhabitants more directly.



**Figure 9 Davide Enia in *I capitoli dell'infanzia* (ca. 2009)**  
Courtesy of [http://www.davideenia.org/foto\\_capitoli.html](http://www.davideenia.org/foto_capitoli.html)

Similar to Baliani's *Corpo di stato*, where he interweaves personal narrative with the events surrounding Aldo Moro's assassination, Enia recounts the murder of Giovanni Falcone, the judge who, along with Paolo Borsellino, gained fame for their success in fighting the Sicilian Mafia's financial and political might before ultimately being assassinated. Similar to the beginning of *Vajont*, where Paolini recalls watching his

mother listen to news on the radio, Enia shares the moments in which both of his parents returned home after having heard the news of Falcone's slaying. Enia recalls these scenes in various depths of further and nearer reaching pasts that relate to this particular tragedy, but in all his descriptions there is a centrifugal force that casts the entire play in orbit by the use of a single word in Sicilian dialect; *s'asciucò*.

In a poetic opening that returns throughout the piece like a chorus he announces, "The first image is that of a dog that stares. I am the dog. I am watching my father who is a rock that cries."<sup>39</sup> He then offers the only word that he remembers his laconic father uttering, *s'asciucò*. From here, he shares experiences that color their relationship, reminisces on his hometown of Palermo, and recalls one of his youthful infatuations with a local girl. Just as the play seems to veer away from the ominous tones of its beginning, Enia drops the word again, *s'asciucò*, and whips the audience back around to this central point. Here, in the middle of the piece, Enia offers an etymology, and the audience begins to realize that even in the other memories that he shared, the word was always hovering. Simply enough, it means, "to dry" (*asciugare*). From the Latin *ex-sucare*, a mix of *ex*, which indicates origin and deprivation, and *sucus*, the juice, the spirit, the life made liquid."<sup>40</sup> The abundant imagery of liquids, particularly those that emerge from places where they normally do not exist, like rocks that cry, now takes on a new depth. All the

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<sup>39</sup> "La prima immagine è quella di un cane che guarda. Il cane sono io. Sto guardando mio padre che è una pietra che piange." Davide Enia, *Mio padre non ha mai avuto un cane* (Palermo, Italy: Duepunti Edizioni, 2010), 7.

<sup>40</sup> "Asciugare. Dal latino *ex-sucare*, un composto di *ex* che indica origine e privazione, e *sucus*, il succo, l'umore, la vita fatta liquido." Ibid., 33.

fluid verbs such as “saturated,” “oozing,” or “soaked” that he uses to describe Palermo, which is also full of “deep puddles of blood,”<sup>41</sup> are now connected back to this word.

Continuing on, he explains that “*Exsugere* is the act of sucking or drawing out, of extracting to a state of emptiness and aridness.”<sup>42</sup> In Western Sicilian (specifically Palermo-based) dialect, he notes, a hard “c” replaces the hard “g” from *asciugare* to *asciucare* and thus the word takes on another meaning, the one that his father invoked in his utterance of *s’asciucò* that he barely managed to express “while he was crumbling.”<sup>43</sup> This second explanation is the key to understanding the other recurring imagery in the play, which is that of something so dry that it “disintegrates,” “crumbles,” “fractures,” “shatters,” “cracks,” breaks into “shards,” or is “eviscerated”<sup>44</sup> that Enia summons throughout the piece. Through these distinct word choices that he subtly disperses through the story, he summons a whisper of *s’asciucò*. Finally, he reveals the full sentence that his father had been trying to voice, “The mafia *dried out* Giovanni Falcone.”<sup>45</sup> Masterfully, Enia enables this expression to serve not only as the focal point of the story but also, in his reflective dissemination of its meaning, as the bomb itself that killed Falcone. Capitalizing upon the colloquial definition of *s’asciucò* as “to kill,” much of his imagery suggests a state in which both the life, the “juice” (*succo*), is sucked out of someone in addition to the shattering explosion of an utterly desiccated substance. Enia creates an aural proximity to the events surrounding Falcone’s assassination because the

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<sup>41</sup> *Una pietra che piange; satura, intriso, trasudata; pozzanghera di sangue profonda.*

<sup>42</sup> “*Exsugere* è l’atto del succhiare, del suggere, dell’estrarre svuotando, inaridendo.” Enia, *Mio padre*: 33.

<sup>43</sup> “...mentre si sgretolava.” Ibid., 34.

<sup>44</sup> *Disintegra, sgretola, frattura, incrina, frantume, sventra.*

<sup>45</sup> “La mafia *s’asciucò* a Giovanni Falcone.” Enia, *Mio padre*: 35.

audience constantly, if subtly, relives them in the continual detonation of *s'asciucò* layered both through the repetition of the actual word and its oft-invoked meaning through synonyms. This is not a mere formal matter since the direct address as an aspect of Narrative Theater's orality heightens the intimacy between speaker and audience.

It is no coincidence that such a key term is presented in dialect. This choice enhances the proximity of the events to the audience since its regional and colloquial connotation immediately makes it more intimate. The narrators approach issues of mass interest from within, not above, the perspective of the masses. Here as in Paolini, Celestini, Curino and Baliani, the use of dialect is important in how it shapes the narrator's rapport with the spectators. The narrators tend to use dialect similarly where it initially might be inaccessible to Italian speakers from other regions. The expression become clear through an explanation on the narrator's part, either through physical communication not far from miming, or through outright explanation as Enia's work here demonstrates. Since the narrators choose to work with dialect and go through the trouble of explaining it, they place the regional amidst the national. Falcone's murder was a tragedy for Italy as a country, and so every Italian audience already experiences the play with a particular perspective and historical knowledge. Yet, Enia renders the story more Sicilian through the use of *s'asciucò*, and through scatterings of other words in dialect, thereby spicing the spectator's recollections with a local flavor and underlining the regional resonances insofar as they consider the murder not just as an Italian, but as a Sicilian, event. Inherent in the attempt to expand a non-Sicilian spectator's appreciation for the local is the question of what this event meant for Sicilians themselves. The use of dialect redistributes the power of the tragedy back to Sicily and to a "regular family" by

way of Enia and his parents. Dialect then might connote regional or even local identities as well as class and Enia brings out these multiple dimensions in his repeated invocation of a single word.

### **Vocal Witness to History**

Dialect is important to Narrative Theater in how it strengthens the rapport between the narrator and the audience. The familiarity, intimacy, and sense of rootedness associated with dialect, construct a sense of authenticity. The narrators appear evermore modest and similar to the spectators because they use language that roots them in the local, the near, the common. The presence of testimony in Narrative Theater functions in a similar way. One can first glean its importance by how trends in scholarship from the 1970s echo in the performances of the narrators. Oral history, particularly its emphasis on language and interpersonal relationships, along with microhistory and its ability to highlight ideological systems from new perspectives, has many commonalities to Narrative Theater's own methodology.

Running parallel to the discovery of microhistory as a method, Italian historians in the 1970s reconsidered the practice and value of oral history, both the inherent problems of ascertaining its accuracy as well as its unique benefits. Among the most dedicated to oral historiography is former Università di Torino professor Luisa Passerini. She notes that this method of oral history privileges what is closer, ordinary, and normal, and—important to the study of Narrative Theater—she underlines the significance of language in her analysis of marginalized groups. The very language of oral history, she stresses, is of the common folk (*gente comune*), and thus the historian plays witness to

more than an educated turn of phrase and calculated diction. Rather, she hears dialects and codes from people with no official voice.<sup>46</sup> This cultural conscientiousness demands a kind of detective work that is important to the way Narrative Theater manifests itself through language and dialect. Enia dramatizes this by giving the one word in dialect a centrifugal force in his piece. A primary function of *s'asciucò* is to emphasize the associations with “common folk,” the ordinary, and everyday life. It is not only regional, but everyday vernacular.

Oral historical methods are also relevant to the use of comedy in Narrative Theater. As I noted earlier, there are parallels to moments of *fabula* or even satire present in classical oratory. An additional dimension here, which a consideration of oral history can flesh out, is the tension between written and spoken texts. Returning to the discussion of comedy in Paolini's *Vajont*, and placing this work in conversation with Passerini's studies, it is clear how the narrators are in a special position to articulate tragedy. In her book about working class Turin during Fascism, *Torino operaia e fascismo* (1984), Passerini explores the experiences of living under the Mussolini regime by comparing oral and written accounts. While in the process of interviewing a particular individual, she began to notice the woman's storytelling rhythms. She observed the particular moments when the interviewee sped up, the repetition of particular words, and the elements of comedy that she alternated with dramatic and painful ones.<sup>47</sup> She realized that this comic tendency was the big difference between the woman's oral account and the one written in her diary. The facts were the same; but the ways in which she told the

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<sup>46</sup> Luisa Passerini, ed. *Storia orale: Vita quotidiana e cultura materiale delle classi subalterne* (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1978), vii-viii.

<sup>47</sup> Luisa Passerini, *Torino operaia e fascismo* (Bari: Gius. Laterza & Figli SpA, 1984), 14-16.



story differed based on the medium. This finding, corroborated with similar patterns in others' accounts, lead Passerini to conclude that orally expressing one's memories veiled the most tragic elements such as deaths and injuries, pain and fear. In fact, she notes that the interviewee revealed how people were able to avoid the most difficult moments in oral accounts.<sup>48</sup> This observation resounds with Narrative Theater where the narrators must communicate difficult events orally, usually without the possibility of hiding behind costumes or a set.

This distinction between the written and the oral recalls Nencioni's gradations, particularly in the use of humor to avoid the seriousness featured in written accounts. Paolini does not leave out any of the tragic details, but does include comedic elements in his presentation. As I have shown, his use of comedy creates a closer rapport with the audience, varies his presentation, and provides some relief to a truly tragic story. Passerini's findings show that "everyday" individuals deploy a similar rhetorical strategy, suggesting that Paolini's tactic also contains these more instinctual elements of self-defense and protection. In this way, the structure and delivery of his performance mirrors that of actual people who experienced the 1963 Vajont tragedy. Whether the audience is reading on that level or not, the storytelling patterns, although heightened, are similar to those found in oral testimony, implicating Paolini even more profoundly in the story he shares.

In fact, members of the Laboratorio Teatro Settimo describe part of their early method as collecting as many testimonies (oral, newspaper, charts, and photographs) as

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<sup>48</sup> "La memoria orale vela gli elementi di maggior tragicità—i morti e i feriti, il dolore e lo spavento—e fa emergere il carattere di eversione simbolica proprio della festa." Ibid., 16.

they could in order to make a theater text. They would define the outcome not as a record of any particular event, but rather as an exploration of how testimony reconstructs that event. They believed that collecting these varied sources and analyzing them altogether would permit a universal truth to emerge from which they could construct a theater piece.<sup>49</sup> Here their practice overlaps with microhistory. Through the investigation of smaller under-represented accounts, historians aim to draw some larger conclusion. As much as *Vajont* is about giving voice to the locals who lost their, it is also a story of hubris and how the hasty execution of a project led to calamity. Similarly, with respect to microhistory, in terms of both substance and the naming of the method, there is an auto-reflexive dialogic practice.<sup>50</sup> Narrators exercise a similar level of awareness as they develop their research process.

In addition to the self-awareness in method that the Teatro Settimo exercised in the above example, the narrators also suggest this meta-dialogue through specific performative elements. For example, Celestini's linguistic poetics are particularly unique in the way he accelerates his speech in nearly all his productions, creating an additional tension. Because of this fast pace, the audience is always aware to some extent that Celestini relays the story by varying degrees of separation. The automated tone of his speech highlights the fact that the audience is not hearing the story from the primary source. This type of meta-awareness comments on the story's own pretenses to authenticity. Having these elements in common with the practices of oral history and

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<sup>49</sup> "Realizzare una 'approssimazione al soggetto', e dunque formulare ipotesi e creazioni drammaturgiche sulla base di indizi, di micro-notizie apparentemente trascurabili ma che in realtà possono rivelare fenomeni profondi di notevole importanza." Settimo, "LTU3: Appunti per l'avvio del terzo laboratorio di trasformazione urbana. La ricerca storica,," Curino Private Collection.

<sup>50</sup> Ginzburg, "Clues: Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes," 24.

microhistory indicates a level of academic rigor and poetical direction unique to Narrative Theater. Much of the dialogue in these pieces is accessible to mass audiences since the narrators base a significant amount of their texts on actual testimony, often leaving dialect intact, yet the very practice connotes a precise historiographical methodology.

### **Journalism**

Historians are not the only professionals with whom narrators share techniques. Particularly in plays that border on “civic theater,” with more overt socio-political messages such as *Vajont*, the narrators sometimes present themselves as quasi-investigative journalists. The ways that narrators subvert traditional presentations of drama through the counter-information journalist style has been little explored, yet it is a particularly common feature in early Paolini as well as more recent Celestini pieces where they consciously intend for audiences to discuss and grapple with the topics in the show. The attempt to confront issues from different angles recalls the “counter-information” tendency of the 1970s where the notion of “making information” changed so that the strategies of sharing news destabilized the traditional presentations of journalism.<sup>51</sup> The goal of journalism then was not only to inform the public, but also to offer the reader a more multi-dimensional perception of the present and to reach more diverse audiences. This concept is certainly not new to theater.

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<sup>51</sup> Massimo Veneziani, *Controinformazione: Stampa alternativa e giornalismo d'inchiesta dagli anni Sessanta a oggi* (Rome: Castelvechi, 2006), 43.

In fact, Dario Fo explores the notion of “living newspapers” in the Author’s Note of the 1977 edition of his *Mistero Buffo*, when he refers to theater, particularly comic theater, as a primary vehicle for people to express ideas, communicate, and even provoke one another. He claims that, “For the people, grotesque theater in particular has always been the first method of expression, communication and the commotion of ideas. The newspaper was oral news, dramatized by the public.”<sup>52</sup> His idea recalls the classical dimensions of the *historia*, *argumentum* and *fabula* triangle. Fo, the jester, enacts this logic in different ways than the narrators, exaggerating the *fabula* and satire in many plays to underline the absurdist elements of true—often tragic—situations. Although the poetics is quite distinct from Fo’s, the attempt to provide information and provoke discussion is intrinsic to Narrative Theater, and a key distinction to draw upon is the way in which their “information” reaches beyond facts to something more akin to the Benjaminian vision of storytelling.

One of the qualities that might emerge during the act of remembering is an investigative energy that recalls Fo’s comments about theater as the people’s newspaper. In recovering the past, one’s adrenalin picks up at the prospects of discovery. A defining element in the communicative structure of Narrative Theater is this excited informant quality when relaying information. In fact, it is similar to the practice of investigative journalism and reporting, and grounds the formation of Narrative Theater in a particular decade. While the 1970s might officially stand for a heavy period of intense political

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<sup>52</sup> “Per il popolo, il teatro, specie il teatro grottesco, è sempre stato il mezzo primo d’espressione, di comunicazione e di agitazione delle idee. Il teatro era il giornale parlato e drammatizzato del popolo.” Dario Fo, *Mistero buffo: Giullarata popolare*, Nuova , aggiornata nei testi e nelle note. ed.(Verona: Bertani, 1977), 5. It is noteworthy that in the 2003 edition “grottesco” was substituted with “comico” and “popolo” with “classi inferiori.”

turmoil, one of the positive outcomes was the phenomenon of “counter-information” that offered a different perspective from that of the mainstream newspapers. Narrative Theater does the same in that it re-envisions what constitutes relevant data. In the 1970s, “making information” changed, and strategies of sharing news subverted traditional journalistic methods.<sup>53</sup> The goal of journalism became not just to inform the public, but also to train the reader better to decode the underlying reality of the times. This more analytical approach also correlates with other influences from the 1970s such as the success of semiotics, the recasting of sociology and social research, and the intense politicization of media studies and culture. Similar to journalism’s reconceptualization, the audience was to discuss and dissect the content of plays such as *Passione*. In forming this hybrid performance genre, the narrators similarly subvert both historical and dramatic tradition.

Finally, I would like to underline the tendency toward a conversational mode of engagement amongst certain intellectuals during the 1970s that is relevant to the dialogic mechanism in Narrative Theater. Returning to the cultural historian Jennifer Burns, she has written that though both Italo Calvino and Pier Paolo Pasolini had embraced political commitment early in their careers, they began publishing more front-page editorials in mainstream newspapers such as the Milan-based *Il Corriere della sera* during the 1970s that they actually replaced the usual political commentators. This offered them a direct engagement with a large readership. As Burns points out, they also began to respond to each other in editorials in a structure of re-quoting and questioning in a “you say this” followed by “why?” pattern. Burns interprets that for Pasolini, this type of exchange had greater value than mere ‘journalism’ in its capacity to provide deeper explanations to the

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<sup>53</sup> Veneziani, *Controinformazione*: 43.

public.<sup>54</sup> What is really happening here is a choice of dialogic prose with direct questions over narrative prose. This is exactly what the narrators do as they share their stories. Although their format is a monologue, they perform a dialogic exchange on many levels between themselves and their research, the characters they discuss or portray, and the members of the audience.

Rather than commenting on their roles as artists, narrators perform them, and what they perform is something very similar to the ideas of the *intellettuale impegnato*. Burns writes that “individual authors were claiming not just to be the spokesperson of the movements but to embody the plural, heterodiegetic voice of the protestors.”<sup>55</sup> As Curino clearly demonstrates in *Passione*, when she assumes various characters, or when Baliani considers not only his own perspective, but wonders about the personal choices of some of his friends, the narrators, more so than writers because of the performance element, literally embody all these variegated voices. They are to some extent a new breed of intellectuals that work through periods in history or more current events not in newspaper editorials, but on the stages and in the piazzas throughout Italy.

When Benjamin laments the moribund state of storytelling, he places some of the blame on print media. Journalism, he suggests, contributed to the replacement of knowledge with information. As an example, he quotes Hippolyte de Villemessant (1810-1879), the founder of *Le Figaro*, who characterized the nature of information in a famous formulation, “To my readers ... an attic fire in the Latin Quarter is more important than a revolution in Madrid....” Benjamin suggests the centrality of distance: that which is

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<sup>54</sup> Burns, "Facts, Fictions, Fake," 2-3.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 5.

closer has more importance because it lays claim to verifiability. All that is necessary is that the information appears “understandable in itself.”<sup>56</sup> The loss here entails the way in which information does not live on, while stories that contain truth or wisdom supposedly do. Space is not a factor. As he notes, the distance one has traveled, or the extravagance of the tale, matters no more than “...listening to the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living...” and in fact, “an orientation toward practical interests” is a worthy trait of many successful storytellers.<sup>57</sup> The narrators, storytellers “from home,” find ways for a method that partially invokes journalism and therefore risks spouting information, even while they include a dimension that spurs a more deep-seated and lasting knowledge.

This dynamic is clear in Baliani’s *Corpo di stato*. As written in the 1998 program for *Corpo di stato*, the play is closely linked to his first major Narrative Theater success *Kohlhaas* (1990) because even though they are vastly different stories, they are cut from the same cloth: “the conflicted relationship between the need for revolt against injustice and the acceptance of the role of the avengers.”<sup>58</sup> Throughout the piece he quotes newspapers from the kidnapping and opens the show with what becomes a foreboding memory of when in 1973 students occupied the school of architecture in Rome. He starts out, in other words, with information. As the piece moves quickly to the end of the decade, he explores the violence of those years both from personal memory and as documented in newspapers.

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<sup>56</sup> Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 84.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>58</sup> “Il tessuto è lo stesso: il rapporto conflittuale tra esigenza di rivolta contro l’ingiustizia e assunzione del ruolo di giustiziere.” Baliani, *Corpo di stato*: 64B.

What draws out the greater themes in the piece is the combination of impartial journalism with Baliani's memories and commentary. Here, the universal truths that Benjamin sees in the talented storyteller emerge through a combination of concrete inquiry and reflection. Themes of violence beget violence. Against headlines of skirmishes between students and police, Baliani explores his own rage while watching his friend beaten by riot police, followed by the seething desire to be better prepared for a future encounter with the police. With the reflexivity characteristic of Narrative Theater, he soon asks himself, what that means. *Better armed?*

"I had seen many people killed [like Moro's guards] in those years. Many. But now, I don't know why, it was different [seeing them]. It was as though all the others, that I had tried to erase from my memory, now returned all together, all of them, those killed in cold blood, leaving their homes, the university staircases, where the victim was without an escape, without the possibility of a real fight, all these killings for which I could never find, never find for myself, a justification. But how did it come to this? How is it possible that friends, buddies from groups I hung out with, began to talk about weapons, just like that? From one day to the next they had begun to use technical terms, from specialized journals, as though they were infatuated. But wasn't it always the fascists that were in love with guns" (2003: 27-28)?<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> "Io ne avevo visti tanti di morti ammazzati così [come gli uomini della scorta di Moro] in quegli anni. Tanti. Ma adesso, no so perché, era diverso [con quegli della scorta]. Era come se anche tutti gli altri, che io avevo come cercato di cancellare dalla memoria, adesso tornassero tutti assieme, tutti, quelli uccisi a sangue freddo, uscendo di casa, scendendo i gradini di un'università, dove la vittima era senza scampo, senza possibilità di scontro reale, tutte uccisioni di cui non ero mai riuscito a dare, a darmi, una



In dramatizing the hysteria, youthful passions and fears from scenes of brawls with police to reading about the murder of his friend in the paper, Baliani laments the confusion of those years. He asks the timeless question about that threshold of violence and clarity. The key word, and chapter title, in the above excerpt is “arms,” since here weapons symbolize the turn from the rational to chaos. The Benjaminian ability to convey this larger question is here aided by journalistic accounts of time because they ground Baliani’s story in a tangible reality. This probably helps to explain the popularity of Narrative Theater just as Villemessant acknowledged that his readers gravitated towards what they knew. This does not have to hold a negative connotation, however. The narrators’ orality is vast with aspects that resonate with classical oratory and *commedia dell’arte* comedy, to cultural patterns from the 1970s along with the presence of regionalism as expressed through dialects. The political import to which all these factors accrue is that their orality both gives a voice to many under-represented people and perspectives, and also constructs a site where people can continue to add new layers.

Paolini, and indeed the other narrators commit their artistic projects to representations of those that history has largely left behind. In performing a history “from below” they assert that the many “small histories” like those of the Friulian townspeople matter. Paolini shifts the focus from the engineer and the government officials involved in the creation of the Vajont dam to the many people directly affected by its construction, many of whom eventually lost their lives. In simply telling their stories, the narrators

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giustificazione. Ma come si era arrivati a tutto questo? Com’era successo che amici, compagni di gruppo, di coreo, improvvisamente s’erano messi a parlare di armi? Da un giorno all’altro avevano cominciato a usare termini tecnici, da riviste specializzate, come se se ne fossero infatuati. Ma non erano sempre stati i fascisti gli innamorati delle pistole?” Ibid.

include the marginalized in a larger discourse of public history. Narrative Theater proves that even in times of social and economic discontent, there is still a space for the artistic development of culture for popular audiences. Indeed, it argues for the very necessity of recuperating the local through the practice of orality.

## Chapter 4

### Locating Community

In loopy cursive strokes from an inky blue pen the pressing question remained, “What will the new show be?” It was June 1, 1976. In Laura Curino’s personal journal, she recapitulates a meeting by the members of what soon became the Laboratorio Teatro Settimo, expressing her frustrations in the limited commentary for the “lack of focus” and “emptiness” at the gathering. The encounter “limped” along, she confides and pinpoints the problem by posing another question. In her orderly swirls she wonders, “How to reconcile the new theater discourse with the discourse on territory?”<sup>1</sup> In many respects this question is representative of the impulse that spurred the company’s numerous endeavors, from its earliest productions over twenty-five years ago to the most recent. As Curino’s theater company continued to search for ways in which their theater could explore “discourses on territory,” the possibilities assumed many different forms. Specific towns, places of work, and public institutions are central spheres across different Narrative Theater productions, but the genre also grew to encompass and contemplate the broader overlapping of public and private domains.

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<sup>1</sup> “Cosa sarà il nuovo spettacolo? Tutta la riunione si evolve, zoppicando, sul tema ‘come conciliare il nuovo discorso teatrale ed il discorso sul territorio?’” Laboratorio Teatro Settimo, “Cosa sarà il nuovo spettacolo?,” *Personal Notebook*, 6 Jan 1976, Box 1976, Curino Private Collection: Settimo Torinese, Turin.

This chapter concerns spaces; first, territories and specific establishments, and second, performance spaces, especially when they explore the extremes of staging possibilities that range from private homes to piazzas in the center of a town. Many Narrative Theater plays are specifically about certain lands, or human-made constructions. Many of Teatro Settimo's productions directly involve Settimo, while Paolini's *Vajont* is specific to several small towns in Friuli Venezia Giulia and a number of his other pieces reference that region's culture and language more generally. Enia and Celestini often concern themselves with themes specific to Sicily and Rome, respectively. Then there are the plays about locations such as factories, insane asylums, or call centers. Territory and locations are more than just themes; they are the other characters with whom narrators interact. I argue that place is of such importance to Narrative Theater practice due to the ideals of community that are attached to them. Exploring this concept both in light of the 1970s, when Curino was writing in her notebook, and in terms of anthropologist Victor Turner's notions of *communitas*, I will use the early works of the Teatro Settimo as well as Curino's 1996 piece *Camillo Olivetti* to demonstrate the importance of place in Narrative Theater.

The space in which narrators perform is also significant and very much a part of the same discourses of community. In the beginning, Teatro Settimo mostly worked in their hometown of Settimo Torinese, which they had declared was void of memory. One of their goals was to create its history, and they accomplished this in part by turning the city into their stage. Whether they performed in the basement of a shop, or in a friend of a friend's living room, the city was their stage. Narrative Theater is a practice that reconfigures and re-imagines space. With their level of popular recognition today, one

might expect narrators to perform on proscenium stages in mid-sized theaters of main Italian cities, but many still opt for nontraditional theater spaces, suggesting that performance sites continue to be particularly important to the genre. Since middle-to-large theaters would be simpler in terms of bookings and more lucrative in ticket sales, why bother to set up stages in the middle of a *piazza*, work with small theaters on the outskirts of cities or in small rural towns, use abandoned train stations, or perform in a public park? These were all choices for performance sites during the spring and summer of 2010 by Baliani, Enia and Curino. The main reason, I will argue, is because of the diverse communities that they seek not only to attract, but also to create.

To date, scholars have been largely unable to investigate these initial endeavors as most documents from the early years of the Teatro Settimo have not been publicly available. Here they provide a completely fresh viewpoint from which to approach the entire genre, and one of the most important themes that they reveal is the extent to which discussions on territory, location, and performance spaces were paramount in the development of the company that would bear some of the most prominent names in Narrative Theater. One venue that this company found particularly fruitful was the festival circuit where the members would present new works, see other contemporary productions and of course meet with other theater artists. I culminate my investigation with a brief review of the narrators' involvement in different theater festivals and examine the role of these events in creating further spheres of public performance.

## Early Endeavors, 1978 -1982

The Laboratorio Teatro Settimo experimented with various ways to engage discourses on territory by joining collectives, working with community groups, and incorporating the city into many of their early endeavors. One of their more important collaborative efforts was Arcircolo PEPE, formed at the end of 1978 by local groups with a variety of entrepreneurial plans from starting a graphic design company, a crafts and prints shop, and a pub-restaurant. These groups decided to join forces to apply for money from the region of Piedmont, the city of Turin, and other governmental sources. The groups came together under PEPE as a starting point to obtain basic funding with the intention to disband and eventually function on their own.<sup>2</sup> Under PEPE, Teatro Settimo was able to create a legal basis for their company with low costs and shared administrative responsibilities. There are countless letters in the Curino Private Collection from Teatro Settimo addressed to various local government offices such as the Cultural Attachés (*Assessorato alla Cultura*) of Settimo, Turin, and Piedmont asking for support. While the company also earned money working with schools, and eventually through their performances, these local state funds were integral to their initial development.

Before stepping into the rich cultural environment of the 1970s from the perspective of the narrators, I would like to recount briefly the antecedents to that decade. From their earliest years, the young artists of Teatro Settimo were committed to their community. Through theater, they aimed to combat the isolation of the individual that

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<sup>2</sup> Lizbeth Goodman and Gabriella Giannachi, "A Theatre for Urban Renewal," *New Theatre Quarterly* 7, no. 25 (1991): 27-28.

resulted from the alienation of industrially-driven postwar Italian society. As much as their creativity was rooted in theater, it was also concerned with creating a space destined to exist for the people.

The problem was that the primary funds for those initiatives were in swaths of unregulated, but not easily obtainable, public money. With World War II lingering in the recent past, the 1950s were home to major public undertakings to rebuild the country, initially with good results. There was successful growth in the iron and steel industries, the building of highways, and the expansion of telephone lines, all creating the illusion of an economic boom. Granted, there was no illusion in terms of the overall economy. The period between 1953 and 1962 was a prosperous time economically, but the rub was in the expense. The programs in place that led to temporary fortune were not sustainable. By the following decade, from roughly 1963-1972, the government was unable to produce any profit from state-sponsored companies, creating deficits and steep losses that soon resulted in overstuffed bureaucracies and frequent intra-party political fighting.<sup>3</sup> The narrators came of age during this time, when factories were rising around them in the swelling towns of the Italian north, with their poor infrastructure and economic instability.

One could understand the period as an age when the corporation first overshadowed the individual. Those in power sprayed buzzwords like “creation, expansion, growth,” and yet these ideals did not always resonate on the ground in people’s daily lives. Teatro Settimo artists were among those that interpreted the so-called economic boom in such a way. In an undated PEPE pamphlet amidst materials

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<sup>3</sup> Ginsborg, *Storia d'Italia*: 340-42.

from 1978-1981 in the Curino Private Collection, the artists voice some of these concerns. Their writing resembles a manifesto in their denunciations of greed and exploitation that belied the deceptive rhetoric of the 1960s “economic miracle.” They illustrate a grotesque interpretation of their city, which they liken to other peripheral towns of industrial metropolises which were, in their opinion, also constructed for the sole purpose of corporate profit rather than with the needs of its citizens in mind.

Settimo, they insist,

“...is not a city fit for humankind. It is actually the opposite; an emblematic form of the denial of human needs. Its streets, its houses, its factories and the availability of all these entities, with the relationships that result from them, are the achievements of capital. This city, like many others near Turin, Milan or Genoa, was built and transformed to make the most money it could. In doing so (which translates to exploitation, immigration, alienation, displacement and many other things that all of us who live in Settimo live with daily), in doing so, we were saying, a person is just an object, a tool.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Non è una città fatta a misura d’uomo, è anzi proprio il contrario, una forma emblematica della negazione dei bisogni umani. Le sue vie, le sue case, le sue fabbriche e la disposizione di tutte queste entità, con i rapporti che ne conseguono, sono la concretizzazione delle esigenze del capitale. Questa città, come molte altre vicine a Torino, a Milano o a Genova è stata costruita, trasformata per guadagnare il massimo. In questo processo (che significa sfruttamento, immigrazione, alienazione, sradicamento e un sacco di altre cose che tutti noi abitanti di Settimo viviamo quotidianamente), di questo processo dicevamo, l’uomo è solo un oggetto, uno strumento.” Laboratorio Teatro Settimo, *"L'Arcircolo Pepe Pamphlet,"* [1978?], Box 1978, Curino Private Collection: Settimo Torinese, Turin.



Heavily involved in the identity of their city, as their name —Laboratorio Teatro Settimo—attests, the artists rely on a stark juxtaposition between capitalist greed over the needs of people. Here they offer their interpretation of what led to the tense political environment of the 1970s. To them, their urban factory-scape did not symbolize progress, development and wellbeing, but exploitation, marginalization and alienation. Coping with these realities is a major theme in many Narrative Theater plays from both generations of narrators.

Another reason why PEPE, an organization that anyone with a project could join, was an important collective for Teatro Settimo is that it separated them from the politicized theater world of the 1970s, where many groups associated themselves with specific political parties. Even while most narrators suggest a left-leaning ideology, even today many of them are careful not to be spokespeople for any party or to proselytize an overt particular agenda. This characteristic is in fact a key distinction between narrators and other types of performance artists, including political satirists. Their decision to remain unaligned with specific parties also demonstrates an entirely different agenda than someone like Dario Fo who proudly displayed his affiliation with the PCI (*Partito Comunista Italiano*). Rather than fomenting specific political critiques, Teatro Settimo was instead committed to such broader goals as an inclusive environment and was focused on community work. If they wanted to create a public sphere where marginalized voices could speak, they did not want it to be at the expense of other group with whom they might fundamentally disagree.

The environment of PEPE also placed them on the same economic level as any other beginning entrepreneurs. Although idealistic, their goal to create “a more just

society that shares the aim for everyone to truly be the protagonists” was simple and rings true to the more leftist ideology of their time.<sup>5</sup> Through PEPE, they explained how they wanted to make a serious and worthy contribution to their city; one they felt was indispensable and urgent. In addition to a community where artists and entrepreneurs could strategize and help each other, PEPE offered all its members the same political autonomy that Teatro Settimo sought, and with that came both ideological and financial benefits. They conceived of creativity as “the capacity to mobilize rational, critical, and intuitive forces...” for the purpose of finding new solutions.<sup>6</sup> This attitude certainly helped make their work appealing to city and state councils who had discretionary funds for cultural activities. Rather than pushing policy, such a civic-minded agenda made it easier to find state support. Minimizing an overt political critique was a strategy for appealing to municipalities.

Even if their shows were critical of Italian society, they were simply citizens stating their views, not representatives of particular parties. PEPE was linked to a moment of a prevailing demand for “agitation” when it was necessary to rethink the actual condition of the people. They wrote that it was time to understand why they lived in “these suburban ghettos” and in whose hands were the peoples’ lives.<sup>7</sup> Teatro Settimo used PEPE as a way to create a new instrument (eventually their theater practice) to help

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<sup>5</sup> “Una società più giusta e partecipata in cui tutti siano veramente protagonisti.” Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “La capacità di mobilitare forze razionali, critiche, intuitive, inconscio per dare, nell’affrontare problemi, soluzioni nuove.” Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> “Al momento in cui sono nati da una esigenza prevalentemente ‘di agitazione’: era cioè necessario allargare la coscienza del malessere, ‘sensibilizzare’ come si diceva allora, la gente sulla propria condizione, capire perché viviamo in questi ghetti periferici e per volontà di chi... il circolo dovrebbe essere soprattutto ‘potenzialità’, capacità cioè di elaborazione collettiva, di ricerca di massa, simbolo per iniziative ramificate nel territorio, preparazione... e costruzione delle risposte ai problemi che generano il disagio, il malessere, la disperazione.” Ibid.

people confront those social issues in which many marginalized groups questioned why they were amidst on the fringes of Italian life.

In this same pamphlet, Teatro Settimo makes clear its aims to restructure the cultural life of the town by arguing for a link between social climate and territory. Written along the margins in Curino's handwriting are several leading questions that the document confronts. "So is Settimo a city fit for humankind?"<sup>8</sup> What after all might such a place look like? Since industrial giants such as FIAT largely created Settimo as a residence for its employees, Teatro Settimo artists are asking if FIAT created a town that was on par with what modern towns should be as much as they were asking themselves how they could help people turn their depressing industrial town into a livable creative space. When there are no public parks, no cultural exhibits, and no community programs for children or the elderly, Teatro Settimo asks what kind of environment does this produce. Throughout the document, Teatro Settimo authors articulate the dynamics of this urban space and they conclude that like industrial metropolises such as Turin, Milan, and Genoa, which were reconceived during the capitalist era for the sole purpose of economic earnings, Settimo was not constructed with the quality of life of its inhabitants in mind.

Fifteen years later, while writing *Camillo Olivetti*, the notion of a space "fit for humankind" reappears. Early in the performance, Curino recalls how she marveled at the possibility of a place with acceptable living and working conditions, both in the Olivetti workshops and Ivrea, the factory town that supports them. She asks,

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<sup>8</sup> "Ma Settimo è una città a 'misura d'uomo'?" Ibid.

How was it possible that a factory amidst trees and nature existed? No walls, but glass panels, so that the workers, while they worked, could see the trees. How was it possible that a factory *fit for humankind* existed, and also, a *city fit for humankind*... and not at the price of pollution, alienation, sickness, but simply a place of wellbeing with dignity in one's work, respect for man, for his body, his environment, his education? (Original emphasis.)<sup>9</sup>

For Curino, Olivetti and Ivrea are portrayed as what FIAT and Settimo Torinese should have been. It stands in sharp and direct contrast to her description of the modern city from the PEPE pamphlet, which is characterized by capitalist alienation and exploitation. Beyond the focus on livable space, there is another story around the Olivetti story that already surrounds Curino's personal story, and that is one of marginalized groups. In *Camillo Olivetti* Curino performs a history that considers the worker. Even though the story is named for the single individual who built the factory, it is told by other people in his life—his mother and wife—and in many ways the real protagonists are the factory workers.

Even before introducing any of the members and their community projects, the PEPE pamphlet authors explain that they have based the organization on principles of teamwork and volunteerism. Via collaboration and communication, the goal of

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<sup>9</sup> “Ma come era possibile che esistesse una fabbrica... in mezzo agli alberi e niente muri, ma vetrate, vetrate grandi, in modo che gli operai, mentre lavoravano, potessero vederli, gli alberi... Come era possibile che esistesse una fabbrica *a misura d'uomo*, era così che si diceva: una fabbrica a misura d'uomo. E anche una *città a misura d'uomo*... Una tecnologia al servizio del benessere, e il prezzo del benessere non veniva pagato con inquinamento, alienazione, malattia, no: il benessere era *ben essere*, dignità del lavoro, rispetto per l'uomo, per il suo corpo, per il suo ambiente, per la sua educazione...” Curino and Vacis, *Camillo Olivetti: Alle radici di un sogno*: 35-36.

ameliorating Settimo offers a way to measure one's own set of priorities in the company of others. As the members of PEPE re-think public spaces, the very process allows participants to re-think their own social roles.<sup>10</sup> Slowly, the authors articulate a delicate translation of group ethics onto that of the individual, emphasizing that together they will teach everyone to cultivate and to express their own cultural patrimony.<sup>11</sup> This idea of linking group work to individual cultivation is one of the better examples of Teatro Settimo's belief in the artist as "cultural worker." The authors hope to teach others that an artist is not the only member of society who can produce culture, and they express their intention to rethink, within a group environment, a way in which everyone can contribute. The PEPE pamphlet shows the articulation of the Teatro Settimo's notion of theater as a form of community service.

Indeed this is reminiscent of the *animators'* efforts when, for example, they worked with children in San Salvario to create a play that recounted their lives as children of parents who worked in factories. The ultimate lesson was that even children could create culture worthy of discussion. The opportunities that PEPE aimed to create were not just hobbies, but those that would spur individuals' creative growth, provoke rigorous inquiry, and encourage the use of one's free time for knowledge.<sup>12</sup> Thinking through these projects was a necessary issue that surfaced in the early pre-Narrative Theater endeavors of Teatro Settimo and continues in current productions. As the Teatro

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<sup>10</sup> La sua strutturazione, la sua organizzazione significa lavoro, comune, volontario. Significa cimentarsi insieme, con un linguaggio di cui possibile riappropriarsi: l'organizzazione degli spazi... Settimo, "L'Arcircolo Pepe Pamphlet," Curino Private Collection.

<sup>11</sup> "Si tratta da pensare ognuno come in possesso di un patrimonio culturale proprio e di lavorare per creare le possibilità di comunicarlo..." Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> "Le occasioni che il circolo PEPE cercherà di produrre non saranno hobbies, ma possibilità di uscirne per usare il proprio tempo liberato dal lavoro come conoscenza e crescita per usarlo creativamente." Ibid.

Settimo artists stated, their work was not only about urban renewal, but about communication. All of their work, they attest, is “based on the idea of putting people in contact with each other.”<sup>13</sup> Public space was important in how the community would create experiences where their private lives would intertwine with one another and how those minor encounters would go on to affect many lives.

Another initiative that addressed these ideas, even more directly with their city, was a set of performances and workshops that Teatro Settimo called the *Progetto Città Laboratorio* (City Laboratory Project). In their records, the group created a booklet with photographs of cafés and community centers where the elderly and young people met. They also photographed piazzas and described their primary uses, which happened to be as parking spots, and as sites for religious or political protests. The artists added their personal impressions of these places noting, for example, “this is a free space,” referring to a piazza that was largely empty, or “this space is a bit different because of all the cars” for a piazza full of them. To some extent, the artists in the City Lab personify spaces by treating them as though they were characters in a story. They follow the town squares on different days and describe how often the location is empty or full of people. They are curious about what happens to the piazzas and how they transform when there are vendors in them or what they are like during protests. It is as if their study is guided by the question, what is the life of a piazza, or this café, or that community center? They conclude that when events take place, the actual space changes.<sup>14</sup> Notably, Teatro Settimo members do not portray physical spaces only as central to the livelihood of the

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<sup>13</sup> Goodman and Giannachi, “A Theatre for Urban Renewal,” 28.

<sup>14</sup> Laboratorio Teatro Settimo, “Fase 0, 1, 2: Progessto Città Laboratorio,” *Booklet*, 1980/1981, Box 1980, Curino Private Collection: Settimo Torinese, Turin.

community, but as vulnerable to it as well. The town square mirrors the quality of life in its neighborhood. In these early works, the members of Teatro Settimo postulate space as a lens into social life of urban and industrial towns.



**Figure 10 Photos of Settimo Torinese from Progetto Città Laboratorio (1980/1981)**  
Courtesy of Curino Private Collection

This phenomenon is not unique to the early days of Narrative Theater, however. There are many recent examples of narrators choosing low cost options for their audience members. In 2010, for example, Davide Enia performed in a Bolognese public park and Baliani performed in the main square of Chivasso (near Settimo) as well as in an abandoned train station in Piedmont. Enia is part of the “second generation” (though he was once Curino’s student), and Baliani never worked with Teatro Settimo, but they use these public spaces for cultural productions that are free and open to the public. While there might be public art displays, vagabond performances, or street theater troupes that occupy piazzas or other public spaces, it is a rare for a genre that has sustained itself for more than thirty years to continue working outside of professional theaters. The fact that narrators do adds an element of subversion to their work, yet, in each of these instances, today the narrators are changing the history of the city, of the actual place, in the same

spirit as City Lab back in 1979. The more a piazza is used for a cultural event and not as a parking lot, the more people will see their own town as having a livelihood beyond its industries.

Further, the theater event becomes a part of the history of the space. It becomes a story centered on a space. Teatro Settimo explicitly articulated one of its goals as creating memories for Settimo Torinese, the town that has neither its own history nor its own name, but is defined instead by its distance from a “real” place (seven kilometers from Turin). Their hypothesis is that their plays and educational events help to reconnect the town with those who live in it. They were inspired by Marc Bloch and his warning in *The Historian’s Craft* that ignorance of the past does not only damage understanding of the present, but also actually compromises the present.<sup>15</sup> Bloch is relevant due to his early encouragement of microhistory, and especially, to his influence on Ginzburg’s work. In the early 1970s Ginzburg translated Bloch and also wrote the preface to one of his books.<sup>16</sup> By following both Bloch and Ginzburg, narrators perform microhistories with these types of projects by working in smaller towns and sharing private stories.

From various flyers, event programs and newspaper reviews there is evidence of another early endeavor by Teatro Settimo, the 1981 Vivapiazza project, as a progression from the City Lab. The enterprise entails similar features such as cultural events for

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<sup>15</sup> Cited in Settimo, “LTU3: Appunti per l’avvio del terzo laboratorio di trasformazione urbana. La ricerca storica,” Curino Private Collection.

<sup>16</sup> See Marc Bloch, *I caratteri originali della storia rurale francese* [Les caractères originaux de l’histoire rurale française], trans. Carlo Ginzburg (Turin: Einaudi, 1973). The following edition contains a preface by Ginzburg with a contribution by Lucien Febvre: Marc Bloch, *I re taumaturghi: studi sul carattere sovranaturale attribuito alla potenza dei re particolarmente in Francia e in Inghilterra* [Les Rois thaumaturges: Étude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale, particulièrement en France et en Angleterre], trans. Silvestro Lega (Turin: Einaudi, 1973).



children, including participation in the *Villaggio FIAT*, a program organized by the car manufacturer during the summers for spouses and children of their employees. Teatro Settimo continued to develop their ethnographic research style by conducting interviews with locals about their experiences with the city, and also “occupied” the piazzas in a similar way as they had with City Lab. Additionally, they arranged for or played live music in the piazzas and held informal encounters to discuss the state of theater in Italy, particularly the “terzo teatro” or “teatro di gruppo” where the “third theater” or “group theater” referred simply to a new wave of theater. As Lucio Diana, one of Teatro Settimo’s founders told the national Turin-based newspaper *La Stampa*, their idea was to recuperate sophisticated artistic traditions in the sphere of everyday life.<sup>17</sup> This echoes back to the notion of small histories. Teatro Settimo was not thinking of grandiose successes. Instead, they wanted to work within the daily rhythms of their town, embracing, and even altering its daily pace.

According to the extant journalistic accounts, Teatro Settimo was able to create a striking sense of community with *Vivapiazza*. *La Stampa* declared that the project fascinated the public and created a physical meeting ground where people could exchange ideas.<sup>18</sup> Other papers announced that Teatro Settimo “rediscovered the piazzas.”<sup>19</sup> These sources also claimed that their efforts allowed the city, a belt of factories and dormitory houses, to breathe oxygen during those two summer weeks when

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<sup>17</sup> “Si propone di recuperare le espressioni artistiche più avanzate in un ambito di vita quotidiana.” P.G., “Che la festa cominci... sulla piazza settimese,” *La Stampa*, 21 July 1981.

<sup>18</sup> Affascina il pubblico...Un luogo d’incontro e di scambio... “A Settimo <<Viva la piazza!>>,” *La Stampa*, 28 July 1981.

<sup>19</sup> “Settimo riscopre le piazze,” *Gazzetta del Popolo*, 15 July 1981.

it could enjoy *Vivapiazza*.<sup>20</sup> Echoing the very description that Teatro Settimo had used in their research, a staff writer for *La Stampa* noted that “the look of this piazza which is often desolate in its vastness [and] normally used for parking, has been completely altered... in this form, the piazza recuperates its natural function as a place for meeting, enjoyment, [and] discussion.”<sup>21</sup> By these accounts, Teatro Settimo was successful in its early effort to build not only a story / history for Settimo, but also to create a sense of community. This intertwining of history and community became critical element of Narrative Theater.

Teatro Settimo’s involvement with the city of Settimo is at times so strong that they might seem more like activists who chose to use theater as their method rather than theater artists who chose to focus their work on their city. The company spearheaded three main performance events in their early years: the *Progetto Città Laboratorio*, *Vivapiazza*, and *Morire dal ridere*. Although led by Teatro Settimo, other artists and entrepreneurs and various state and independent associations, some of which Teatro Settimo began itself, shared in the responsibilities. The shared goal of these initiatives was to ameliorate existing public spaces and create new ones. As they describe in some of their own initial summaries, 1975-1980 were formative years for the Teatro Settimo company in which they held meetings to tease out both practical and creative goals, and to develop a working relationship with the city. The government initiated endeavors such as a regional research center, begun in 1982, and called the *Istituto Teatro e Metropoli*

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<sup>20</sup> Cintura torinese di fabbriche e case-dormitorio, Settimo respira almeno d’estate una boccata d’ossigeno con *Vivapiazza*... animeranno per due settimane strade e piazze della città. R.M., "Cavalcata eroica del teatro in piazza," *Il Manifesto*, 17 July 1981.

<sup>21</sup> L’aspetto di questa piazza solitamente desolata nella sua vastità, usata di norma come parcheggio, è stato completamente stravolto... la piazza recupera così la sua funzione naturale di punto d’incontro, divertimento, discussione. P.G., "Che la festa cominci...".

(ISTMO), as well as the *Piano d'ambiente culturale* (PAC) and the *Atelier di Cultura Teatrale* (ACT), the latter a collaboration between the city of Settimo, the regional Council for Culture (*Assessorato alla cultura*), and Teatro Settimo. They were primarily theater artists, but the nature of their work, thus, put them in an influential position where they could potentially etch out a precedent for Settimo's future cultural undertakings.

For the ACT, Teatro Settimo outlined three overarching goals including community service, formation, and finally, research. First they aimed to foster a sense of civic responsibility by working with cultural organizations, gatherings, and activities for groups such as children. Second, they focused their goals on the formation of events such as conferences and meetings to discuss the theory and practice of theater arts in the community. Their third task, research, was directed towards information on the territory and on theater, defining territory by its coordinates of time and space. Regarding this last point, they explained that their interest in "space as the connection between cultural potential and urban structure" and expressed "the coordinate of time investigated through historical research, [with] the possibility to characterize a cultural identity, [and provide] memories for a city that does not have any."<sup>22</sup> Besides a didactic-oriented knowledge, they did not mention theater. Rather, from the very beginning, years before projects such as *Passione*, *Vajont* or *Kohlhaas* became the representative works of Narrative Theater, their focus was heavily invested in public space and public memory. They posited a connection between the urban landscape and culture and showed their dedication to

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<sup>22</sup> "Lo spazio come connessione fra proposta culturale e struttura urbana... la coordinate tempo indaga, attraverso la ricerca storica, la possibilità di individuare una identità culturale, una memoria per una città che non la possiede." Laboratorio Teatro Settimo, "Atelier di Cultura Teatrale," *Correspondence*, 1982, Box 1982, Curino Private Collection: Settimo Torinese, Turin.

Settimo by constructing and recounting its own storied past. These early goals became foundational for the later works of not only those first generation narrators but also for those who came later to the genre without a background in Teatro Settimo. In the section that follows, I further examine early influences and ideals of Teatro Settimo, arguing that they set the groundwork for the important conceptions of community that shaped the articulation of the Narrative Theater genre and still influence contemporary productions.

### **Notions of Community: Revisiting Animazione**

The city-space of Settimo Torinese marks the nascent days of Teatro Settimo both in terms of how the members met through different official and underground institutions and of the involvement the group had with the city itself. The way in which they came together, in addition to their relationship with the urban space, is very much in tune with other movements of the times. The political events of 1968 and the 1970s spurred grass-roots gatherings that made advances and created change from the bottom of the economic-political chain. In Milan, youth groups occupied some 50 buildings where they created concerts, films, photography and music workshops, discussion circles, yoga classes as well as counseling services for drug addicts.<sup>23</sup> This community-based atmosphere of working together encouraged the development and creativity of Teatro Settimo. They too grew from a cellular network of connections and interactions.

Projects such as *Vivapiazza*, City Lab, and the initiatives with PEPE created an alternative setting outside of established institutions that is worth reflecting upon,

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<sup>23</sup> Ginsborg, *Storia d'Italia*: 455-56.

especially in terms of Victor Turner's approach to liminality and community. He differentiates between the actual social groups of a community by using the Latin *communitas* to mean the social relationships that bind members of a community. By liminality, he describes a dark and chaotic state that exists "betwixt and between" and is a cultural manifestation of the *communitas*, where those transitional qualities inherent in the liminal become "definitive states of culture" which are then institutionalized with transition as a permanent condition.<sup>24</sup> Narrative Theater has much in common with these notions because its hybrid nature suggests a liminal dimension where that very indeterminateness becomes a permanent structure of Narrative Theater. *Communitas* and liminality work together: Teatro Settimo worked to create a history for the city and in so doing became the cultural manifestation, the liminal dimension, the actual mechanism that moved the town from disparate to cohesive.

Later, with shows such as *Vajont*, the physical place of the dam, like the physical place of Settimo, symbolizes not just the community of Longarone and other towns, but also a lost community, a vacant space, a lacuna. Similar to *animazione*, then, Narrative Theater is a practice that attempts to fill in historical gaps, answer questions, and create a space that will fulfill those objectives. For Turner, *communitas* "breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority" where historically those three conditions of liminality, marginality, and structural inferiority "frequently generated myths, symbols, rituals,

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<sup>24</sup> Victor Witter Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1969), 95-97.

philosophical systems, and works of art.”<sup>25</sup> Narrators use performance sites as they are, whether small or large theaters or public parks, but when they can ground their stories in physical spaces that evoke the narratives, they capitalize not only on the aura of the story, but also on the sense of *communitas* that they are trying to build. As they solidify these social bonds, they create public spheres ripe for discourse.

In fact, liminality also echoes with more theoretical conceptions of space. Curino and fellow Teatro Settimo artist Gabriele Vacis provocatively referred to their work as the *progetto eterotopico* or the Heterotopic Project in 1987. Their intention in choosing this title was to privilege the process of an unfinished project, rather than a finished work. This method is set in contrast to result-oriented expectations that would celebrate an ending, or a complete form.<sup>26</sup> Within the very idea of this process, there is a tension between the real and unreal. Here is a space that fosters creation, yet temporally exists before that event. Foucault similarly posits the notion of heterotopia against that of a utopia. Rather than a nonmaterial space of perfection, he interprets a heterotopia as a real place, but one that maintains some aspect of the illusory.<sup>27</sup> One could use Foucault’s idea to understand theater in general, and indeed he acknowledges that a heterotopia is “capable of juxtaposing in a single real space, several sites that are in themselves incompatible,” which is what theater does when it presumes the space of anywhere other than a theater.<sup>28</sup> While it would seem that Curino does not pretend that she is in any other space *but* the theater, remaining strictly loyal to Goffman’s notions of frames, Foucault’s

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>26</sup> Guccini and Marelli, *Stabat mater*: 19.

<sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 24.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 25.

notion of heterotopia, the name Curino herself gave to her work, also shows the slippery way that narrators negotiate space.

Naming her work heterotopic also indicates that Curino embraced postmodern thought early on and incorporated its understanding of history as incomplete. In continuing to trace out the meaning of heterotopias, Foucault explains that a mirror is utopic in how it shows an object, but that object does not exist where it is shown. The mirror exists. However, he notes, one can also consider the mirror heterotopic since it exists in reality and “exerts a sort of counteraction” to where the object rests.<sup>29</sup> Agency and power resurface as Curino sought to understand a different history. In considering the mechanics and processes of power, she intentionally fashioned what Foucault would call “a new mode of exercise of power.”<sup>30</sup> She was not distracted with what the final show would look like, but was focused and committed to the process. The Heterotopic Project is another manifestation of finding the value in and the power of the middle-ground. Liminality is also a metaphor for Narrative Theater more broadly. This practice, which critics are reluctant to define as a genre, is about these in-between postmodern spaces where many influences have come together to make each show unique. In their efforts to create communities around specific ideas, the narrators first create a space where their stories’ endings are open to change.

Focusing on *communitas* as an idea that reflects the binding element of groups, Teatro Settimo’s early work with *animazione* was very influential. That the members of the group met in a library not only speaks to the research habits that is one of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>30</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*: 38.

cornerstones of the Narrative Theater genre, but also demonstrates the importance of the library as a meeting space. The group had a rigorous work ethic that involved readings, discussions, practices, and drafting letters to the Settimo city council for various permissions, but they needed a space to come together, and that first took place in the local library, which was also the site for other groups to come together to discuss social, cultural, and political issues. The document that I discuss below focuses on Teatro Settimo's work, but also gives a flavor of the other groups surrounding them during their formation.

In a type of informational pamphlet dated in 1977, Teatro Settimo members summarize their own history, recapitulating those first months starting in April 1974 when they began to meet at the Biblioteca Civica for a course called Animazione Teatrale del Teatro dell'Angolo. The group slowly formed over the following months as they continued to meet and discuss how to define theater, political theater, and theater play. Revealing the era's burgeoning feminist consciousness, the authors of the document note that the larger group also divided into an all-female group. Right after the August vacations, in September 1974, the group's first project was to make a play about the history of Settimo, "an alternative version of historical facts that signal the passage of an agricultural Settimo to the industrial boom Settimo." They decided not to write a script, but instead improvise *canovacci*, the *commedia dell'arte* style of short scene work. It was also in these first encounters when they decided to use a minimum of technology — lights, sound equipment, microphones—quipping that they did not have the money then, nor would they ever, to pay for that. This minimalist *mise-en-scène* has remained since. Although no one in the group had worked with Grotowsky or Barba at this point, these



technical choices are reminiscent of the Poor Theater. In early 1975, the library has become a real social center where other groups such as a feminist theater group, a music group, and an alternative group called M. Enriquez among others, meet to discuss the intersections of politics, culture, and art.<sup>31</sup>

What is important here is that the physical site, the library, is a place that fostered dialogue among a diverse array of groups. Identifying the 1970s as the period following the economic boom, with the birth of harsh, new realities such as urban marginalization/alienation, growing consciousness regarding workers, schools and students, internal immigration from south to north, and as a period where the question of equal rights for women were brought to the fore, emphasizes how fertile the connection between artistic experimentation and social/political contestation was. One of the main goals for theater practitioners was to build “vital and creative” art, and an important way that *animators* sought to accomplish this was in preparing a performance space. The fundamental concern over where the artists worked extends into choices in performance spaces. In the library they learned about the practitioners of *animazione* opted not to perform on stage but rather in places more readily a part of daily life in a sort of “social theatricalization” (*teatralizzazione sociale*).<sup>32</sup> While the themes of the Teatro Settimo’s first projects were not political *per se*, their performances in piazzas were a political act in how they “socialized” the inhabitants of Settimo to engage in various topical issues.

Largely a result of the automobile industry protests of 1969-70, factory spaces were particularly popular in *animazione* productions. The protests also indelibly

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<sup>31</sup> Laboratorio Teatro Settimo, “Laboratorio Teatro Settimo,” *Informational Pamphlet*, 1977, Box 1977, Curino Private Collection: Settimo Torinese, Turin.

<sup>32</sup> Stomeo, *Intrecci*: 111-12.

connected *animazione* to Turin, home to Fiat and Alfa Romeo, where many practitioners honed the craft. During those times, the Teatro Stabile of Turin operated more independently and on a smaller budget than today. In the 1969-70 season, it hosted the Theatrical Decentralization Project (*Progetto di Decentramento Teatrale*) in working class or southern migrant quarters in an attempt to directly address the changing urban space of the city, which was largely swelling with southern migrants seeking work in the auto factories. In 1970, Scabia premiered his show Decentralized Actions (*Azioni decentrate*) in response to the FIAT strikes of 1969, which he based off of interviews. Loredana Perissinotto, one of the founders of the movement, described this type of work as a way to engage with the social and political realities within working-class communities. “And where are we?” she asks, “We are in school, we’re around the neighborhood, we’re in meetings, we’re in front of the TV, we are where we are...”<sup>33</sup> And so instead of disturbing those rhythms and asking people to interrupt their daily practices in order to engage in political and cultural explorations, Scabia’s idea was to bring theater to them. Doing so did not mean renting a local theaters or trying to create a traditional stage in the school gym. It meant inhabiting their spaces, the FIAT factory, and putting the factory in dialogue with the show. They did not pretend they were anywhere but in the very space under theatrical consideration.

*Animazione* used public spaces such as streets, piazzas, factories, and community centers for performance events, which in turn generated a momentum that encouraged sensitization and conscious awareness of the spectators’ social identity. The founding

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<sup>33</sup> Lodovico Mamprin, Gian Renzo Morteo, and Loredana Perissinotto, *Tre dialoghi sull'animazione* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1977), 16.

*animators* defined their working spaces as *decentrato*, which, in the physical sense, highlights their choice to work outside of theaters and in neighborhood piazzas, street-crossings, or schools with the aim of reaching the spectator in her environment. There are also dramaturgical reverberations since the narrative action changes according to the needs of those who inhabit that particular space, given that different spectators require different points of emphasis.<sup>34</sup> For example, Scabia and Perissinotto produced a show in 1969 called *Il teatrino di Corso Taranto* (The Little Theater on Taranto Street) in a working-class district of Turin, for children of migrants from southern Italy. Playing with puppetry and improvisation, the *animators* invited the kids to tell stories about their average day and their relationships with their parents. They recalled fantastic images from their dreams and nightmares and the performers from Scabia, Perissinotto, their partners, along with the children, transformed these stories into fables, and eventually into a show.<sup>35</sup> In terms of dramaturgical practices, the decision to hold performances in public places required a level of fluidity and extemporaneity uncommon in traditional theater.

In more traditionally produced shows, the consumer buys an experience. In *animazione*, the experience *is* the creation of the show, which functions as a reframing of the children's lived experiences. The artists remove the potential for (and risk of) commodification in not only charging free admission for the community, but also because they did not emphasize consumer acquisition. The audience was not led to expect anything, even entertainment, in return for their time: the importance was in the creative

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<sup>34</sup> Stomeo, *Intrecci*: 115.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

process as much, if not more, than in the finished project. Spectators witness a developed narrative and, if they want, can build upon it and take it in different directions by incorporating their own experiences and share those via discussion with friends, colleagues, etc. In this way the “product,” being the show, is not the focus. Rather the experience of its development and dissemination, the context of its own livelihood, is the main event.

This production style is an early sign of the research and ethnographic aspects of Narrative Theater from the first Teatro Settimo show to second generation pieces thirty years later. For example, Ascanio Celestini’s *Lotta di classe* has involved several formats including Narrative Theater, but it has also appeared as a published book and a documentary-style film. Consistent with his preference for improvisation, none of these sources are quite the same, but they all depict snippets of the lives of young employees of the Atesia call center just outside of Rome. As is characteristic in Narrative Theater, he intersperses autobiographical details throughout the piece. Here is an example of the interrelationship between Narrative Theater’s multivalent forms and the ethnographic style of the *animators* and their method of scenario construction. There is a similar growth process to that which had begun with *animazione*. As *animazione* used research and community outreach to develop theater projects, they also sought to create a communal sense of civic responsibility. Even while *animazione* did not last or evolve in the way that Narrative Theater did, it spurred interest in documenting ordinary lives and using theater to embody and to express marginalized voices.

In terms of theater’s relationship to the social life, Morteo accounts for the social reverberations of theatrical practice, emphasizing the importance for *animators* to present

a way for people to live cultural experiences, and to help expose people to culture who might not have much opportunity otherwise.<sup>36</sup> Morteo characterizes *animazione*'s pedagogical aims as a sort of extended pass-the-baton exercise, urging *animators* to teach people how to be *animators* themselves. Narrators grapple with didactic obligations differently and their philosophies have evolved as a result of their practice. Initially Teatro Settimo worked much more closely with the community, blurring the boundaries between making and teaching art whereas now those delineations are much clearer. With the exception of workshops or laboratories where they teach their process, they have fewer pedagogical objectives and aim instead to connect their audiences to specific socio-political situations and to encourage them to consider both in their personal life stories and those of the greater public. The Teatro Settimo artists are clear about the connection between their work and their community, seeking to transform the town that gave the group their name. They saw their theater work as overlapping with forms of community interaction so that in addition to writing and performing plays, they would also conduct workshops at local schools, summer camps for children, and storytelling practices with the elderly. They refer to themselves as cultural workers (*operatori culturali*) and consider their shows service-oriented (*di servizio*).

These practitioners assume an air of microhistory in their asking the children of southern migrant workers to recall an average day, or in confronting issues of low wages and temporary contracts at call centers. Recollecting history shapes both the performance narrative (however loosely or indeterminately constructed) and the choices over performance venue. Official theaters are for official stories. They are for popular actors

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<sup>36</sup> Morteo and Sagna, *L'animazione come propedeutica al teatro*: 5.

who will draw big crowds, or large theater companies that can afford the overhead. As much as they might have intended to be subversive when first starting out, it would have been difficult for early career narrators to work in major theater houses, but now they have more of a chance whether they wanted to politically or not. Today many are popular and prominent, largely thanks to screen appearances, and perform in major urban venues in cities like Palermo, Rome, Milan and Turin, but they also choose spaces much more frequently outside of these zones, and, when possible, perform in smaller, lesser-known theaters. One can speculate as to why that might be with the obvious answers pointing towards better pay and recognition.

And yet, as I briefly mentioned earlier, in the 2009 and 2010 season Laura Curino performed in the small non-equity (under 100 seats) family-owned Tangem Theater in Turin. In Milan, she acted in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* at the celebrated Piccolo, but also performed two of her Narrative Theater pieces at a theater called Teatro Ringhiera owned by a young theater company on the outskirts of the city. In the latter case, before she began her performance she talked about their work and asked the audience to support them with donations. Ticket prices for both shows averaged 10 euros. Marco Baliani performed the twenty year anniversary of *Kohlhaas* in a small town about an hour outside of Bologna (Sant'Agata Bolognese) with similar ticket rates. During the summer he performed two shows, one in an abandoned train station and one in the square of a small town outside of Turin called Chivasso. Davide Enia held one of his staple shows *Maggio '43* in a public park in Bologna. Those last three events were free.

Regarding Sant'Agata Bolognese, Chivasso, and the Teatro Ringhiera, it might be true that much of the audience came from major cities, and thus efforts to bring culture to

local peoples were somewhat compromised, but there are nonetheless some notable local benefits. First, out of town spectators would boost the local economy through the normal channels of tourism. Second, the ticket prices at the theaters are much less expensive than those such as the Argentina or Piccolo (even though both those establishments have origins in “for the people” ideals). In this way, the narrators cater to less wealthy people whether they are autoworkers or students, and to small town dwellers who have only occasional access to culture.

### **Sites of Performance**

In this last section, I would like to focus more on the types of performance spaces towards which narrators gravitate. Their choices are a mix of large metropolitan theaters, smaller rural houses, and public spaces. Within this variety of venues narrators promote a heterogeneous public that seeks to break down exclusionary differences. Certainly the experience will be different for someone who attends a show in an intimate space versus the local park or a major urban theater, as will it differ for those familiar with Narrative Theater from television or the books lining shelves at Feltrinelli, the celebrated nationwide bookstore. Even the more spectacular choices, such as an outdoor production of *Vajont* placed directly in front of the actual Vajont dam, lend a sense of intimacy because of the deliberate connection the narrator makes with audience members, which is one of the key criteria governing venue choice. As much as territory is a topic in several pieces, narrators also use locations to illicit various themes, which is particularly salient when they opt for alternative spaces such old FIAT factories or a stranger’s living room.

In fact, one of the great successes of Teatro Settimo was a production called *Stabat Mater* that debuted in 1989 and won such international awards as the Edinburgh Fringe. Unlike the vast majority of Narrative Theater productions, three actors carried this show; Laura Curino, Mariella Fabbri and Lucilla Giagnoni, the same three actors that performed *Adriano Olivetti* written by Curino in the mid-1990s in addition to many other Settimo productions. The terms of the performance were that they would perform at somebody's house in exchange for shelter for one night and food the entire day. The narrators asked the audience to make contributions towards the actors' journey home, and the piece itself contains the theme of returning to one's past. The actors play three sisters, each of whom has a mythical quality or power. Gaia was pregnant since her birth. Her mother, they say, was pregnant with a pregnant child. Demetra has never and will never sleep and is always preparing for some undefined event, meanwhile Fosca controls the family funds (and is the one who asks the audience for donations) and communicates with spirits including that of their deceased brother. As they traveled with the show, they stayed in character throughout their entire stay at someone's home and during the scheduled times when they would perform the narrative (the stranger's house functioning a stop on their journey to find their lost brothers and sisters). They would also invite audience members to share a story.

With the production of *Stabat Mater*, Narrative Theater converted a private space—someone's home—into a public one where there was an exchange between performer and audience. The narrators even broke many of the conventions within Narrative Theater, namely staying in character beyond the actual performance, abandoning autobiographical elements, and choosing not to embrace any clear social or



political issue even by way of suggestion.<sup>37</sup> The performance itself, however, was political in its form. As Curino says during an interview, “In *Stabat Mater*, we have overruled the administrative bureaucracy... We are doing this show without documents, without legality, without any tickets, without taxes, and even without theatres.”<sup>38</sup> And in these choices, the narrators created a powerful community environment confounding the boundaries between the private and the public. This begs the question: if a performance is in a private space, is it still theater? Approximately six months after *Stabat Mater* began touring, Vacis participated in a workshop with Grotowski, the account of which he later published as a book. Focusing on the actor-spectator relationship, Grotowski iterates one of his more famous beliefs that technology need not and should not mediate this relationship. As Vacis recalls, Grotowski’s main point was that all one needs for theater is the actor and the spectator because the space between them *is* theater.<sup>39</sup> While the space between the audience and the actor can be small or vast, another way to think about it is in the experience that takes place at the performance site, which in the case of *Stabat Mater* is unconventional for the theater and for the public sphere as well.

Connecting to some of my second chapter’s main points, narrators’ strong self-identification as cultural servants (not ambassadors) is largely why they often perform on virtually empty stages. Baliani, for example, presents the entirety of *Kohlhaas* seated in a single chair under a tight spotlight. There is nothing else on the stage. The same is true

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<sup>37</sup> *Gli Olivetti*, for example does not overtly confront a social political issue either, but there is an implicit comparison between the condition of today’s factory workers to those in Curino’s story, and most other Narrative Theater pieces operate similarly.

<sup>38</sup> Goodman and Giannachi, “A Theatre for Urban Renewal,” 31.

<sup>39</sup> Vacis, *Awareness: Dieci giorni con Jerzy Grotowski*: 5.

for several of his other pieces including *Frollo* (1993) and *Tracce* (1996). In *Corpo di stato* he stands on an empty stage with a blank white screen behind him onto which he projects black and white still images from the 1970s. Of course these choices vary between different narrators, but usually only within a small degree. In her *Olivetti* plays, Curino stands the entire time and does not use any props. She has performed the piece in the round and on a proscenium stage. In both instances she performs in an empty space around which she barely moves. In her more recent piece *Il signore del cane nero* (The Man of the Black Dog), about the oil tycoon Enrico Mattei, as well as in her early piece, the foundational *Passione* (1987), she wears a costume that sometimes functions as a prop such as a coat or a shawl, and in *Il signore* she uses projected images. Recently, Celestini, Enia, and Paolini have incorporated live musicians with them on stage. Still, as is the case in *Kohlhaas*, the stage is always and is only the stage. They do not use set design to pretend they are in a different world. They use the stage as a blank canvas so that the story is the focal point. The space serves as itself. It provides a meeting point for the audience and the narrator, and her work is what occurs in that space. As Grotowski discovered, there was no need for set designs as they did not serve the piece.

When working in traditional theaters on proscenium stages, narrators and other performers have to be mindful of the inherent politics in the spatial arrangement. One of Dario Fo's companies, the *Associazione nuova scena*, wrote concisely about the drawbacks of theater layouts concerning class, equanimity, and two-way exchange. The group viewed traditional theaters as capitalist structures that reinforce economic distinctions. Regarding the actual location of theaters, they point out that in many instances the most celebrated theaters are in two or three major cities while the remainder

is in any given region's central city. Further, major theaters often organize the seating arrangements according to class. Finally, the association criticizes the extravagant publicity choices for which major theaters opt since it renders the play more a commodity than an experience.<sup>40</sup> Some aspects of these complaints are unavoidable, and some superficial. The association denounces the location of theaters because they believe that those who live outside of major cities cannot access culture in the way that urban populations do. The group, however, does not acknowledge that such a set-up might serve a greater, and often more diverse, population, or that there might be an economic necessity for most theaters to be located in major urban areas. Their interests lie in targeting very specific populations. They are not concerned with a general populous of oppressed or underrepresented groups, but specifically those with fewer opportunities to experience culture.

Location and arrangement of the audience area is an important way in which narrators can create a sense of community. Dario Fo knew this and made adjustments to convey his ideas. At the beginning of his shows he occasionally invited people with the worst seats to come forward and sit on the stage. Here Fo breaks the traditional space between performer and audience and conjures the carnivalesque performances in piazzas from the Middle Ages and Renaissance where the actor performed with the public and there was no hierarchy between performer and spectator.<sup>41</sup> When narrators tell their stories on provisional stages, in basements of retail stores, or in factory warehouses they disrupt the hierarchical conventions of audience seating. Even when narrators perform in

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<sup>40</sup> Fo and Franceschi, *Compagni senza censura*: 5-6.

<sup>41</sup> Soriani, "*Mistero buffo*, dal varietà al teatro di narrazione," 107.

theaters, particularly smaller ones, there are open seating policies so that they can avoid arrangements that privilege those from the upper and middle classes. Creating a spatial arrangement that challenges the hierarchical set-up of traditional theaters corresponds directly to the equalizing of the narrator-audience rapport. In many ways, the spatial choices help to allay the inherent divisiveness involved in artistic production.

The inventors of *animazione* also grappled with this issue. Society separates artistic roles into the person who paints and the person who looks at the painting, or the person who plays an instrument and the person that listens to the music.<sup>42</sup> The spectators still give their attention to the speaker, placing her in a leadership position, but ritual traditions of performance recall a thick texture of social relations. Curino underlined a section in Morteo's book where he cites the work of early performance theorist Oskar Eberle who examined life, religion, dance and theater in primitive populations. In these cultures, it was uncommon for people to follow the events of a scene passively during a performance.<sup>43</sup> Rather, people participated. Similarly, narrators desire active and present audience members and one of the ways in which they can foster this is through simple choices related to the performance space. For example, by leaving the house lights on or performing outdoors, narrators emphasize collectivity by promoting the awareness among audience members that they can see (or be seen by) the person next to them as much as the performer. These choices also allow the narrator to make eye contact with audience members and directly address them.

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<sup>42</sup> Morteo and Sagna, *L'animazione come propedeutica al teatro*: 9.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Another aspect of the role of the narrator is the interchangeability between the individual and the space she inhabits. In certain instances, the narrator can come to represent the space itself, particularly when she occupies public spaces that are not normally used as performance sites. Here I am thinking about the very powerful choice, not always available to the narrators, of performing near or on the site corresponding to the story. The clearest example of such a case is Paolini's *Vajont*. He has performed this piece in theaters all over Italy and abroad, on provisional stages and in the living room of friends. Most famously, he performed this piece on a makeshift stage directly in front of the actual Vajont dam that loomed in the distance behind him, eerily lit up at night, serving as a very powerful presence, the central character, even the villain, throughout his performance. Lingering as the backdrop, it competes with Paolini in its power to symbolize the people who constructed it, those that perished because of it, and the entire tragic narrative. Paolini's siting of his performance there makes the physical structure a tangible link to the past.

It is worth noting the importance of festivals both in terms of their value to the development of Narrative Theater, and particularly in their relation to Habermas's theory of the bourgeois public sphere. In addition to performances and workshops, theater festivals in Italy serve as important cultural sites especially those organized by city councils, private theater companies, and other sponsors. These events not only offer a series of shows, but also subsidize lectures, workshops, interviews, and encourage the exchange of ideas between artists, scholars, and general members of the public. The many festival circuits in the 1970s, 1980s, and even today, provide an arena to assess the state of theater in Italy. They provide an opportunity for new companies to display their

works and for local audiences to see established theater artists who might normally perform in larger urban venues. In many ways the festivals are also “class-blind.” Thanks to the various sponsorships, many of the events are located in rural/industrial regions and are free, thus bringing a small boom to local economies.

One of the most important festivals in the latter half of twentieth century, for example, took place in the summer of 1967 in the Piedmont town of Ivrea, home to the Olivetti bicycle and typewriter factories. In fact, the Olivetti Group contributed to the *Convegno sul Nuovo Teatro* festival, a gesture that Curino invokes during her show *Gli Olivetti* when she notes the company’s support for local activities. The reason why the 1967 festival was particularly special was that a group of leading theater artists decided to meet there to discuss a fiery manifesto that decried the state of Italian theater. In the November 1966 issue of the theater journal *Sipario*, many leading artists from Carmelo Bene and Scabia to Quartucci and Quadri called for a new theater (*un nuovo teatro*), declaring the 1967 Ivrea festival as the place where they would convene to devise fresh methods and practices.<sup>44</sup> Even as fresh styles were already underway in the work of some of these very authors, and even with news about foreign projects that were popular in Italy particularly including the Living Theater, Grotowski, and John Cage, these artists called for a review of Italian performance practices.<sup>45</sup> The manifesto inspired a cross-disciplinary call to action with signatories from such other artists as the musician Sylvano Bussotti and the film directors Marco Bellocchio and Liliana Cavani. The festival was to

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<sup>44</sup> Mainly seven individuals organized the printed manifesto and ensuing call to action including Ettore Capriolo, Corrado Augias, Franco Quadri, Giuseppe Bartolucci, Edoardo Fadini, Roberto Lerici, and Giuliano Scabia, and eventually, Carmelo Bene and Carlo Quartucci joined the discussion. Artists such as Luca Ronconi and Dario Fo did not sign the manifesto, but were present at the Ivrea gathering.

<sup>45</sup> Marco De Marinis, *Il nuovo teatro: 1947-1970* (Milan: Bompiani, 1987), 168.

be the space where the types of discussions the authors of the *Sipario* manifesto desired could occur. Ivrea, after all, is not a main Italian city where many of the artists who attended the festival based themselves.

When several of these artists looked back on the conference twenty years later, most noted its importance in creating a space for people to congregate. Eugenio Barba, for example, shared that Ivrea 1967 was where he first met Dario Fo who would then become a life-long friend and interlocutor and would travel to Denmark for workshops at Barba's school. Leo de Berardinis, also among the most accomplished of twentieth century Italian theater artists, states that in addition to providing a venue for one of his experimental productions involving film and TV screens,<sup>46</sup> it was at the conference where he finally met Carmelo Bene. In 1968, along with renowned actor Perla Peragallo, he and Bene went on to create a widely recognized and celebrated production of *Don Chisciotte*. Perhaps Fo himself best sums up the conference when he says that it was the "point of departure [because] at Ivrea we all met each other for the first time and we talked together..."<sup>47</sup> While there are more specific outcomes from the encounters in Ivrea, particularly involving avant-garde theater, one of the most beneficial results was that it brought together artists, paved the way for open dialogue involving performance, and later fostered collaboration between many of them.

Festivals have also played a similarly important role in the development and growth of Narrative Theater. It was at the 1982 Sant'Arcangelo di Romagna festival held

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<sup>46</sup> *La faticosa messa in scena dell'Amleto di William Shakespeare*, with frequent collaborator Perla Peragallo.

<sup>47</sup> Quel convegno è stato il punto di partenza, a Ivrea ci siamo incontrati per la prima volta e abbiamo parlato insieme. Augias et al., "Per un nuovo teatro."

in the small town of Sant'Arcangelo and in six other nearby smaller towns, where Curino and Vacis discussed working with Paolini. He and Vacis had actually met the year before at a workshop, another important space for encounters, which Barba held at his school in Volterra, The International School of Theatre Anthropology. Paolini invited Teatro Settimo to perform in Treviso, where he was based, and in turn they invited him and his company, Studio 900 di Treviso, to Settimo. Remembering one of the first Teatro Settimo he had seen at the festival, *Citrosodina*, a children's show, he worked with the company to write one of his first monologues called *Adriatico* (1987), about the adventures of a boy sent to a militaristic summer camp (*colonia estiva*). That piece later became a part of a larger series of monologues called *Gli Album* (1992), which he produced independently of Teatro Settimo, though on some of the monologues such as *Liberi tutti*, inspired by Luigi Meneghello, he still collaborated with Vacis (directing) and Tarasco (music design).

Teatro Settimo also invited Paolini to act in several of their shows including *Riso Amaro* (1988), *Libera nos* (1989), *La storia di Romeo e Giulietta* (1991) and *La trilogia della villeggiatura* (1993). By that point he and Vacis had formed a close professional relationship and had already begun co-writing *Vajont*, which Paolini performed and Vacis directed. Although Paolini had worked with several theater companies such as Teatro degli Stracci, Studio 900, and Tag Teatro di Mestre before collaborating with Teatro Settimo, his work with them is clearly crucial for the development of Narrative Theater, not to mention his own career. The encounter at the 1982 Sant'Arcangelo di Romagna festival was what brought them altogether. These networks of cultural endeavors, organized by state and city councils along with some private sponsorship, and which



operated outside of the more lucrative theater houses that hire productions for a season, are important to acknowledge because, as is the case with Sant' Arcangelo and Ivrea, they provided much more than culture and tourism for the local, often rural populations. They offered a new space, not so unlike the library, for actors, writers, directors, and producers to meet each other and discuss topics that ranged from the possibility of collaboration to the state of the contemporary Italian theater.

In two final examples, I would like to consider a festival in the town of Pordenone, near Venice, at the Scuola Sperimentale dell'Attore in 1991 and an earlier event that Teatro Settimo helped organize in Settimo called ISTMO in March 1984: "From the collective imagination to contemporaneity" (*dall'immaginario collettivo alla contemporaneità*). In Pordenone, Teatro Settimo performed five of their shows, *Villeggiatura*, *Novecento*, *Affinità*, *Passione*, *Tartufo* and participated in several critical gatherings such as a meeting titled, "Towards the Heart of the Matter" (*Verso il cuore delle cose*), which involved artists and scholars including Maurizio Buscarino, Gerardo Guccini, and as organizer, Roberto Canziani. Over the next few days Canziani and Settimo organized three other meetings, specifically for high school students, called, "Leaving the Twentieth Century" (*Per uscire dal ventesimo secolo*) and finally Curino held a workshop for actors, *animators*, and educators called, "The Scene as Collective Breath" (*La scena come respiro collettivo*).<sup>48</sup>

In the ISTMO project, they established a meeting center called the "house bar for the people" (*bar casa del popolo*). In addition to offering performances of three of their early shows—*Citrosodina* (a children's piece); *Esercizi sulla tavola di Mendeleev*; and

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<sup>48</sup> Canziani, *Dedica: Laboratorio Teatro Settimo*: 7.

*Signorine*—there was also an exhibit of theater-centered photographs, including member of Teatro Settimo at work.<sup>49</sup> These extremely rich environments included theater, scholarship, photography, and opportunities for more open dialogue at designated spaces such as the *bar casa del popolo*. These efforts resonated with community building projects as they offered workshops or labs and public meeting places. Narrative Theater grew out of these types of gatherings. The 1984 festival spurred an alliance between Teatro Settimo and Paolini, which was particularly important for the creation of some of the most successful Narrative Theater pieces, such as *Vajont*.

Finally, well after some of the first big successes of Narrative Theater, several noteworthy Teatro Settimo collaborations continued to revisit *animazione* such as at the 1998 and 2000 festivals in Turin called “*Il gioco del teatro*” sponsored by such private theaters as the Teatro dell’angolo and Compagnia Stilema as well as public organizations like the Regione Piemonte Assessorato alla Cultura. Similar to Ivrea and Pordenone, these festivals were also full of talks, presentations, performances, interviews and debates.<sup>50</sup> Once, again an assortment of individuals attended including students, scholars, theater companies and representatives from municipalities. The 2000 festival opened with *racconti danzati* (danced stories) called *Attraverso il bosco* (Across the Woods) by Claudio Montagna which was billed as a CAST (theater group) production but presented by Teatro Settimo as “an example of theater as a place to reflect, to confront oneself and

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<sup>49</sup> Laboratorio Teatro Settimo, Regione Piemontese, and Città di Settimo Torinese, “ISTMO: Istituto Teatro e Metropoli. Dall’immaginario collettivo alla contemporaneità,” *Informational Pamphlet*, 10 Mar 1984, Box 1984, Curino Private Collection: Settimo Torinese, Turin.

<sup>50</sup> Some examples are what were deemed “theoretical reflections” such as “1968/69 La nascita del progetto ‘Animazione’ al Teatro Stabile di Torino” by Nuccio Messina (director of the magazine *Primafile*); “Dal Teatro all’Animazione. Dall’Animazione al Teatro” by Patrizia Mattioda; and “Il Corpo Animato” by Claudia Allasia (dance critic) (CPC # 2000 – checking source details).

to understand adolescents.”<sup>51</sup> The publicity materials also included an endorsement from the Cultural Administrator of Piedmont (*l’assessore all Cultura della Regione Piemonte*), Giampiero Leo, who declared that the festival “will be once again an occasion that gives space to the most interesting and established productions through diverse techniques...;” and that one of the festival’s more beneficial aspects was its sponsorship by public organizations, cultural institutions, and artistic companies who had come together to create relationships between regional community programs and activities important to the EU.”<sup>52</sup> Considering the leadership in events such as the *Gioco del Teatro* conference series, to a large extent, Teatro Settimo succeeded in transforming cityscapes into places that provided opportunities for cultural dialogue.

Narrators ultimately create environments that enhance the dynamics of their productions, and that seek to foster a counter-public sphere for subaltern groups. Along with the practice of *animazione*, it is clear that some of the 1970s-era ideological struggles were a result of economic slowdown and capitalist restructuring, which affected the narrators since, like many other students throughout the decade, the members of Teatro Settimo were active in their communities. In the case of Teatro Settimo not only did they offer dialogue through the content of their shows, but also in the way that they gathered communities and encouraged the exchange of experiences. Particularly in the

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<sup>51</sup> “Un esempio di teatro come luogo offerto per riflettere, confrontarsi e comprendere gli adolescenti” (CPC # 2000 – checking source details).

<sup>52</sup> “la rassegna sarà l’occasione ancora una volta per dare spazio ai più interessanti esiti espressivi maturati in questo ambito attraverso tecniche diverse... frutto dell’incontro fra forze propositive – enti pubblici, istituzioni culturali e compagnie – che hanno elaborato una progettazione ideativa indirizzata alla creazione di rapporti e all’elaborazione di programmi comuni tra le realtà operanti nella nostra regione e quelle attive nell’area dell’UE...” – checking source details

initial years of Narrative Theater, at the end of the 1970s and in the early 1980s, community involvement was a constant and key component to Teatro Settimo's work. Their effort to restructure Settimo for the benefit of the community played an important role in their early success as a theater company. Ultimately, their relationship to their city frames many focal points relating to their performative choices and their identity as artists. It is in the city, with the often dialect language of the city where Narrative Theater grounds and sustains itself. One aim of my study has been to shed light on peaceful yet powerful ways in which theater sought to endow people with some sense of cultural agency. In their ability to emphasize common threads between cities like their own, such as those on the outskirts of Milan and Genoa, narrators were able to turn their regional explorations into ones with a national appeal all the while focusing on the lives and experiences from whom they drew their narrative and for whom they performed them.

## Chapter 5

### Media that Plays a Supporting Role

In this concluding chapter I argue that media, and particularly technological media, function best when in the service of live performance. Narrative Theater has used all sorts of media to enhance their shows while also profiting from its wide-reaching potential for exhibition. As Guccini explains, the genre is agile, economic, and easy to reproduce as well as to follow. Aware of this, the narrators use different means to create a mass audience of on-lookers through video, radio, and television.<sup>1</sup> I am interested in not only the presentation of Narrative Theater through television, but also how theatrical productions use media in live performance. In both instances, the most successful uses of media are when the additional instruments—a screen on stage or camera angles for television—do not take on a life of their own, but constantly support the narrator.

By taking this position, I am continuing to place Narrative Theater in a genealogy that includes Grotowsky and Brecht. One of the main arguments for a Poor Theater was in response to new technologies and the cinematizing of theater, while epic traditions demand transparency with the use of apparatus, instead of masking machinery. This path, on which Peter Brook and Eugenio Barba also walked, is one where media projections do not enhance the intellectual power of visual spectacle in theater. It connotes two main

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<sup>1</sup> Guccini, *La bottega dei narratori*: 14.

scholarly conceptualizations of digital media and performance. One group, led by new media scholar Lev Manovich, conceives of technology as part of the artwork itself and, in many cases, its most innovative and creative aspect; the other insists that technology is but a means to express ideas.<sup>2</sup> Given the existing similarities to philosophies in the Poor Theater and Epic Theater traditions, it is not surprising that Narrative Theater would embrace a more utilitarian approach to media. As I argue with an examination of *Corpo di stato*, what is surprising is that when Narrative Theater productions refuse this approach and attempt to compete with a more cinematic vision of a pre-existing play, they ultimately fail to convey many of the genre's hallmark attributes including a sense of community and commonality, and they also fail as video products.

At the heart of this discussion is the relationship between live performance and so-called mediatized performance. Performance theorist Philip Auslander's writings are helpful in that he refuses to think of the two as competing binaries of immutable differences. He emphasizes instead a historical and contingent reading of this relationship even while insisting on an unequivocal rivalry between varying media.<sup>3</sup> Approaching the subject from a viewpoint of "cultural economy," Auslander focuses on the competition between live performance and mediatized events, seeing the former as the perennial loser against cinema, and even more so against television and digital media. He understands the defensive position taken up by theater aficionados, scholars and critics, who insist that the intrinsic value and transcendence of a live performance experience is in its very

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<sup>2</sup> For a helpful overview of these two perspectives, see Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1.

resistance to commercialized media culture. One of the reasons why Auslander sees this reasoning as untenable, however, is because of the blurring between media and performance to the point where ontological differences between the two are less clear.<sup>4</sup>

This tension raises the stakes for the un-spectacular Narrative Theater and its rapport with media. In this case, there is not necessarily a blurring between the live and televised performance, but the successful televised performances are meant to serve the live one in the utilitarian way that I outlined above. Auslander begins to move away from the rigid binary of theater/commercial media when he re-replaces performance and media in an almost dialectical rapport. Although he does not fully arrive at this conclusion, Auslander was on his way to realizing that part of the problem with more traditional arguments surrounding performance and media is hermeneutical. Economics, whether cultural or financial, is not a particularly nuanced scale on which to weigh performance and media. In fact, they should not be weighed against each other, but considered with respect to one another. Analyzing how Narrative Theater works in a variety of media makes this point clear. While I am interested in how the genre translates across different media, my measure of success is neither monetary nor cultural capital, but in how explorations across new media refer back to the in person performance even if that means revealing a new dimension.

There is a further duality with which to reconcile, which is the opposition between orality and literacy as discussed in chapter three. Both modes of communication exist as

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

binaries, and even hierarchies, with literacy widely seen as the more sophisticated form.<sup>5</sup> The advent of visual, technological, and digital media, from the cinema and television to the internet, presents new media intercessors to consider the journey of orality from spoken word to written text and now into new dimensions. With the addition of new media, orality not only competes against literacy, but also against new modes of *visuality*, as well as more varied, hyperlinked and interactive types of prose. These primary, secondary, and tertiary oralities do not travel in one direction, but back to each other and mediated by each other, transforming the notion of a pure unmediated state of orality into a nearly anachronistic one.

In the first section of this chapter, I analyze technological media in a live performance of Laura Curino's *Santa Bàrbera*,<sup>2</sup> demonstrating the ways that projected images and enhanced sound heighten important themes in the piece. As I investigate below, Curino was particularly successful in enlivening a complex feminist message, particularly where concepts of the voice are concerned. Following this discussion, my analysis will focus on the presence of Narrative Theater on television. I begin with a brief review of the trajectory of the idea of public service broadcasting on Italian television, since Narrative Theater can be conceived as a genre suited for this medium.

After establishing the long history of theater on Italian television, I investigate Paolini's *Vajont* and Baliani's *Corpo di stato* as two contrasting case studies. The experience of watching Paolini on TV is about having access to the piece. The camera work and spectacular setting attempt to replicate the live experience as though the audience at home could feel as though they were directly in front of Paolini. In zooming-

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<sup>5</sup> For a succinct introduction to the historical rapport between orality and literacy see Marina Spunta, *Voicing the Word: Writing Orality in Contemporary Italian Fiction* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), 13-15.



in on the Vajont Dam, it is as if the camera were trying to make up for the fact that those at home cannot smell the humidity in the air. By contrast, Baliani's production attempts to be something, anything, other than a televised Narrative Theater piece. Ultimately, the use of technology offers another way in which this already hybrid practice can adjust to and embrace different media potentialities. For a monologist genre, technology becomes both a way for narrators to expand their audience, but also another voice in their dialogic practice.

### **Multiple Media Performance: Curino's *Santa Bàrbera* (2005)**

Laura Curino's *Santa Bàrbera* is an interesting example of how media and technology function within a Narrative Theater piece on the stage because it makes explicit use of basic sound and visual technologies to amplify a feminist narrative by adding new dimensions to verbal language. There are many extra-textual layers present in *Santa Bàrbera* from the medieval writings of Jacopo da Varazze who chronicled the saint's story, to the sixteenth century frescos of Lorenzo Lotto that retell Bàrbera's tale on the walls of a chapel.<sup>6</sup> Curino also incorporates a manifesto from the contemporary subculture world of "ravers" to pose a contrast with the antiquated language that evokes those older texts.

The characteristics that define Narrative Theater are still intact: a minimalist set, usually consisting of a podium downstage left from which Curino remains most of the

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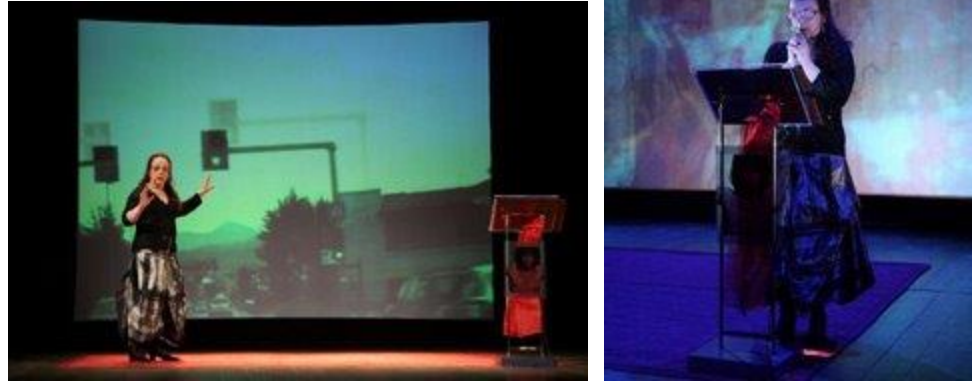
<sup>6</sup> Varazze (c. 1230 – 1298) was a member of the Dominican order who eventually became archbishop of Genoa. He compiled hagiographies c. 1260, which became very popular in the late medieval ages through the Renaissance.

time; her costume is dressy casual; she is the only performer; she is the author of the script, and as she addresses the audience directly, including elements of autobiography. At times, however, she amplifies the volume of her voice through a microphone that reaches piercingly loud levels, in addition to projecting film, photographs, and a digital montage of morphing colors and shapes behind her. These choices create an additional voice, with its own resonance and appearance, expressing ideas the narrator either cannot or chooses not to convey directly. Although these choices might seem anachronistic for Narrative Theater, let alone a story about a fourth century martyr, Curino uses these tools to emphasize feminist leitmotifs by playing with different registers of the female voice that do not include verbal language. In using technology to heighten the contemporary relevance of Bàrbera's story, Curino also demonstrates how technologies have the potential to serve as an instrument for subversive gestures.

To some extent, Curino's choice of technology in performance continues the articulation of feminist gestures in Italy, another way in which the 1970s echoes in Narrative Theater today. Then, much of Italian grass-roots feminism took place in the public sphere and was expressed in forms that were inherently theatrical instead of discursive or linguistic.<sup>7</sup> That some artists explored non-linguistic means of communication is relevant in considering how such a practice can inform theatrical modes of expression. There is some evidence in Italian cultural history that technology in the arts serves the women's movement by providing another type of voice, and this is the lineage that Curino follows.

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<sup>7</sup> Sharon Wood, "Women and Theater in Italy: Natalia Ginzburg, Franca Rame, and Dacia Maraini," *Romance Languages Annual* 5 (1993): 343.



**Figure 11 Laura Curino in *Santa Bàrbara* (ca. 2005)  
Courtesy of Curino Private Collection**

Renowned Living Theater artist Judith Malina, for example, alludes to this when she saw a play in Italy in the 1970s in which the women would not speak since male rhetoric so dominated their language. In lieu of their live voices, they used physical language and a tape recording to tell their story.<sup>8</sup> For Anglo-American audiences, this type of observation might seem clearly rooted in the second-wave feminism of the 1960s through the early 1980s, but these arguments about gendered language and sexual difference are still very prevalent in current Italian feminist thought. Grounded in the 1970s, though still pertinent, Hélène Cixous' concepts of language and sound from her famous essay, "Laugh of Medusa," explore the feminist implications in Curino's choices. I invoke this discussion here not only to substantiate my claim that Curino's use of technology is a tool to articulate a voice that is historically and even currently silenced, but also to contextualize the social and cultural relevance in Curino's use of technology.

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<sup>8</sup> Malpede, *Women in Theatre*: 215-17.

In 2005, Teatro Donizetti (Bergamo) commissioned Curino and fellow Settimo company member, Roberto Tarasco, to write *Santa Bàrbera* as part of a series called *Altri Percorsi* (Other Paths),<sup>9</sup> which involved several local associations interested in regional promotion. They based the script on a sequence of sixteenth century frescos painted by Lorenzo Lotto in Trescore Balneario,<sup>10</sup> a northern Italian town approximately ten miles west of Bergamo, which in turn were based on a story in the thirteenth century *La leggenda aurea* (The Golden Legend) by Jacopo da Varazze. As the play explores, Bàrbera is a beautiful young woman whose wealthy and ardently pagan father of considerable wealth keeps her cloistered (protected, in his view) from the evils in the world, particularly her many potential suitors. When he leaves on a business trip, and as workers build a tower in which to keep her like Rapunzel, her sisterly best friend Giuliana introduces her to Christianity, of which she soon becomes a convert. When her father returns he is horrified, and in consultation with the town prefect, subjects her to many tortures and eventually executes her by his own hand.

In a postmodern gesture, one of the ways in which *Santa Bàrbera* pushes against conventional boundaries is in its interweaving of many media, not just twentieth century

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<sup>9</sup> The theater launched the series as a “birthday” celebration from when it first billed *Altri Percorsi* 25 years prior. Then as now, it was an important endeavor for the Donizetti as much as it was for new theater practices in late 20<sup>th</sup> century Italy. Some of the seminal Narrative Theater pieces such as Marco Baliani’s *Kohlhaas* (1991) made their national debuts there, and Curino and Tarasco’s company, Laboratorio Teatro Settimo also performed several important pre-Narrative Theater pieces there such as *Elementi di struttura del sentimento* (1980). The Donizetti sustained its relationship with Curino, and over the years she performed some of her most important Narrative Theater pieces there. For a detailed discussion of how *Santa Bàrbera* came to fruition, see Maria Grazia Panigada, “Introduction,” in *Santa Bàrbera*, ed. Laura Curino and Roberto Tarasco (Bergamo, Italy: Teatro Donizetti and the Assessorato alla Cultura del Comune di Bergamo, 2008), 9-13.

<sup>10</sup> Lotto’s (c. 1480 – 1556) frescos can be found in the small chapel known as the Capella dell’Oratorio Suardi.

technology, but also fourth century hagiography through a twelfth century legend depicted in sixteenth century frescos. To some extent, this characteristic is common in Narrative Theater practices where the act of narration operates within its own binary: on the one hand, it reproduces rituals and stories from societies that are not technologically advanced; on the other, it embodies a postmodernist poetics with its complex theories of self-referentiality.<sup>11</sup> Narrative Theater is more than mere narration because its process is dialectical, combining ancient modes of storytelling with postmodern theatrical ideas, to create a new practice entirely its own. A vast array of media only contributes to this. In addition to exploring Varazze's rendition and Lotto's frescos of Santa Bàrbera's life, Curino gives an entirely contemporary layer to the voice of her heroine by intertwining much of the alternative and relatively little known "Raver's Manifesto," a text hailed as an authentic voice of these subculture gatherings.<sup>12</sup> In Curino's production the sequence in which she recites excerpts from the manifesto is among the most technologically rigorous. When considered in light of Cixous' "Laugh of Medusa," the combination of machinery with the contemporary slang in the Raver's Manifesto exemplify how Curino embraces technology to amplify her feminist interpretation of the story.

Recalling Cixous' key ideas offers a powerful perspective when applied to Curino's recitation of the Raver's Manifesto. In terms of its structure, Cixous' own formal hybridity connects critical commentary with direct address and autobiography.

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<sup>11</sup> Guccini and Marelli, *Stabat mater*: 13.

<sup>12</sup> As in *Santa Bàrbera*, the manifesto often appears unattributed, though based off a copyright record in England from 2001 Maria Pike claims authorship. Little is known about the author. Though some websites now attribute the Raver's Manifesto to Pike, in the past it circulated anonymously. For copyright details, see: <http://www.copyrightdeposit.com/rep9/0029582.htm>.

Though not intended for performance in the way that Curino's piece is, there is an innately performative quality in Cixous' text since she asserts how writing is a means for women to claim autonomy. In the oft-cited first words, "Woman must write her self," Cixous articulates the notion that writing begins with the body and connects the act of writing to the psychoanalytic conception of the body as a site of early memory, ongoing experience, and biological drives and desires, all of which shape and have the potential to disrupt the formation of the female subject. In her exploration of different literary styles, she dramatizes her point of an innate fluctuation and lack of fixedness in corporeal existence.

Just as one could claim that the performance Judith Malina witnessed was reactionary and thus dependent, one could also argue that Cixous's essay supports the idea that phallogentric forms were what pushed women writers towards a breaking up of forms and the possibility of what might be designated as a "female" style of practice as opposed to an independently authentic impulse. As feminist performance scholar Elaine Aston points out, that suggestion allows the concept of feminism to be determined by patriarchy.<sup>13</sup> After all, why should such binaries bound Cixous' and Curino's stylistic choices and experimental instincts which, in any event, might simply derive from a post-modern inclination? Rather, their feminism reflects not an insurgence against rigidity, but an exploration that emanated from other sources. Similarly, Bàrbera's desire to pursue Christianity had little to do with her cloistered existence. Early on in the play, she brags to Giuliana about her father's affection. Even while Giuliana points out his domineering behavior, Bàrbera is less rebellious than she is curious about religion.

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<sup>13</sup> Elaine Aston and Sue-Ellen Case, *Staging International Feminisms* (Basingstoke: New York, 2007), 46.

Returning to Cixous, her psychoanalytic framework invokes temporal landscapes through which women must traverse in order to re-access what they lost in their journey towards adulthood, or womanhood, more specifically. Woman has the tough task to return from afar, from a place she inhabited before her body was “frigidified.”<sup>14</sup> The body of course is crucial in second-wave feminist theory, and continues to be an important subject in Italian feminist circles. In 1970s Italy there was a transition within the discourse of female subjectivity, linking women to a sphere of feelings that was not automatically pejorative since it did not necessarily connote a society in which women were unequal. On the other hand, such a notion did not exactly suggest that women were liberated. Italian feminists argued that there was a contradiction inherent in the idea of emancipation, which was more of a juridical principle than a state of being, since freedom does not necessarily ensure equality.<sup>15</sup> The discourse on female subjectivity needed to shift to sexual difference in order for liberation to happen.

That Bàrbera must withstand carnal tortures before her death relates to the distinctions between equality and liberation with respect to the somatic. As Curino narrates, “so then the prefect, full of fury, commanded that her flesh be cruelly tortured... so that her whole body bleeds.”<sup>16</sup> While Christ aids Bàrbera, the prefect persistently attacks her body. Overnight her sores heal and so again he orders her body thrashed and

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<sup>14</sup> Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 4 (1976): 877.

<sup>15</sup> Sandra Kemp and Paola Bono, *The Lonely Mirror: Italian Perspectives on Feminist Theory* (London: New York, 1993), 5. For a related and brief summary in Italian, see also Serena Palieri, “A proposito di femminismo,” *L’Unità*, 16 April 2009.

<sup>16</sup> “Allora il prefetto, pieno di furore, comanda che le sue carni fossero duramente tormentate... sicché tutto il corpo suo s’insanguinasse.” Laura Curino and Roberto Tarasco, *Santa Bàrbera* (Bergamo, Italy: Teatro Donizelli and the Assessorato all Cultura del Comune di Bergamo, 2008), 35.

torn, and commands that hot iron plates are put on top of her flesh.<sup>17</sup> When Giuliana begins to pray for her friend, the prefect then condemns her body to flames as well. When Bàrbera miraculously extinguishes them with her breath the prefect orders that both women have their breasts cut off.<sup>18</sup> Certainly male and female martyrs underwent much carnal torture, but the body is further emphasized in this hagiography as Diòscoro had originally locked Bàrbera away to hide her beauty. Her body is the reason for her punishment, and it is through such that she approaches death.

Cixous' invocation of the "frigidified" body suggests that in childhood, girls experience some type of liberation, at least until society instills its repressive mores onto them. Bàrbera's youth, however, is characterized by the tight control of her father, and she only expresses autonomy when she baptizes herself by dunking her head in the fountain of her garden. Curino punctuates this moment with laughter, loose physical movements such as raising her arms up in a *hallelujah* gesture, and a folk-version of "Over the Rainbow" sung by the Hawaiian musician Israel Kamakawiwo'ole. Curino, as Bàrbera, sways to the music and dances, performing her pleasure in one of the more physically acted moments in the entire play. Here, Curino uses a different medium to convey a newly "thawed out" body free of restraints by allowing the song to be Bàrbera's voice. While there is occasional music in Narrative Theater productions, rarely does it speak for the narrator/character but here, as when Malina witnessed the production in Faenza, Curino ushers in a new voice—a recorded one—to convey a state that is utterly

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<sup>17</sup> "...comando che tutto il suo corpo fosse/'...afflito e... dilaniato, e poi che sopra le sue carni fossero poste piastre di ferro affocate!" Ibid., 37.

<sup>18</sup> "Fossero loro tagliati i seni." Ibid.



foreign to Bàrbera. The next time in which Bàrbera experiences a similarly ecstatic event is also when Curino substitutes her voice technologically when she recites excerpts from the counter-culture text known as the Raver's Manifesto.

The ravers' movement has been seen by cultural historians as an extension of the 1960s drug culture updated with a contemporary edge where Bob Marley is replaced with techno-dance music. The raver motto, P.L.U.R., stands for the non-violent ideals ubiquitous in the 1960s: Peace Love Unity Respect, and one could argue that, like Bàrbera, raver culture is widely misunderstood and thus unfairly condemned. Curino capitalizes upon this undercurrent to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of her story. Giuliana, as the voice of Jesus' teachings, and Bàrbera, in her state of forgiveness, convey the ideals of P.L.U.R. Giuliana—described as a modern punk-raver with her piercings and dog collar, a parallel to the depiction of Jesus as an outcast—ultimately liberates Bàrbera through the ecstatic message of P.L.U.R. as expressed in the Manifesto.

Cixous' idea that writing as a woman means writing the body directly involves Curino in one of the few Narrative Theater performances that is not overtly autobiographical. Cixous insists that "by writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display—the ailing or dead figure..."<sup>19</sup> Curino takes back this ailing figure by developing a rhythmic vocal strength that culminates with her recitation of the Raver's Manifesto and using a microphone to bellow this chant throughout the performance space. As the prefect attempts to physically diminish Bàrbera, the tenor of Curino's voice builds towards an ecstatic sequence that precedes Bàrbera's death. In English she quotes

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<sup>19</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 880.

the manifesto, "Our emotional state of choice is Ecstasy. / Our nourishment of choice is Love. / Our addiction of choice is technology. / Our religion of choice is music."<sup>20</sup>

Repeating the text in Italian, her voice grows louder, ramped up almost unbearably by the microphone in an echo of the words themselves. Technology and music are indispensable and intertwined.

In this instance, the use of the microphone and the psychedelic back projection function as the pre-Oedipal breaking up of symbolic order (language) even though language is among its conduits. Curino's vocal performance paves the way for transcendence when the words' repetitions serve as instruments for sound, for a voice, the female voice that reverberates in Cixous' essay. When a woman speaks,

She doesn't 'speak', she throws herself forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the 'logic' of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body.<sup>21</sup>

Curino's body reverberates through her voice, and is charged with a language that commands its own sounds, rhetoric, and codes, invoking a contemporary subculture text written by a woman in celebration of many ideals. Curino's appropriation of the text within the world of this play further demonstrates, perhaps finally and climactically, the third-wave inclusiveness of her feminism through a topic dominant in second-wave

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<sup>20</sup> Curino and Tarasco, *Santa Bàrbera*: 42.

<sup>21</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 881.

inquiry; that of the body.<sup>22</sup> As she announces “our” utopian principles, she again conjures the intersectionality of third-wave feminism that is not only about women, but other marginalized groups. The choice of this text also emphasizes that Curino is speaking about youth.<sup>23</sup>

Similar to other Narrative Theater artists who have long honed their poetics, Curino’s relationship to language is very specific. Cixous’ exhortation that women must write faces a serious challenge in feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero’s arguments about language. Woman, she asserts must “...speak herself, think herself, and represent herself as a subject” and yet “woman is not the subject of her language. Her language is not *hers*, therefore she speaks and represents herself in a language which is not hers, that is, through the categories of the language of the other.”<sup>24</sup> Curino, however, as a writer and as a performer is in command of *her* language, and finds a way to “write woman” through the use of technological media. Thinking of Narrative Theater more broadly, technological media serves different ambitions, but here I want to conclude by stressing

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<sup>22</sup> One of the most common understandings of the third-wave is as a reaction to a perceived exclusionary and bourgeois tone of 1960s and 1970s feminism by women who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s. For a thorough analysis of the relationship between the second- and third-waves see: Catherine Harnois, "Representing Feminisms: Past, Present, and Future," *NWSA Journal* 20, no. 1 (2008): 120-45. For a popular understanding of the third-wave see: Helene Shugart, Catherine Egley Waggoner, and D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein, "Mediating Third-Wave Feminism: Appropriation as Postmodern Media Practice," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 8, no. 2 (2001): 194-96.

<sup>23</sup> For a detailed analysis of how feminist intersectionality, a notion that generally questions the relationship between gender and other social categories such as race and class, breaks down see: Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 3 (2005): 1771-800.

<sup>24</sup> Adriana Cavarero, "Towards a Theory of Sexual Difference," in *The Lonely Mirror: Italian Perspectives on Feminist Theory*, ed. Sandra Kemp and Paola Bono (London: New York, 1993), 194, 97.

how it functions as a means to express long-held feminist ideas about the vexed relationship between women and language.

### **Translating Theater onto Television**

In plays ranging from *Santa Bàrbera*, to Curino's *Il Signore del cane nero* (2010) and Baliani's *Corpo di stato*, narrators use a large screen upstage center on which they project still or moving images. Rather than interacting with the projections, they usually allow them to absorb the full attention of the audience by standing to the side of the stage or, in Baliani's case, sitting down next to the slides of images, sometimes even watching them himself as if instructionally encouraging the audience to follow his gaze. Sometimes, however, narrators use screens much more differently as when they assume different formats (i.e., television). This mode of exhibition invites those at home to experience the genre as entirely mediated through a screen, but is it then still Narrative Theater?

The answer to this question varies to some extent with each production. In the section that follows, I will analyze two pieces, Paolini's *Vajont* and Baliani's *Corpo di stato*, both of which appeared on national television, arguing that the most engaging moments in each version are when the technology remains invisible and the camera functions only in the service of the performance, rather than attempting to enhance it. In other words, when the production team translates the piece into a televisual format without trying to make it a cinematic experience, a successful example of a filmed Narrative Theater emerges, as was the case with *Vajont*. When, however, the team attempts to produce a TV show that enhances, as opposed to just translates, the theatrical

event, as was the case with *Corpo di stato*, there is an entirely different result, and one that steers the play away from its populist roots with the use of distracting devices.

Before exploring these two case studies, it is worth reflecting upon the history of theater on Italian television, in terms of such concepts as plurality and mass communication. One of the central aspects of Narrative Theater is its almost pedagogic ability to encourage reflection and criticism from a local perspective by the average person of major and minor events in national history. It is not intended as an intellectual genre accessible only to an educated elite, but rather as a form that appeals to popular groups. This socially progressive vision has much in common with the early history of television in Italy, and is also related to the ubiquity of theater, literary adaptations and historical dramas on Italian sets.

One consistent trend has been that despite major changes, Italian television is concerned with notions of public service to varying degrees. In this way, Narrative Theater shares common traits with the history of televised live performance. When Narrative Theater productions air nationally, they further their mission to foster a national public sphere for the discussion of local topics so that communities can work through different perspectives. Narrators can reach more people via television than they can while touring the country in their intimate productions. In fact, the history of Italian television conveys similar philosophies of inclusiveness and dialogue that the public sphere connotes. Even though various political decisions eventually quenched many of those initiatives, the presence of Narrative Theater on television indicates an ongoing commitment towards public service broadcasting.

Most experts categorize developments in Italian television in three phases: the state monopoly from 1954-1975, the rise of private broadcasting from 1975-1992, and the duopoly of the state and the Fininvest media company from 1992-onwards. Though for very different reasons, it is during these first two periods in which the basic ideals between Italian television and the public sphere overlap. In the first phase, which comprises the invention of the state-owned public service broadcaster Radio Audizioni Italiane, or Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI) in 1954, political leaders explored the extent to which the new medium could affect public sentiments and could educate the masses and extend their cultural horizons. After years of Berlusconi's media monopoly, with supreme control over so much of television as owner of three out of the seven main national stations and with the potential to preside over the three state-owned channels as head of state (leaving only one independent), it is evident that the role of political and economic power is of the utmost importance.

Italian media scholar Milly Buonanno argues that in the 1950s the RAI board was largely composed of intellectuals and managers who combined a predominant humanist-literary training with a moderate Catholic political orientation, and that they were more fascinated with the possibilities of influence of this new form than they were with its role as a public service.<sup>25</sup> With the Christian Democrats (*Democrazia Cristiana*, DC) dominating politics for the entirety of this first period, the film scholar Elena Dagrada argues that transmissions advocated their views and policies, and that television served as

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<sup>25</sup> Milly Buonanno, *Italian TV Drama and Beyond: Stories from the Soil, Stories from the Sea* (Chicago: Intellect, 2012), 15.

a means for maintaining DC's hold on power.<sup>26</sup> These are somewhat alarming prospects even if beneath this paternalistic monitoring the underlying objective was still to broaden the horizons of citizens through the dissemination of information and entertainment in order to unify, modernize, and democratize the country. This history provokes questions regarding the political and cultural autonomy of Narrative Theater in its presence, albeit infrequent, on television. When Berlusconi was prime minister, however, Narrative Theater production were mostly aired on the one national channel (La7) not controlled by the government or by Berlusconi's private media company; this suggests that an implicit leftism in the genre given its absence on other, major channels.

Many credit Sergio Pugliese, a playwright and theater aficionado who was the first director of programming at RAI from 1953-1965, with the strong presence of theater broadcasting, both taped and live, on Italian TV. In weekly Friday evening broadcasts, Pugliese and his team introduced viewers to many classics from the Greeks to the contemporary greats such as Pirandello. These more conservative choices have led some scholars, such as Buonanno, Aldo Grasso, and Damiana Spadaro, to argue that his decisions, which began with Goldoni's one act *L'Osteria della Posta* on January 3, 1954, soon followed by *Romeo and Juliet*, speak to a pedagogic inclination, in which the RAI leadership delighted how Italy would become a more cultivated nation.<sup>27</sup> Indeed these

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<sup>26</sup> Elena Dagrada, "Television and its Critics: A Parallel History " in *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, ed. David Forgacs and Robert Lumley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 224.

<sup>27</sup> See: Buonanno, *Italian TV Drama and Beyond*: 15; Aldo Grasso, *Storia della televisione italiana* (Milan: Garzanti, 2000), 862; Damiana Spadaro, *Il teatro in televisione da Eduardo De Filippo a Dario Fo. Il teleteatro: Sviluppo, tecniche e esperienze* (Florence: Firenze Atheneum, 2004), 23. Other canonical works of theater included plays by Chekhov, Gogol, Ibsen, Moliere, O'Neill, and Shaw.

efforts were popular and far-reaching, offering a taste of culture to a much wider audience than normally has the means to regularly attend theatrical performances.

Televised theatrical productions were popular in both cities and rural towns with millions of spectators in what journalist turned scholar Emilio Pozzi refers to as the “golden years” for theater.<sup>28</sup> While it might be true that Pugliese was especially likely to allow theater productions a privileged spot, the choice to put theater on TV was similar to the decision of presenting plays on the radio and in films. Pugliese and his team may very well have had a pedagogical inclination in their programming, but it is also logical that they sought to understand and create a uniquely televisual language.

Broadcasting theater, thus, led to the articulation of a medium-specific (televised) language. An almost trial and error exploration of theater on camera helped to define the parameters of televisual communication and entertainment. RAI programming directors experimented with the format and developed several different modes of representing theater on TV. These mainly included direct transmission in which little changed from the stage version; translation in which the text and production was designed only for television; and adaptations in which the play is highly altered and served as a type of meta-text.<sup>29</sup> Narrative Theater productions are almost always aired as direct transmissions, but translation between the two media always occurs, as will be seen in my analysis of *Vajont* and *Corpo di stato* in the following section. Before considering these contemporary examples, I examine the early translation of plays into televisual language

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<sup>28</sup> Emilio Pozzi, "Prefazione," in *Il teatro in televisione: Regia e registi dalle prime trasmissioni in diretta all'alta definizione*, ed. Giorgio Tabanelli (Rome: RAI ERI, 2002), 15.

<sup>29</sup> Grasso, *Storia della televisione italiana*: 861.



to parallel those endeavors with how the minimalism of a Narrative Theater piece transcends the stage and attracts millions of viewers while formally changing very little.

Pozzi understands the early years of programming as less pedagogical and more experimental, arguing that Pugliese and his team searched for an authentic mode of communication that was specific to TV.<sup>30</sup> Tabanelli also emphasizes that live TV, aired in real time, was fundamental to the language of TV. Pugliese and his colleague, Carlo Terron, were well aware that TV required its own language, just like cinema, and that there is a tension between the televisual technology, cinematic representation, and live performance. Over time Pugliese began to form opinions about what type of performances were more adaptable. He thought that plays with fewer characters such as that of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and not Roman or Greek classics with large choruses, best suited the televised performance because the framing could encompass a small amount of characters while maintaining an intimacy similar to the theater.<sup>31</sup> This comment has some relevance to Narrative Theater, as there is just one person on stage to film. There is, however, another attribute that developed from televised theater that I think has far more in common with the mechanisms in Narrative Theater and that is probably related to its success: its hybridity.

As Grasso points out, the history of theater on TV is also the history of interesting hybrid forms such as the *teleromanzo* or *teleinchiesta*, the latter of particular importance to Narrative Theater. *Teatro inchiesta*, premiering on November 10, 1966, was a

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<sup>30</sup> Pozzi, "Il teatro in televisione," 14.

<sup>31</sup> Giorgio Tabanelli, *Il teatro in televisione: Regia e registi dalle prime trasmissioni in diretta all'alta definizione* (Rome: RAI ERI, 2002), 311-12; 16-17.

theatrical reconstruction of historical or current events within a specifically televisual language in which, for example, a narrator, who remains outside of the scenes, guides the audience through a nonlinear story replete with flashbacks.<sup>32</sup> This format has a legacy today in the fusion of crime drama with reality TV, in shows about missing persons as well as types of narrativized investigative journalism. It is hard not to see similarities with Narrative Theater, especially those productions that some call “Civic Theater” such as *Vajont* or *Corpo di stato*. The mix of storytelling and mystery—not of how the story ends, but an alternative perspective from which it is told—provides a level of drama and suspense similar to mystery novels. Along with the *inchiesta* and theatrical adaptations, Narrative Theater shares these hybrid tendencies with a performance method that incorporates several traditions. Even though the genre clearly comes from theater, and actually in part because its origins are in stage performances, Narrative Theater on TV continues a tradition of television programming from RAI’s earliest days, which might help to explain the genre’s success.

In a similar vein to Grasso, Spadaro argues that during the passage from theatrical performance to a televised production, the play irrevocably and profoundly changes to create a hybridization of the two. The end result is neither theater nor television but a *teledramma*.<sup>33</sup> According to Buonanno, these types of developments are of utmost importance because of their cohesive value. In her essay reconstructing the origins of domestic television drama, she argues that the *sceneggiato* (or “dramatized novel” was fiction specifically adapted for TV and popular from the 1950s to 1970s) was a crucial

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<sup>32</sup> Grasso, *Storia della televisione italiana*: 861; 65.

<sup>33</sup> Spadaro, *Il teatro in televisione*: 9-10.

aspect of the “nation building” strategy commonly associated with the beginning of Italian TV because of how it nationalized the Italian language in a country of regional dialects. The *teledramma*, she argues, also deserves acknowledgement for its ability to convey key historical events and canonical literary texts.<sup>34</sup> To put it more directly, as Matthew Hibberd does, RAI promoted interconnection and nationality in the postwar climate through programs that discussed a wide range of issues via a universally accessible service.<sup>35</sup> Executives developed the public broadcasting service with a catholic array of programs from immensely popular quiz shows such as *Campanile sera* or *Lascia o raddoppia?* to news programs and drama.

This type of programming continued with the creation of more stations. In 1961 with the launch of the second national channel RAI2, the new director, Ettore Bernabei (ex-editor of the Christian Democratic newspaper, *Il Popolo*) also emphasized informational, cultural, and school programs.<sup>36</sup> This nationalist discussion was, thus, part of television from the beginning. The medium’s development through this first period is important for the consideration of Narrative Theater on TV since the practice challenges many nationalist discourses by uprooting and re-examining histories that are considered accepted truths. Yet, Narrative Theater does not break with the tradition of promoting national unity just because it might be more dissident. When it comes to “nation building,” many questions over production interrogate the dynamics between region and

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<sup>34</sup> Buonanno, *Italian TV Drama and Beyond*: 14.

<sup>35</sup> Matthew Hibberd, "The Reform of Public Service Broadcasting in Italy," *Media, Culture & Society* 23, no. 2 (2001): 234.

<sup>36</sup> Dagrada, "Television and its Critics," 236.

nation or challenge dominant historical narratives can possibly redefine what events count as “key” events while still promote some sort of unified narrative. Their presence on television, with its own medium history, makes this nationalist inclination all the more apparent.

In the second era of Italian television, subject to a distribution of political influence known as *lottizzazione*<sup>37</sup> during the period 1975-1992, the emergence of other stations challenged the dominant programming schemes. As a result of Reform Law 103 in 1975, which aimed to address pluralism of information, *lottizzazione* evolved as political parties, followed by managers and journalists, shared positions of power in broadcasting. While the DC held on to RAI1, the Socialist Party (PSI) took control of RAI2, and as late as 1987 the Communist Party (PCI) ran RAI3. The three main political parties, armed with their own channels, behaved as though they considered RAI’s public role to be one where each could establish its own cultural and political influence.<sup>38</sup> For television scholar Cinzia Padovani, these behaviors challenge the notion that public service media can enhance democratic practices.

The concept of public service on television unfolds in two main ways; the first in terms of access, and the second in content. Grasso argues that since the beginning of television broadcasting, the directors have been seen as responsible for providing the

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<sup>37</sup> Literally *lottizzazione* describes the way in which any one entity can be split up into minor parts. This occurred with other state conglomerates in Italy around the same time including ENI, the Italian oil and gas company, ENEL the Italian energy provider, and the Institute for Industrial Reconstruction, which played a role in refinancing banks and private companies. Here I use the term only to refer to the state-run television networks under RAI, which first divided into two, and eventually three.

<sup>38</sup> Cinzia Padovani, *A Fatal Attraction: Public Television and Politics in Italy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 4.

nation with access to political views with respect to cultural growth.<sup>39</sup> Although basic, this is an important point for Narrative Theater, which slowly created a space for itself over decades of performing in small towns and major cities, but then had unprecedented exposure through television.

With respect to the development of the three main state channels, since the DC was solely in control of the RAI from 1953 until 1975, a wide variety of political perspectives was not possible until the parceling out of stations across political parties. The main criticism of *lottizzazione* is that allocating a national channel to each main political party challenged the standard view of objectivity as an *absence* of political bias, but rather that it was exposure to *multiple* political perspectives. Instead of refraining from party propaganda, *lottizzazione* allowed the main parties a forum for their political views. The dominant view of television critics is that while *lottizzazione* came about precisely to instill plurality, it ultimately clashed with the ideal of public service by fracturing the whole system along partisans who did not interact with each other.<sup>40</sup> Knowing this history raises several questions about Narrative Theater on television. Even though those party lines have long since dissolved, the genre's very presence on certain channels raises questions about what kind of network would broadcast a live performance, virtually free of spectacle, and critical of dominant national histories. Does that station automatically become a little more progressive, liberal, experimental, or artistic? Or is a televised Narrative Theater production still a rare enough event that it would have little effect on the reputation of the network?

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<sup>39</sup> Grasso, *Storia della televisione italiana*: 840.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 841.

Padovani argues that, despite the widespread criticism of *lottizzazione*, it nonetheless promoted a plurality of voices (even if they did not talk to one another), which was ultimately a positive step for democratic practices and public service.<sup>41</sup> Although the political division of the broadcaster was not an imitable arrangement, she argues that it did achieve a laudable result in offering multiple perspectives. This is a valid point. As people began to better understand the communicative reach of television, it was considered too risky to leave it entirely in the hands of a single political party. Yet, as there was no discussion between the networks, and as they were so divided across party lines, the system did not really manage to *integrate* a plurality of voices. Even though more voices reached more of the public, they still spoke independently, encouraging division rather than a spirit of national unity. Although the televisual landscape was very different by the time when Narrative Theater began producing telecasts, this history, with questions about plurality of voices and integration of perspectives, still lingers. The inherent qualities of the Narrative Theater genre that put different outlooks into dialogue and challenge dominant views contrast with the fragmentation of Italian television networks. In a small but relevant way, when a station chooses to air a Narrative Theater production, it corrects that past.

By the 1990s, an environment of duopoly in which the three RAI state-owned channels and the three Fininvest (Berlusconi's umbrella company) channels dominated the airwaves, making for a new kind of media homogeneity. Unsurprisingly, in an age when high ratings generated advertising revenue, and Italy being now thirty years away from the era of long uninterrupted programs, RAI had to battle the contradiction between

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<sup>41</sup> Padovani, *A Fatal Attraction*.

its public service mission and commercial imperatives. Increasingly programming that more rigorously engaged audiences was quartered off into a niche market, rather than ones with the dominant aim of entertainment. Instead of a push towards “quality” programming, executives were drawn towards the latter because of revenue.<sup>42</sup> As a result, RAI’s more recent high audience share is related to its diminishing distinctiveness in an increasingly standardized media market. One of the more fascinating aspects about the frequency of Narrative Theater on television is that it almost always airs with no commercial interruption, as was common for televised theater in the early days of RAI. Productions that implicitly challenge the growth in commercialization and privatization of the broadcasting and telecommunications sectors, like those of Narrative Theater, threaten the national network by putting their revenue sources at risk.

This new phase in Italian television is closely tied to the political fallout from the series of scandals known as *Tangentopoli* (sometimes translated as *Bribesville*), a state of such pervasive corruption that by the end of the judicial investigations between 1992-1996 (collectively called *Mani pulite* or Clean Hands), the DC collapsed, and the PSI and PCI were severely weakened and disappeared within a decade. In order to accomplish the eradication of *lottizzazione*, and allow for the reconsolidation of media power, the RAI board of directors argued that the networks’ financial health could lead to independence, and urged greater efficiencies in an effort to move away from party-affiliated networks, to those geared toward the entire citizenry.<sup>43</sup> Most of this transition occurred during a technocratic government with Ciampi as the prime minister. When Berlusconi succeeded

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<sup>42</sup> Cinzia Padovani and Michael Tracey, "Report on the Conditions of Public Service Broadcasting," *Television & New Media* 4, no. 2 (2003): 139-40.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

him in 1994, he implemented a new board of directors, and re-established television along market-driven lines. By this time, critics no longer perceived television as an instrument with educative possibilities, but rather as an integral part of the culture industry, which one could run as a competitive profitable business.<sup>44</sup> RAI's public service mission dwindled as its scheduling strategy strived to maximize audience share. To this end, RAI's freedom from the parties did not result with a leadership committed to quality, innovative, enriching programming, but instead was submissive to capitalist imperatives and the demise of the public service ethos.

This was the environment when Narrative Theater entered its televisual era with the broadcast of Paolini's *Vajont* on RAI2 on October 9, 1997, which was the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the tragedy. Like the leadership of Pugliese in the 1950s, the director of RAI2 in 1997 was Carlo Freccero, who handpicked *Vajont* after seeing the show in person. Thanks to Freccero, other shows by Paolini and Laura Curino, Marco Baliani and Moni Ovadia also appeared on the network. With these choices, which were only a fraction of RAI2's programming, Freccero and his team slightly disassociated themselves from the commercial and financial imperatives brought on by private competition that had largely replaced public service and community-driven discussions. That Narrative Theater, a practice that is critical of dominant national narratives, has a presence at all on Italian television suggests that it is possible for networks to redefine their social roles. One of Narrative Theater's central contributions to television is its mere presence and ongoing popularity, demonstrating a sizeable audience interested in engaging with the nuanced and rigorous discourses that the genre offers.

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<sup>44</sup> Dagrada, "Television and its Critics," 244.



Knowing the history of Italian television can help to better sort through the televised presence of Narrative Theater in terms of its implications for the performance genre and for television. The myriad ways that diverse groups rejected television also shows how people struggled to conceive of television's role within Italian society. The initial negative responses went beyond arguments of elite culture versus popular culture. Literary and theater critics, who were still coming to terms with film, regarded television as "the bearer of massified culture, a commodification of art, and as lowering the status of the intellectuals who wrote about it," the left saw it as a "diabolical invention of the corrupt capitalist West," and the Catholic and conservative intellectuals saw it as a threat to traditional social relations and ethical values.<sup>45</sup> The real question, however, lies beyond these different ideological critiques to the broader concern of television's impact on the public. A close examination of two Narrative Theater pieces will help demonstrate how a successful translation from the stage to television preserves this quintessentially democratic goal.

### **Translating Narrative Theater onto Television**

In 2001, there was a major blockbuster film, laden with special effects, starring the well-known Italian actress Laura Morante as the journalist Tina Merlin about the Vajont disaster. Titled *La diga del disonore*, it was translated for release in France as *La folie des hommes*, and portrayed the uncovering of political corruption that was present in Paolini's play. Yet, by industry standards, the film, with all its technological savvy and

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 235.

close-ups of a digitized tsunami wiping out seven villages, was a flop. Meanwhile, the taping of Paolini's show, with few additional visual effects, was a great success both for him and for Narrative Theater as a whole since this production increased popular interest in these kinds of productions. In an insightful discussion on stand-up comedy, performance theorist Philip Auslander notes that upon seeing a televised show of a comedian, studio executives were surprised to discover that viewers responded with a desire to see that individual perform live. Put another way, mediatized performance became the referent for the live one.<sup>46</sup> In this section, I discuss both the televised *Vajont* and *Corpo di stato* analyzing the transformation from the stage to a televisual language while taking into consideration the role that theater has historically played on the much politicized Italian networks as discussed in the previous section.

In the televised *Vajont*, a decision to stage in front of the dam brought the show lasting recognition. These spectacular settings are not an uncommon choice for televised Narrative Theater, suggesting that they play an important role in compensating for the lack of other elements of spectacle. While Baliani has performed *Corpo di stato* in a plethora of humble locations, the televised performance was set dramatically amidst the ancient ruins of Rome in the heart of the city. Curino's *Camillo Olivetti*, which has also been produced in a wide range of venues, was taped overlooking the Olivetti factories in Ivrea. Given the inherent drama in these backdrops, they add a dynamic both to the in-person and televised performances, but also introduce a risky element. Visual media scholar Giorgio Simonelli argues that they set a visual standard, which will appear to denigrate future productions if it is not met. He inextricably ties all of Paolini's TV work

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<sup>46</sup> Auslander, *Liveness*: 30-31.

back to the *Vajont* production. The fact that it aired on the anniversary of the tragedy, took place in front of the dam, and also at the exact time of the tragedy created an inherent drama that, because it was the first piece of Narrative Theater on television, became part of the standard mode of presentation. For him, the emotional height of the piece has no match.<sup>47</sup> And yet, as part of what makes Narrative Theater so successful in all of its medial forms is the inherent drama in the subject itself, there is little that would distract and detract from the central themes.

As Simonelli himself notes, many Narrative Theater pieces have moments of dramatic intrigue that include political-military dynamics fraught with cover-ups, as they embrace a re-readings of history, civic passion and the addition of new perspectives. Pointing out that two to five million viewers watch Narrative Theater each time a production airs, he suggests that these theatrically televised events should be as frequent as once a month, and replace Raidue's *Palcoscenico* which only offers the same dull homogenized theater productions, completely void of flavor, and which fare poorly on TV and in the theaters.<sup>48</sup> This contrast between the average televised theater production and that of Narrative Theater suggests that, while the genre maintains its minimalist aesthetic, it is more effective at translating itself into a successful piece for TV. Part of this has to do with its inherent hybridity which allows for a proximity to many different forms, but most of its success is due to the translation from a language of theater to one of TV.

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<sup>47</sup> Giorgio Simonelli, *I peggiori anni della sua vita: La televisione italiana nel nuovo millennio* (Turin: Effatà, 2004), 37.

<sup>48</sup> Giorgio Simonelli, *Ci salvi chi può: Cronache della TV italiana dal 2000 a oggi* (Turin: Effatà, 2009), 195-96.

Paolini slowly developed *Vajont*, first performing it after dinner for friends in September 1993.<sup>49</sup> By the time the production aired on RAI2 in 1997, he had presented his piece over 200 times in a plethora of different venues many of which were outside of theaters. Less than six months after his first post-dinner performance, he recorded it on the Milan based left-leaning radio station Radio Popolare in March of 1994 following an earlier theatrical performance.<sup>50</sup> The show began around midnight, ended at 2:30 am and he accepted callers until 4 am.<sup>51</sup> Besides the obvious exposure to a not particularly mainstream audience (given the hour), the radio broadcast also allowed Paolini to continue the exhibition of his show on his own terms in low-pressure situations. It also gave him time; time to let the production grow and change in small ways, and to understand it both in terms of its theatrical staging, as well as in a language suitable for radio and eventually for television.

While his show gained momentum through word of mouth, particularly in artistic and intellectual circles where people such as Freccero attended a performance, Paolini still chose spaces that were non-traditional, rarely entering theaters. As he explains, this was not because he was anti-establishment *per se*, but because he felt that more intimate venues better served the show. Within two weeks of accepting Freccero's proposition to

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<sup>49</sup> For a detailed description of that first performance, see: Marco Paolini and Oliviero Ponte di Pino, *Quaderno del Vajont: Dagli album al Teatro della diga* (Turin: Einaudi, 1999), 16-17.

<sup>50</sup> Radio Popolare in Milan is part of a tradition in which many left-leaning political stations emerged during the 1970s and include, perhaps most famously, Radio Alice in Bologna, which later became Radio Radicale; Radio Aut in the Palermo region lead by Peppino Impastato who spoke out against the mafia who then murdered him, and who Baliani honors in *Corpo di stato*; and even more recently Radio Blackout in Turin, emerging from protests in occupied universities in the late 1980s and early 1990s known as *il movimento della pantera*.

<sup>51</sup> Paolini and Ponte di Pino, *Quaderno del Vajont: Dagli album al Teatro della diga*: 50-51.

air the piece on national television, new offers were pouring in for Paolini to perform *Vajont* at festivals and in theaters nationwide. As he says, “*Vajont* exploded in theaters,” which he found distressing given his preference for nontraditional venues. He also admits that the televised performance killed something in the theatrical version without elaborating on what precisely that was.<sup>52</sup> One key aspect of *Vajont*’s evolution is its malleability across genres, which is also representative of Narrative Theater. From its first iterations in the company of friends, through the midnight performance on the radio and ultimately the televised show, Paolini constantly adjusts the text. Throughout the life of a production it is typical for actors to tweak their performance, but the text often remains fixed. Narrative Theater allows a continual re-invention to any given piece, but also presents specific challenges when changing modes of representation.

The October 9, 1997 televised performance of *Vajont* is a direct transmission, and not a translation or adaptation—to use Grasso’s terms—of the original theater piece. Seven cameras alternate perspective from center, left, and right, zoom in for close-ups of both the performer and audience, and also take extreme long shots of the audience, the stage, and the dramatic background of the dam itself. Most shots tend to be direct medium shots or high angles, and no low angles, an important distinction from Baliani’s production that I discuss later who took more liberty with cinema aesthetics. As Grasso points out, one of the advantages of direct transmission is its incorporation of the physicality and sacredness of the actual stage, which the viewer sees on the screen. Everyday life, normalcy, and that colloquial tone characteristic of many Narrative Theater pieces are all also typical of TV, working to the genre’s advantage.

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<sup>52</sup> “A teatro esplodeva *Vajont*.” Ibid., 43, 71.



**Figure 12 Marco Paolini in *Vajont* televised by RAI (1997)**

In terms of additions to the play, the transition into a televisual language was fairly simple. There are several types of extra material: shots of maps, newspapers, newspaper photographs, and old footage from the disaster, all of which are less and less frequent as the show continues. Grasso adds that Paolini's verbal dexterity in *Vajont* was helped out by the inclusion of imagery from the aftermath, some of which was never before seen because it had been ignored or censored.<sup>53</sup> In fact, the inclusion of visual imagery is so infrequent and unobtrusive that, in my view, it had very little to do with the production's success.

The very first shot is a paper map with Venice and the surrounding area that slowly shifts and zooms to Longarone and Erto, two of the nearby towns affected by the disaster. This shot then dissolves from the paper map into several establishing landscape

<sup>53</sup> Grasso, *Storia della televisione italiana*: 863, 66, 71.

shots of the dam itself, zooming out into an extreme long shot of the mountain top where the dam still exists, panning to the valleys below, only to zoom back on the dam. All the while open credits run. Then the camera switches to the live transmission, starting in on the dam, now in the night but lit by flood lights, shifting cameras to pan the set of the play. Paolini, framed with audience members in front of him and the dam lit behind him, utters his first words in the center of the frame, as it continues to zoom in to a medium long (“American”) shot. Up until Paolini speaks, there is no sound except the water trickling down the rocks, and a few coughs or rumbles from the audience. For the next minute, the camera follows his few movements on the stage, keeping him framed in the same way, occasionally switching to medium shots of audience members as he begins interacting with them. Only after a minute and a half into Paolini’s opening, the images of old newspapers replace him as he provides a voiceover, along with a shortened running text in subtitles, stating the bare facts of what happened exactly thirty-nine years before. The camera focuses particularly on the newspaper photos, and then old video footage begins for stretches of five or six seconds. That first sequence lasts 36 seconds before going back to Paolini, and then switches back to old footage of the aftermath, at one point superimposing his performance with the wreckage. For the next four minutes the image of Paolini is interrupted by old footage in clips of ten to twenty-five seconds. This pattern continues, but with far less frequency as the show progresses as the camera stays primarily with Paolini.

Given that the pattern—of long takes sometimes panning at different frames and angles of Paolini with a smattering of quick shots of the audience all interrupted at several points to show old footage—quickly turns redundant, it is clear that the televisual

language has preserved the minimalism of the Narrative Theater genre. The footage is important though as it sets a research tone that underlines the erudition of the genre and enhances its ties to microhistory. Showing these primary sources, the audience at home is exposed to authentic quasi-anthropological research. The footage consists of medium shots or long shots of the rubble and its aftermath. In one sequence, people help an older woman walk over debris by holding her on either side. She, dressed in black as though for mourning, looks directly at the camera at one point, and the expressive pain that registers across her face in a shot of no more than three seconds is potent, if brief.

These sequences show how real people personalize the event in a way that microhistorians describe as witnessing the intimate effects of ordinary people. In his preface to his book on witchcraft, Carlo Ginzburg discusses how the “rich variety of individual attitudes and behavior” emerging from the sources so enveloped him that he risked losing sight of the larger project. He goes on to describe that “the principal characteristic of this documentation is its immediacy... the voices of these peasants reach us directly, without barriers...”<sup>54</sup> When the haggard woman stares directly at the camera, filling the entire television screen, there is a new proximity to the Vajont disaster, different than what an in-person performance can offer. Even if there were a screen onstage onto which Paolini projected the images, it would still only be a part of the audience’s focus. Perhaps some audience members continue to Paolini? Maybe the focus of others drifts back to the chalkboard during those few seconds when the woman is seen? By creating a televisual language through the inclusion of raw footage, Paolini and

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<sup>54</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft & Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. John & Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), xvii.



his team are successful in maintaining a direct intimacy with the audience that is both new and different from being in the performance space itself.

Two other influential choices that helped translate the piece into the new format are the use of seven cameras as well as the location itself in front of the dam. Unlike the experience of sitting in the audience, multiple camera setups allow the viewer to see Paolini from different angles and at different distances. They also capture close-ups of the audience at different times, allowing the viewer to take part in the reactions or, at least, to witness them more intimately. These choices are also an efficient way to compensate for the lack of in person rigor. The cameras imitate different movements of the eye, sometimes going beyond the limits of human vision such as seeing Paolini from two different places in the audience, or seeing him much more closely than one who is in the back of the audience could. Even while the cameras may enhance and build upon the live performance, they still reaffirm the in-person experience more than try to go beyond it. The reference is still the stage performance, even if Paolini's team must adapt and create a new televisual language. While the inclusion of the images and footage might challenge the limits of an in-person performance, the camera work re-enforces it in a translation that is effective for the medium.

Now I would like to turn to the RAI production of *Corpo di stato* in order to explore the consequences of a clumsier attempt at translating a Narrative Theater piece to television. Similar to the airing of *Vajont*, RAI also showed this production on an anniversary, which was that of Aldo Moro's assassination in 1978. Impastato's death received less coverage regarding the show, even though Baliani also frames his piece through it. Arguably the most minimalist of the narrators, rarely adding even a single

prop, Baliani embraces the technical adjustments in this endeavor that have remarkable effects. There are few differences between the transition of *Vajont* to TV and *Corpo di stato* to TV, but those key modifications result in one main difference: Baliani and his team's attempt to dramatize the production and its underlying ideas through televisual means ultimately detract and distract from the core of the piece. This is somewhat surprising given that the RAI director, Felice Cappa, was involved in the production after having worked on similar projects in the late 1990s including works by Dario Fo (*Marino libero!*, 1998), Paolini (both *Vajont* and *I Tigi-Canto per Ustica*), and Curino (the Olivetti saga). To the credit of Simonelli, who had portrayed Paolini's *Vajont* as so spectacularly charged by emotion and novelty, it does seem as though Cappa was competing with himself, trying to enhance the emotional resonance of the show to that of *Vajont*.

In his review of *Corpo di stato*, the critic Gualtiero Peirce at *La Repubblica* addresses the comparison immediately. Quite simply, he states that Baliani's piece did not create the same "magic" as Paolini's. It did not create the same "televisual fusion." He also notes that it had about half the viewership as *Vajont*, which reached over a million sets (at an almost seven percent market share).<sup>55</sup> He states that this discrepancy is partially due to the fact that *Vajont*'s tragic power is the fault of nature—the landslides that triggered the tsunami—while the tragedy in *Corpo di stato* is caused by humans and told in a very personal autobiographical manner. In fact, Paolini's show was largely aimed at correcting the prevailing view with the evidence of human error and he does so through his own memory in addition to his research. Rather, the two problems with Baliani's televised production revolve around its location and the use of the cameras.

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<sup>55</sup> Gualtiero Peirce, "Corpo a corpo fra video e teatro," *La Repubblica*, 11 May 1998.

Instead of enhancing the theatrical experience, the production competes with it through the hyperbolic background in the ancient government buildings of the Roman Forum, as well as the schizophrenic and low angle camera movements in addition to dramatic shadows that are typical of melodrama and horror films.



Figure 13 Marco Baliani in *Corpo di stato* televised by RAI (1998)

Certainly there is a clear rationale in the choice of the Roman Forum as the quintessential symbol of the city and the political heart of the nation, evoking the past as well as dramatic leitmotifs from the text such as justice, betrayal, and human frailty. As Italian theater scholar Ron Jenkins notes, it also serves as a material contrast to the use of contemporary media such as the soundtrack and photograph stills from the 1970s.<sup>56</sup> The production opens in a beautifully lit panning shot of the ruins with the Temple of Jupiter twinkling in the background. A textual overlay announces the live transmission from Augustus's Forum. As a recording of the musician and political activist Joan Baez singing the old folk song "Fare Thee Well" begins, cameras switch to different shots—

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<sup>56</sup> Jenkins, "Body of State," ix.

some closer zooming out, some panoramic—of the crumbling structures. The black sky hangs like a curtain in the background, playing a particularly important and surprising part in evoking the sense of a theater. As though it were the wings of a stage set, it frames, but also cuts off the world in which the action takes place. It is no doubt stunning, just like the image of the dam in *Vajont* or the factories in Ivrea for RAI's *Camillo Olivetti*, but it is too poetic and abstract, clashing and even upstaging the play. Baliani's tale is nostalgic, but confronts a specific moment in the past. The Forum represents power and politics, but also an ideal republic in which, he argues, those qualities have atrophied in the present. While this is the metaphor that Baliani wished to capitalize upon, such romantic renderings betray the straightforward directness of the genre. So much of Narrative Theater is about opening up new dialogues, offering diverse perspectives, uncovering lesser-known facts, and yet the choice of this location confounds that process with its mystery.

Further, the space was not conducive to the in-person performance, forcing Baliani away from his audience members and thrusting him into the camera. He complains in his diaries how terrible it was to be unable to engage with the audience as they were almost placed behind him so as to give the visual sense of community even while he looked only at the camera.<sup>57</sup> Sadly, this “sense of community” reveals more of an attempt rather than a successful execution. The fact that the producers aimed for the at-home viewers to perceive a sense of community highlights the fact that there was not actually one, and that is unfortunate. They were thinking only in terms of the visual presentation, not in how the actual audience functions in relation to the piece. According

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<sup>57</sup> Baliani, *Corpo di stato*: 101.

to Baliani, the director of the piece, Maria Maglietta, who was also his longtime partner and who he refers to in the play, intimated as much. She protested the location, citing its grandiloquence and rhetorical pedantry, but Felice insisted. Ultimately she did convince the producers to avoid the great staircase where they considered having Baliani stand, looking down on the audience.<sup>58</sup> The dramatic angles that a staircase would have created were not lost on them, but rather incorporated by placing the cameras low so that everything seems larger and looming. Neither Baliani nor his show fails, however, with respect to the location choice, but the translation of his piece into a televisual language was cluttered with an insincere baroque set instead of one that would have supported the mechanisms already at work in the piece and within the genre.

Returning to the cameras, many of the close-ups in the first few images of the Forum are shot from a low angle, a choice problematically echoed throughout the production. After a little over a minute, from a shot of the moon, unsteadily captured by the camera, the image switches to the first image of Baliani in a medium close-up, framed by pillars of the ancient Forum behind him. The camera here is also low angled, glaring up at him in a way that makes the ruins behind him appear even larger. Besides the actual location, this aesthetic is one of the most miscalculated choices of the production. These low-angle shots are reminiscent of horror films that dramatically overwhelm the spectator through harsh angles to create imposing figures on screen. Perhaps Baliani and Felice meant to convey the authority of the State, which is certainly a leitmotif in the play, and this might explain shooting the ruins in such away. Even so, it is a manipulative choice.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 81-82.

In any translation to the screen, the principles of Narrative Theater—its directness and authenticity—must be preserved. Luckily the cameras also capture Baliani in medium long shots that are framed at eye level, but when they frame him from the low angle, he morphs into an Orwellian authority figure rather than the sympathetic voice working through a complicated history rife with personal conflict. The differences in these two productions highlight the difficulty in successfully translating Narrative Theater for television. By and large the productions are quite similar. Both embrace a spectacular space, use multiple cameras, incorporate archival footage or photographs, and maintain the primary focus on the narrator in a mode of direct address. Yet the slight differences, with which Baliani's team aimed to enhance the drama of the production, reveal two very different productions.

Before concluding, I would like to acknowledge the growing use of digital efforts and its implications for the genre. Of all the narrators examined in this study, Celestini and, to a lesser extent, Paolini, are the most engaged with technology and media. What distinguishes Celestini are his regular appearances on satirical programs or talk shows on television, many of which appear on YouTube, as well as his range of filmmaking, consisting of Narrative Theater pieces that he usually develops into a media version that stands truly independent. Celestini experiments with the developmental order of his creative projects whether they are from theater to film (as in most cases), or film to theater. The Temps Project that I analyzed earlier in terms of language is one of the best examples of the range of media within which he works. His medial choices fracture the project in many ways that resound against each other and offers different layers of his

central idea through a documentary film, live performance, a novel, and a separate text sold with the film that culls various research and preparation materials, including interviews and published editorials.

For the performance, Celestini tells a string of anecdotes in his classic chatty fast-paced delivery that relate to class struggles and temporary employees, interspersed with live music that sometimes accompanies a story, and sometimes separates them. The performance functions as a prequel to the film; he narrates the content as much as he shares stories of how the film came into existence. As he shares anecdotes from interviews, he demonstrates his process of the elements that lead him to create the film. In fact, the show, *Appunti per un film sulla lotta di classe* (Notes for a Film on Class Struggle) carries a publicity tagline that casually states, “It is not a play, but is exactly what the title says it is.” The next line follows states: “A play by and with Ascanio Celestini.” This project highlights Celestini’s journey across media and demonstrates the evolving life of a text, serving as an example of how Narrative Theater is a form that intrinsically questions what constitutes a play, and how other media can contribute to this genre.

More broadly, the diverse use of media in Narrative Theater, from its presence in shows such as *Santa Bàrbera* to the not always successful translation into television as with *Vajont* and *Corpo di stato*, reflects the genre’s inherent hybridity even within its rigid minimalist presentation. Whether present in a stage show, or used as a new way of exhibition, media interacts most effectively when it serves the production, rather than converting into it another form. The visual imagery and sound in *Santa Bàrbera* help to clarify Curino’s complex rendering of female agency, while the cameras in *Vajont* assist

the at-home spectator in feeling as a part of the community as they shift from audience members back to Paolini. On the other hand, when cinematic techniques overpower the content of the piece, as it did in *Corpo di stato*, the result is a production that buries its most meaningful elements of human connection under distracting pretense. Narrators are clearly still experimenting with media in their famously minimalist genre, but are finding that simplicity does not have to mean pre-technology. Embraced correctly, different media draws attention not to itself, but to the performance.



## **Conclusion**

### **The Many Platforms of Italian Performers**

This dissertation has sought to analyze the emergence of Narrative Theater through multiple lenses and, thus, to outline new directions for future scholarship across Italian studies, theater and performance, and microhistory. The centrality of performance, and particularly the intersection between performance and politics, is highly important in contemporary Italy. Even recently, in the first months of 2013, Italy witnessed two distinctly theatrical events: the election of a new pope and national elections to parliament. The latter featured, front and center, Beppe Grillo, a satirist who crossed over into the realm of politics, and whose material often criticized national scandals involving Italy's elite. Although a provocateur since the late 1970s, Grillo was barred from publicly owned television in 1987, just as Dario Fo had been in the 1950s, for suggesting that then Prime Minister, Bettino Craxi, was the puppeteer of a corrupt Socialist Party. It took five more years for officials to address the corruption to which Grillo alluded, and Craxi ultimately escaped to Tunisia, where he eventually died. This is one example of Grillo publicly exposing a scandal before journalists or actual investigators, a problem that foregrounds the platform of his new political party, the MoVimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement, or M5S), which deadlocked the Italian parliamentary elections with a

shocking 25.5% of votes in March 2013.<sup>1</sup> By exposing scandal and corruption, at first through comedy and later in attempts to raise awareness for campaign with more dramatic acts such as swimming across the Strait of Messina in 2012, Grillo performed a sort of populist one-man-show of political action and community.

While Narrative Theater was always distinct than Grillo's work—though they might employ comedy, narrators are clearly not comedians or political satirists, and though they are political, not one of the main narrators has ever shown or expressed any intention to run for office—it shares one aspect that lies at the heart of Grillo's political and cultural production. Both Grillo and the narrators actually perform the confrontation between official and unofficial information, and the narrators in particular synthesize what such a confrontation means for the ordinary individual.

To a large extent, Narrative Theater pieces aim to inspire ordinary people to take responsibility for the recuperation, discovery, and (re-)making of the past. When Paolini, for example, performs *Vajont*, he asks why it is that journalists (with the exception of Tina Merlin whose work, he says, went largely unnoticed) and government officials never bothered to ask what caused the landslide and who was at fault. Why did questions and investigations not follow after public mourning? Similarly, after anticipating the bankruptcy scandal of Parmalat in one of his routines (still today the largest bankruptcy in all of Europe), Grillo wondered why he was the one to break the story, stating that “The real catastrophe is information: It is serious that these things come out with us,

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<sup>1</sup> The capitol “V” in “moVimento” stands for an Italian swearword directed towards members of parliament, euphemistically translatable as “take a hike.” For a complete breakdown of votes see: <http://elezioni.interno.it/camera/scrutini/20130224/C000000000.htm>; [http://www.repubblica.it/static/speciale/2013/elezioni/camera/riepilogo\\_nazionale.html](http://www.repubblica.it/static/speciale/2013/elezioni/camera/riepilogo_nazionale.html)

comedians, and not with the press, who arrives afterwards.”<sup>2</sup> Although very different, these two modes of performance recall Walter Benjamin’s musing in “The Storyteller” that I connect to the narrator’s sense of duty in sharing experience. Grillo and Paolini point to a situation where the artist uncovers truths, sometimes before the press, and interprets their meanings for the ordinary citizen. In different ways, they both emphasize the artist’s key role as a carrier of information, yet, encourage their audiences to become more active and engaged in the politics of their community, region, and country.

Contextualizing Narrative Theater in a mode of “epic performance” as Gerardo Guccini does, highlights its potential to reach beyond national discourses. On the one hand, my argument that Narrative Theater emerged through a convergence of political crisis and cultural developments in the practices of theater and history in the 1970s emphasizes its *italianità*. When conceptualizing this genre under Guccini’s umbrella term, on the other hand, it is clear that Narrative Theater shares many commonalities across borders, and an investigation that considers other national modes of performance would be particularly fruitful both to tease out universal traits and to better demarcate the specificity of this particular theatrical genre. France, for example, has witnessed its own renaissance of community-based efforts such as the Théâtre du Grabuge and the emergence of prominent individual performers like Jérôme Bel and Xavier Le Roy.<sup>3</sup> In North America, the practice of Documentary Theater, which relies heavily on the

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<sup>2</sup> “Ma la vera catastrofe è l’informazione: è grave che queste cose vengano fuori da noi, dai comici, non dalla stampa che è arrivata dopo.” Quoted in “Grillo sentito sul crac Parmalat ‘Ho portato pure Fiat e Telecom’,” *La Repubblica*, 16 Jan 2004. Available at <http://www.repubblica.it/2004/a/sezioni/economia/parmalat6/grillo1/grillo1.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Clare Finburgh and Carl Lavery, *Contemporary French Theatre and Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

research of existing documents as the backbone of its scripts, is particularly relevant despite significant formal differences such as productions with ensemble casts rather than individual performers/narrators.

Austin Bunn's 2011 *Rust*, for example, is similar to Celestini's ethnographic research style and that of the Teatro Settimo, in that he based his play on conversations with former workers and other residents of Wyoming, Michigan who recounted for him their experiences of the 2008 closing of the local General Motors factory. One benefit of a comparative transnational analysis is not only its interdisciplinarity, but also the ways in which it would shed light on different areas of Italian studies. A comparison of *Rust* with Curino's Olivetti saga would travel beyond broad questions related to capitalism to questions regarding working-class activism, the lasting influence of the Communist Party, and notions of *autonomia* or workerism. Listening to the women of the Michigan factory might also lead one to reflect upon representations of feminism in Curino's work, and the different ways in which the feminist movement played out, and continues, in Italy. These are broad strokes, but my point is to highlight just a few of the many potential future directions for studies on Narrative Theater.

In a different way, a comparative study on the more well-known, and notorious, *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs* (2011) by Mike Daisey would offer yet another way to consider performance and politics in Italy. This work has very close formal resemblances to Narrative Theater. Daisey sits at a desk for most of the performance and juxtaposes his personal affinity for Apple products with his experiences researching their production in exploitative Chinese factories, particularly Foxconn's Shenzhen facility. Similar to Grillo, Daisey's piece anticipated a long exposé by *The New York Times* that

uncovered practices in the mammoth factory that produces most of the world's electronics (not just Apple's). Daisey asked important questions about reconciling one's consumerist predilections with the knowledge that they fuel low wages, inhumane working conditions, and huge corporate profits, to say nothing of how outsourcing work to China has affected the lives of working-class people in the West. After an hour long episode on Daisey on NPR's *This American Life*, however, the show's staff (somewhat belatedly) investigated their doubts regarding the veracity of some of his claims. Their discovery that he had fabricated parts of his story generated controversy over the appropriate boundaries between documentary reporting and artistic license.

It is hard to imagine that narrators I investigate here would submit mendacious claims, and yet Daisey's experience causes one to question why that seems so unlikely. Part of the answer has to do with why Narrative Theater is a category of its own, which points back to the work of Grillo and other satirists, and especially the genre's relationship to politics. Grillo, Fo, and Daisey walk a line between art and activism, where narrators may linger but tend to privilege the art. More recent work by Celestini, such as his piece on the Roman call center, is the closest to this more activist path, but much of that show is sprinkled with seemingly non-sequitur sequences that reframe the larger issue of labor practices. He builds on the plight of the Artesia workers, rather than campaigns for them.

Considering the works that the narrators keep in their repertory, and those that they have newly developed, the main characteristics that built Narrative Theater will continue to be its defining features. The formal ones—the actor-author, solo performer, minimalist *mise-en-scène*—are easier to recognize. Those that truly define the genre—the

narrator as civic worker, the regional linguistics and gradations of orality, the notions of community that reflect in the performance space—are more slippery and malleable. It is through these conceptions and techniques that they shift the focus from a dominant, traditional narrative focus on important figures to the experiences of individuals and what they can reveal about Italian society in its many layers and complexities.

Contextualizing the genre's origins in the 1970s sheds light both on many of the plays' themes and leitmotifs, while also helping to explain how the practices of microhistory and the emphasis on minor works influenced the founders of the genre. The power of Narrative Theater also reflects the subtlety of these factors. At the end of a show, one might at first reflect upon what was once a familiar narrative, but slowly, perhaps in the retelling to someone else, it might become apparent that the auditor's own memories have changed as well. Soon, this new account, with the spectator's own personal history now layered onto that of the narrator's, morphs once more, itself becoming the newest interpretation. Within this most recent version lingers the dawning awareness that no one story is final.

## Appendices

### A. Teatrography

#### Marco Baliani

##### *Storia di Petrosinella* (1978)

Collaboratively created by Osvaldo Alzari, Marco Baliani, Tanny Giser, Maria Maglietta, Stefano Occhibelli, Marcella Tersigni  
Collettivo Ruotalibera (Baliani's first theater company)

##### *Popout* (1979)

Collaboratively created by Marco Baliani, Maria Maglietta, Rossana Marullo,  
Collettivo Ruotalibera

##### *Souperman* (1982)

Collaboratively created by Osvaldo Alzari, Ursine Arthman, Marco Baliani,  
Francesco Brucoli, Tanny Giser, Stefano Occhibelli  
Ruotalibera teatro

##### *Rosa e Celeste* (1983)

Text and direction by Marco Baliani with Maria Maglietta, Tiziana Lucattini  
Ruotalibera Teatro

##### *Orphy 2013* (1984)

Text and direction by Marco Baliani, with Osvaldo Alzari, Piero Avallone, Roberto Anglisani, Francesco Brucoli, Tiziana Lucattini, Maria Maglietta  
Ruotalibera Teatro

##### *Oz* (1986)

Text and direction by Marco Baliani, with Maria Maglietta, Tiziana Lucattini,  
Francesco Brucoli, Nestor Davio  
Ruotalibera Teatro

##### *Tisiù* (1988)

Text by Marco Baliani, direction by Maria Maglietta, set by Marcella Tersigni, with  
Roberto Anglisani, Francesco Brucoli, Giampietro Lorenzato, Tiziana Lucattini,  
Marcella Tersigni  
Ruotalibera Teatro - Festival Internazionale Teatro Ragazzi di Muggia - Centro di  
Ricerca Teatro Ragazzi di Monterotondo

*Storie* (1988)

Text by and with Marco Baliani  
Ruotalibera Teatro

*Jeann d’Arc* (1989)

Text by Marco Baliani, with Maria Maglietta  
Ruotalibera Teatro

*Saturnus* (1989)

Text and direction by Marco Baliani, with Miriam Bardini, Gigi Tapella  
Festival Internazionale Steirischer Herbst di Graz, 1989

*Kohlhaas* (1989)

Based on the eponymous novel by Heinrich von Kleist, text by Marco Baliani, Remo Rostagno, with Marco Baliani  
Ruotalibera Teatro

*Antigone delle città* (2 agosto 1991)

In the piazza of Bologna on the anniversary of the 1980 bombing at the train station  
Directed by Marco Baliani  
Text by Gianni D’Elia, Franco Fortini, Franco Loi, Marco Baliani,  
Maria Maglietta, Bruno Tognolini, with 100 actors from Comune di Bologna-Studio Festi

*Antigone della terra* (2 August 1992)

In the piazza of Bologna on the anniversary of the 1980 bombing at the train station  
Directed by Marco Baliani  
Text by Marco Baliani, Bruno Tognolini, with 100 actors from Comune di Bologna-Studio Festi

*Memoria del fuoco* (1992)

Based on the trilogy by Eduardo Galeano, direction by Marco Baliani, text by Marco Baliani, Valeria Frabetti, Maria Maglietta, with Isabella Carloni, Tania Eijk, Valeria Frabetti, Tanny Giser, Victoria Gutierrez, Angela Malfitano, Patricia Savastano  
La Baracca Bologna, Drama Teatri Modena , Drolesera Festival

*Memorie del gelso. Intorno ai racconti e alla memoria storica della città di Alessandria* (1992)

Text and direction by Marco Baliani, with the company “I Pochi” and the chorus from Teatro Comunale di Alessandria  
Teatro Comunale di Alessandria

*Frollo* (1993)

Text by Marco Baliani and Mario Bianchi, with Marco Baliani  
Trickster Teatro (Baliani’s second theater company)



*Piccoli angeli* (1993)

Text and direction by Marco Baliani, with Roberto Anglisani, Maria Maglietta  
Trickster Teatro

*Come gocce di una fiumana* (1994)

(Based on original writings by soldiers in the trenches during the First World War),  
directed by Marco Baliani, text by Marco Baliani, Maria Maglietta, Francesco  
Guadagni,  
with Roberto Anglisani Sandra Cosatto, Elisa Cuppini, Fabiano Fantini, Teresa  
Ludovico,  
Rita Maffei, Claudio Moretti, Piera Principe, Renato Rinaldi  
Museo della Guerra di Rovereto

*Lear* (1994)

By William Shakespeare, directed by Maria Maglietta, with Marco Baliani, Giancarlo  
Ilari (Coco Leonardi)  
Festival di Santarcangelo dei Teatri

*Terra dove non annotta* (1995)

By Marco Baliani, Francesco Guadagni, Maria Maglietta, directed by Marco Baliani,  
with Bernardino Bonzani, Antonello Cossia, Elisa Cuppini, Gabriele Duma, Fabiano  
Fantini, Carlo Ferrari, Piergiorgio Gallicani, Caia Grimaz, Claudio Moretti, Renato  
Rinaldi, Antonio Volpi  
Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra, Museo Storico di Trento, Materiali di Lavoro  
e Ars Group, Trento

*Le vie del ritorno* (1996)

By Erich Maria Remarque, Francesco Guadagni, Maria Maglietta, directed by Marco  
Baliani, with Aleksandar Cujetkovic, Gabriele Duma, Massimo  
Lanzetta, Giancarlo Previati  
Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra, Museo Storico di Trento, Materiali di Lavoro,  
Ars Group e Campana dei Caduti di Rovereto

*Migranti* (1996)

Direction by Marco Baliani, text by Marco Baliani, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Ismail  
Kadarè, Amin Maalouf, Predrag Matvejevic, Vassilis Vassilikòs, Alessandra  
Ghiglione, Maria Maglietta, Letizia Quintavalla, dance and movement by Elisa  
Cuppini, scene di Letizia Quintavalla, costumi di Maria Maglietta with Veronica  
Ambrosino, Roberto Anglisani, Edmond Budina, Stefano Cipiciani,  
Elisa Cuppini, Gabriele Duma, Michele Fiocchi, Valeria Frabetti, Alì Guentas, Eve  
Gurrier, Sigal Harari, Angela Iurilli, Teresa Ludovico, Maria Maglietta, Francesca  
Mainetti, Lola Manzano, Montserrat Merino, Francesco Palagiano, Carlo Presotto,  
Morello Rinaldi, Carlo Maria Rossi, Mahmud Said, Nesrin Uskanat  
Dèlphinos Produzioni, Progetto I Porti del Mediterraneo, ETI

Tracce (1996)

Based on the writings by Ernst Bloch, text and with Marco Baliani  
Trickster Teatro

*Giufà* (1997)

Directed by Marco Baliani, text by Maria Maglietta, with collaboration from Fatima Galaire, with Salvatore Arena, Hazim Begacic, Federico Bertozzi, Antonello Cossia, Abeer Fawzy, Annalisa Legato, Monica Morini, Carlo Ottolini, Oliver Pauls, Caterina Pontrandolfo, Antonino Praticò, Anna Redi, Alfonso Rodriguez Celos, Adrian Schvarzste, Elisabetta Vergani  
Dèlphinos Produzioni, Progetto I Porti del Mediterraneo

*Corpo di Stato* (1998)

*Il delitto Moro: una generazione divisa*, (from an idea by Marco Baliani and Felice Cappa), by and with Marco Baliani, directed by Maria Maglietta,  
Casa degli Alfieri Asti- Trickster Teatro Parma e Rai Due

*Francesco a testa in giù* (2000)

Text by Marco Baliani and Felice Cappa, directed by Maria Maglietta, with Marco Baliani, Roberto Anglisani and Patrizia Romeo  
Teatro Stabile dell'Umbria, Casa Degli Alfieri, Trickster Teatro, Rai Due

*Pinocchio nero* (2004)

A project by Marco Baliani with youth from Nairobi, direction by Marco Baliani, with Nahashon Mbugua Kavo, Joseph Mutoka, John Chege, Kevin Chege, Michael Mwaura, Mohammed Kamau, Wycliff Onera, George Kamau, George Ngugi, Patrick Kamau, Wilson Franco, Daniel Kamande, Samuel Gakuha, Onesmus Kamau, John Kavoo, Ibrahiim Karanja, Denis Kiarie, John Muthama, James Nganga e Alex Wagacha, con la collaborazione artistica di Letizia Quintavalla, Maria Maglietta, Elisa Cuppini e Morello Rinaldi.  
Amref Italia, Teatro delle Briciole-Teatro al Parco

### **Ascanio Celestini**

*Cicoria. In fondo al mondo, Pasolini* (1998/9) Written, directed and with Ascanio Celestini and Gaetano Ventriglia  
festival VolterraTeatro

The *Milleuno* trilogy:

*Baccalà, il racconto dell'acqua* (1999)

*Vita Morte e Miracoli* (1999)

*La fine del Mondo* (2000)

Written, directed and with Ascanio Celestini  
Teatro del Montevaso

*Radio Clandestina* (2000)

Based on *L'Ordine è già stato eseguito* by Alessandro Portelli, text and with Ascanio Celestini.

Performed in former Nazi cells on Via Tasso (now Museo della Liberazione)

*Fabbrica* (2002)

*Cecafumo* (2002)

*Le nozze di Antigone* (2003)

Written by Ascanio Celestini with Veronica Cruciani and Arturo Cirillo.

*Scemo di guerra, Roma, 4 giugno 1944* (2004).

La Biennale di Venezia  
onda ad aprile su

*La pecora nera. Elogio funebre del manicomio elettrico* (2005)

Teatro Morlacchi di Perugia

*Appunti per un film sulla lotta di classe* (2006)

Piccolo Teatro Grassi di Milano

### **Laura Curino**

With the Laboratorio Teatro Settimo:

*Mi ami?* (1978 dir. not credited)

*Citrosodina-Sogni a 99 canali* (1981 dir. Vacis)

*Verso la gloria-Petivuasò* (1981)

*Signorine* (1982 dir. Vacis)

*Kanner Puro* (1983 dir. Vacis)

*Esercizi sulla tavola di Mendeleev* (1984 dir. Vacis)

*Elementi di struttura del Sentimento* (1985 dir. Vacis)

*Riso Amaro* (1987 dir. not credited)

*Nel Tempo tra le guerre* (1988 dir. Vacis)

*Istinto Occidentale* (1988 dir. Vacis)

*Stabat Mater* (1989 dir. Vacis)

*La Storia di Romeo e Giulietta*, (1990 dir. Vacis)

*Affinità* (1992 dir. Vacis)

*Villeggiatura, smanie, avventure e ritorno* (1993 dir. Vacis)

*Passione* (1992)

Written by Curino with consultation from Roberto Tarasco, and Gabriele Vacis; dir.  
Roberto Tarasco

*Canto per Torino* (1995)

*Canto delle Città* (1995)

dir. Vacis with collaboration from la Città e la Provincia di Torino, the Festival of Dubrovnik ("Mittelfest") and the Regione Piemonte.

*Camillo Olivetti* (1996)

Text by Curino with consultation by Vacis, dir. Vacis  
Settimo Torinese

*Adriano Olivetti* (1998)

Text by Curino with consultation by Vacis, dir. Vacis, with Laura Curino, Mariella Fabbris, Lucilla Giagnoni.  
Produzione Teatro Settimo

*Cori* (1999)

By Laura Curino, Gabriele Vacis, Roberto Tarasco.

*Geografie* (1999)

By and with Laura Curino

*Fenicie*, (2000)

Dir. Vacis Coproduzione Teatro Settimo/ Teatro Stabile Torino

*Macbeth Concerto* (2001)

Dir. Gabriele Vacis with Laura Curino, Francesco De Francesco, Michele Di Mauro, Lucilla Giagnoni

*L'eta' dell'oro* (2002)

Co-written by Laura Curino e Michela Marelli dir. Serena Sinigaglia with Curino  
Teatro Stabile di Torino

*Una stanza tutta per me* (2004)

Co-written by, Laura Curino and Michela Marelli dir. Claudia Sorace with Laura Curino

### **Davide Enia**

*Italia-Brasile 3 a 2* (2002)

*Maggio '43* (2003)

Festival di Santarcangelo Schegge

*Scanna* (2004)

Biennale di teatro di Venezia

*Rembò* ( 2005)

## **Marco Paolini**

With the Laboratorio Teatro Settimo

*Riso Amaro* (1987 dir. not credited)

*Adriatico* (1987 dir. Vacis)

*Libera Nos* (1989 dir. Vacis)

*La Storia di Romeo e Giulietta*, (1990 dir. Vacis)

*Liberi tutti* (1992 dir. Vacis)

*Villeggiatura, smanie, avventure e ritorno*, (1993 dir. Vacis)

*Album "teatrali"*

*Adriatico* (debut: Settimo Torinese, 1987)

*Tiri in porta* (debut: Mira, 1990)

*Liberi tutti* (debut: Treviso, 1992)

*Aprile '74 e '75* (debut: Mira, 1995)

*Stazioni di transito - Album di storie* (debut: Sestri Levante, 1999)

*Il racconto del Vajont* (Marano, 1994)

*Appunti foresti* (Arcidosso, 1996)

*Il milione - Quaderno veneziano* (Mestre, 1997)

*I Bestiari*

*Bestiario veneto - In riviera* (Mira, 1998)

*Bestiario veneto - Parole mate* (Treviso, 1998)

*Bestiario veneto - L'orto* (Vicenza, 1998)

*Bestiario italiano - I cani del gas* (Verona, 1999)

*I-TIGI Canto per Ustica* (Bologna, 2000)

*Parlamento chimico - Storie di plastica* (Castiglioncello - Livorno, 2001)

*Song n. 32* (with musicians i Mercanti di Liquore, 2003)

*Karma-Kola* (with musicians i Mercanti di Liquore, 2006)

*Teatro Civico, 6 monologhi per Report* (2003)

*U-238*

*Cipolle e libertà*

*Trecentosessanta lire*

*Binario illegale*

*Bhopal 2 dic. '84*

*Ferrari Primavera*

## **B. Filmography**

### **Marco Baliani**

*Corpo di Stato* (1998)

Rai2

*Francesco a testa in giù* (2000)

Rai2

### **Ascanio Celestini**

*Cecafumo* (2002)

“La Storia siamo noi” series on Rai Educational

*Radio clandestina* (2004)

Rai2 Palcoscenico

*Parole sante* (2007)

Cinema release

*La pecora nera* (2010)

Cinema release

### **Laura Curino**

*Camillo Olivetti* (1998)

Rai2 Palcoscenico

*Adriano Olivetti* (2001)

Rai2

### **Marco Paolini**

*Il racconto del Vajont* (1997)

Rai2

*Album*

"dal teatro alla televisione" on Rai3

*Aprile '74 E 5 Rugby* (10-02-2005; La7 01-02-2008)

*Don Bernardo e Barbin* (17-02-2005)

*Capodanno del '69* (24-02-2005)

*La Compagnia* (03-03-2005)

*Un filo di pensieri* (10-03-2005)

*Un mondo perfetto* (17-03-2005)

*I 400 folpi* (24-03-2005)

*Odor di botte e di limoni* (31-03-2005)

*Notte d'Agosto del '74* (14-04-2005)  
*La comune di Gemona* (21-04-2005)  
*Americhe 1984* (28-04-2005)  
*La cortina di ferro* (05-05-2005)  
*Teatro tenda del popolo* (12-05-2005)

*I Miserabili - Io e Margaret Thatcher* (2007)

*Il Sergente* (30-10-2007)  
La7

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