

Drama-Based Foreign Language Learning and the Modern *Mandragola*

Abstract

Experiential learning is on the rise at post-secondary institutions across North America. Course instructors across all disciplines are implementing a wide variety of high-impact practices to investigate the transformative effects of experiential learning modules and student-centered environments on undergraduate education. At the University of Toronto Mississauga, experiential learning is the foundation of Italian Theatre and Performance, an upper-year Italian Studies course that uses drama and performance-based learning to reimagine the shape and function of foreign language education. Students work towards the shared goal of a live foreign theatrical performance by collaborating on product-oriented tasks such as scriptwriting, rehearsals, set design, and community outreach, which provide a professional and immersive context in which to refine their language skills. Through this emphasis on active learning and practical interactions, the theatre course transforms the passive humanities classroom into a vibrant student-centered environment that demonstrates how a comprehensive integration of drama and performance-based learning into foreign language education can greatly enhance student development of linguistic, sociocultural, and pragmatic competence in the target language.

KEYWORDS: experiential learning; performance-based learning; drama-based pedagogy; foreign language theatre; *La Mandragola*; Machiavelli

Introduction

Language instructors have historically made extensive use of dramatic exercises such as role-playing skits, improvisation, and peer-to-peer dialogue writing in their classrooms, but performance-based learning has predominantly been seen as complementary to “self-study” language acquisition, which emphasizes the rote memorization of core vocabulary and repetitive drilling of grammatical structures. While the pedagogical value of these traditional methods cannot not be overlooked, recent years have seen the publication of a considerable body of work on the benefits of incorporating drama and performance-based learning into all aspects of foreign language education. Scholars such as Even have praised the approach for its ability to develop and strengthen learners’ communicative

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and interactional skills through a more practical and immersive classroom setting (2008: 162). The learning environment, which actually sees the classroom transformed into a theatre, gives learners a chance to immediately transfer what they have learned into experience (166) and attain a more pragmatic knowledge of the language through contextualization (Essif 9). Semke maintains that dramatic activities are specifically beneficial in the way that they afford students more time on pointed tasks through repetition (1980: 139), which moreover leads to improvements in the learners' L2 fluency and comprehensibility (Galante and Thomson 2017).

Much of the research around drama and performance-based learning has emerged in the larger context and growing international popularity of experiential learning at post-secondary institutions. Responding to a variety of factors ranging from economic pressures, government mandates, and institutional academic plans, course instructors across all disciplines are launching a variety of high-impact practices¹ to investigate the transformative effects of experientially engaging learning modules and student-centered learning environments. What follows is a case study of one such practice that has paid significant dividends for students in the Department of Language Studies at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM). Experiential learning has for thirty years been the foundation of Italian Theatre and Performance (ITA413), an upper-level Italian language course that uses drama and performance-based learning to reimagine the shape and function of foreign language education. Through its emphasis on active learning and practical interactions, ITA413 transforms a traditionally passive humanities classroom into an effective student-centered and action-oriented environment in which students apply their Italian language skills to accomplish a vast number of diverse tasks that finally culminate in the live production of a foreign language play. Such tasks, which range from scriptwriting to rehearsals to set design to community outreach, provide a professional and immersive context for students to refine their language skills while collaboratively working towards a shared goal. By having students work through various language-focused tasks in order to put on a successful theatrical production, ITA413 demonstrates how a comprehensive integration of drama and performance-based learning into the foreign language classroom can greatly enhance student development of linguistic, sociocultural, and pragmatic competence² in the target language.

1. Experiential Learning through Theatre and Drama

Experiential learning as a pedagogical framework provides students with a pragmatic and/or professional context in which to apply an otherwise abstract cur-

¹ The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) defines a high-impact practice as any course which provides students with hands-on field experience, community service-learning, and involvement in a formal project with a faculty member.

² The three pillars of the Common European Framework for Reference of Languages - linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competence, will serve as a qualitative metric for evaluating the effectiveness of this pedagogical approach and will be defined in section 2.

riculum. Depending on the format, experiential learning can take place inside or outside of the classroom, but in both cases it implies a break with traditional modes of knowledge transmission (such as note-taking in lecture halls) to expose students to hands-on applications, emphasize learning-by-doing, and encourage them to reflect on their progress and accomplishments.³ In regards to foreign language education, experiential learning comprises of any activity in which students engage in action-based immersive and practical contexts. By experiencing how foreign languages are applied to everyday situations, students come to internalize the linguistic and sociolinguistic features of the target language in ways that go beyond the rote memorization traditionally promoted within the language classroom, which helps them to build confidence in their own foreign language skills and motivates them with a clear real-world goal in sight.

It is easy to see how theatre and drama might lend itself to experiential learning in the foreign language classroom, simply by how the stage offers a clear context for students to practice and engage their interpersonal communication skills in the target language. Of course, some instructors may be apprehensive of using performance-based learning if it appears to limit students' creative potential or to be too contrived or static. The presence of the script may predispose the conversation and impede real engagement with the foreign language or "become a barrier to communication" (Cortazzi and Jin 1996: 185). Criticism that memorizing and regurgitating lines does not constitute real communication⁴ perhaps explains why dramatic exercises have continued to be a footnote to the grammar textbook rather than being employed in a more comprehensive fashion towards foreign language acquisition. Such criticisms, however, are misguided and drawn from a fundamental misunderstanding of theatre as functioning around a paradox of simultaneous reality and artifice. Actors do not merely recite the script; rather, a successful actor internalizes the existing material and improvises a new expression tinged with their own creativity. Each expression is further inflected by the on-stage presence of fellow cast members, whose counter-expressions result in a dynamic environment in which communication is constantly evolving in different and sometimes unexpected ways. Rather than predetermining how the communicative event will unfold, the three components of theatre — the script, the stage, and the live audience — provide a structural context in which artifice gives way to reality: the students deconstruct the linguistic features of the static script, refashion the language in their own image, and articulate new expressions that are validated by the audience as a legitimate exchange in the target language.

Experiential learning, in its emphasis on hands-on applications, also implies a break from traditional classroom formats, which in the humanities have historically been instructor-focused with knowledge being disseminated in a top-down

³ Experiential learning is a well-known practice, often encouraged for inclusion in curricula (Ontario Ministry of Education). Foundational works in this area can be read in Kolb and Lewis and Williams.

⁴ As highlighted in Bancheri 2010: 101, 105, the performative classroom at the centre of our case study also rebukes this reductive view of drama since students are encouraged to experiment with language as they contribute to script changes and the ability to improvise is a necessary skill to possess in any live performance. We will explore these ideas further along in this paper.

fashion through lecture halls and seminars. Julia M. Furay has stated that drama can help instructors to realize “the transformative potential of our classrooms” by moving students from a passive to an active learning context (2014: 211). Certainly those dramatic activities appended to grammar textbooks perform such a function by positioning students on a stage (physical or metaphorical) and having them demonstrate the extent of their language skills through performance. Such activities are limited, however, in how much of an impact on foreign language acquisition can be made because the transformation is not maintained: once the exercise is over, the stage is immediately disassembled and the students return to their seats to passively await the instructor’s next lesson. In order to be truly effective, drama and performance-based learning demands a comprehensive integration into the foreign language curriculum; the stage must not be transitory, but should instead be the central focus of the foreign language education. As anyone with a background in theatre will attest, the stage is a natural catalyst for self-reflection, self-improvement, and – if truly successful – self-discovery.⁵ From a pedagogical perspective, the stage provides a highly intrapersonal and interpersonal context that transforms the passive instructor-focused classroom into a student-centered learning environment in which students collaboratively inform the shape of their education. In this comprehensive dramatic experience, students become active participants in their own language education and exert control over how (and how much) they improve their language skills. This, in turn, raises their confidence levels and contributes to a sense of autonomy within and outside the classroom—practices that are, moreover, “implicit and explicit recipe[s] to improve future action” as well (Wiliam and Thompson 2007: 12).

2. Evaluating Italian Theatre and Performance⁶

Pedagogical scholars have proposed the “theatrical workshop,” in line with the structure of ITA413 Italian Theatre and Performance, as one solution to how language instructors can integrate drama and performance-based learning into their classrooms in a more comprehensive fashion. Popularized by the work of Salvatore Bancheri,⁷ the theatrical workshop is a product- and clear goal-oriented approach to foreign language acquisition in which students prepare and perform a complete theatrical production in the target language before a live audience consisting of their peers, family, and local community (2010: 85). Distinct from traditional language classrooms in which an instructor guides students through a series of grammatical units prescribed by a textbook and expects students to un-

⁵ Espinosa, drawing from the works of Glisan et al. and Herrera et al., writes, “The philosophy behind performance-based assessment is that knowledge is constructed during learning, and that students discover knowledge for themselves rather than receive knowledge from the teacher” (2015: 2442).

⁶ This section includes contributions by Larysa Bablak (University of Toronto Mississauga).

⁷ See Bancheri 2010 on the successful pedagogical experiments conducted in this format at Middlebury College and the University of Toronto Mississauga, the latter of which will be addressed at length in the second half of this paper.

dertake rigorous self-study to master lessons between classes, the theatrical workshop achieves language learning through active on-site engagement with the target language using interpersonal interactions that are integrated into every aspect of the course material. By studying and subsequently performing a literary work, the theatrical workshop provides a practical context for language learning that enables a full immersion into the target language and its surrounding culture. For the final theatrical production to be a success, students must familiarize themselves not only with the play script but also with the historical moment in which it was written and performed, and they must think carefully about how to accurately represent the meaning of the play for a contemporary audience. From an experiential perspective, Italian Theatre and Performance places students in constant engagement with the linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of the foreign language. Students participate directly in language formation and articulation through repeated rehearsals that help them decide how to interpret the play's script and what precise language to use, according to the specific context.

In line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the theatrical workshop asks students to operate as "social agent[s]" (1) by assigning different tasks in addition to rehearsals, which function in lieu of graded assignments and encompass all of the responsibilities (costume and set design, community outreach, etc.) needed to realize a successful theatrical production. Each of these tasks are experiential in nature and include a significant oral or written component intended to build linguistic and sociolinguistic competences in the foreign language. CEFR defines linguistic competence as not only the quality of lexical, phonological, and syntactic knowledge of the foreign language as a system, but also how that knowledge is organized in the brain and made accessible for communication (13). Effective communication on- and off-stage requires an advanced linguistic competence in the foreign language that goes beyond memorizing and reproducing a script. Students must be able to follow the conversation in the foreign language at all times so that they can position themselves appropriately in relation to their interlocutors and reconstruct the language of the script as needed. Linguistic competence is interdependent with sociolinguistic competence: that is, the student must also have comparable knowledge of the social and cultural factors that govern communication in a foreign language. Such factors include the ability to switch registers depending on the interlocutor at hand, which plays an important role in establishing on-stage relationships between characters and an even more important role when interacting with members of the community. A sociolinguistically competent speaker does not view language as separate from culture, but rather builds a holistic communicative competence in which all aspects of language learning interact.

CEFR refers to this holistic communicative competence, which is upheld by linguistic and sociolinguistic competence, as the student achieving pragmatic competence in the foreign language. Pragmatic competence is the end goal of language learning and refers to a practical ability to communicate in the foreign language according to real-world situations. Experiential learning can significantly help students achieve pragmatic competence by providing them with a practical context that leverages both linguistic and sociolinguistic competences in

the production of foreign language communication. If rehearsals function as a space in which students can practice employing the linguistic structures of a language as well as identifying the social and cultural cues that govern their usage, then the experiential tasks (script writing, radio interviews, etc.) and final performances before a live audience constitute situations in which students develop and demonstrate pragmatic competence in the foreign language. Such tasks that require them to exercise their language skills to engage the community outside the classroom are important for helping students to become comfortable with and build confidence in communicating in the foreign language. Receiving negative feedback in a practical setting helps students to understand and correct their precise mistakes, while receiving positive feedback further motivates them in their language education. As the case study that follows demonstrates, the theatrical workshop is conducive towards developing pragmatic competence by providing an environment in which language is put to practical use, mistakes are immediately corrected, and the students gradually come into an understanding of how to more effectively communicate in the foreign language.

3. Italian Theatre and Performance at UTM

Bancheri and Pugliese have written extensively⁸ on the process by which the theatrical workshop was first introduced into the Italian curriculum at UTM, beginning as an extracurricular activity in 1986-87 with the formation of the theatre troupe *Maschere Duemondi*.⁹ The immense success and growing popularity of the “Italian Play” (as it is referred to among the community) would lead to the extracurricular activity being reimaged in 1992 as the full-year credit course ITA413: Italian Theatre and Performance, in which students are given the opportunity to critically analyze, rehearse, and perform a five-run theatre production of an Italian-language work. The course serves as a pivotal cornerstone with which the Department of Language Studies at UTM continues to distinguish itself through the experiential nature of its founding vision and, consequently, of its course offerings. Since taking on instruction and direction of the course in 2010, we continue to maintain the mission of the theatrical workshop as a student-centered space for optimal language and cultural acquisition while also introducing new approaches to experiential learning.¹⁰

⁸ For Bancheri and Pugliese’s early experiments with the theatrical workshop at UTM, see Bancheri and Pugliese 1996 and 1993.

⁹ *Maschere Duemondi* was established by Pugliese and Bancheri, who jointly directed theatre productions from 1986 through to 1999 and then alternating until 2009. Since 2010, I (Teresa Lobalsamo) have become director of the course and its shows. With its performance of Niccolò Machiavelli’s *La Mandragola*, *Maschere Duemondi* celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in 2017. For more information on the history of the Italian Play’s productions, please see the troupe’s web page on the Department’s web site: www.utm.utoronto.ca/language-studies/programs/italian/italian-play-maschere-duemondi.

¹⁰ The course’s overall approach to experiential learning resonates with students. Academic evaluations are remarkably positive year over year, with students citing the impact that the course’s experiential learning approach has had on their ability to communicate in the foreign

Through discussion-based learning and close readings, the first trimester of the course is a preparatory phase in which students engage with the text to be performed by learning critical theories of theatre and Italian Renaissance comedy; positioning the piece within relevant historical, socio-political, and cultural contexts; and introducing the play script and its adaptations. Students are then quickly immersed into the product-oriented structure of the course as the three hours of class time each week are repurposed to allow for two hours of rehearsal followed by a one-hour production meeting. During meetings, previously assigned individual or group tasks – composing proposals for fundraising, advertising, community liaising, set designs – are discussed in terms of progress made, challenges encountered, and next steps. Once all communications have been approved by the instructor, fundraising letters and “save-the-date” e-mail blasts are rolled out in October, soon to be followed by the launch of the website as well as final drafts of any promotional and/or educational materials.¹¹ November marks the beginning of table reads, once students have successfully auditioned and been assigned their roles. In addition to memorizing lines, students are encouraged to contribute to script modifications as they embrace their character and envision his or her place on stage interacting with others. Major revisions end when the process of blocking begins.

To ensure that lines have been memorized and that students have a strong grasp of their respective character’s motivations, oral examinations serve to evaluate their readiness in assigned roles. By this point, students will have demonstrated their commitment to and capacity for performance sufficiently enough to continue on in their role or be asked to relinquish it in favour of different, production-specific responsibilities. With six weeks to showtime, an intensive rehearsal schedule (of approximately 15 hours of rehearsal time distributed over three days per week) is rolled out, with each session beginning with a student-led improvisational warm-up exercise in the target language.

4. Adapting Machiavelli’s *La Mandragola*¹²

Preparing the play script is a dense research project that begins six to eight months prior to the start of the course. While most course materials are prepared by the instructor, we have in recent years framed compiling the script as a faculty-facilitated experiential research project for senior-level (C1 Italian) undergraduate students. Under the close supervision of the instructor, the students review several publications and multimedia adaptations of the play as part of an editorial process that makes practical use of critical-thinking, foreign language, and crea-

language. One such student, having taken the course twice in his academic career, states, “There is certainly no course like it. This course succeeds in integrating language, acting, people skills, teamwork all in one and can change you as a person, only in a positive way.”

¹¹ One performance is held specifically for area elementary and high school teachers and students.

¹² This section includes contributions by Dr. Adriana Grimaldi (University of Toronto Mississauga).

tive writing skills. Linguistic and sociolinguistic capacities are strengthened as the students read through and, in the case of movies, transcribe scripts in the original Italian, breaking down the strongest interpretations of scenes, characters, and dialogue from a variety of different texts and incorporating them into a new amalgamated version that will serve as the basis for ITA413.

For its most recent (2017) production, Maschere Duemondi anticipated a return to Renaissance comedies. Work on Niccolò Machiavelli's *La Mandragola* began in January 2016 as part of an undergraduate research project, which produced character descriptions and plot summaries that would help ease the transition into scriptwriting the following summer. We decided early on to use Guido Davico Bonino's 1964 edition of the text, which features modern Italian spelling and publishing conventions—something that we try to offer our students when possible, so that they might practice the language in the same form that they will encounter off-stage. Following in the classical style that it imitates, *La Mandragola* is incredibly condensed in action, time, and space; taken as is, it would have easily been one of the shortest plays that Maschere Duemondi has ever staged. Wanting to flesh out the script in ways that might inspire the incoming ITA413 students, we decided to add scenes and dialogue from Alberto Lattuada's 1965 film adaptation featuring Italian actor Antonio De Curtis (stage name Totò). Lattuada's adaptation excels in world-building and character development, particularly in regards to its handling of Lucrezia, which is a revolution upon Machiavelli's original script.

At the risk of being reductive, *La Mandragola* is a play about men that finds comedy in the outlandish, deceitful, and even contemptible things that young men will do to win a woman's heart. Despite her importance to the plot, Lucrezia is conspicuously off-stage for most of the play; in his prologue, Machiavelli does not even list her among the major players of the comedy.¹³ Coupled with the fact that the plot hinges on Lucrezia being tricked into drinking a mysterious potion and ushered off to bed with a strange man, we were concerned that Machiavelli's original portrayal of this crucial female character might carry with it some unintended baggage in 2015.¹⁴ From the beginning, then, we decided that Lucrezia would have a more prevalent on-stage presence and increased agency in her interactions with the predominantly male cast of characters, for which the 1965 film provided the perfect model. Unlike Machiavelli's behind-the-scenes symbol of untainted virtue, Lattuada portrays Lucrezia as holding a degree of power over her husband, refusing to be led along by his whims and repeatedly mocking him for his naiveté towards word-of-mouth pregnancy methods. We would also make use of the film's more balanced interpretation of the events between Act IV and V, in which Lucrezia scolds Callimaco for his deceit before voluntarily taking him

¹³ “Uno amante meschino, / un dottor poco astuto, / un frate mal vissuto, / un parassito di malizia el cucco, / fien questo giorno el vostro badalucco. [Machiavelli 1964: 4; “A wretched man in love, / a judge devoid of craft, / a friar of sinful life, / a parasite beloved of nought but guile / will be your entertainment now awhile”, trans. Newbigin in Machiavelli 2009: 4]

¹⁴ We resurrected this play around the same time that allegations of sexual misconduct against Bill Cosby had begun to pick up steam, and without any way of knowing how the coming years would radically bring similar discussions to the forefront of public consciousness.

as her lord. Both of these measures would serve to diffuse the uncomfortable elements in Machiavelli's original tale.

We knew that empowering Lucrezia would resonate with ITA413 students, as the course has historically enrolled a higher ratio of female-to-male students—a reality that has always posed a challenge for casting Renaissance plays dominated by male characters. While the director can mitigate this issue by swapping the gender of minor characters, the November auditions for *La Mandragola* revealed many strong female candidates for leading roles. Candidates could have been placed into drag roles, but the troupe agreed that the strength of the female performers could best be matched if they also commanded the sexual dynamics of the plot and, with that, the genders of all major characters were reversed. Whereas Machiavelli had written of Callimaco cuckolding the older Nicia to steal the heart of his young and virtuous wife Lucrezia, the students were excited to stage the reverse story in which the passionate Cleandra would cuckold the overbearing Lucrezia and rescue the noble Nicia from the prison of a sexless marriage. Rather than remaining off-stage, Lucrezia would step out from the curtains to become the central antagonist of the play. Ligurio, Siro, and Timoteo would likewise be genderswapped as Liguria, Sira, Timotea, who would operate alongside Cleandra to facilitate her less than noble and benevolent motives, thus resulting in something of a feminist spin on the classic tale that even Machiavelli himself could never have imagined.

Excited by the comedic opportunities that a genderswapped cast would bring to the play, the students began a massive rewriting of the script in November that put to work their linguistic and sociolinguistic understanding of the Italian language. Before even thinking about rewriting scenes, the students were required to take a more fundamental look at the precise language used by each character and replace all of the gendered elements (including adjective and verb agreement) with their appropriate counterparts. Changing the genders of the cast also required the students to consider the cultural function of social class in the Renaissance: for example, would the same standards of politeness between male characters still apply to female characters? Was it necessary for Liguria to address Cleandra using formal modes of address, just as Ligurio submits himself into the service of Callimaco? In order to write believable dialogue, the students had to apply their understanding of the Italian language and Renaissance culture to make decisions about how a character's background would affect their interactions with others. An example of the students' sensitivity to cultural and historical expectations is recognizable in how Liguria's dialogue was modified when presenting "il medico Cleandra" to Lucrezia:

LIGURIO Come io vi ho detto, io credo che Dio ci abbia mandato lei perché adempiate il desiderio vostro.

LUCREZIA Sì, giusto ed è proprio così... lei? Lei chi?

LIGURIO Lei. Il medico. Sapete che in Francia sono molto più moderni.

LUCREZIA Certo.

[LIGURIO As I told you, I think she is a godsend, sent down just for you!

LUCREZIA That's wonderf... she? She who?

LIGURIO She's the doctor. The French are very modern.
 LUCREZIA That's true.]
 (Translation ours)

By recognizing an emergent problem in the genderswapped script and using their knowledge of Machiavelli's text and its Renaissance context to invent a suitable (and rather comedic) solution, the students illustrate how a practical activity such as script editing can provide an opportunity to refine linguistic and sociolinguistic competences in the foreign language.

When the time came to introduce new scenes and dialogue to fit this new plot direction, the troupe flourished in their ability to invent and convey realistic character interactions that would resonate with their contemporary audience. It is through the introduction of new content, particularly in the original gags that emerged directly from the genderswapped context, that the students made visible strides towards achieving pragmatic competence in the foreign language. Machiavelli's original play gestures towards the possibility that Nicia is actually impotent and in denial, blaming Lucrezia for his own failure of masculinity. In the 1965 film, Nicia grapples with his impotence by subjecting Lucrezia to increasingly absurd pregnancy remedies,¹⁵ all the while refusing to believe the problem could lie with him.¹⁶ Playing with the reversed gender dynamics, the revised *Mandragola* rewrote Lucrezia to be convinced that Nicia's impotence prevents him from making sexual advances on her, when in reality he is repulsed by the thought of sleeping with his wife, whom he only married by arrangement given their mutual status in aristocratic singledom and to whom he is forced to invent excuses night after night. It is with masterful subtlety that the students integrated this recurring joke into gags that demonstrated an ability to distill comedic elements from the original play and make practical use of them in their new script. In Act I Scene 1, for example, Lucrezia has Ramondo and Sostrata warm Nicia's abdomen with heated stones, a scene taken directly out of Lattuada's 1965 film. Ramondo assures his son that "niente è meglio del sasso caldo per favorire la passione di un uomo che è più mulo che cavallo," ("There is nothing better than the pain of hot rock to stimulate a man, who is actually more of donkey than a man") which prompts a panicked response from Nicia: "Ho detto che era solo un mal di pancia!" ("I said it was only a stomachache!"). Similarly, Act II Scene 2 opens with Nicia's back to the audience and his hands engaged in some sort of strenuous activity at waist level; he turns and it is revealed that he is actually grinding pepper into soup, which is followed up with a series of emasculating battute from Lucrezia: "Ma non perdere la speranza, amor mio, perché questa zuppa... con pepe tritato... zucchini schiacciati... peperoncino piccolo piccolo..." ("But don't lose hope, my love, because with this soup... made with ground pepper... crushed zucchinis... tiny little peppers...", translation ours). The script and performative contributions

¹⁵ LUCREZIA "Sassi cotti sul ventre, bagni speziati e altre diavolerie!" (Lattuada) [LUCREZIA "Heated stones on the womb, spiced baths, and other crazy ideas!", translation ours].

¹⁶ NICIA "Impotente io? Ha! Io non credo che ci sia in Firenze un uomo più ferrigno, sano e rubizzo di me! No!" (Lattuada) [NICIA "Me, impotent? Ha! I don't believe that there is a man in Florence more robust, healthy, and lively than me!", translation ours].

that the students made to such scenes demonstrate pragmatic competence in understanding how comedy functioned in Machiavelli's play and further communicating that function within a fresh and contemporary context.

In portraying Lucrezia as the dissatisfied spouse seeking an heir, which is essentially Nicia's primary motivation in the original text, she also inherits some of the necessary naiveté of that character without losing any of the agency that has been bestowed upon her by virtue of the genderswap. The scenes in which her home remedies are employed in order to cure Nicia of his infertility, to cite one example, now gain a heightened comedic sense as his "impotence" is played as a cunning visual gag. The eventual fulfilment of Cleandra's plan, and consequent cuckolding of Lucrezia, is also softened; as while our erstwhile Lucrezia had indeed been duped, much like the original Nicia, she is convinced the mandrake has helped to cement her status in society as she will now be able to bear a much-needed heir, after her husband's "curing." In the adapted version, Lucrezia's gain is not necessarily Nicia's loss either, as the latter, now inhabiting the subordinate role, has inherited some of the cunning and pragmatism associated with Machiavelli's Lucrezia. While he is seen to be at the mercy of his domineering wife and parents, this submissiveness is necessarily mitigated by the fact that he is male and, as such, would have more power and agency in the world just outside the boundaries of the play. It is with this knowledge that the audience's entertainment is heightened, as is the satirical element of the adaptation.

This up-ending of the male-female dynamic within this Renaissance marriage is indeed a subversion of the roles of authority generally attributed to husband and wife, a subversion that Machiavelli would have appreciated.

5. Language Learning through Rehearsal

Once the script had been sufficiently revised to accommodate the role-reversed cast, rehearsals shifted from a round table setting to a designated stage space in which the students began practicing their lines with the accompanying stage directions. We introduce the stage early in the rehearsal process so that the students learn the language of the script as part of a complete communicative event that has a clear setting and real-life interlocutors.¹⁷ By stepping onto the stage and interacting with their peers, the students quickly come to realize that a successful performance will not depend on how well they know the script, but rather how well they have internalized the linguistic structures and sociolinguistic conventions of the language, which affords them varying degrees of flexibility in how they can engage their interlocutors. We must here reiterate that theatre is not the scripted language production that pedagogical scholars tend to imagine; Galante recognizes that drama places the greater emphasis on improvisation, which provides a space for students to experiment with their linguistic constructions and practice realistic conversations with their peers (Galante and Thomson 2017: 119).

¹⁷ As opposed to table reads, which are disembodied in nature and have more in common with the dramatic exercises often sidelined in language textbooks.

As evidence of this, Bancheri directs critics to the clear differences between the script and the words actually spoken by the students on stage (2010: 105), which we likewise observed in all of the performances of *La Mandragola*. Being able to readily access and recall lines from a foreign language script requires that the students possess advanced linguistic competence in the language, such that the lines are not being recalled but are instead linguistically reconstructed on the spot. In the event that something unexpected occurs on stage, students must have mastery over their own linguistic abilities so that they can recover from the deviation and confidently proceed with the scene. Students rely on the script only insofar that it guides their language learning; once they have internalized the grammatical patterns and social nuances that inform the language, the script is voluntarily cast aside so that they may perform “unrestricted” and utilize the transformative potential of the stage to its full extent.

Rehearsals are closely supervised and supported by the instructor in her capacity as the director of the play. She ensures that the learning experience meets the expectations of both the Language Studies curriculum and CEFR goals in respect to developing linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competence in the foreign language. In addition to guiding them through early rehearsals and helping them to find their characters on stage, the director provides students with immediate feedback on pronunciation, delivery, retention, and improvisation. Her presence initiates a continuous feedback loop throughout rehearsals that maintains an active learning environment in which each individual student is constantly working to correct their mistakes and increase their proficiency in the language. In a traditional lecture-style classroom, students spend the majority of class time copying notes in preparation for periodic tests; as a result, they only come to recognize their weaknesses immediately before and after such tests. During rehearsals, however, the director is available for immediate consultation. When a student mispronounces a term, for example, the director can interrupt the performance to demonstrate the proper pronunciation, or provide corrections at the end of each scene, which will have a more immediate and lasting impression on the student’s memory than does red ink on a returned test that the student may have written weeks before. Being forced to stop the play and correct their pronunciation not only provides the student with the opportunity to correct the error and prove their linguistic competence to their peers, but it further reminds them that they—the students, not the script—are the driving force behind the play and that a successful performance will not manifest unless each of them works to improve their competences in the language.

Realizing that the success of the final performances will be intimately linked to each of their individual successes in the language component of the course, the students are motivated to take initiative within their own language learning and perpetuate this continuous feedback loop amongst themselves and their peers. Much writing has been done on the benefits of increasing peer-to-peer interaction in the classroom and the theatrical workshop is an ideal setting for this as rehearsals place students in constant face-to-face interactions with one another (see Christensen 1991). As rehearsals progress, the students not only serve as interlocutors for their peers but also as instructors, offering constructive crit-

icism to bring out the best in each other's performances. Following the director's example, the students learn to recognize linguistic and sociolinguistic errors in their own language formulations (such as verb conjugation and formality) and hear those same errors in the formulations of their peers. Bancheri describes this moment as the director receding into the background to allow the students to take centre-stage in the classroom (2010: 100), such that the continuous feedback loop between instructor and student evolves into a collaborative exercise that engages the entire class in language learning. This 'collaborative language learning' also diffuses the pressures of the traditional classroom, where each individual student must prove their mettle to the instructor, instead substituting a more balanced power dynamic in which the students work together to develop their language skills and where the only pressure is a shared desire to put on a strong public performance.

Complementing this collaborative and student-centred approach to language learning, ITA₄₁₃ places a heavy emphasis on self-reflection and self-evaluation. Unlike traditional language courses that maintain a clear distinction between lectures and tests or assignments, ITA₄₁₃'s continuous feedback loop ensures that students are constantly evaluated for their efforts during rehearsals by the instructor, their peers, and – most importantly – themselves. We have already noted how this collaborative process can help students to identify areas in which they may presently be lacking and motivate them to learn the language for the sake of the final performance. It is important to remember, however, that this process is indeed cyclical: it allows students to visibly see the improvements in one another, which prompts further self-evaluation and creates a learning environment in which students are always striving to do better. In order to facilitate this culture of self-improvement, the instructor provides students with a "Readiness Skills Rubric" that helps them to keep track of their learning progress throughout the year. The Readiness Skills Rubric is not an optional document but integrated into the course evaluation so that students are actually in partial control of their grades and therefore invested in their own improvement. Students evaluate themselves on how their language skills develop, the dedication that they bring to their individual tasks, the impact of their attitude on their peers, and their willingness to challenge themselves further. Students are encouraged to credit themselves where they feel that credit is due, but with this responsibility comes an increased awareness to the areas in which they are still lacking and require further improvement. In this sense, the product-oriented theatrical workshop provides an ideal space and arc of time in which a learner can practice language in an interpersonal context, recognize their intrapersonal strengths and weaknesses, and develop those skills alongside their peers towards the ultimate goal of putting on a successful performance.

6. Language Practice through Community Engagement

If the on-stage rehearsals enable the students to practice their language skills in a safe and supportive environment, then we might view the theatre production

tasks that are run adjacent to rehearsals as experiential and evaluatory checkpoints that ask them to apply their language skills beyond the classroom to engage the local community. Because the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) is home to a sizeable Italian immigrant community, *Maschere Duemondi* has historically framed the Italian Play as a biannual cultural event that leverages a steady network of patronage consisting of area schools, small businesses, cultural centres, and (most importantly) foreign-language media outlets. From the very beginning of the course, the students are expected to establish and maintain continuous contact with patrons in order to complete a range of theatre production tasks from fundraising and advertising to generating and disseminating foreign-language teaching materials. Community engagement is carried out in the foreign language, often out of necessity (rather than to meet a learning objective) in order to reach the community members that the Italian Play routinely brings in, many of whom primarily speak Italian in their households and get their news from Italian newspapers, magazines, and radio stations. Students must utilize linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge to communicate effectively with the patrons, which further provides an opportunity to demonstrate pragmatic competence in the foreign language and build confidence operating in a professional context.

Having the students interact with patrons encourages the students to begin thinking about language acquisition not as something that occurs through a textbook or within the classroom, but as an ongoing process of active communication that comes to inhabit every part of their daily lives. CEFR identifies this as the moment in which a student “recognises that language learning is a life-long task [. . . and that] a young person’s motivation, skill and confidence in facing new language experience[s] out of school comes to be of central importance” (5). ITA₄₁₃ looks to effect this change immediately in its students by having them take on the responsibility of raising funds for the play, which go towards creating the set, costumes, and promotional materials. Beginning in September, the students write emails, social media posts, and magazine articles which are intended to advertise the shows and attract patronage in the form of sponsorship and, later down the line, ticket sales. While operating in this public relations role, the students learn to write concise copy and translate ideas from English to Italian; they learn to be aware of their target audience and experiment with adapting their language depending on the age, sex, or ethnicity of the interlocutor, which often requires moving between formal and informal registers or taking advantage of social or cultural colloquialisms that will elicit a favourable response. Through these pragmatic rhetorical exercises, the students experience firsthand how their foreign language skills can be usefully applied to real-world situations.

While drawing attention to the accuracy and effectiveness of their written productions is important for getting students to think critically about the function of the language that they use, a greater challenge yet lies in preparing the students for in-person interactions, which will often require them to improvise speech on the spot in order to effectively respond to their interlocutors. CEFR makes a point of highlighting the importance of adaptable communication by expressing the need for “flexibility upon different parts of this competence to achieve effective communication with a particular interlocutor,” which goes hand-

in-hand with developing pragmatic competence in the foreign language (4). Rehearsals are critical in providing a space for students to experiment with different language formulations; this becomes a crucial skill for the final performance and enables them to recover from mistakes and unexpected events that might occur on-stage. In order to familiarize students with real-time thinking and the pressures of real-world communication ahead of the final performance, a variety of in-person interactions are integrated into the production tasks. Some of the most important tasks are live television and radio interviews on premier multicultural media stations in Toronto, where actors and actresses introduce themselves and encourage the local community to attend their upcoming performances. While the information about the shows to be communicated is scripted well in advance of the show, it is up to the students to exercise their creativity in how they respond to questions from the interviewer and generate excitement about their upcoming performances. In each and every case, these in-person interactions provide a valuable opportunity for the students to test their pragmatic competence in the foreign language and showcase the strides they have made in the classroom before a live community audience.

Conclusion

All of the on-stage rehearsals and off-stage production tasks carry the students towards the final performances, which serve as the point of convergence for the various language skills that they have developed and refined over the course of the year. Needless to say, the students are once again in charge of managing both the front house and the actual performance. They will by this time have created and mailed out a program, sold tickets, arranged group transportation, and even printed t-shirts for the event. The final performances, which usually bring in an average of 150 patrons per show, transition the students from an educational to a completely professional context in which experiential learning is fully realized. In front of an audience that consists of their university peers, family members, and patrons from their local community, the students conduct themselves as professionals while engaging attendees in the foreign language; this extends to selling raffle tickets, guiding people to their seats, and mingling with attendees during intermission and after the show. Their on-stage personas are no different: the students become actors, ready to put all of their language skills — their linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competences — on display for the theatregoers. It is under these real-world pressures that the final performances unfold; it is within these real-time interactions that real communication is realized and their capacity for foreign language communication is illustrated before the entire community.

Through each task, from community outreach to the final performances, students hone and improve their skills in ways that offer answers to the new-age-old question “What am I to do with a degree in Italian?” as they come to acknowledge, instead, what they are indeed capable of doing with a degree in Italian. In fact, student opinion surveys not only report improvement in foreign language skills and overall communicative abilities, but they further remark on the mean-

ingful bonds that have been created and express pride over the dedication and work ethic that they have developed. The students who engage in the high-impact practices associated with producing and performing live theatre demonstrate a marked improvement in their language skills and in their self-confidence by the course's end. More than just a numeric grade, achievements are palpable in the laughter and applause of the audience, when the sum of months of study and layers of work come to fruition. While the stakes could not feel higher to the students, especially at the onset, neither is the success that they obtain as the final curtains are drawn.

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