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Memory and Performance.
Classical Reception in Early Modern Festivals

Edited by Francesca Bortoletti, Giovanna Di Martino,
and Eugenio Refini

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Miscellany

Special Section

Francesca Bortoletti - Eugenio Refini*

Dionysus and the Youth Between Academia and the *Polis*. Rethinking the Intersections of Scholarship, Performance-based Research, and Pedagogy

Abstract

This essay examines how Italian Renaissance Humanism adopted drama as a pedagogical tool to prepare young people for the challenges of adult life. By reviewing four key centers – Rome, Florence, Venice, and Padua – it argues that a central feature of the humanist approach to theatre was the concept of 'choral' involvement from all participants. In its Dionysian spirit, the dramatic chorality revived by humanist school dramas, especially within universities and learned academies, fostered forms of engagement that integrated ethics, aesthetics, and educational entertainment. The essay concludes with a contemporary example demonstrating how the classical tradition, revitalised through the humanist revival of ancient drama, continues to provide effective models at the intersection of scholarship, performance, and pedagogy: namely, Marco Martinelli's "non-school".

Keywords: Humanist theatre; pedagogy; chorus; academies; universities

We have taught youth
both to perform and to sing,
to ignite their passion.
(Sulpizio da Veroli, 1486; translation ours)

1. Prologue

The discovery in the early fifteenth century of twelve previously unknown comedies by Plautus and the commentary by Aelius Donatus on the works of Terence stimulated an ever-growing interest in the theatre of the ancient world. This revival spurred a circulation of commentaries, editions, and

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translations of Latin and Greek authors.[1] The initial advocates for staging classical works were primarily humanists, often operating within educational and academic settings. Humanist schools served as the foundation for the assimilation of classical culture and dramaturgy, sharing this role with various other environments, locations, and individuals that collectively formed the community-based backdrop of theatrical life. Through this framework, a diverse and dynamic conception of theatre and its civic function emerged within the space of the city.

The interconnection between academic instruction, pedagogical aims, and the social, civic, and civil functions of youth and intellectuals constituted a necessary condition for the integration of classical dramaturgy into the writings and performative practices across diverse cultural contexts of the fifteenth century. This integration occurred with varying intentions and circumstances, establishing a complex interplay among schools, universities, humanist and student circles, and spheres of elite (or even 'subversive') entertainment, diplomatic and political exercises, as well as festive and civic life within the city. There existed a discontinuity of experiences among different centers across the Italian peninsula, as well as within individual centers themselves. This diversity of circumstances sought, through different approaches, to bring about the realisation of texts and performative contexts that shared common archaeological references but varied significantly in methods and outcomes.

In Rome, for instance, the performance of Latin and Greek comedies was closely associated with the educational practices of the Academy of Pomponio Leto, which prioritised the material aspects of theatrical performance and their growing prominence within civic ceremonial life. However, this was not a uniquely Roman phenomenon, even though, as Fabrizio Cruciani points out, "Rome was certainly the focal point, and the Academy of the Pomponians its culturally privileged site" (1983, 184). There was a prior precedent in Florence, where the application of ancient pedagogical traditions guided both the teaching of schoolmasters, who with their students brought Latin and Greek dramaturgy to the 'stage', and that of Angelo Poliziano, who in his university lectures emphasised the institutional and educational value of the recitations of Plautus and Terence. A few decades earlier in Venice, the revival of ancient drama materialised in the pedagogical program of Tito Livio Frulovisi's School, integrating itself

[1] In 1429, Poggio Bracciolini reported that Niccolò Cusano had brought to Rome a manuscript containing 16 plays by Plautus, of which only four were previously known. News of this new manuscript spurred an intense effort to transcribe and study Plautus's text, identifiable as the *Itala recensio*, a recension whose origins, authorship, and date of assembly remain difficult to pinpoint (see Sabbadini 1986, 45-59; Questa 1984, 151-4; Tontini 2002, 57-88).

into the composite educational landscape of Venice and the ongoing private initiatives in teaching. These experiences, together with the philosophical and scientific activities of the School of Rialto and the academic chairs of San Marco, ensured a prolific plurality of educational centers that brought theatre to young people from various social backgrounds within the Venetian Republic.[2] Similarly, at the universities of Bologna, Pavia, and Padua, young students engaged during their studies in the composition (and occasionally the performance) of original dramatic works modeled after the ancients. Some of these works achieved a high level of erudition, while others took on a parodic form, serving as polemical critiques of contemporary society.

These seemingly marginal histories, presented by elite groups guided by the vision and efforts of a few, nonetheless inhabited places, activated them, and through this, offered acute and varied demonstrations of how the canonical precept of imitating ancient Greco-Roman theatre could be interpreted and revitalised. These efforts exposed young students to new pedagogical and performative practices, novel textual outcomes, and fresh perspectives on theatre and its role within society.

In the form of a brief historical and geographical narrative presented in four sections, this essay outlines the main features of these experiences, which throughout the fifteenth century and across the entire Italian Peninsula animated the pedagogical thought and practices of schools, academies, and universities. In the conclusion, we will turn to other explorations of the ancient Dionysian spirit, festivities, games, and the "bringing to life" of classical drama within the practices of theatre director Marco Martinelli's "non-scuola" (literary, "non-school"), and its encounter with our own ideas of pedagogical practice and the study of antiquity, both within and beyond academia today.

[2] The environment surrounding the promotion of ancient-style performances in the courts of Ferrara and Milan, however, differed significantly. In Ferrara, the antiquarian taste of the Este court, particularly Duke Ercole, fostered a notable series of performances of Plautine comedies, translated into the vernacular and in verse, presented during carnivals and major dynastic celebrations of the family. This began in 1486 with a vernacular production of Plautus's *Menaechmi* (see Zorzi 1977, 5-59; Cruciani, Falletti, Ruffini 1994, 131-217). In contrast, no records document performances of classical comedies in Milan's schools, academic circles, or court; however, a flourishing incunabular production of Plautus's and Terence's works aimed at educational circulation or scholarly audiences is well documented, especially among intellectuals and literati associated with the court of Ludovico il Moro, as argued by Claudio Passera (2014, 225-90).

2. Ancient Theatre, Academy, and *Polis* in the Rome of the *Pomponiani*

> The Italian Renaissance theatre was the work of a group of individuals – relatively few in number and often interconnected. The revival of ancient theatre, which lies at its origins, is part of an ambitious project set within a real society: the dream of a distinguished, harmonious way of life envisioned by a group of influential and active men. The reclamation of ancient theatre in Rome was led by a *sodalitas*, the Roman Academy. After the pioneering efforts of Pomponio Leto (and Giovanni Sulpizio da Veroli), the Academy's development can be traced through the study of Tommaso Fedra Inghirami, Pomponio's successor in the rhetoric chair at the esteemed University of Rome. (Cruciani 1983, 38-9)

In papal Rome, from Pius II to Paul III, the fluctuating fortunes of a *sodalitas literaria* – the Roman Academy of Pomponio Leto and later Sulpizio da Veroli – emerged as a crucial thread for understanding the values, experiments, and initiatives through which the 'invention' of theatre based on ancient models took shape in the city. This occurred within the ccademy, schools, and universities, and extended through these institutions into both private and public festivities.

Throughout the fifteenth century, the philological approach that permeated various fields and centers of humanistic knowledge, alongside the rhetorical praise of the *litterae humanae* and the quest to grasp the essence of antiquity, intersected with a new ethical and civic pedagogical practice aimed at young students and future citizens.[3] In the Rome of Pomponio and Sulpizio, this pedagogical impetus drew upon the reading of classical dramas, their translations, and rewritings, creating privileged contexts for performing – "as a living thing" – ancient comedy and tragedy. Through this "acting and singing", it fostered reflection on the role of theatre in modern society. It cultivated a vision of theatre that, following the ancient model, aimed to educate youth – both by entertaining and admonishing them – through "the performance of poetry, stories, jokes, and theatrical dramas", bringing a new theatrical vision from the halls of the Academy to the festive spaces of the *polis*.

The endeavor to revive classical theatre, situated between pedagogy and rhetoric, found expression in Rome as a culturally powerful project within the gatherings and rituals of Pomponio's disciples, the so-called *pomponiani*, initially considered heretical enough to prompt the temporary closure of

[3] For a broader discussion on humanistic pedagogy, particularly in poetry, rhetoric, and theatre, the literature is extensive. Key references include Billanovich 1978, 365-80; Branca 1983; Garin 1958, 1994, 1996; and Dionisotti 2003. On Latin humanistic comedy, see Stäuble 1968; Pittaluga 2002, 101-214; Ruggio 2011, 3-72.

the school.[4] In later phases, however, this endeavor paved the way for the affirmation of the *Pomponiani*'s theatrical practices in closer relation to the city and its official cultural and political arenas, adapting to its norms and traditions while simultaneously asserting the needs and vision of the new humanistic culture. This connection between pedagogy and the revival of ancient theatre in Rome is corroborated by the accounts of fifteenth-century chroniclers and literati. Marcantonio Sabellico, a professor at the School of San Marco in Venice, recalls Pomponio Leto (who had spent a brief period in Venice between 1467-1468) and the celebrations he organised for the anniversary of Rome's founding, where "[t]he young, eager for eloquence, gave their first demonstrations of talent with panegyrics and encomiastic speeches" (1499; see Cruciani 1983, 47-59). And where: "The old antechambers were used as theatres, in which works by Plautus, Terence, and some more recent plays were performed, which he [Pomponio] taught to the young nobles and supervised their performances" (ibid.).

Here, pedagogy and theatre are intertwined, encompassing rhetorical discourse, expression, and action. They progress through the study of antiquity and the revival of its rituals and dramas, enacted by the student-orator-actors of the school within the Academy's halls or even in the bishops' chambers repurposed as theatres, thanks to Pomponio's teachings and direction. The spoken word, understood as a pure means of communication, brings the search for the ancient rhetorical model down to the humbler ground of human relationships and real life, finding its rhetorical training ground in the rediscovery and performance of classical dramas.

To stage classical dramas in Rome and within the humanist circles of the *pomponiani* was, therefore, to embody antiquity in a collective manner and to propose it as a model for contemporary times. The aim was to educate young people, as the ancients did, in the arts of acting, speaking, and singing, thereby shaping society as a whole for political and civic engagement. The recitation in Greek and Latin did not remain confined to the school or separate cultural settings; in Rome, it became a moment of shared collective participation in public ceremonies and festivals, both within and beyond the city.[5]

[4] The Roman Academy was founded by Pomponio Leto in 1465 but was closed by Pope Paul II in 1468 on charges of heresy, with several members imprisoned; it was reopened in 1471 under Pope Sixtus IV. Documentation is fragmented for the Academy's early phase before 1486. For studies on Pomponio Leto and the Roman Academy, see De Rossi 1882; Zabughin 1901-12; Dietrich 1957; Cruciani 1980, 356-77; Medioli Masotti 1982, 189-204; 1984, 451-59; 1987, 135-66; Moscadi 1994-95; Bianca 2008, 25-56; 2011, 47-59.

[5] In this later phase, the Academy was no longer seen as "dangerous" and gradually gained approval from authorities (Bianco 2008, 45-7). Academicians' participation in civic festivities further illustrates this shift. For instance, in 1492, the *Palilie* ceremony

The pedagogical program of the *pomponiani* finds its meaning within the interplay between entertainment and celebration, as evidenced by figures such as Tommaso Inghirami, known as Phedrus/Phedra for his portrayal of Phaedra in Seneca's *Hippolytus* in 1486, marking his first acting endeavor. This performance took place first in the square in front of Cardinal Riario's palace "near Campo de' Fiori", and then at Castel Sant'Angelo, in the presence of the citizenry and under the direction of Sulpizio da Veroli, who also authored the *Argomentum* and *Prologus*. In these two compositions that introduce the Senecan tragedy, Sulpizio emphasises that the performance is a novel event, insisting on the educational value of acting, and arguing that the spectators (the "people of Quirites") would emerge from it as better individuals.[6]

After succeeding Pomponio as a rhetoric instructor at the University of Rome in 1497, Inghirami also performed outside the papal borders, such as in Naples, where he and his students ("Fedria comico cum la sua schola") were invited to perform "comedie et egloghe ale noze della Regina iovane e il duca di Calabria" in 1501. Through these activities and practices of the *pomponiani*, the connection between pedagogy and the revival of ancient theatre, as well as between these elements and the *polis*, grew increasingly strong, reaching its epicenter in Rome on the Capitoline Hill (see Cruciani 1969). There, in 1513, during the festivities for the conferral of Roman citizenship to the nephews of the new Pope Leo X, Giuliano and Lorenzo de' Medici, Fedra/Inghirami staged and performed Plautus's *Poenulus* and oversaw the entire iconological program of the decorative apparatus of a temporary theatre built for the occasion. This theatre appears to respond to a request made by Sulpizio da Veroli as early as 1486, in the dedication to Cardinal Raffaele Riario preceding the *editio princeps* of Vitruvius's *De Architectura*, which expressed the hope of seeing a public building erected in Rome suitable for the performances of their students and at the service of Roman citizens:

> Tu [Raffaele Riario] enim primus Tragoediae quam nos iuventutem excitandi gratia et agere et cantare primi hoc aevo docuimus (nam eius actionem iam multis saeculis Roma non viderat) in medio foro pulpitum ad quinque pedum altitudinem erectum pulcherrime exornasti. Eandemque postaquam

organised by the *Pomponiani* coincided with the celebration of the fall of Granada and Holy Week. From 1501 onward, they were included in papal court ceremonies and later extended to broader civic festivities. The *Pomponiani* were also involved in celebrating the 1493 wedding of Lucrezia Borgia and Giovanni Sforza, bringing ancient comedy to the Vatican with a performance of Plautus's *Menaechmi*, which was reprised in 1502 for Lucrezia's marriage to Alfonso d'Este.

[6] Cruciani 1980. For more on Tommaso Fedra Inghirami, see Romano 1985, 239-50; Rowland 1996, 275-82.

> in Hadriani mole divo Innocentio spectante est acta, rursus intra tuos penates tanquam in media circi cavea toto consessu umbraculis tecto, admisso populo et pluribus tui ordinis spectatoribus honorifice excepisti. Tu etiam primus picturatae scoenae faciem quom Pomponiani comoediam agerent, nostro saeculo ostendisti. Quare a te quoque theatrum novum tota urbs magnis votis expectat.
>
> [For you [Raffaele Riario] were the first to magnificently adorn a stage erected in the middle of the square, five feet high, for the tragedy that we were the first to teach to the youth of this age, to act and to sing in order to stir them up (for Rome had not seen such a performance for many centuries). After it was performed at Hadrian's Mausoleum in the presence of the divine Innocent, and then again within your household, as if in the middle of the circus's seating, with the entire audience covered by canopies, admitting the people and many spectators of your rank, you welcomed it with honor. You were also the first to show our century the appearance of a painted scene when the *pomponiani* performed a comedy. Therefore, the entire city awaits from you, with great hope, a new theatre.][7]

A theatre is necessary ("theatro est opus"). Such a request, and its partial fulfillment – albeit in temporary form – during the ceremonies of 1513, not only affirmed the connection between pedagogy and theatre but also the link between the academy, the ancient city, and the modern city through the promotion of performances and the active participation of the Roman *sodalitas* in the political, economic, cultural, and festive fabric of the city. Here, ideas, practices, and customs that constituted the pedagogical process of modern youth and the populace coalesce, asserting a model of living and being that is embodied by the theatre: "Nam quae voluptas potest cum hac spectandi delectatione conferri? Quae per oculos et aures blande in animos influens eos titillat, movet, docet et afficit?" (Sulpizio 1496; "Indeed, what pleasure can compare with this delight of watching a spectacle that, insinuating itself gently through the eyes and ears, charms, moves, instructs, and affects the soul?").

This phenomenon was not exclusively Roman, as noted from the outset, although elsewhere the pedagogical experience did not always find, as it did in Rome, a convergence with the economic, political, and festive elite of the *polis*. Nevertheless, other pedagogical initiatives across the Italian Peninsula also laid the groundwork, in each case distinctive and unique, where a dramaturgical form in dialogue with the ancient texts and their performance repertoire found the opportunity to materialise in shared and communal performative settings. Through these, the educational value of performing classical texts for young adults in modern society was asserted, along with the instructive

[7] Here and below, transcriptions from Cruciani 1983, 222-5.

and critical functions that such practice, from its classical origins, had held in the community, according to a conception of comedy as *magistra vitae*. Let us continue this brief narrative by turning our gaze momentarily to Florence.

2. School Drama in Medicean Florence

> The most original and consequential experience for the future development of Florentine theatre, and perhaps the one most closely tied to Lorenzo [de' Medici]'s personal interest, was the rediscovery of classical dramaturgy. This is a story not yet fully deciphered but one of considerable significance, both because it spans more than a decade (from 1476 to 1488, if we consider only the well-documented dates, which roughly correspond to a period of reduced public performances and ceremonies) and because it represents a central juncture in the history of Renaissance theatre, with Florence being the first city in Italy to revive Latin and Greek dramaturgy on stage. Nevertheless, the few events known to have taken place during these years failed to establish themselves within the city's theatrical traditions or, for that matter, to gain any form of public recognition. (Ventrone 1993, 22-3)

A letter from Pietro Cennini to Alemanno Rinuccini recalls that during the Carnival festivities of 1476 in Florence, Giorgio Antonio Vespucci, a renowned tutor of young Florentine nobles and a friend of Angelo Poliziano and Marsilio Ficino, had his students – including, in all likelihood, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici and Vespucci's nephew Amerigo – perform Terence's *Andria* in Latin three times, at three different locations: at the school, at Lorenzo's house, and finally, at the Palazzo della Signoria before the Magistrates. From the classroom, the classical comedy was brought to traditional civic power centers in Florentine society as an exercise in oratory and gestural skills for young nobles, and as an example of pedagogical practice inspired by the ancient tradition. This model, formalised in the writings of Cicero and Quintilian, included not only customary training practices such as dance, military and equestrian exercises, but also theatrical performance – often alongside skilled actors – to refine the rhetorical abilities of school-aged boys.[8] In more spontaneous, yet repeated, humanistic gatherings, this approach embraced the recitation of ancient dramas and poetic improvisation with the lyre, drawing on classical imagery and the civic role of poetry and theatre.[9]

[8] The letter from Cennini to Rinuccini is preserved at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze (BNCF) in manuscript 2.9.14, 175*r*-176*r*, and was published in Marchesi 1899, XXI-II. See section 6, specifically entry 6.2 concerning this letter by Lorenza Biagini in Ventrone 1992a, 221-30 (223-4); Ventrone 1993, 22-38. Pintor suggested that the recitation may have been intended to conclude a course by Vespucci on Terence.

[9] See Bortoletti 2012 and 2020. This is a vision and experimentation that, primarily

In that same year, a few months later, Pietro Domizi, a canon of the Florentine cathedral and tutor at the Schola Cantorum Eugeniana,[10] requested that Lorenzo the Magnificent host a performance of *Licinia*, a Latin comedy he had written and had his clerical students from the School of Santa Maria del Fiore perform.[11] A few years later, in 1479, Domizi wrote again to Lorenzo, inviting him to attend a performance of another Latin comedy composed by him. Domizi had intentionally composed his own texts, modeled on the classics but written in Latin and inspired by morally edifying themes, considering Vespucci's choice to stage a classical comedy unsuitable for the education of young clerics.

The proposals of Vespucci and Domizi were not isolated in Florence. For instance, Luca de' Bernardi from San Gimignano, a grammar teacher at the Florentine Studio between 1485 and 1498, routinely had his students perform comedies he composed in the classical style, alternating vernacular octaves with Latin Sapphic rhyme, and even, on at least one occasion, a comedy by Plautus.[12] Additionally, it is known that Greek performances took place in Florence, as suggested by the discovery of a parchment containing the role of Charon from Aristophanes' *Plutus*, showing signs of wear that suggest performative use, as Paola Ventrone notes, drawing on Marzi's 19th-century study.[13] The students of Janus Lascaris, a master at the Florentine Studio, also performed in Greek, as indicated by Poliziano's comments on the 1493 production of Sophocles' *Electra* at Bartolomeo Scala's house,

through the use of the vernacular in literary settings and seeking a new classical quality for the mother tongue, opens toward an expressive eclecticism. This would eventually lead, with *La fabula di Orfeo* by Angelo Poliziano, to the writing and performance of the first secular drama in the vernacular, culminating – significantly – in a joyous Dionysian bacchanal.

[10] The school was founded by Pope Eugene IV (see Trexler 1980).

[11] In Florence, however, the relationship between an evolving pedagogical model and theatre finds fertile expression not only within scholastic or academic domains but also within the devotional associative context of confraternal organisations, known as the "compagnie dei Fanciulli" (children's companies), to which Feo Belcari and Antonio Peruzzi's ventures in the vernacular religious drama genre, the *sacra rappresentazione*, are connected.

[12] See Ventrone 1993, 25. De' Bernardi's teaching position in grammar in Florence is documented in the State Archives of Florence, in the records *Deliberazioni circa lo Studio fiorentino e pisano* from 1484 to 1492, 114*v*, 120*r*, 121*r*, 131*r*, 133*v*, 141*v*, and in the records for the years 1492-1503, 10*r*, 112*r*.

[13] See also Ventrone 1993, 28-9. The Aristophanic fragment, housed in the State Archives of Florence (Diplomatico, Badia Fiorentina, no. 7, Casella 2588, 14 . . . [sic]), was described by Garbero Zorzi, in Fabbri, Garbero-Zorzi, Petrioli Tofani, Zorzi 1975, entry 4.1, 72. The scholar suggests that this may be what is referred to in theatrical terms as a "scanned part", meaning a disassembled portion of the script distributed among the actors.

where Alessandra and Giuliano Scala played the roles of Electra and Orestes, respectively.[14] The performance was a great success, and Alessandra's acting, in particular, was praised by both Poliziano and her teacher Lascaris.

In 1488, Paolo Comparini, a close associate and secretary of Poliziano and a tutor at the Schola Cantorum of San Lorenzo, staged a performance of Plautus's *Menaechmi*. For this production, Poliziano wrote the prologue, in which he defended the inclusion of classical drama performances in school curricula against criticisms, affirming the centrality of staging ancient comedies in the educational development of young people, as expressed in the accompanying letter to Comparini.[15] Drawing on Quintilian's precepts and echoing the opening of Plautine prologues, Poliziano addresses the audience directly, urging them to remain silent and, if some verses prove displeasing, to "quae si minus placebunt, auribus expuite / aut devorate quasi pilulas et pharmacus" (13-14; "spit them out from their ears or swallow them whole like pills and remedies"). He then shifts to polemics, adopting the style of Terentian prologues, to criticise the authors of contemporary comedies, contrasting the stylistic, rhetorical, and moral educational value of ancient drama with the works of modern innovators (18; "molitores novitii"), whose prose comedies, he contends, are comedies in name only.[16]

The prologue continues with a praise of Plautine comedy, which segues into a fierce anti-clerical invective against those who distort and condemn the practice of performing ancient comedies, a practice supported by Lorenzo the Magnificent. Whether these invectives were aimed specifically at Domizi's attempts in playwriting and staging is uncertain. As Paola Ventrone notes, all these efforts to revive the classical model within the context of Florentine schools – whether by Vespucci or Domizi – belonged to the same cultural milieu centered around Lorenzo and reflected a charged atmosphere of controversy and conflict, integrating political disputes between Medicean and anti-Medicean factions into their

[14] Poliziano refers to the performance both in one of the Greek epigrams that the Florentine poet dedicated to Alessandra after 1493 and in a letter addressed to the humanist Cassandra Fedele.

[15] Poliziano's prologue to Plautus's *Menaechmi*, transmitted in two versions following Poliziano's death – one contained in the Laurenzian manuscript pl. XC sup. 39 and the other printed in the Aldine edition of 1498, found in the *Epistolario* (i 5) and among the *Epigrammi latini* (Ii 3-4) – was published by Del Lungo (based on the Aldine edition, without regard to the Laurenzian manuscript) and more recently by Giovanna Bombieri (who, while following the Aldine edition due to its inclusion of a cover letter to Paolo Contarini, also compared it with the manuscript version). See Del Lungo 1867, 281-84, and Bombieri 1985, 498-506 (text, 492-3).

[16] Here, we will follow the manuscript version, highlighted as a variant in relation to the Aldine edition in the text published by Bombieri 1985, 492-3.

dramatic writings and performances. These debates manifested through the use of classical material even within university and private course settings (Ventrone 1993, 31).

The themes found in Poliziano's prologue, especially in the passages of invective, align closely with the arguments he expressed a few years earlier during his lecture course on *Andria* at the Studio, probably between 1485 and 1486 – notes from which have survived in his own handwriting.[17] In the midst of these polemics against ancient theatre, the master adeptly explains in his lectures the usefulness of ancient *fabulae* both as exempla for a balanced and just life, and as a practice for mastering language, the art of speech, voice, gesture, and persuasive communication, skills that Florentine politics and society demanded from its young citizens. In this context, the Florentine heralds, who served as entertainers and diplomats, representing the Signoria at official ceremonies both in the city and abroad, played a central role in the city's political life (Ventrone 2016, 7-24; Bortoletti 2020, 63-77).

Reconstructing the historical and sacred origins of classical drama and emphasising its function as a source of exemplary teaching, Poliziano invokes the authority of ancient writers to counter any ideological opposition to the theatrical exercises of Lorenzo's circle. Here, the ancient tradition, its theatre, and its revival in the education of Florentine adolescents and future citizens are employed in a discourse aimed at defending Lorenzo's cultural policy against criticisms from ecclesiastical authorities and anti-Medicean factions, as Poliziano systematically argues in the preface to the first *Centuria* of the *Miscellanea*, published in the autumn of 1489 (Martelli 2009, 93-158; Ventrone 1993, 36).

This dynamic interplay between the school, the academy, the university, and politics surrounding classical theatre as an educational and pedagogical practice for Florentine youth did not, as elsewhere, lead to its establishment as a dominant cultural form during the age of Lorenzo and his successors, as Poliziano had hoped. However, it left a legacy that, as Ventrone observes, would reveal its significance in the years to come.[18]

[17] Lattanzi Rosselli 1973, where the notes from Poliziano's lectures are edited.

[18] Ventrone 1993, 37; Ead. 1992b, 150-96. Evidence of this legacy, particularly the influence of Poliziano's lessons and the related theatrical experiences of the young Florentines of that era, can also be found in the theatrical writings of subsequent playwrights such as Niccolò Machiavelli, Jacopo Nardi, and his student Eufrosino Bonini. Furthermore, looking beyond the Medici boundaries, it is worth noting that – as Franco Ruffini pointed out concerning the Florentine *Andria* of 1476, from which we began this discussion – the text of the Terentian comedy, presented in a school context in Florence, was revived fifteen years after the performances of the Vespucci during the carnival of 1491 in Ferrara, in celebration of the marriage between Alfonso d'Este and Anna Sforza. See Cruciani, Falletti, Ruffini 1994, 207-8.

It was no coincidence, then, that when the Medici returned to Florence in 1512 after 18 years of exile, Eufrosino Bonini – Poliziano's student, a grammar teacher in Greek at the Florentine Studio, and an editor of Aristophanes – was commissioned by the Medici to write a vernacular comedy inspired by the first three parts of Aristophanes' *Plutus* (1-801): *Comedia di Iustitia* (A Comedy of Justice), performed during the Carnival festivities of 1513 to celebrate the Medici as guarantors of renewed peace, justice, and liberty in Florence. In Bonini's writing, Asclepius is no longer a god but represented by a council of enlightened doctors (whereby the Italian for doctors, *medici*, has obvious resonances with the Medici family), with whom the chorus of laborers, who open the play by depicting the anguish of poverty in the face of injustice and power, engages (Di Martino in this issue).[19] The chorus appears here as a dramaturgical and historical link between the ancient and the present, serving as both the actor and the audience of the piece, embodying the people – the "fedeli" which "Iustitia ha exauditi". Through this figure, Bonini revives the political and civic lesson of ancient theatre, which fundamentally aimed at the moral healing of its primary audience, the citizens, and thus society.

Behind Bonini's reworking of Aristophanes lies not only an encomiastic and overtly political intent connected to the first Medicean restoration but also the re-emergence of an idea of theatre as *exemplum* and as a pedagogical and persuasive tool that does not exclude entertainment. Further discussion on Bonini's comedy will follow shortly (see Di Martino in this issue). However, it is crucial here to emphasise that, although the pedagogical-humanistic experiences of ancient theatre within Florentine schools and the Studio did not manage to secure a stable place in the city's theatrical traditions or gain public recognition, their legacy remains vibrant, finding new forms, visions, and projects of revival – both in the near and distant future. This legacy also intertwines with other heritages that, during those uncertain and prolific years of the late fifteenth century, extended their roots. Let us now turn our attention to the northeast, to the lagoon, to the domains of the Serenissima, where ancient theatre found a renewed presence.

[19] Bonini's *Iustitia* was discovered in a Florentine manuscript: ms. Magl. Strozz., 7, 1211; it was subsequently described by Pintor and then published alongside two other contemporary vernacular comedies, *Amicitia* and *I Due felici rivali* by Jacopo Nardi, which also have classical roots, in Stefani 1986, 109-50. Bonini also edited the first Giuntina edition of Aristophanes' *Plutus* in 1515, which was republished in 1525 along with *Pax*. For information on the humanistic reception of Aristophanes, particularly concerning *Plutus*, see Cisterna 2012; Muttini 2019, 1-40; 2020, 67-91, Bastin-Hammou 2023. Regarding the relationship between Aristophanes and the early performances of comedies and farces in the Florentine context, refer also to De Mara 1980, 378-408.

3. Frulovisi's School Drama in Venice

> In 1430s Venice, school theatre did not emerge within centers of power. Scholastic comedy – a unique form of performance and likely the earliest association between classical dramaturgy and rhetorical-acting practice – remained distant from other public or elite circles and functions. It did not lead to a straightforward transmission or multiplication of similar forms; instead, it fostered a gradual infusion of an appreciation for learned recitation into the education and private conduct of individuals and communities within the ruling class. (Guarino 1988, 45)

In the Venice of the 1430s, within the private school of the parish of San Basso, the Ferrara-born teacher and rector Tito Livio Frulovisi educated his students in rhetoric and oratory through the performance of comedies he composed in Latin prose. Having studied in Venice under the humanist Guarino Veronese,[20] Frulovisi presented the recitation of comedies as a refined cultural activity, intended as an alternative to other forms of elite entertainment. He firmly believed in the pedagogical role of theatrical performance as a mnemonic exercise and rhetorical practice, useful for the political, ethical, and civic education of young Venetian aristocrats, the future leaders of the Republic.

Seven of Frulovisi's comedies are preserved in a manuscript held by St. John's College, Cambridge: *Corallaria*, *Claudi duo*, *Emporia*, *Symmachus*, *Oratoria*, *Eugenius*, and *Peregrinatio*, each accompanied by an *argumentum*, a *prologus*, and some autograph marginal notes. These annotations reflect the master's awareness of the significance of his work, in terms of both its relation to the classical model from which it draws inspiration and its address to contemporary society, where he staged new plays with his students.[21] The

[20] Guarino Veronese taught in Venice from 1414 to 1419. The first phase of the educational path designed by Guarino Veronese was dedicated to learning the basic rules of Latin grammar; the second phase introduced students to the reading of various literary genres; finally, the third phase focused on rhetoric through the study of the philosophical works of Cicero and Plato. See Garin 1957, 143-6; Sabbadini 1896, 19-22; Frulovisi 2010, xiii-xiv.

[21] Cambridge Codex, Library of St. John's College, C. 10, from the 15th century: the only manuscript that has transmitted the theatrical corpus of Frulovisi. The comedies of Frulovisi were published by Previté-Orton (who considers the notes and corrections to be autographs): *Titi Livii de Frulovisii Opera hactenus inedita*, edited by W. Previté-Orton, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1932. The editor prefaced the editions with a lengthy introduction (ix-xxxvii), which, along with the previous essay (Previté-Orton 1932) and the one by Ferrari (1921, 17-28), contributed to a preliminary biographical and historical-literary reconstruction of Frulovisi and his works. In addition to these preliminary studies on the works of Frulovisi and the relationship between comedy and education in Venice, see also: Sabbadini 1934, 55-81; Stäuble 1968,

first five comedies in the manuscript were certainly performed between 1432 and 1435, as indicated by the content of the stage directions and prologues, which follow the model of Terentian manuscripts.[22] This is evident even in the opening of *Corallaria*:

> Corollaria T. Liviii Frulovisii incipit. Titulus. Acta Venetiis ludis Romanis Francisco Foscari duce, Leonardo Mocenigo, Iacobo Trivisano, Bertucio Quirino, Fantino Michaele, Antonio Contareno et Petro Lauredano procuratoribus, indictione undecima. Egit Hyeronimus de Ponte. Modos facere Leonardus Piçolus et Iohannes Gratius Iuditibiis. Tota est peracta Latina. (1-6)
>
> [The *Corallaria* of Tito Livio Frulovisi begins. Title. Performed in Venice during the Roman Games under Doge Francesco Foscari and the magistrates Leonardo Mocenigo, Iacopo Trivisan, Bertuccio Quirino, Fantino Michele, Antonio Contareno, and Pietro Loredan, in the eleventh indiction. Staged by Girolamo da Ponte. Music composed by Leonardo Pizzolo and Giovanni Grazio with playful flutes. The entire performance was in Latin.][23]

As in his other comedies, Frulovisi indicates the governing authorities at the time of the performance (the doge and procurators), as well as the musicians and the director, in this case, the student Girolamo da Ponte, who also served as the *recitator*, as revealed in the prologue.[24] Belonging to prominent Venetian aristocratic families, such as the Da Ponte and the

23-51; 1968, 51-65; Guarino 1987, 135-66; Arbizzoni 1998; Rundle 2004, 193-202. Recently, new critical editions, translations, and commentaries of some of Frulovisi's comedies have been published within the series *Teatro umanistico*, aimed at recovering a corpus of works that are often unpublished or published in sixteenth-century editions: *Oratoria*, edited by Cristina Cocco in 2010; *Claudi Duo*, edited by Incardona (2011); *Peregrinatio*, *Emporia*, and *Symmachus*, edited by Fossati (2012, 2014, and 2017); *Corollaria*, edited by Bisanti (2021).

[22] In particular, *Corollaria*, *I Claudi duo*, and *L'Emporia* were written and performed between the autumn of 1432 and the summer of 1433, while *Symmachus* was composed in 1433-1434, and finally *Oratoria* in 1434-1435, as indicated by the procurators' records. For a discussion of the stage directions and their importance in Humanistic theatre, see Pittaluga 2002 and the introductions and commentaries in the aforementioned editions of Frulovisi's works.

[23] This text is transcribed from the edition and translation by Bisanti 2021, 6-7.

[24] For the other comedies, the staging and performance of the prologue were entrusted to the students of the School of San Basso: Simone Fioravanti for *I Claudi duo*; Antonio da Ponte, brother of Girolamo, for *L'Emporia*; and again Girolamo da Ponte for *Oratoria*. The production of *Symmachus*, however, was assigned to a colleague of Frulovisi, Paolo di Andrea, who served as rector scholarum for the Venetian parish of San Giovanni Bragora, located by the Riva degli Schiavoni. See *Corollaria*, edited by Bisanti 2021, xliv and n110.

Fioravanti, the students articulated, through the prologues, the vision of their master Frulovisi, presenting to the audience gathered for the Roman Games the rationale behind their theatrical endeavor. This practice emerged from the intersection of writing, education, and theatre – both ancient and contemporary.

In the prologue of *Corallaria*, Girolamo Da Ponte, a young student, takes the stage, declaring the reason for his appearance: his master's intention for him to serve as a defender, rather than a mere prologue, to advocate for the significance of staging 'new' comedies and to counter the criticisms of school performances, which some deemed unsuitable and merely recreational for young students:

> Ne cui vestrum mirum sit qui sim et cur venerim, paucis dabo et simul eloquar nomen meum. Praeceptor huc me misit meus. Oratorem voluit esse, non prologum. Nomen Hieronymus [Da Ponte] est mihi. Nunc attendite quid velim. Si quiquam unquam meruit de vobis et vestris liberis, date operam nobis statariam, atque attendite equo animo. Neque vos moveat oratio malevolum, qui ita dictitant: non licere novas dare fabulas: satis esse graece scriptitatas et conversas latine. Sint fuerintque graecae et latinae multe. Qua gratia ab studio et industria hominem student reicere? Retrahere volunt in ocium. Credunt mutata hominorum ingenia, quanquam omnino perierint virtutis precia. Quod fecere Greci, facerent et Latini, si sibi honoris palmam praesto scirent. Avaricia, ambicio, invidia, crudelitats iniquum bonorum pervertunt ingenia. Scitis ab urbe fere condita in hodiernum moris semper fuisse et esse in nostra patria his feriis disciplulis praeceptores aliquid ludorum dare. Qui certant hastis: qui saltationibus: qui Baccho magis sacrificant. (2021, 15-31)

> [So that none of you may wonder who I am and why I have come, I shall say it briefly and, at the same time, reveal my name. My master sent me here. He wished me to be his advocate, not the prologue. My name is Girolamo [Da Ponte]. Now listen attentively to what I wish to convey. If ever he deserved anything from you and your children, allow us to perform a 'stational' comedy and listen with an open mind. Do not be swayed by the words of the malevolent, who claim: 'It is not permissible to stage new comedies; those written in Greek and translated into Latin suffice'. Let there be many Greek and Latin comedies, past and present. But why do they seek to discourage man from study and industriousness? They want to drag him into idleness. They think that men's talents have changed, even though the rewards of virtue have entirely perished. What the Greeks accomplished, the Latins would also achieve, if they recognized the honor they could attain. Greed, ambition, envy, cruelty, and injustice corrupt the qualities of the good. You know that since the founding of the city, and to this day, it has always been customary in our homeland for teachers to offer their

> students some form of entertainment during festivals. Some compete with spears, others dance, and still others prefer to offer sacrifices to Bacchus.][25]

Following the model of Terence's comedies,[26] and in particular citing *Heautontimorumenos* ("Oratorem esse voluit me, non prologum"; Ter. *Heaut.*, 11), the young Da Ponte thus becomes the spokesperson for his master and playwright, inviting the audience to act as impartial judges, to recognise the value of composing new comedies modeled on the ancients and to bring ancient texts back to life, thereby stimulating the intellect, creativity, and industriousness of contemporary society. The comedies are presented by the young orator as a gift from the master to his students, offering them – reviving ancient festival traditions – alternatives to martial games, dancing, or Bacchic festivities.

Frulovisi's defense of the legitimacy of staging new comedies in the style of the ancients is closely tied to the concerns of the present, reflecting his aim to engage contemporary audiences. This is evident in the many references to daily customs, historical events, and moral issues of the time. Moreover, he sought to reform scholastic customs by offering a new kind of theatrical practice – honest, learned, and enjoyable. Otherwise, as highlighted in the subsequent lines of the same Prologue, ancient texts would be mere "decrepitude". Here, the voice of the young disciple is juxtaposed with that of the teacher, who addresses his students, their parents, and the public:

> Honestior est nobis visus hic ludus scenicus. In hoc est nostrum studium placere adulescentulis nostri discipulis vobisque et populo. Neque ex hoc studio aliam palmam expetimus, nisi quod vobis iocunda sit voluntas nostra. Scio malivolos detrahere et argumento et stilo. Id illi sibi hoc responsum habeant. Alias sibi excogitent, et in publicum adducant. Facta eos laudent, non maledicta oratio . . . Nova delectant, nova placent, vetera senium inducunt. Nunc virtutem et aequanimitatem expeto vestram vosque queso et obstetor: equo animo attendite dum huiusce fabulae argumentum eloquor. (2021, 31-43)
>
> [This theatrical performance seemed more suitable to us. In it, we place our desire to please our young students, you, and the public. We ask for no reward from this effort other than for our intent to be pleasing to you. I know that the spiteful criticize both the subject and the style. Let them take this response. Let them think up others themselves and present them publicly. May deeds, not scornful speech, bring them praise. New things delight; new things please; old things lead to decrepitude. Now, I seek your attention and

[25] See also Bisanti 2021, 6-9.

[26] The speaker of the prologue often presents himself as a defender-orator in the guise of the prologue: "Orator ad vos venio ornatu prologi" ("Vengo a voi come difensore in veste di prologo"; Ter. *Hecyra*, 9).

goodwill; I implore and beseech you: listen willingly as I unfold the plot of this comedy.][27]

The aim of Frulovisi, as teacher, director, and playwright, is not simply to revive antiquity for its own sake but rather to present something 'new' through that tradition – something that would please, educate, and entertain. For Frulovisi, the purpose of this new writing does not lie in achieving a stylistic excellence equal to that of the ancients, as other individual humanist efforts of the time sought to do.[28] Instead, he seeks to integrate classical heritage within a didactic-rhetorical curriculum, as part of a pedagogical vision in which the study and engagement with classical texts, as a thematic and linguistic repertoire, and the practice of acting, could instruct his students and reach the citizens, even if this is limited here to a small, elite audience.

The diversity of literary and theatrical sources employed by Frulovisi in composing his comedies – from Aristophanes (Plutus) to Lucian (Timon), Plautus, Terence, and the novella tradition – reveals that these classical precedents operate at a granular level rather than shaping the overall form of the text and dramaturgy. His primary aim was to create scenarios for performance and exercises in recitation for adolescents. Frulovisi provides some information about how these performances were conducted through his prologues and notes. Performed entirely in Latin ("Tota est peracta Latina"; *Corallaria*, 6), his comedies initially featured the participation of *histriones* and mimes, as in the case of the *Corallaria*. However, in later performances, the stage appears to have been increasingly left to the students of the school, with the number of characters expanding: from sixteen in the *Corallaria* (including minor figures like the "bats" or policemen who appear briefly in Scene 8, along with three characters mentioned but without lines) to twenty in *Claudi Duo* and *Emporia*, and up to twenty-four in *Symmachus*. As noted by Armando Bisanti in the introduction to the new critical edition and translation of *Corallaria*, "ci troviamo di fronte, in tutti i casi, a

[27] Several elements may be found here that Antonio Stäuble had already identified as characteristic of Frulovisi's comedies, namely: the comedic influences of Greek and, in particular, Latin sources, including Terence and Plautus, along with medieval narrative elements, and references to contemporary life, whether everyday or historical (Stäuble 1968, 51-65).

[28] As often noted, Frulovisi was the most prolific Italian author of Latin humanistic comedies. The majority of other contemporary authors engaged in comic-dramatic production as a marginal experience, focusing instead more diligently on other genres, which were perhaps considered more 'elevated': from Vergerio's *Paulus*, Rinuccio Aretino's *Penia*, Sicco Polenton's *Catinia*, and Antonio Barzizza's *Cauteraria* to Alberti's *Pilodoxus fabula*, Leonardo della Serrata's *Poliscena*, and the goliardic farce *Repetitio magistri Zanini coqui*, and especially Ugolino Pisani's *Philogenia*. See Perosa 1965; Pandolfi and Artese 1965; Stäuble 1968; Padoan 1982; Guarino 1987.

componimenti particolarmente 'affollati', benché . . . questo 'affollamento' risulti più apparente che reale, dal momento che non sono mai chiamati ad agire e a parlare più di tre personaggi alla volta" (Bisanti 2021, xlviii; "in all cases, we are dealing with particularly 'crowded' compositions, although . . this 'crowdedness' is more apparent than real, since no more than three characters ever appear on stage simultaneously").

This crowdedness invites reflection, for although, as Bisanti observes, no more than three characters appear together on stage at any given time, in adherence to classical theatrical conventions, the multiplication of figures and subsidiary characters suggests a writing process that, as we might describe it today, emerges directly from the stage and Frulovisi's work with his students. It develops in relation to the group of students at the School of San Basso, where he taught. This scenario raises the possibility that behind this "crowdedness" lies an idea of a chorus, understood as a pedagogical practice and collective experience that bridges the worlds of theatre and life.

The prologues also reveal that other teachers of the time engaged in the writing of comedies and viewed theatre and acting as a healthy pedagogical practice, forming a key component of their instruction. Notably, in the prologue to his third comedy, *Emporia*, Frulovisi mocks his rivals' initiatives, asserting his own superiority as a playwright and educator. This episode provides valuable evidence of a lively and polemical debate within the Venetian scholastic community regarding the educational and didactic use of theatre, particularly that of Latin and Greek drama. It also reflects the broader revival of classical drama in Venice, which went beyond autonomous literary productions or the philological rigor of Venetian editions, influencing the other aspect of the city's classical revival, seen for instance in the masters of the School of San Marco, especially Giorgio Merula.[29] On one hand, ancient drama, particularly comedy, became part of the exegetical circuit of Venetian humanism, which regarded philology as a preliminary science to all knowledge and practice. On the other hand, and in parallel, these plays served as examples of living language, gaining new form, voice, and action in school performances, becoming central to the rituals of schools and academies.

Nevertheless, Frulovisi's comedies, like the Venetian humanistic comedy tradition in general, did not gain prominence in the public sphere as they did in places such as Rome, where festive and celebratory intentions converged between the cultural and socio-political elites. Instead, these comedies

[29] Giorgio Merula served as a professor in the second chair of the School of San Marco from 1468 to 1484 and actively collaborated with the printers Vindelino da Spira and Giovanni Colonna. In 1471, *Terenzio*, edited with Raffaele Zovenzoni, and Donato's commentary were published separately. In 1472, an emended edition of *Plautus* was printed.

remained within the private circles of the Venetian oligarchy. Despite this, they contributed to the patrimonial memory of patrician families, aiding the absorption of texts into scholarly tradition, circulating themes and motifs through manuscripts, and of course, influencing educational practices.[30]

In other contexts, the failure to establish school theatre at the centers of power led, in some cases, to its emergence as a form of anti-literary protest against the dominant cultural and political power, as seen in the student circles around the University of Padua. Yet even in these seemingly marginal locations, practices of the dramatic arts emerged, in which the ancient model of classical theatre found new modes of expression and adaptation, reaching different levels of artistic and civic knowledge and action. Let us now briefly outline some of these features before finally arriving at 'our' own modern engagement with these practices.

4. The Studium of Padua

> Among the students in Padua, satirical associations had formed, such as the 'Macaronic Sect' and the 'Cosmic Academy', remembered primarily for their focus on extracurricular pursuits: love affairs, feasts, pranks, and revelry of all kinds. Among the entertainments sponsored by these groups, performances increasingly took center stage, modeled after the popular street farces enjoyed by the general public and not disdained by the upper classes. Alongside *mariazi* (festive skits), there appeared proto-goliardic farces, pastoral eclogues, and rustic comedies, as well as more complex works. Though these works lacked the full structure of a theatrical play and were undivided into acts or scenes, they represent the early forms of a sophisticated drama, foreshadowing the emergence of formal theatre. (Zorzi 1967, xlii)

On the mainland across the lagoon, in the halls of the University of Padua, a dense network of students, professors, and poets – among whom could also be found "altri scapigliati, giullari, *clerici vagantes*, cantimpanca, talenti estrosi quanto irregolari" (ibid.; other *scapigliati*, jesters, *clerici vagantes*, *cantimpanca*, talents as whimsical as they are irregular) – began laying the foundations of what Pandolfi has termed the "spurie origini del nostro teatro drammatico" (spurious origins of our dramatic theatre; see Pandolfi

[30] See Guarino 1987, 143-4. As noted by the scholar, the circulation of Plautine and Terentian manuscripts is also documented in the catalogs of the Marciana Library; more generally, the circulation of classical theatre, further fueled by exchanges among patricians, philologists, and editors, also leaves its mark in private libraries. Notably, there is the Estense manuscript of Aristophanes signed by Marco Musuro and Alvise and Francesco Barbaro.

and Artese 1965, ix). Padua emerged as a unique crucible of diverse literary experiences and cultural currents. Still deeply infused with a rural ethos, the city was also receptive to the grafting of a university culture rooted in Aristotelian-Averroist traditions, which had made the integration of the renewed humanistic pedagogical system into the academic curriculum difficult.[31] Nevertheless, new methods of commentary, texts, and authors gradually found their way into the classrooms of the ancient University of Padua, which could not remain unaffected by the teachings of scholars such as Ermolao Barbaro, Pietro Pomponazzi, or Giorgio Merula himself.[32]

By the late fifteenth century, the struggle between the new and the old, between the emerging trends of Humanism and the persistence of university culture tied to the tradition of Scholasticism, was still ongoing. The role of *auctoritates* remained strong, and numerous constraints continued to govern the university system, which at the beginning of the new century was still deeply embedded in the civic fabric. The *universitas scholarium*, of medieval origin and initially connected to ecclesiastical power, continued to uphold its corporate spirit during this period. Its distinct presence at the city's ceremonial events reflected a well-defined representative role in the framework and rhythms of civic rituals. University life was not merely marked by the ringing of the bell that signaled the beginning and end of classes, nor was the classroom context the only cultural reality with which the student population came into contact. The university itself, the Cathedral, the Episcopal Palace, the Palace of the Captain, convents, confraternities, churches, main streets, as well as shops, taverns, and squares: these were varied spaces where the presence of students was registered during formal festive occasions or in the form of spontaneous gatherings, often taking on a provocative character that challenged the established order. This atmosphere frequently translated into parodic distortions and licentious, erudite humor.[33]

[31] Founded in 1222, the Studio quickly gained wide acclaim, becoming the official seat of the University of the Republic of Venice in 1405 (when Padua transitioned from Carrarese to Venetian rule) and a cultural center of considerable prestige.

[32] As Garin states, the University was characterised by readings and commentaries of various authors, and these readings were conducted by professors who, while enjoying a degree of freedom in their pedagogical choices, introduced new issues, authors, texts, and translations into the classrooms of the Studio. These innovations were acquired and cultivated in other locations more attuned to the advancements of humanistic culture. See Garin 1994, 7-11. Also refer to Billanovich 1977, 19-110; 1978, 365-80.

[33] The feasts of Saint Luke, coinciding with the start of the academic year on October 18, and of Saint Catherine, the patron saint of the law faculty, as well as the procession of Corpus Christi, were celebratory moments in both academic and civic life. These events often provided opportunities for the student community to engage in inappropriate behavior and licentiousness. Similarly, graduation ceremonies and the election of the Rector, held in the cathedral or in the Palazzo del Capitanio, were

Such was the case, for instance, at the University of Pavia, as documented by Matteo Vegio's fifteenth-century invective against the customs of certain "empi cerimoniali studenteschi" (impious student ceremonies) that turned the *vesperiae* – the final disputations of the graduating student held in the presence of peers and professors in the university's halls and in the Cathedral – into an "allegro baccanale" (merry bacchanal). This kind of conduct is also attested in one of Ugolino Pisani's works, the *Repetitio egregii Zanini coqui*, a parody of an academic ceremony in the form of a comedy written in the so-called *Latinus grossus*, performed in Pavia during the Carnival of 1435 and two years later in Ferrara before Leonello d'Este and Guarino, who sharply criticised the work for its lack of fidelity to the humanistic comic model in both form and linguistic purity.[34]

Similar experiences likely characterised student life and the bohemian culture in Padua as well, though we have limited information about these events. However, some dramatic compositions in Latin from this period attest to the influence of classical dramatic models and the new humanistic comedy: Sicco Polenton's *Catinia* (1419) and its anonymous vernacular version (published in Trent in 1492); *Armiranda*, composed by the Bergamasque student Giovanni Michele Alberto Carrara (c.1457-1460); the anonymous *Commedia elettorale* (1462); and the *Comedia* by the Sicilian student Caio Caloria Ponzio (1490) (Padoan 1982; Bortoletti 2002-2003, 151-65).

It is uncertain whether these comedies were actually performed or what occasion might have prompted their composition and potential staging. However, by undertaking a comparative study of various sources – such as decrees, legal rulings, and other official documents in conjunction with contemporary literary texts – some intriguing information can be gleaned about student customs beyond the confines of the university.[35] Students attended music, singing, and dance classes at private schools, such as that

accompanied by an imposing ceremonial that actively involved the entire student body. Divided into various nations, the students often resolved internal rivalries through animated debates and, at times, through duels, complete with witnesses and an audience. From such situations arose, as noted by Pandolfi, the first comedic texts of our theatre and the initial true performances. See Pandolfi and Artese 1965.

[34] This production also includes the *De falso hypocrita* (1437) by Mercurio Ranzio, the *Janus sacerdos* (1427), and the *Philogenia* by Ugolino Pisani, composed a few years later, as well as the *Cauteraria* by Antonio Barzizza (1420-1425). For further reference, see Pandolfi and Artese 1965; Perosa 1965, 23-5; Stäuble 1968; Viti 1982; Chiabbò-Doglio 1998.

[35] Among the manuscripts consulted at the Historical Archive of the University of Padua are mss 609 and 610, titled by Giomo, *Processi contro studenti*; ms 587 (which contains information on performances to be conducted prior to the doctorate, notes on ceremonies and promoters); and ms 655, which pertains to sacred and profane festivals, distribution of gifts, etc. (1437-1757).

of the lute master Antonio Rota, or participated in private readings and lectures at professors' homes, which became meeting places not unlike the circles of humanist scholars who, as previously noted, were actively engaged in practices of recitation, literary disputations, or other forms of entertainment.[36]

Within these kinds of informal student circles and associations, one can trace the tastes, interests, and literary and artistic inclinations of a diverse cohort. This is corroborated by reports from Bernardino Scardeone on the performances by the noble Paduan Matteo da Rio, who staged *pavanerie* and theatrical *fabulae* for the enjoyment of his circle of friends—performances so delightful that "nothing sweeter for cheering the spirit, no matter how sorrowful, could ever be read or heard by our people" (Scardeone 1569, 290). Similarly, a literary recollection from one of Niccolò Cosmico's opponents – Cosmico being a Paduan-born grammar teacher later associated with the Pomponian Academy in Rome – mentions a certain "accademia a gente strana, nominata Cosmicana" (academy of strange people, named the Cosmicana). Vittorio Rossi interpreted this as the *macaronea secta*, a group taking poetic shape and gaining life in Tifi Odasi's *Macaronea*, and later consecrated in Teofilo Folengo's macaronic works, beginning with that choral poem of anarchy and tumult, *Baldus*.[37]

The connection between such literary production and the university environment has now been well recognised and documented. Although the details of the elusive student performers are unclear, the remaining texts clearly reflect the intellectual playfulness characteristic of the university and student culture, as well as an experimental approach to language and its expressive possibilities. This experimentation involved incorporating dialectal material into conventional poetic and dramatic formulas inspired by classical models, demonstrating in Padua, too, the intersections between humanistic research and university scholarship, as well as their connection to literary and poetical uses of the local dialects. These practices undermined

[36] While examining the records of a trial involving the lutenist Antonio Rota, who was determined to seek compensation for the physical and material damages inflicted upon him during a duel, a joyful, chivalric, and erudite group emerges, primarily composed of students from Rota's school of dance, music, and singing, who hastened without hesitation to testify in favor of their teacher. See Martellozzo Forin 1969, 425-43; Bortoletti 2002-2003, 161.

[37] Rossi highlights the connections, not only literary, between the two poets – Cosmico and Odasi – and their affiliation with the same academic environment in Padua. This connection is further corroborated by the hypotheses of identity put forth by Rossi and Fabris, which suggest that the protagonists of the macaronic poems are based on real individuals associated with the Studio. See Rossi 1882; 1888, 1-49; Fabris 1933, 3-16; Paccagnella 1979, 62-8; 1980, 80.

the new values, education, and discursive practices of the literati and scholars attuned to the new rules of classical rhetoric and the emergent vernacular dramaturgies.

The aristocratic and elitist nature (with a distinctly archeological flair) that characterises the humanistic experience in Rome and other centers across the peninsula takes on an innovative tension in the Veneto region. Here, there is a revival of the rich linguistic and literary material associated with the tradition of the dialect, integrating into the high-end literary discourse the irreverent tensions and transgressive enthusiasms of the goliard community and the heterogeneous world of "eccentric talents" referenced by Zorzi. Throughout the fifteenth century, Padua lacked recognised cultural centers that could serve as alternatives to the university. The environment of the court, which under the Carrara dynasty had offered a favorable space for the convergence of diverse cultural experiences and reinterpretations, had long since disappeared. Meanwhile, the setting cultivated by Alvise Cornaro – where intellectuals, artists, writers, and playwrights would later gather to create a new if smaller scale court in Padua, and even develop the concept of a theatrical space in the Cornaro loggia with a kind of *scaenae frons* – was still far from being realised.[38]

We must, in fact, move forward in time to find references in Padua to the practice of drama – comic theatre in particular – related to official festive occasions and relevant spaces, revealing a pedagogical and didactic role for theatre. This emerges no earlier than 1532, when, by concession of the Rector of the university, comedy was allowed during the Carnival celebrations as a replacement for the traditional equestrian joust. The performance was a play by Angelo Beolco, known as Ruzante, likely *La Piovana*, staged by the author himself "ad ricreationem scolarium" (for the recreation of the students) (Sambin 1983).

However, throughout the fifteenth century, the presence of texts linked to a poetic and dramatic production that engaged, albeit subversively (or in a "Dionysian anarchic" manner), with the classical tradition, is connected to the communicative and educational power of the spoken word – whether classical, dialectal, or modern – and to a practice of performance conceived as a means of expressing alternative forms of knowledge and action. This practice originated within the university setting and intersected with the legacy of the ancient Dionysian bacchanalia, giving rise to a new theatrical

[38] We must also wait until the end of the century to witness the realisation, in nearby Vicenza, of the vision and hope – expressed nearly a century earlier by Sulpizio – of a theatre building designed according to Vitruvian principles: namely, the construction of the Teatro Olimpico (1485), the result of the collaborative exegetical efforts of Ermolao Barbaro, Andrea Palladio, and primarily academic patrons. See Mazzoni 1998.

language and novel creative solutions. These solutions, which emerged from seemingly marginal contexts, in turn generated new trends, wherein theatre – much like the ancient chorus – was experienced as a collective act (both poetic and dramaturgical), primarily involving the diverse youth of the student body, repeatedly traversing and impacting the entire *polis*.

5. Epilogue: Martinelli's "non-scuola": "igniting the chorus"

> Theatre as tradition, or rather as a séance: from Aristophanes to Jarry, from Ruzzante to Brecht. We are nourished by all those dead, indispensable bread and wine, and all those dead, like vampires, feed on our blood to stay alive among the living, marking their presence in the unbroken chain of centuries. Not a place for staging (*messa in scena*), but a place for bringing to life (*messa in vita*). (Martinelli 2021, 10)

At the end of our narrative, and in its epilogue, it is worth making room for new reflections and practices that intertwine research and pedagogy, exploring ways to connect our contemporary world with the classical stage, the "dead" with the "living". These reflections and practices are part of a journey marked by intersections, readings, and exchanges within and beyond academia, aiming to integrate theatre practice into teaching—not merely as a space for knowledge transmission, but as a site of research and inquiry itself. It is a place where students are not merely recipients but active agents in reactivating and valuing a legacy – textual, oral, visual, or performative – rooted in the classical model.

This approach has been enriched over the years by the extensive and collective experience of the "non-scuola", developed by theatre director Marco Martinelli and the Teatro delle Albe in Ravenna. Through the engagement of school and college students with classical texts, this initiative seeks to rekindle the Dionysian principles of festivity, ritual, and, most importantly, play – transforming an undifferentiated group into a CHORUS.

Starting in 1991, Marco Martinelli has cultivated this practice and methodology by conducting theatre workshops in collaboration with Italian schools and internationally. The "non-scuola" approach enables young people to become cultural creators through the immersive experience of performance and engagement with the classical tradition. The "non-scuola" method evolved from Martinelli's lifelong dedication to the craft and art of theatre, a journey he began alongside his artistic and life partner, Ermanna Montanari, with the founding of their theatre company, Teatro delle Albe/Ravenna Teatro, in 1983. Central to their work is the conviction that theatre serves, above all, as a space for connection – personal, artistic, and social.

Since the inception of the "non-scuola" theatrical method, Martinelli has

looked at classical texts with fresh eyes, working together with adolescents. Over the years, alongside his companions in life and art, he has developed a new practice that has led him to work with the most difficult texts in the most difficult situations: in Scampia, a northern suburb of Naples, a place marked by Camorra feuds, drug dealing, and more, where the "non-scuola" has brought together students from Scampia and from the affluent Naples neighborhood of Piazza del Gesù (Martinelli 2009, 2016); in Mazara del Vallo, a multicultural city in Sicily just 200 km from the Tunisian coast; in the Sardinian hinterland, in Seneghe; or in Calabrian towns under administrative control for mafia infiltration, working with the adolescents of Lamezia Terme and Roma youth. He continued amidst the rubble of earthquake-stricken towns in Emilia, in the archaeological sites of Pompei (Saturnino 2024), or by playing with the multilingualism of university and high school students from various European and non-European countries (see below).

His work has also crossed national borders, reaching Senegalese neighborhoods in Belgium, Puerto Rican communities in the Bronx of New York, Chicago, Kibera in Africa, Rio de Janeiro, or the farthest outskirts in the North-East of London. With this new perspective, Martinelli has brought the classics closer to hundreds, even thousands, of young people, discovering them:

> enthusiastic, capable of dedicating time and passion to theatrical work, attentive and focused, volcanoes of untapped energy . . . capable of moving from wild blows to tender caresses, from chaos and shouting to an almost religious silence, hungry for affection and tenderness, longing for that temperature felt on stage, that state in which stutterers sing without faltering and the shy become lions, that upside-down life, never to end. (Martinelli 2016, 8-9)

Martinelli calls all these young souls "asini" (donkeys) – creatures that seem so distant from those ancient texts, which have poetically captured and preserved for centuries stories of injustice, war, peace, and that powerful tangle of drives, upheavals, anxieties, infatuations, challenges, visions, and dreams that animate creation. And yet, the classics and today's adolescents are so close in their shared anticipation for this tangle of indistinct elements to be *messi in vita* (brought to life). Indeed, they can engage in dialogue, recognise one another, and, as Martinelli would say, "rub together" like two wooden sticks until, from that friction, a spark is born – a fire. The fire of Dionysus. It resides in ancient texts and lives within young people, yesterday as today, and still ignites today as a veritable game:

> Play, even today, is the 'loving massacre' of Tradition – not 'staging' ancient

> texts, but 'bringing them to life': resurrecting Aristophanes, not merely reciting him. The technique of performance begins with tearing apart, tilling the ground.[39]

The essence of this endeavour lies in focusing and unleashing the creative energy of young people, creating a "short circuit" as they read canonical texts, then "incorporate" and manipulate them, making them resonate through a creative process born at the moment of the first encounter between the coryphaeus, Martinelli, and that initially undifferentiated group of young people, who, in that shared moment of working together, embody "the world" – indeed, "the universe". That gathering of people – of "masks" – each with their own world, individual and unrepeatable, rich with infinite nuances, boiling desires, conflicting emotions, a collective of bodies echoing distances, a tangle of voices inherited from the past and ready to engage in dialogue in the present (Treu 2022).

A dialogue that begins with silence and listening, with a commitment that is mutual and voluntary, sealed from the very first moment, in that "farsi luogo" (becoming a place), in that becoming a CIRCLE: "the form which we have shaped over millennia and which still shapes us" (Martinelli 2023).

At the centre of this circle lies its pivot – mobile, alert, in motion and listening. At the very centre of this pivot is its coryphaeus – Martinelli – the messenger of Dionysus, with his techniques, the tools of a knowledge in continuous evolution, made of poetry, song, and movement. He begins to play, and with his tools, he activates energy aimed at rediscovering that mysterious, almost alchemical, balance between word and sound, narrative and music, through which, via the joyful sacredness of play that generates fire, the weaving of a polyphonic narrative and a performative presence made of gesture, voice, and thought takes shape.

Aristophanes's comedies have thus become a key text for Martinelli, a means of 'playing' with students in the workshops. This is not an archaeological or literary recovery of the ancient text to try to restore what has been lost. That kind of approach would only create innocuous and useless historical reconstructions. It would foster 'decay', as Frulovisi warned centuries ago, emphasising the role of youth as a conduit between generations, connecting with the public and thus with the community and the *polis*. Dionysus, Martinelli reminds us, is not a subject for philologists. Dionysus evokes and generates energy, grace, and connection – between actors, the "technicians of

[39] Martinelli *et al.* 2004, 12. The phrase also appears under the entry "Historia Universalis" in *Noboalfabeto. 21 lettere per la non-scuola*, a collection of twenty-one dogmas corresponding to the 21 letters of the Italian alphabet, written by Martinelli and Montanari in 2001a and 2001b. This work was conceived to preserve the spirit in which the "non-scuola" experience was born.

Dionysus", as the Greeks called them, and the spectators:

> [Dionysus] is the god who presides over the origins of Western theatre; he is not merely the "precursor" of the most archaic rites but the transformed figure, the Aristophanic clown, the Holy Dionysus as he came to be called in the villages of Christianized Greece: we still call him this, knowing he has a thousand names, elusive. What has always fascinated us about Dionysus is his anarchic quality, his turbulent, wild, 'foreign' irruption into the norms and peaceful life of society. Children and animals, adolescents and the marginalized embody him naturally. Every performance is an adventure, a process of making and unmaking, under his banner. He appears in the world by many names: in Brazil, they call him *axè*; in Bali, *tasku* (literally, 'the place that receives light'); in Japan, *iki iki*, 'the radiant one'; in Senegal, he takes form in the field of forces created by the griot-narrator or in the dance circle called *sabàr*, where all are simultaneously spectators and actors, anyone can enter the center of the circle because the circle itself is the stage, the place of celebration, the space for bodies in ecstasy. (Martinelli 2023, 23; translation ours)

Dionysus is a key term in the language of Martinelli's work, in the "non-scuola", and in the Teatro delle Albe, alongside the concept of *messa in vita* ("bringing to life"), which describes "an eruption of human beings, citizens, in creative tension with the language of art" (2021, 35). This is the fiery connection between young adults and the classics, starting from the "circle" and bringing life to the stage, creating turmoil in the individual actor and the spectator. The spectator ceases to be a mere observer and becomes a knowledgeable participant, capable of recognising part of themselves in this act of bringing to life. The audience, the citizens, thus join the action of the chorus in and for the polis, encouraged to "devour", as Poliziano urged his audience, "whole, like pills or medicines", these verses renewed through the bodies, voices, and actions of young adults.

It is from the circle and its transformation into a space that "our action" has taken shape, energy, thought, and alchemical "fire", transfiguring what is undifferentiated – each time different in the various stages of "our" projects – into a CHORUS. A chorus led by the choragus Martinelli, with the collaboration of dramaturg Giovanna Di Martino, and which, as is only natural, opened itself to the city, with an invitation for shared participation in the work of *messa in vita*: a way of making theatre between art and life that is both choral and collective.

In 2022-2023, our journey began with Aristophanes's *Plutus* and scenes from sixteenth-century adaptations: *Commedia di Iustitia* by Bonini (1513), discussed earlier in this essay; *Hey for Honesty, Down with Knavery* by Thomas Randolph with additions by a certain F.J. (1651), another highly politicised reworking of *Plutus*; and finally, *The World's Idol, Plutus: A*

Comedy by H.H.B. (possibly H.H. Burnell, 1659), which accompanies his Aristophanes with a discourse that openly denounces some of the political and religious issues of its time (Di Martino in this issue). The final script was a mosaic of many fragments, created across two workshops, in Parma (October 10-14, 2022) and London (February 20-24, 2023), with participation of 10 university students (5 from UCL and 5 from UNPR), alongside secondary students from each host city, supported by the W.I.D.E. (Widening International Didactics and Education) program. The project continued in Parma in fall 2023 with Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, once again under the guidance of Marco Martinelli and Giovanna Di Martino. This *Lysistrata* "in cinque lingue" (in five languages")[40] transformed a group of 40 students from 7 universities across 5 countries into a CHORUS: students came from France (Centre d'Études Supérieures de la Renaissance [CESR]-Université de Tours, Paris Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris Nanterre, Paris 13 Nord), the Netherlands (University of Groningen), the Czech Republic (University of Olomouc), the United Kingdom (University College London), and Italy (University of Parma). Realised as part of the Erasmus BIP (Blended Intensive Program), this project took the form of an International Fall School. It brought together Italian and foreign scholars from diverse disciplines, as well as archivists and theatre artists, who led interdisciplinary seminars and workshops on reviving classical works in the performing arts.

The first chapter of this ongoing project concluded with Aristophanes's *Peace* in the fall of 2024 in London, at Chickenshed Theatre, an inclusive space in North London known for working with people with disabilities and special needs, open to all who wish to join in its theatre, art, music, and dance projects. A group of 12 university students (10 from the University of Parma in WIDE 2024 mobility, and 2 from the University of Bristol) collaborated with about 30 young people from the Chickenshed Theatre, guided once again by Martinelli as choragus, along with dramaturg Di Martino and UBU-awarded actress Ermanna Montanari, Martinelli's artistic and life partner. *Aristophanes at Chickenshed* marked a natural extension of this productive partnership between the University of Parma, UCL, and the Teatro delle Albe/Ravenna Teatro. This three-year project offered an immersive journey through Aristophanes' theatre, dramaturgy, performance practices, and the reimagining of ancient drama as a living text that renews itself each time through fragments of humanity – each from different backgrounds, cultures, languages, and daily lives—who, guided by our choragus, come together in the circle, enacting their transformative act to turn the undifferentiated into a CHORUS.

[40] This was the title of 'our' Lysistrata according an article appeared on the *Gazzetta di Parma* (15 October 2023).

Through these workshops in Parma and London, a diverse international network emerged, strongly rooted in each local context, engaging other institutions, theatres, archives, and secondary schools. Our format – international and local at once, intersecting disciplines and bridging theoretical and practical work – arose from the need to create tangible conditions for sharing methods and theories to study and reinvent the classics, rewriting or bringing them to life within society, across time, and today.

In bringing the classics to life, the meaning and function of pedagogical practices are once again placed at the centre, leading the youth to actively engage in dialogue with an author who lived thousands of years ago, and thus with history. Through this interaction, they manage to act in the present, reactivating ancient stories with the thoughts and urgencies of contemporary life, in a powerful mechanism of reinterpretation through a kind of agency that is deep rooted in ancient drama itself. Just as the adolescent Aristophanes did in his early works and, as an adult, in his later endeavours, today's adolescents and college students shout, dance, sing, and take a stand on the injustices and values of society, faithfully renewing the tradition, in an act that is at once translation and betrayal.

It is in this process of *messa in vita* that Martinelli's theatre finds its civic and political dimension (whereby 'political' is understood in the classical and humanistic sense of 'relevant to the *polis*'). This dimension is the same that defines "our action" in research and pedagogy. This action, which we intend to continue under the guidance of choragus Martinelli, envisions new collaborations, synergies, and shared projects with our students, as we look toward new texts, encounters, and fragments of humanity with which to ignite a new CHORUS. This is an action within and beyond the academy and university classrooms – a political and civic act, even more than a pedagogical one, grounded in the dynamic exchange between research and teaching, and entailing an intentional betrayal of the tradition to revive its essence. In doing so, we renew its original force, engaging in dialogue with the *polis*.

> Now you stand bare and unarmed at the center of the circle, the guide;
> it is up to you to light the fire. You are the spark.
> So that the undifferentiated may be transformed into Chorus.
> (Martinelli 2021; translation ours)

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