

From the School to the Educating Community: Practices of Social Theatre in Italy as a New Form of Activism

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ABSTRACT

Interactions between political activism and performative practices are historically numerous in Italy but, recently, they appear somehow institutionalised. In this scenario, some social theatre initiatives, combining arts with care, education and social development, might constitute a new outlet for activism. After a brief introduction on social theatre, this paper seeks to establish the quality of its civic and political meaning through the analysis of two recent cases: the Franco Agostino Teatro Festival in Crema (Milan) and the Monteverlino “school without boundaries” in Milan, different instances of performative practices promoting forms of active involvement of the local community in changes of curriculum, education system and community identity.

Children, parents, teachers, staff, common citizens, social workers and local cultural activists participate as actors, authors and audience to theatrical and performative events and workshops, producing new

socio-cultural resources to be employed in local issues.

A new “educating community” might be emerging, able to reflect upon itself, devise new scenarios, build new relationships and transform people’s behaviours, starting within the school walls but spilling out into the community.

Even if this might not yet be indubitably identified as activism, here theatrical and performative experiences are becoming direct social action and a spur for local educational policies.

Italy can boast two quite spectacular examples of commingling between theatre and political activism. The first is Dario Fo, 1997 Nobel Prize for Literature, whose theatre was closely linked to political movements and protest from students, workers and the underclass in general during the 1970s and 1980s (Fo, 1973 and 1990; Meldolesi, 1978; Maceri, 1998; Behan, 2000). The second is the comedian-turned-politician Beppe Grillo who, after a television and theatre career, founded and led the Five Star Movement, the majority party in the last two general elections, currently in a coalition government with the right-wing Lega party (Ponte di Pino, 2014; Tarchi, 2015; Bernardi, 2015 and 2017).

It is clear therefore that the interactions between political activism and performative practices are so deeply rooted and variegated that it would be difficult to summarise them exhaustively here. For the purpose of this paper, it will suffice to mention three of its most relevant recent occurrences, describing the state of the art of experiences of activism that, originating from real life problems, use direct participation of common people to performative practices as one of their strengths.

The first is the on-going protest against the environmental impact of the TAV, the high-speed train connecting Turin in Piedmont and Lyon in France, under construction in Val di Susa (Caruso, 2010; Algostino, 2011). Here, performative actions, realised by artists and local people alike, support more usual forms of civic mobilisation.¹ In a totally different league are the theatrical and performative events routinely organised by the Libera Association Against the Mafias,² with the clear purpose of awakening consciences and commemorating past atrocities, in order to

¹ For example, view an [arts blog here](#) or a [Sky News report here](#), retrieved October 30, 2018.

² [Libera Association’s website](#), retrieved October 30, 2018.

express dissent, reinforce solidarity and educate to the fight against the mafias both locally and nationally (Bisicchia, 2011). And lastly, there are numerous performative events against femicides and violence towards women, which have established the use of artistic practices like flash mobs and installations in public spaces during major protest actions or in accordance with worldwide movements like One Billion Rising.³ These experiences may differ for objectives, involvement of citizens, roots in their territories, and type of performative practice chosen. What they have in common is, however, the value given to the end product of the performative process (be it murals, shows, or flash mobs).

To bring this introductory excursus to a close, a recent development of political theatre in the strict sense should be mentioned, that is, its steady institutionalisation, after the great resonance it had between the 1960s and the 1980s. This is the case, for example, of the satirical political theatre as expressed by the likes of Beppe Grillo, Sabrina Guffanti, Daniele Luttazzi and Paolo Rossi, which lends itself to:

An uncritical, gastronomical, hollow and conformist laugh, good as a weapon of the fittest against the weak, and so including a perfect reversal of the Rabelaisian comic, as well as of any true satire, which in its purest sense is always against the mighty, it is the device that the weak can use against the strong. (De Marinis, 2013)

The same trend appears to apply also to the narrative theatre, the civil theatre and the theatre of memory, equally turned into established forms, devoid of most of their original subversive and challenging power (Baliani, 2010).

From time to time, a teatrologist, more inclined perhaps to wishful thinking than to empirical observation, might presume to be discovering some native occurrence of a new Italian season of political theatre (Casi & Di Gioia, 2012, p. 15-32), laboriously emerging in the era of post-politics, post-truth and post-reality politics. However, more to the point is perhaps Ponte di Pino's remark (1996, p. 162-165 and 2003, p. 17-18), that the gradual appearance of social theatre at the end of the 1990s might be the new front where the political force of contemporary theatre would find its outlet.

³ For example, [a news article on Panorama.it](#); [another on Pratosfera.com](#); [an article on La Repubblica, Genova](#); [and another on Ansa](#), retrieved October 30, 2018.

To confirm this view, while the recognised forms of political theatricality were showing the first signs of crisis, there has been a wide spreading of social theatre and performances, acting on the social and cultural fields and producing civic changes, promoting community ties, improving people's life conditions. One can therefore suppose that contemporary social theatre might be taking on some of the civil and political responsibilities that used to belong to activist movements.

SOCIAL THEATRE

In Italy, great political and social impetus was given to the theatre during the 1960s and the 1970s. Revolutionary theatrical movements sought to go beyond its narrow institutional confines: during the 1960s, this was expressed through the experiences of the New Italian Theatre and the theatrical animation (De Marinis, 1987; Margiotta, 2013; Fiaschini, 2016), and in the 1970s through the theatre of grassroots groups, Eugenio Barba's Third Theatre (De Marinis, 1983; Barba, 1985), the spread of psychodrama (Schützenberger, 1970; Lemoine, & Lemoine, 1972), and the ubiquitous and prolific presence of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1977). All these movements underlined the social and political identity of the theatre, proposing and fostering innovative ways to do it. At the end of this revolutionary period, the theatrical movements were either institutionalised or marginalised.

Many new theatres were built everywhere, under the direction of civil servants who were keen to promote theatre productions to assist the cultural development of the area. These theatres were initially meant to be a public service for the local community, but as time went by, they lost the connection with the real needs of the local people and their cultural and popular resources (De Marinis, 1983 and 2010; Taviani, 1997).

This turning point transformed the majority of the Italian theatrical production into an experience where representations prevailed on performances and collective creative processes, professionals overruled amateurs and free participation, closed forms of communication replaced open ones and vision supplanted action. If during the 1960s and the 1970s theatre and performance had attempted to be active experiences for the relational, symbolic, imaginary, political self-development of the communities, as they were a cultural rite of social construction (Pasolini, 1968; Bernardi, 2004), then in the 1980s and

1990s they were predominantly reduced to promoting an aesthetical community of passive consumers of cultural products (Bauman, 2001).

In this scenario, the practices of social theatre emerging on the Italian socio-cultural scene during the 1980s ignored the theatrical system without seeking to change it, while also abandoning any political commitment and contestation. The first experiences were conducted in contexts marked by hardship and disadvantage such as prisons, mental hospitals, centres for the disabled, with the clear purpose of improving the living conditions of the people, groups and communities through their direct participation to the performing arts as actors, authors and spectators.

These theatrical practices, often facilitated by experienced trainers, combined the usual artistic objectives with care, education and social development: a phenomenon firstly defined “social theatre” by Bernardi (1998), a binomial entered into common use and recognised internationally (Schechner & Thompson, 2004a).

Experiences of social theatre spread rapidly in different social and cultural environments (Conte et al., 2003) and are now commonplace. For example, a survey in Milan in 2016 counted more than 60 groups, cultural companies and associations engaged in social theatre in a variety of contexts, from hospitals to prisons, schools of all levels, businesses, local services for the elderly and the disabled, canteens and shelters for people in serious conditions of poverty and homelessness and centres for immigrants and refugees.

Social theatre is now belatedly receiving public and academic recognition of its specific socio-developmental resources. Only in recent years research and studies⁴ are being undertaken in support of on-going projects, with training courses for specialised operators/facilitators with specific job profiles, and the identification of processes and criteria of evaluation.

⁴ See for example *Performare il sociale. Formazione, cura e inclusione sociale attraverso il teatro*, a national research project currently underway involving the Italian universities of Turin, Milan, Rome, Pavia, Genoa funded by the MIUR Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research.

BRIEF REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS

From the end of the 1960s and all through the 1970s, the Italian school system was in great turmoil. Crises were triggered by the social and cultural transformation produced by massive industrialisation processes, including those of the cultural production, and by mass schooling. These changes had a radical effect on the traditional school and on the forms of cultural transmission of the past, and radically undermined the social systems of the community (Cavallera, 2013). All these conditions short-circuited with the theatrical protest and renewal, so that theatrical animation (Rostagno, 1980; Puppa, 2001) became one of the most interesting “dilatations” (Scabia, 1973, p. 50) of the theatre and, at the same time, a way to dispose of theatrical tradition and experiment with new answers to some social issues. Theatrical animation in schools had three distinctive features: research and artistic innovation; a community approach (the school seen an active subject in, of and for local communities), and a political intention to change the social and school system.

At the end of the 1970s, when the innovative revolution collapsed and was reabsorbed, the theatrical animation gradually lost its identity, flowing back into mainstream youth theatre. This form of theatre dedicates particular care to the production of quality shows for children and young adults and it is generally able to keep up the dialogue with its audience and respond to its needs. In the meantime, some groups, often organised in cooperative societies,⁵ continued to propose theatre workshops for students and training courses for teachers in schools (Gagliardi, 1991; Bernardi & Cuminetti, 1998). In particular, the experience of the theatrical laboratory was used in schools to satisfy the main aims of teaching, both as an active way of learning and as a support for the achievement of wider educational objectives – e.g. acquisition of social and relational skills, health education – within the framework of programs introduced to address youth problems, such as the “Youth Project” launched in 1988 by a special parliamentary committee.⁶

These two forms were consolidated in the following years and,

⁵ See an article on the Italian cooperative movement on [the Italian Documentation Centre website](#), retrieved October 30, 2018.

⁶ *Progetto giovani: identità e solidarietà nel vissuto giovanile*, Roma, Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 1992.

during the 1990s, the institutionalisation process of the theatre in schools produced a series of agreements between the Ministry of Education, the Undersecretariat of State, the Italian Theatrical Authority and the universities (in 1995, in 1997 and in 2004), which strengthened a trend (Perissinotto, 2001) marked by the loss of its community approach and also of its political intention, and its closure in the theatrical show system and in the school education system (Fiaschini, 2014). This is confirmed by the “Strategic guidelines for the application of theatrical activities in education,” a document published by the MIUR (Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research) in 2016 following the promulgation of the so called “The Good School” Law 13 July 2015 n. 107, focused exclusively on a school closed to the wider community, which is in turn relegated to the role of mere financial, organisational and promotional partner.⁷

TWO CASES WHERE PERFORMATIVE PRACTICES PROMOTED FORMS OF ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Within this framework, one can move on to analyse the more recent trends of social theatre and performance in schools, and how they appear to have created new forms of community engagement and civil responsibility. Chosen among the many important theatrical and performative experiences meant to encourage an active participation of local communities in school educational processes and to promote schools as a driving force of civil participation in a territory (of which there are exemplary projects in Lodi, Cremona and Mantova), I present two field studies that integrate a direct and almost ethnographic observation of events with their theoretical and methodological reconsideration.

To fully understand these examples, it is necessary to explain that in Italy the vast majority of school theatrical activities is still rather informally presented, because theatre has only recently been included in the national curriculum. Only in 2015 “The Good School” legislation claimed, despite the above-mentioned limitations, the important role played by arts and theatre in the curriculum, handing out specific norms to reorganise and recognise these activities.⁸

⁷ [View the document here](#), retrieved October 30, 2018.

⁸ [View the document here](#), retrieved October 30, 2018.

The first field study is the Franco Agostino Teatro Festival in the town of Crema, near Milan, founded in 1999 (Carpani et al., 2018). At first, it presented the typical features just explained: theatrical labs were organised in schools during the school year and a final festival took place in the town theatre, where the shows created by the lab groups were performed. All the activities took place within the closed boundaries of the school and theatre.⁹ In 2003, the festival organising committee, composed by volunteers, decided to open up the project to the town, aiming to involve the families of the schoolchildren along with public and private institutions and to build active citizenship and community engagement.

To achieve this, it was necessary to invest time, find new ideas, build a socio-relational network and a new organisation of the whole festival process, engaging different subjects—individuals, families, institutions, associations, theatre companies and so on—to co-project and co-fulfil the festival from its new beginning. To go beyond the old model confined in the school and theatre, the new enlarged committee devised and set up a collective event, more ritual than theatrical, open to the town's participation with different languages and performative acts. From then on, everyone was involved as actor, author and spectator throughout the event, without strict distinctions, and everybody could provide a creative contribution to feed the collective identity. The events—performances by young people, exhibits, expositions, parades, artistic installations, concerts and conferences—are all connected to a theme chosen every year among relevant socio-cultural local or global topics, and spread in the local context, hosted in non-theatrical spaces in the town: courtyards, streets, squares, parks, public buildings. Noteworthy examples include: “Which way do you go to school?” on the town-school-family relationship; “The school is open to everyone. Adults, children and the Constitution,” based on Article 34 of the Constitution of the Italian Republic; “We all fall down! Down with global warming!” on environmental good practices; “I trust you!” on the virtues of self-esteem and trust; and finally “Yummy! Sink your teeth into theatre!” on nourishment for body and soul.

In particular, the children's theatrical parade, invading the streets with masques and ephemeral stages accompanied by the local marching band, transforms the town into a “possible world where the

⁹ For a detailed description of the festival activities, see [the official website](#), retrieved October 30, 2018.

voice of the children combines with the voice of the parents and adults in a powerful invocation for change, for a better life and a more active, shared citizenship” (Fiaschini, 2014, p. 144). This is evidence of a long process of transformation from festival events into cultural and civil rights so powerful as to feed the relational heritage of the community and put the education and growth of the young back at the centre of the local political agenda.

The second field case is the Montevelino “School without boundary,”¹⁰ a small state multi-ethnic pre-school in Milan. Here, theatrical activities such as dramatisation and symbolic play are commonly used in teaching; parties and feasts are organised for Christmas, Carnival, Ramadan and at the end of the school year, while once a year a professional theatre performance is hosted.

Given the complexity of its neighbourhood, the school has designed, with qualified practitioners, a social theatre approach aimed at implementing ludic, dramaturgical and mimetic practices in order to foster the integrated development of the children (Innocenti Malini & Gentile, 2016), at the promotion of the intercultural and intergenerational community as well as at the educators’ theatrical training. These three objectives are achievable through participation in the theatrical experience (consisting of labs, performances and performative feasts), where both adults and children can be actors as well as authors. In particular, the parents’ participation has been growing progressively over the years. Initially, parents attended the shows as audience. Occasionally, they helped the feast organisers or took in the food and sweets for the breaks. In 2013 the activities of the lab began to interact more closely with the ordinary school time, building a ‘performative bridge’ between school and families, who were curious and engaged by the creative artefacts (installations, plays, choruses) made by their children assisted by educators and theatrical practitioners.

The connection was loose and hesitant to begin with, the parents were invited to participate in one specific theatrical-lab that, through expressive and theatrical work, led the group to compose symbolic scenic actions in which different cultural identities found opportunities for mutual recognition. The lab produced a show made by the parents for the children, other adults and parents, within the school feast. Later, this integration triggered the most recent evolution: the parents have been

¹⁰ See [Alchemilla Lab](#), retrieved October 30, 2018.

producing real performative animations in every class during ordinary school time. Symbolic and performative practices (for example, the making of bread, singing) have been selected transversally among different cultures and played in their ethnic variations. The performative outputs of the labs have formed the backbone of the dramaturgy of the final festival that opened the intra-school intercultural process to the whole neighbourhood, thanks to a great visual and emotional impact. The performative process with its lab and festival has contributed to promoting social integration and to developing educational and cultural policies shared by the school community (Gentile, 2016).

THE POTENTIALS OF SOCIAL THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE IN BUILDING AN EDUCATING COMMUNITY: A NEW FORM OF ACTIVISM

The most innovative aspects of the two cases analysed are the peculiarity of the performative practices used during the creative process and the active participation that they have generated. They present some typical theatrical practices (e.g. exhibition, dramatisation), and some performative and festive practices (e.g. baking, parade, procession), which are introduced into contexts, such as schools and communities, characterised by their own performances. The interaction between these different types of performance transforms the ordinary experience but also the extraordinary and festive one (Schechner & Thompson, 2004b; Colombo & Innocenti Malini, 2017). A performative innovation realised in an active and collective way stimulates community involvement and therefore the performance becomes the field where people can participate, go beyond their limits, discuss, imagine, project and improve the community's life. When some people, a group or an entire community explore their authorship and their power of acting, the theatrical and performative effects feed the collective symbolic creation of the social body. It is apparent that the propulsive thrust of these practices does not develop only in the system of the arts, but also, and above all, in that of social relationships: thus, the dimension of the product is always subordinate to the dimension of the process and the aesthetic value of the experience is closely connected to its value in terms of social change. When all this happens, the social theatre and performance activities empower an "educating community." It is a community that thanks to the contribution of everyone, from the

youngest to the oldest, in terms of authorship and actorality, takes charge of its responsibility in the growth and education of its own members. In this process, social theatre could well become a new, albeit unusual, form of activism.

This takes Ponte di Pino's intuition, focused primarily on the performance as an opportunity for marginalised people to gain visibility and as the occasion for the community to gather, thus seeing this as the political outcome of social theatre (Ponte di Pino, 1996 and 2003), one step further. The two examples described have highlighted experiences that have had an impact on local policies, both at the level of the participative processes of the inhabitants and at the level of the performative products of the events.

These public events were not planned to urge the institutions to act and solve problems. It was the people themselves who, through performative processes, entered into significant and collaborative relationships, shared resources and issues, and devised independent creative and collective solutions for their local problems. For instance, a common problem encountered by parents of small children is the after school pick-up, as the school day in Italy is usually short (mostly mornings only). Building on the new relationships forged during the workshops and theatrical and performative feasts, some stay-at-home mothers casually volunteered to support working parents, often sharing the charge, and breaking down prejudices.¹¹ Theatrical and performative practices produced social actions that truly changed the daily lives of the context instead of being simply a way to express people's dissatisfaction. This bottom-up change connects the different actors of the community and the social and symbolic dimensions. It is a transformation that increasingly affects also local policies, so much so that local politicians and administrators recognise its decisive efficacy and support both its process and the resulting innovation.

In this light, what happened in the Montevelino school is particularly interesting.¹² The theatre and social performance activities were introduced to satisfy the need for intercultural inclusion, as the school as

¹¹ Elisa Rota, social theatre facilitator in the Montevelino project, personal communication, June 3, 2018.

¹² The following information and interviews are taken from the document "Spring section and nursery school 'Montevelino': the building of a community school", presented by the headteacher and team to the Central Direction for Education and Instruction, Children Services Sector of the municipality of Milan.

well as the territory were being put under stress by difficult situations of cohabitation of people of different ethnic origin. These activities did not use the theatrical medium to express their demands or protests, nor did they fall prey of the ideological “fear of the stranger” which is common in mainstream media. Quite the opposite: they became the cradle of a new dialogue between families, teachers, children and school staff, leading to the creation and realisation of intercultural workshops for the children during school hours, and then of a series of feasts and events open to the community, based on their outcomes.

These activities had an important effect on the relationship between parents and educators, which has developed in the direction of increased cooperation and sharing of the educational processes: as one mother puts it, “after the initial perplexity and indecision, the fact of being in a shared space with other mothers and teachers was a special moment”; while another said that it was important “to see the teachers in plain clothes, without their ‘teaching hat’, bridging the gap towards the parents.”

The Montevelino school is changing under the thrust of these performative processes. The daily practices of reception of the children have been redesigned with an eye to different languages and forms of expression, especially non-verbal and gestural ones. The educators invest more time in relationships, for example “welcoming the children and parents into the classroom is a rule transformed into habitual and spontaneous practice” as one teacher said, and continued:

We have learnt to hug a lot from our Arab mums, who usually hug each other and praise the Lord during Ramadan. This happens even when they arrive late, giving us the opportunity to devise new strategies to explain the school and city rules to them. They give us food and gifts from their home countries, expressing the wish to be recognised as bearers of significance and knowledge.

It is a true performative exchange which becomes a practice of encounter and reciprocal inclusion, multiplying for everyone the opportunities to exchange tales and express themselves. In this subtle, ordinary and shared way, theatrical and performative activities are affecting the local prevailing symbolic system and its social representations.

The year 2015 for instance, was celebrated as “A year as good as

bread” in the Montevelino school and in its neighbourhood, echoing the theme of the Expo Milan 2015 “Feeding the planet.” All the school activities revolved around bread, seen as a common reference at the same time tangible and symbolic, an opportunity for workshops where different recipes and tales were exchanged, different breads prepared, different flavours experienced. The local community was invited to join in and share multi-ethnic songs and music, choirs and orchestras, shows and feasts.

In 2016 the Montevelino school began to perceive itself as a “community school” and plan accordingly, involving children, parents and local counterparts (associations, libraries, public services, trades) as authors and actors of its educational activities, creating the preconditions necessary to “fulfil the aims of the project by revealing hidden resources and abilities, in order to enrich the life of the community. To build up a common narration in which each one can feel not only actor but also author,” as described by the Montevelino headteacher. A community dramaturgy which has spread to local policies: after four years of experimentation, the municipality of Milan has decided to extend the model of community school born out of the Montevelino experience to other schools of the district, using it as a pilot for educational policies towards inclusion.

In conclusion, both experiences, despite some peculiarities, introduce an important innovation, beyond confirming the importance of the esthetical performative dimension in building and maintaining social relationships (Simmel 1896; Durkheim, 1912; Mukařovský & Corduas, 1971; Bourriaud, 2001). The fact that these social theatre processes are closely related to the social environment that produces them and to which they address themselves, constitutes an interesting performative innovation. This, however, does not imply or require the invention, apparent or otherwise, of new forms of representation of the dynamics of power existing in their context (Wolff, 1993; Born, 2010; Bourdieu, 1979 and 1997). What happens here is quite different: despite the fact that their meaning is linked to the interaction among performative practice, actors and spectators in a specific moment of a peculiar social process, they have managed to generate a form of “pragmatic reflexivity” (Turner, 1982, p. 100) through the exchange among different dimensions of human experience giving origin to a sort of “creative democratisation.” “The group or community does not merely ‘flow’ in

unison at these performances, but, more actively, tries to understand itself in order to change itself ” (Turner, 1982, p. 101).

For this reason, the process does not end with the event, the performance, the theatre lab or feast it was born out of. The innovations, imaginations, relationships created and experienced during the performative and theatrical process have developed year after year, have imbued everyday life and induced real change, transforming rules, roles and habits in schools as much as in the community interactions, producing an exercise of direct democracy in the definition of local policies.

Can this be clearly identified as a new form of activism? One cannot be sure, yet. What has been ascertained, however, is that direct performative participation has been the driving force in the co-creation of educational policies and that a new way in which theatre and performance mobilise relationships, representations and political actions has emerged.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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