The Theater of Narration

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Chapter 3

A Language of One’s Own

The commedia dell’arte was the theater of skill (arte as in “artisanal”) because in addition to their work onstage, the performers also invented their skits, directed themselves, and generally approached their shows as products to trade. They did not separate themselves into actors, writers, directors, and managers but were capable in all these roles, which resulted in having more control and freedom in both how or what story they told, and for whom. In fact, these performers had a sophisticated economic understanding of their trade as a market product, cutting out the middleperson (customarily the court), and selling their “commodities” independently. While there were also plenty of playwrights who rose to fame who did not act, including the fifteenth-century Roman cardinal Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena or the Florentine most famous for his political theory, Niccolò Machiavelli, or even the eighteenth-century feuding Venetians Carlo Goldoni and Carlo Gozzi, there were many more itinerant troupes of artisans whose work was grounded in a particularly physical mode of performance that led them to craft their stories. (Franca Rame came from such a family of itinerant performers.) They might have written outlines, but they never wrote complete scripts. In recognizing the theater of narration in this lineage, it becomes clear that narrators have reclaimed the artisanship of drama by assuming more ownership in its creation.

Inherent in such autonomy is an experimentalism that only today seems irreverent, since postwar theater in Italy—unlike in France, Germany, and the UK—had become largely director-led. This return to a holistic mode of creation allows for, and even favors, a new dramaturgical language. Dialect or regional diction; a restrained physical language that nods to classical forms of oratory; and cultural jargon that infuses the practice with impegno are primary characteristics of that language in the theater of narration. These attributes have become some of the most original, poignant, and direct expressions of the practice’s ingenuity, leading to an atmosphere of inclusivity where people from many walks of life converge in the semipublic sphere of the theater. Ironically, it is these diverse distinctions in their performances—the flavors of the Venetian, Piedmontese, or Sicilian countryside—that create
connections not only to their audiences through a sense of community, but also among the narrators themselves in stylistic unity.

There is a long history of local languages in Italian theater since the Renaissance, particularly in Venice and Naples, two twin capitals of powerhouse regions before the unification. In addition to preserving regional traditions within regional languages, the popular and influential literary aesthetic of verismo and its inherent argument for realism and authenticity encouraged the continuance of dialect through unification and into the twentieth century. In addition to cultural preservation, one key insight that dialect in theater offers is its ability to highlight cultural hierarchies, a theme that is frequently prevalent in the theater of narration. Marvin Carlson stresses that the dynamics of the inferior/superior binary that the dialect/standard language ratio creates ultimately provides an opportunity for the introduction of a rich heteroglossia onstage.

As will become evident in an analysis of dialect in Davide Enia’s Mio padre non ha mai avuto un cane (2010; My Father Never Had a Dog) and Saverio La Ruina’s La borto (2009; The Abortion), regional tongues enable the expression of multiple viewpoints, particularly those that are rarely taken seriously, if heard at all. More than that, its use highlights the general absence from mainstream political discourse of certain populations, such as the Sicilians who live with the terror of the Mafia’s constant presence, as Enia depicts, and poor women in the rural southern province of Calabria, who endure continuing repression, as La Ruina illustrates.

One of the most distinct traits of the theater of narration is the laconic physicality of the solitary actor. Whether sitting in a chair, standing at a podium, or simply downstage center, the narrator directly addresses the audience. This physical mode of presentation most immediately recalls classical oratory, and its modern-day incarnations through lawyers before a court, politicians before constituents, or professors before students. Surprisingly, an analysis of Ciceronian rhetorical tradition reveals a thorough system of historical consideration, argumentation, and narrative, a method that turns out to have much in common with the theater of narration and offers insight into one of the practice’s hallmarks: its terse physical expression. As is common with actors, some narrators also plan each gesture with incredible exactness and specific intentions in mind. An analysis of orality, or the relationship between performance and text, in consideration with Marco Paolini’s Il racconto del Vajont, demonstrates the connection to classical oratory, and how this rediscovered dramaturgical mode successfully captures the attention of modern publics.

Finally, one way the theater of narration endeavors to take a political stance is through diction that evokes language calling for action. This chapter ends not with a production from the 1970s, but with one that fundamentally echoes the 1970s through its rhetoric, imbued with an antiestablishment spirit. Celestini’s fantastic rendering of the lives and experiences of temporary employees on short-term contracts in Appunti per un film sulla lotta di
 classe (2007; Notes for a Film on Class Struggle) shows how even a second-
generation narrator draws on the zeitgeist of the 1970s.

Celestini’s piece also demonstrates the elasticity of the theater of narration
in terms of textual form. Published scripts read as prose or long-form
poetry. Rarely do these texts read as traditional or even experimental scripts
envisioned for performance; rather, they usually read as something between
a manifesto, a public speech, and a novella. Celestini has literally turned his
notes for an actual film project into a theatrical event. Linguist Giovanni
Nencioni’s scholarship on the gradations of written to staged text helps to
demonstrate how the embodied act of performance can enhance the politi-
cal intent of the project. The written form ultimately affects orality: on the
page, the works read fluently, and one would not necessarily presume they
are intended to be spoken. Thus, when the narrators do utter their words,
the event itself produces a radical nuance. The dramaturgical languages that
comprise the theater of narration rely on previous methods of verbal and
physical expression, while the practice also invents its own. Narrators work
outside the establishment, enabling them to communicate with groups of
people who might not typically experience cultural expressions in intimate
and inspiring ways.

The Audacity and Intimacy of Dialect

As the linguist Hermann Haller has noted, the musicality and expression-
istic quality of Italian already makes it a strong candidate for the theater.
Plays in dialect have a mimetic superiority greater than that of prose or
poetry, enabling them to historically represent both the speech forms of local
populations and the affected and versatile interlanguages of noble classes. 5
When Marvin Carlson discusses both Dario Fo and the celebrated twentieth-
century Neopolitan Eduardo De Filippo, he identifies how Italian dramatists
manipulate the linguistic flexibility of Italian so that it suits a specific histori-
cal moment as much as it might also reflect a social and artistic program or
status. 6 Haller, meanwhile, specifies that the dialect play has the potential
to be “an anthropological treasure trove of proverbs, idioms, local customs,
and regional culture.” 7 Following these observations, the theater of narration
shows how dialect also has the potential to function as a historical docu-
ment itself. When Davide Enia explores how even a single word in dialect
can come to contain the symbolism of an entire national event, and Saverio
La Ruina, whose plays are entirely in dialect, shares ordinary struggles of the
rural South, these narrators demonstrate how the regional diction brings the
subaltern voices of their performances center stage.

The use of dialect is a hallmark of the narrators’ practice. Although it
is an area in which scholars have only paid fleeting attention, several have
acknowledged its importance in Paolini’s work, especially the Bestiario
veneto series (1998; *Venetian Gladiator*) calling the piece a tour of the linguistic heritage of the region.\(^8\) Indeed, the most obvious effect of dialect is its ability to conjure a geographically, and thus culturally, specific location. Paolo Puppa declares Paolini a “Gramscian surveyor of linguistic cultural origins,” emphasizing the political potential of dialect as a popular language.\(^9\) In the theater of narration, as dialect works to enhance regional connections, it clearly contributes to the effort to rethink the national in terms of the local, but more than that, as narrators draw attention to dialect, they imbue those local individuals with the agency and authority that usually accompany an educated standard Italian. Davide Enia and Saverio La Ruina, in particular, foreground its importance with a regional language that is so challenging that when La Ruina published three of his plays in a collection, he included an accompanying translation in standard Italian.

Unsurprisingly, the two artists who most fervently employ dialect are from the South, where dialect theater flourished from the unification of the country in the 1860s until well into the twentieth century.\(^10\) Some might associate dialect with class specificity, but in Italy it mostly concerns region. While the three crowning Tuscan poets—Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio—inaugurated Florentine as the most elite dialect and future base for standard Italian, it also became the butt of jokes for proud literati and intelligentsia of other cities. The royal family of Piedmont, for example, often chose to speak in their dialect rather than in Florentine, especially among themselves, asserting the valor of Piedmont.\(^11\) Such linguistic dexterity also appears among traveling artists. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the *bufoni in tenda* (clowns in traveling tents) from in and around Venice offered a rich multilingualism to accommodate the cosmopolitan city-states where the bufoni performed, pointing to their own learned abilities as much as to their audience’s.\(^12\) Into the twentieth century, dialect declined swiftly first under the nationalist educational imperatives of the liberal republic, then under the fascist state, and finally with the postwar introduction of mass media. In parts of the country where cinemas and household televisions were less ubiquitous, the intimately regional locutions continued. An author choosing to write in such an inaccessible register for the majority of the public takes many risks.

Born and raised in Palermo, the Sicilian Davide Enia completed his university degree in Milan and briefly studied theater under Laura Curino. Though he found much early success writing and performing in the theater of narration, he has also had an especially versatile artistic career. In 2002 he wrote two plays for the famed (and fellow Palermitan) director Emma Dante’s theater company as he devised two of his most popular solo shows, *Italia—Brasile 3 a 2* (2002), and *Maggio ’43* (2004). He performs these two narrative theater pieces almost exclusively in a somewhat accessible Palermo-based Sicilian with its mellifluous rhythms that call to mind the traditional storytelling once popular in the South.\(^13\) Later he turned to crafting novels,
and finally he even wrote the libretto for a production of Mozart’s unfinished opera *The Goose of Cairo* in 2017.

Enia’s *L’abisso* (2018; *The Abyss*) (fig. 8), adapted from his book *Appunti per un naufragio* (2017; *Notes on a Shipwreck*), which he has performed in theaters all across Italy, marks a return to the theater of narration as he explores the crisis of migrants pouring through Sicily against the deeply personal relationships to his father and ill uncle. His poetic story ponders the current Mediterranea, with its deaths and rescues of those migrants who risk their lives journeying across it through his own observations and those of others. Importantly, he incorporates interviews from several Italian rescue workers and doctors who have borne firsthand witness to the dangers of this journey, and even from some of the migrants themselves. Though it would constitute a different project altogether, the voices of the migrants could have been much stronger, even if they are ultimately filtered through Enia both in his writings and onstage. Of the several projects concerning migration or occupation that this book acknowledges (Baliani and Costa’s *Human*; Celestini’s *Radio clandestina*; La Ruina’s *Italianesi*; and Vacis’s *Cuore / Tenebra*), *L’abisso* is the one that most directly and intimately confronts the waves of the several hundred thousand migrants per year crossing the Mediterranean since 2014.¹⁴ It is also the play among that group that is most formally loyal to the theater of narration, emphasizing the form’s great potential to confront this urgent issue. The play and its theme were rewarded in 2019 as the winner

![Fig. 8. Davide Enia in *L’abisso* (Teatro Comunale di Siracusa, Sicily, 2018). Photograph by Sergio Bonuomo. Courtesy of Davide Enia.](image-url)
of the important Hystrio-Twister Prize, a type of people’s choice award in which the public votes for the winner. Its large success leaves room to hope that there will be an increasing amount of theatrical productions that address the narratives of migrants and that the public might hear directly from them about their experiences and perceptions of the situation.

The theme of Enia’s earlier work, Mio padre non ha mai avuto un cane (My Father Never Had a Dog), remains largely in the realm of a national crisis, but one that has certainly garnered international notoriety. Reading a national tragedy against a local and autobiographical lens again involving the relationship to his father, the piece is as much about the audacity and intimacy of language, particularly dialect, as it is about organized crime. In this short volume, Enia recounts his own memories when the Sicilian mafia known as Cosa Nostra assassinated the judge Giovanni Falcone. He, along with fellow judge Paolo Borsellino (killed by the Mafia less than two months later), had gained international recognition for their efforts to fight Cosa Nostra’s financial and political might. Similar to the beginning of Vajont, where Paolini recalls watching his mother listen to news of the disaster on the radio, Enia shares the moments in which both of his parents returned home after having heard the news of Falcone’s slaying. Enia recalls these scenes in various depths of further- and nearer-reaching pasts that relate to this specific incident, but in his descriptions, there is a centrifugal force that casts the entire play in orbit: a resurfacing word in Sicilian dialect, s’asciucò, that operates thematically and historically.

In a poetic opening that returns throughout the piece like a Greek chorus, Enia announces, “The first image is that of a dog that stares. I am the dog. I am watching my father who is a rock that cries.” The only word he remembers his laconic father uttering is s’asciucò. From here, he shares experiences that color their relationship, reminisces on his hometown of Palermo, and recalls one of his youthful infatuations with a local girl. Just as the piece seems to veer away from the ominous tones of its beginning, Enia drops the word again, s’asciucò, and whips his readers back around to this central point. Here, in the middle of the piece, Enia offers an etymology, and it becomes evident that even in the other memories that he shared, the word was always hovering. “From the Latin ex-sucare, a mix of ex, which indicates origin and deprivation, and sucus, the juice, the spirit, the life made liquid.” The abundant imagery of liquids, particularly those that emerge from places where they normally do not exist, like rocks that cry, now takes on a new depth. All the fluid-related verbs that Enia has been employing all along to describe Palermo and its “saturated,” “oozing,” or “soaked” ambience, a city scattered with “deep puddles of blood” from the violence of organized crime, are now connected back to this word.

Continuing, he explains that “exsugere is the act of sucking or drawing out, of extracting to a state of emptiness and aridity.” In western Sicilian (specifically Palermo-based) dialect, he notes, a hard “c” replaces the hard
“g” from *asciugare* (standard Italian) to *asciucare* (in dialect), and the word thereby takes on another meaning, the one that his father invoked in his pale utterance of *s’asciucò* “while he was crumbling.” This second explanation is the key to understanding the other recurring imagery in the text that Enia beckons throughout the piece, which is that of something so dry that it “disintegrates,” “crumbles,” “fractures,” “shatters,” “cracks,” breaks into “shards,” or is “eviscerated.” With these distinct word choices that he subtly disperses around the story, he summons a whisper of *s’asciucò*. Finally, he reveals the full sentence that his father had been trying to voice, “*La mafia s’asciucò a Giovanni Falcone*” (The Mafia *eviscerated* Giovanni Falcone). Masterfully, Enia enables this expression to serve not only as the focal point of the story but also, in his reflective dissemination of its meaning, as the bomb itself that killed Falcone. Capitalizing on the colloquial definition of *s’asciucò* as “to kill,” much of his imagery suggests a state in which both the life, the “juice” (*succo*), is sucked out of someone, in addition to the shattering explosion of an utterly desiccated substance. Enia creates an aural proximity to the events surrounding Falcone’s assassination, in which members of the Mafia spectacularly detonated four hundred kilograms of explosives underneath the highway when Falcone and his escort drove by. Along with Falcone, his wife and three police agents were killed. In Enia’s text, he has created his own explosive device out of *s’asciucò*, constantly released through the repetition of the actual word and its oft-invoked meaning through synonyms.

In Enia’s intentional use of dialect with the story’s subject of Sicily and the Mafia lingers the implicit mourning of the ways the island and its corruption hold the country back. In this text, dialect draws parallels to systems of cultural hierarchy at play in Italy. As Carlson asserts, part of the reason people see dialect as inferior is that they see it as a marker of a subordinate geographical area and social class. Enia uses such presumptions to his advantage. With his thorough explanation of the origins and meaning of *s’asciucò*, Enia presumes an audience that is also outside Sicily. He makes it clear that even while the tragic murder was a national disaster making its way into many Italian households, not least when the funerals were broadcast live across the whole country suspending regular television programs, it was a local act. With his focus on this single expression in dialect, demonstrating how even a lone word can contain the symbolism of an entire national event, Enia reckons with the murders as a Sicilian event. He asserts the importance of Sicily through its dialect, as if to say that the rest of the nation needs to address the region’s hardships too so as not to continue to repeat them.

Similarly, through his courageous loyalty to a challenging local dialect, the Calabrian Saverio La Ruina takes the theater of narration in some new directions, not only in his linguistic choices but also in his attraction to a more monologuist theater of characters instead of narrative, like the later work of Musso. His laconic physical language and the softness of his delivery place
him in a gray territory that nonetheless points to the theater of narration, because even if he rarely speaks out of character, frequently one character narrates their story to the audience as Franca Rame’s characters would (often from a chair or even the stage floor). Literary scholar Angela Albanese has argued that despite the portrayal of a number of complex characters, the most central one that stars in most of his works is the “challenging and harmonious” dialect itself. In his two first major solo-theater and prize-winning successes, Disonorata (2006; The Dishonored) and La borto (2009; The Abortion), he commits to a difficult Calabrian dialect known as Calabro-Lucano, stretching over two different regions and heritages, which for the majority of his audiences, who would not be familiar with the dialect, offers particular delights and demands.

Working mnemonically (and thus triggering oral traditions) as well as rhythmically, La Ruina drives the narrative with repetition, whether of phrases, words, sounds, or melodies, thereby creating a Brechtian experience of his theater, insofar as the dialect attracts yet also estranges. To engage with different layers of comprehension is both mesmerizing and off-putting as the audience slips in and out of the story. He amplifies expressivity with his dialogue, but also distances direct meaning. Rather than having the ability to follow the narrative along its plot, the audience member slowly acclimates to the rhythms, repetitions, and assonances of the language, submitting to a more expressionistic experience of the performance.

In provocative and problematic gender crossing, La Ruina portrays a southern woman in La borto (fig. 9) and Disonorata. Vittoria, the protagonist of La borto, shares a dreamlike spiritual experience she recently had while picking white figs, in which she encounters a discerning and judgmental Jesus. Utterly alone in her existence, she shares her story with the audience, who is as much a presence for her as Jesus is: a presence who is there, if not there, but to whom she can speak. La Ruina’s portrayal is soft and understated as he creates a character that is tired and worn but also sharp, ironic, and strong. Much of the story recounts the physical and psychological oppression that Vittoria has endured as a woman in the rural South, and it is refreshing, even liberating, to lose her gender in La Ruina’s portrayal. He could never know in his body the way a woman lives with the oppression of the incessant predatory male gaze that Vittoria recounts. The audiences will never look at his body onstage the way they might if Vittoria were portrayed by a female-bodied actor, and there is some relief in that.

In other ways, even if La Ruina wrote the play based on interviews of many local women (none credited), it is a missed opportunity not to include at least a coauthor who is a woman, and especially to explore what this play would be with a female-bodied actor. While these choices, particularly for the staging, raise fruitful questions about how the audience accepts the story differently from different bodies, the decision not to include and credit any women in any aspect of the production is disempowering to the very
population that La Ruina desires to represent. La Ruina wants both to enact alterity, yet at the same time ventriloquize it and thus assimilate it into his own male authority. Surprisingly, the Brechtian distance that La Ruina’s portrayal invites, which should more readily lead to critical reactions of his choices, is largely lost in the skill of his understated narration, rendering the task of accepting Vittoria via La Ruina all too easy. A further considerable distraction is also the language who stars as the protagonist of the play, as Albanese has observed. Even while Vittoria narrates in the first person, the mesmerizing, poetic quality of the dialect lessens the problematics of La Ruina’s gender choices.

The story Vittoria shares is stark and cruel: at the age of thirteen she was married to a crippled brute who impregnated her eight times before she was thirty, but it is this eighth pregnancy that ends in the title of the play. Vittoria turns to the many other young women in her town in similar positions, and together they try to invent contraceptives, first via prayer (nobody seems to answer) and then via abstinence (their husbands eventually have their way).

E cusi, cu prigavi, nu santu, e cu n’atu, cu a jinta e cu a fora, cu chianu e cu forti, u paisu parìa n’orchestra. . . . E cusi loru anu pututu turnà a si sfucà cumi a loru pariadi e piaciadi e nìai amu vutu turnà a ni pristà cumi a loru pariadi e piaciadi.
E così chi pregava un santo e chi un altro, chi dentro e chi fuori, chi piano e chi forte, il paese pareva un’orchestra. . . E così loro si sono potuti tornare a sfogare come a loro pareva e piaceva e noi ci siamo dovute tornare a prestare come a loro pareva e piaceva.

(And like that someone prayed to a saint and someone to another, someone inside and someone outside, someone quietly and someone loudly, the town seemed like an orchestra. . . And so they [the husbands] were able to relieve themselves again in the ways they wanted and liked, and we had to return to lending ourselves to how they wanted and liked.)23

At work in the dialect are rhythmic sounds that assume emotional resonances. The constant ending of words with “u,” suggests an intimacy, perhaps as it resembles the familiar form of “you,” tu, rendering some of the more difficult moments in the play personal and intimate. La Ruina also pairs consonance with the repetition of words and expressions, even in these few examples: the hard “c” in the first excerpt with “cusì, chianu,” and especially cu repeated several times emphasize the continual prayers, the repeated effort, to whom-ever (cu) was listening. When Vittoria turns back to the men, the repetition of “p” and “t” in “pututu, turnà, paria di e piaciad, vutu turnà, pristà, paria di e piaciadi” brings an abruptness as Vittoria recounts how they ultimately had their way.

Finally, Vittoria/La Ruina recounts the last-resort measure, which includes the universal methods women were and are required to employ in order to rid themselves of forced pregnancies, from throwing themselves down staircases to inserting metal instruments into their bodies to drinking boiling water. As Vittoria recalls the invasive procedure to rid herself of the embryo, she thinks of Lina, who bled to death, and another woman whose life was miraculously saved. As she recalls other women with their uteruses punctured, she begins to think that maybe she herself is dying.

Addu ti mi stai jennu, m’aggìhìu dittu, addù ti mi stai scìfuìlennu, m’aggìhìu dittu, addù ti ni voi ji, c’un i poi lassù i figghi a cusì.

Dove te ne stai andando, mi sono detta, dove te ne stai scivolando, mi sono detta, dove te ne vuoi andare che non li puoi lasciare i figli così.

(Where are you going, I said to myself, where are you slipping away to, I said to myself, where do you want to go because you can’t leave your children like this.)24

The long breath in the repetition of the soft “a” of “Addu, m’aggìhìu, addù, m’aggìhìu, addù” draws out and dramatizes her light-headedness as she bleeds.
While the audience will only follow the meaning to various degrees, the sounds, familiar yet foreign, convey some of the emotion behind the experiences that Vittoria recounts. That La Ruina embraces the thick Calabro-Lucano as the vehicle for such politically fraught subjects not only brings them to a different population but also highlights their relevance to that population. It draws attention to a specific region and asks the audience to consider a social issue of global importance, such as abortion, among a particular group of people.

In a 1918 review of Angelo Musco, a well-known Sicilian actor at the time for whom fellow Sicilian Luigi Pirandello wrote several comedies in dialect, Antonio Gramsci, as theater critic for important communist newspaper *Avanti!*, muses how the unification of the nation (1860) marked the beginning of the end for regional dialects. And yet, he observes, though Sicily confronted this loss with much resistance, the Sicilian theater artists found a way for their regional dialect to garner a national importance.\(^{25}\) In fact, Gramsci praises the Sicilian dialect theater over the literary because he finds it alive and real and believes it captures the social activity of the times. He continues to praise both Pirandello and the writer and director Nino Martoglio for their dialect plays that offer this vitality, but turns back to the actor, to Musco, as the embodiment of simple and sincere life in these dialect performances.

Gramsci offers a connection between dialect and the everyday experiences of ordinary people, those whom he ultimately spent most of his time considering. In his “it is life” declarations, he brings to surface a subtle but bold honesty that dialect affords. These elements also surface in the many moments of dialect in the theater of narration, from the intimacy of the kitchen table where Enia recalls sitting with his father, to the reflective monologues of La Ruina’s characters. Particularly for La Ruina, whose plays deal with wrought social subjects such as abortion, betrayal, and homosexuality in the rural, religious South, the rawness of dialect mirrors the confessions that his characters shyly reveal. It has both a literary and performative function in that it celebrates the mellifluous voices of the everyday, serves as a metaphor for the social issues that not everyone understands (just as not everyone will understand the words in dialect), and, finally, is itself its own quirky, sincere character.

In its playfulness, secrecy, and musicality, dialect theater also embodies a palpable energy. Adding to the element of vitality in Gramsci’s praises for Sicilian theater, Haller notes that Gramsci must have seen “the spirit of independence within the framework of the new national unity.”\(^{26}\) Along with that rebellious spirit, he saw the potential for action in the dialect, emphasizing its liveliness and linking it expressly with possibilities for change and social activity. La Ruina’s plays bring awareness to underrepresented groups and nuance to old habits of sexism and homophobia, particularly in the areas where Calabro-Lucano is spoken. The specific combination of dialects that
La Ruina uses and their idiosyncratic syntax both connect his plays indelibly to their land and the history of the land, in the ways in which language evolved and did not evolve over many centuries. La Ruina’s revolutionary move is to pair the traditional language of a region with his criticism of exclusionary practices in that region, giving the language itself the potential to rewrite those lived practices in a new way that can still be familiar. By uttering that language through performance, it nears the potential of a speech act in which its very vocalization demonstrates new ways of thinking in the old familiar language.

First Is the Word

One of the most significant changes in the last fifteen years of twentieth-century Italian theater was the return of the “dramaturgy of the word” brought forth by the theater of narration. Identifying the practice as logos-centric, the theater scholar Paolo Puppa designated its style a “dramaturgy of the word,” an idea that pairs traditional dramatic analysis based on the script along with performance theory to analyze what takes place on the stage. By this term he means that the word, not the action, is the focal point of the piece. Theater scholar Pier Giorgio Nosari asserts that theater had not only estranged itself from the broader culture by the mid-1980s but also abandoned its own roots in storytelling. He goes on to say, however, that the narrators fixed this double break, in part thanks to their innovative rethinking of the possibilities of orality and narrative. The form draws attention to itself precisely because the content of the stories does not hide behind the spectacle of performance. As a way of drawing the audience’s focus to the spoken word, the physical language of narrators is particularly laconic even as they use precise movements to great effect. They keep their gestures, the amount of stage space they occupy, fleeting impersonations, and so on to a minimum, and mostly employ it to accommodate character portrayals. Examined closely, this performance mode reveals traces of classical oratory, both complicating the narrator’s understated physical language and offering a hypothesis for the practice’s continued success.

In its emphasis on the word, the theater of narration highlights the complicated tension between text and spoken word, and the process of inventing and reconfiguring texts that are intended to sound spontaneous, poetic, realistic, or all of these qualities. The linguist Giovanni Nencioni distinguished written language that approached everyday speech into two main categories: colloquial conversation (parlato-parlato) and theatrical dialogue based on a written text (parlato-scritto). The latter also encompasses two subcategories that differentiate between written texts. One lies within the frame of a short story or novel, such as dialogue, and the other is a type of written text meant to be read aloud or performed (parlato-recitato), as with theater. Nencioni
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works through various distinctions between conversational and written language, considering, for example, the place for the possibility of spontaneity and improvisation with all the inherent moments of self-correction, interruption, inarticulate sounds in written dialogue. These impulsive articulations that can so enrich communication but that are difficult to convey in active (as opposed to descriptive) language led him to conclude that spoken language is “dirty” whereas its written equivalent, even with the intention of vocalized utterance, is “clean.”

Nencioni further argues that spoken language can never really be written comprehensively because the context is constantly in flux. Context here is a variable that is always based on who is in the audience, or the location of a production, which then alters the principal characteristics of spoken language to reflect the rapport between the speaker and the listener. It is the dynamic between the two that informs the speaker of what to say next (and how to say it). This thinking resonates with Erving Goffman’s theory of frames, even if he used a theory of performance to interpret behaviors in everyday life. Nencioni’s linguistic systems offer a formal method to consider orality in the theater of narration, pointing to the inherent performativity in the words, allowing spoken text to exist as the main theatrical event on the stage. Rather than providing a base for onstage action as in a conventional production, the spoken text is the action. This is the dramaturgy of the word, in which the text claims its space—indeed, most of the performance space. The text is the protagonist.

Classical Oration

When Paolini stands downstage center speaking directly to the audience and then casually walks to a chalkboard in *Vajont*, he could be a lecturer in a classroom. When Curino remains at a podium for most of *Santa Bàrbera*, the matter-of-factness in her tone, her focus on the audience, and her professional poise convey the formality of an important business presentation. Narrators also break away from those moments when they portray characters and employ a different physicality, but this formal delivery, recalling classical oratory, lends both a gravitas and a familiarity in terms of narrative construction. The practice’s similarities to Platonic readings of epic poetry, which consist of a combination of mimesis (imitative) and diegesis (narrative), point to its complexities. Epic oral poetry (often associated with Homer or Virgil) with its intersections of written and spoken narrative, along with contemporary mimetic and narrative techniques, and finally ancient traditions in orality lend this very recent practice an important depth as it signals a technical sophistication.

In the late Roman Republic, the Ciceronian rhetorical tradition conceives of oratory through a tripartite system of narration that consists of *historia*, *argumentum*, and *fabula* (history, argument, and fable). With *historia* Cicero
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means to evoke a truth, whereas an argumentum is juridical with the aim of establishing the veracity of specific claims. Fabula plays on the question of doubt, introducing an element of imagination that remains ever-hypothetical, since circumstances are presented as though they actually happened, whether or not they actually did. In addition to these three elements, there is also a poetic convention, closer in form to Horatian ars poetica and analogous to the epidictic branch of rhetoric that involves praise or blame of well-known characters. Similar to satire, this practice functioned as both rhetorical exercise and popular entertainment.\textsuperscript{35} Indeed, such a tripartite system, complete with satirical embellishments, structures many narrative theater pieces as they adhere to the arrangement where historia and argumentum favor a presentation that tends toward the formal, while fabula and its interspersing moments of satire assume a comical tone.

In classical oratory, the comic aspect of fabula is unique to specific circumstances and serves more than as a diversion. As a practice in extemporaneous speech, it allows orators to deviate momentarily from their main arguments and involve the audience to a greater extent, relying heavily on the listener’s imagination.\textsuperscript{36} Similar to contemporary public speeches, whether encouraging fantasy and metaphors through a fabula, bringing the audience to laughter, or using direct address and diverging from the script, forges a connection with the audience, which means that the event is more likely to have an afterlife in the private spheres of its members. In the theater of narration, while narrators maintain the classical formula of historia, argumentum, and fabula, the generally comic fabula sequences comprise anecdotal moments sometimes laced with impersonations. These instances play an important role not only in how they give pause to dramatic tension but also in how they break the terse physicality of the narrators. In their comedic moments they use their bodies much more than during serious sequences, momentarily drawing attention away from the words, and focusing on the physical communication of details.

One purpose of comedy in the retelling of a drama parallels its role in classical oration to offset the seriousness. The benefits of this change-up are numerous. It affords the audience a pause to digest the material, enhances the rapport between narrator and spectator, and enlists another language, a universal physical language, in which to convey events. Paolini’s \textit{Il racconto del Vajont} (coauthored and directed by Gabriele Vacis; fig. 10) is a solemn piece based on the infamous 1963 disaster in the province of Belluno, between Veneto and Friuli, when a landslide provoked by the construction of Europe’s (then) largest dam caused a megatsunami that swept away five small towns, killing more than two thousand people in less than five minutes. In 1993 when he first presented his piece, much of the inquiry regarding the circumstances of the tragedy had been swept away from public consciousness. Paolini has told of receiving copious amounts of correspondence from fans asking him to incorporate their experiences into his work, which he
interprets as a sign that modern society has little faith in institutions amid a dwindling historic memory if they see his work as a resource for themselves. It is also a sign that Paolini’s publics recognize both the intrinsic value in their own stories and that they believe their stories have value for others too.

In his performance (fig. 11), Paolini points out that even in 1963 the press had so sensationalized the events into lugubrious hysteria that they circumvented a responsible journalist-driven investigation into the contributing factors. In his three-hour story he compensates these lapses by questioning what led to the tragedy and by conveying the history from heretofore silent perspectives that include the people from the region as well as the engineers and government officials who contributed toward the construction of the dam. Comic anecdotal moments somewhere between the truth and hyperbole offset the ominous tragic ending to which the audience continually moves closer and closer as the play progresses.

Among the many different styles of comedy, from ironic to romantic to satirical, the one that most resonates here is from Pirandello’s famous essay “L’umorismo,” which revolves around the assertion that humor must exist to say something. Comedy containing a message is the type with which Paolini

Fig. 10. Marco Paolini with Gabriele Vacis in rehearsal for Amleto a Gerusalemme, Palestinian Kids Want to See the Sea (Lime Fonderie Teatralli di Moncalieri, Turin, 2016). Photograph by Michele Fornasero, Indyca. Courtesy of Teatro Stabile Torino—Teatro Nazionale. Though they had worked together since the 1980s on many Teatro Settimo productions, it was their partnership on Vajont that made them famous collaborators.
works. In addition, he plays with some of the vulgarity for which Aristotle disdained comedy as a lesser form than tragedy, while he is also attracted to aspects of the stand-up comedian that lie in the figure and practices of the court jester who holds an inherent wisdom, which he reveals humbly and unspectacularly. Since the sovereign did not want someone who would challenge his authority, this stock character dressed his sagacity and criticism in humor. Even if its humor is occasionally vulgar in the Aristotelian sense, it also deepens the tragic aspect of the events portrayed. The frequent presence of comedy throughout much of this tragic tale demonstrates how the tropes of classic oratory produce a dialectical tendency in the theater of narration that intersects rhetorical skill with actor-centered improvisation-oriented performance styles.

Throughout Vajont, Paolini carefully places comedy in the traditions of the stand-up comedian, slapstick and Aristotelian base humor that contrast with the noble heights of the tragedy more than cerebral witticisms would. Paolini embraces this aspect particularly when he impersonates the locals of Belluno. As a native son, he has additional license to do so because his humor will be seen as self-deprecating. Celestini, a Roman, mimicking the people of
Belluno, would strike a very different tone unless he first established himself from an equivalent sociocultural background. Here Paolini depicts grandmothers with guns threatening to shoot if people try to take away their land. When the water in the valley rises over what used to be their homes, Paolini depicts the citizens of Belluno running to save what they can—furniture, mattresses, and eventually door frames and roof tiles. When their old town was finally submerged, he describes how they canoed back to the site to catch any glimpses they could of the former town. He asks the audience to imagine “some guy with a hat singing *la biondina in gondoletta.*” He conveys their desperation in the face of adversity with great delicacy, balancing the tragedy and absurdity of the situation. They are victims in Paolini’s story, but this slightly facetious suggestion of a lone ranger singing to himself is playful and affectionate. Part of Paolini’s success is in combining a mournful tribute to those who perished with a celebration of them, their routines and way of life, the local culture, and the local dialect.

In contrast to the staid poise of the orator and the limited movements normally exercised in the theater of narration, Paolini embraces a more rigorous physical routine during the comic interludes. He signals these shifts partly by altering his physicality from laconic gestures to flamboyant ones. When he recounts the first geological research on the mountain, he moves around the entire stage, hunched over to imitate scientists who are out of place in the mountains. He flails his hands when referring to the instruments the scientists are carrying:

> Maybe there were two passengers, with baggage strapped on behind, in front, all over the thing. . . . This overloaded [car] is pumping up the military road, barely making it. . . . They have valises, leather packs, picks, surveyors’ gear, specimen cases, topographical recording tools . . . long red and white measure sticks fanning out on the back of the sidecar like tail feathers on a turkey’s ass.41

Paolini’s physical flamboyance enhances the farcical—*fabula*—qualities of his material. In the televised version, the camera switches to the laughing and applauding audience members offering proof that these interludes are successful. Akin to the formula in classical oratory, with an eloquent delivery of speech the juxtaposition of humor and foreboding tragedy resonates between the narrator and the audience, forming a relationship that will enhance the overall emotional impact.

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

**LOCAL:** Casso.

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

**LOCAL:** Casso.

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

**LOCAL:** No, cazzo, that’s the name of the town, Casso. Calm down, cazzo!\(^2\)

During this sequence Paolini engages in a very physical performance largely through facial gestures, shrinking his height to depict the local as meek, and turning from side to side to play the Venetian as though the two were facing each other. This is much in the vein of stand-up comedy, where the actor also solicits reactions from the spectators by occasionally looking out toward them, before returning to impersonate a character through exaggerated facial and bodily expressions.

In this scene, it would appear that the local is the subordinate character because the Venetian—already with more political and cultural authority, since he is from a large cosmopolitan city—is there to destroy the town and take the land. Paolini has the Venetian crudely put the local in an inferior status by treating him disrespectfully from the beginning, leaning forward in his stance, whereas in his portrayal of the local he leans back and throws his arms up defensively. By the end, though, the tables have turned and Paolini physically endows the local from Casso, who gradually straightens up for more height and balance, with a stronger stance than the Venetian, who does not even know the name of the town that he will obliterate. Along with his contrasting physical embodiments of the two, Paolini presents a dramatization of the larger historical point about the unfair ways that rural localities and their peoples have been sacrificed throughout history. Indeed, it is a familiar story for many cultures. Here is an instance of how Paolini rewrites history from the perspective of the masses, not the city dwellers or engineers who have no personal connection to these towns that perished in the Vajont tragedy. Paolini might be making a joke out of the town’s name, but he also enunciates it. He creates a brief routine around it, with a seemingly juvenile play on words that functions mnemonically to restore Casso’s place on the Italian map and within the minds of his spectators.
Historical Connections: Language of the 1970s

The ideological struggles of the 1970s in Italy based on principles and demands of feminist, labor, youth, and other movements devised their own linguistic patterns and diction that echoed through print media in magazines and journals. Rhyming sound-bite slogans abounded, from “L’utero è mio e lo gestisco io” (It’s my uterus and I’m in charge of it) to “Fascisti, borghesi, ancora pochi mesi!” (Fascists, bourgeois, only a few more months!). Many political and social-political groups had their own journals from the “Trotzkjisti” (“Trotskyists” in journals such as Quarta Internazionale; Bandiera Rossa; Falcemartello) and workers (Quaderni Rossi; Potere Operaio; Classe Operaia) to the many cultural-political journals, from Aut aut, which focused on class history and awareness; to Fuori!, which addressed issues of the gay liberation movement; to DWF (Donna Woman Femme), advancing women’s rights; the Marxist Contropiano; and Ideologie, which emphasized recent history and current events. Though some were ephemeral, many survived to contribute to the political and cultural climate throughout much of the 1970s. The very existence of such varied sources speaks to the complexity and heterogeneity of the many different voices that distinguish the political debates of the time.

While the political and cultural tenor of the period was immortalized in journals, other forms of literature were also evolving, including in performance-oriented ways. The youth movement’s rebellion against tradition manifested itself in the rejection of the novel, though even in the early to mid-1960s with literary circles like the Gruppo ’63 experimental prose was more and more frequent. By the 1970s, political protest occupied the space of the novel through linguistic choices in works by marginal writers. Some texts reproduce language used by militants, as when writer-painter–factory worker Vincenzo Guerrazzi focuses on graffiti sprayed by workers in his novel Nord e sud uniti nella lotta (1974; North and South United in Struggle), or Nanni Balestrini’s novel about industrial protest, Vogliamo tutto! (1971; We Want It All!), the title itself a popular slogan from the era. Many of these texts share with the theater of narration the discovery and experimentation of the relationship between the written word and oral expression.

If print media invokes content as much as it invokes method, Jennifer Burns signals the importance of testimony as a conceptual framework for many writers of the time, particularly citing autocoscienza, literally “self-consciousness” but meant to describe the sort of “consciousness-raising” in which feminists sought to publicly share their personal experiences. This practice with storytelling at its root ultimately led to explorations of different narrative modes, including confessional, autobiographical, diaristic, and epistolary. Consciousness-raising encourages the passage from silence to spoken word, and to written word through the publishing of texts. The popularity of autocoscienza groups throughout Italy during the 1970s mirrors
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the historical reclamation present in the theater of narration in terms of both content (a people’s history) and method (sharing personal narrative orally). With respect to writers working in the 1970s, such as Balestrini and Guerrazzi, the desire to challenge and transform conventional forms of society and politics led many to claim to be the spokesperson of certain movements, thus arrogating to themselves the plural, heterodiegetic voice of the protestors. By contrast, most narrators do not attempt an overt challenge against convention or behave as spokespeople even if they regularly embody a “heterodiegetic voice,” presenting different viewpoints. Rather, instead of centering themselves they blend into the other ordinary lives in the stories.

Keeping in mind the link between the experimental prose of the 1970s and the theater of narration, and Nencioni’s distinctions between various spoken communications and their different relationships with texts as a framework, Celestini offers a rich example of these two dynamics in a series of works I call the “Temps Project.” In this vast and versatile oeuvre that ranges across various media, Celestini explores the stories of temporary employees at the Atesia call center near the periphery of Rome. He ultimately published several different texts based on this research, staged a performance, and mounted a documentary film interspersed with short clips of himself sharing anecdotes where employees explain their situation in monologues or respond to interview questions.

One of the texts includes a novel called La lotta di classe (2009; Class Struggle) that consists of four chapters, some fantastic and some realistic, told by different characters who live in an apartment building on the outskirts of Rome, one of whom is a temp at a call center. Another text, I precari non esistono (2008; Temporary Employees Do Not Exist), which accompanies the DVD of his documentary Parole sante (2008; Holy Words), is a collage of sorts that explains the film’s creation with excerpts from interviews, several newspaper and magazine articles, recent laws regarding temporary work standards, photocopies of documents from the government inspection of the Atesia call center, and even the transcript of introductory comments from the public debate when Celestini previewed the film in January 2008. Finally, Celestini created a performance from his research, which he calls Appunti per un film sulla lotta di classe (2007; Notes for a Film on Class Struggle). In this piece Celestini, often dressed casually in a pair of jeans and a button-down shirt, sits in a chair or stands at a raised microphone and tells several stories about Atesia’s temporary workers interspersed with autobiographical accounts. He also reads and sometimes sings parts of his narration, accompanied by a live onstage band (fig. 12). The simple set and his delivery of the text in a rapid, nearly monotonous voice show the connection to the inner emotional state, which flickers with both the urgency of someone who is ready to fight and the weariness of someone who is tired.

The Temps Projects expand beyond performance in that—unlike Celestini’s other works, almost all of which begin on the stage—the research and writing
first developed into a filmed documentary, then to a written assembly of promotional materials, many of which became the performance piece, and finally the crafting of a novel. Celestini does not forget the potential of new media either, since many excerpts from the project are or were once available online. The expansive methods of expression across text, film, and performance are impressive as they demonstrate the consistency of Celestini’s investigative focus. His mission is to share the unjust experiences of workers in what he refers to as a modern factory, and he tackles an array of media to do so. While the film and novel are obviously not theater, they do perform gradations of the orality that narrators have developed. They represent what could be another dimension within Nencioni’s framework, which concerns filmed or digital media. His audience hangs on to the ideas inherent in his story of isolation produced by contemporary capitalist society, with its borders and gated communities. More than just marketing and sales, although also those, these many different types of texts reveal a process. They demonstrate and instruct various methods for people to research and synthesize a situation.

Paolini’s work has also developed into a similar multimedia enterprise. He airs almost every new production on television and sells many of the scripts with a DVD of the performance. For the most part, unlike Parole sante, Paolini’s films and television stints are live tapings of his shows. Baliani, Curino, and Musso have also aired plays on national television channels. In
much the same way that Celestini packaged miscellaneous production and promotion pieces into the book that comes with the film, Baliani and Paolini have released texts that are a mix of journals, rehearsal and performance notes, and research from when they devised the piece. All of the supplementary materials that surround the productions have become a part of the extratextual layers of the theater of narration. They also present highly original gradations, from pre-text to written text to spoken text.

Along with material flexibility, the Temps Projects represents the activist potential of the theater of narration. This is especially noticeable when Celestini ends the theatrical production reciting the same story that concludes the book. He describes a temporary worker named Miss Patricia who closes down her workstation at the office and walks away from, essentially, all that is unjust. Celestini dramatizes this in an emotional and fantastical rendering of the work environment spilling into urban space. In the voice of the employee he describes leaving the bureau:

I cross through the walls of anti-missile glass. . . . Now on the street, I cross through the anti-theft gated communities with their anti-Gypsy alarms, protected by the anti-Black iron bars with their anti-rust varnish where anti-Semitic owners who wear anti-wrinkle cream make their anti-allergy antipasti in their atomic bomb shelters. I cross through the banks under video-surveillance. I walk through the government mints where the machines print money. Every tick registers a new bill. And it’s right to measure the bills with ticks because like the insects these ticks also suck the blood of the people. I cross through the walls of the military barracks, the insane asylums, the prisons. . . . Meanwhile a guard tries to stop me because I cross through her and her uniform too. She will then turn towards her superiors and say, “Captains, what should we do? This is witchcraft!” And I will respond, “No, this is class struggle.”

Celestini’s quick and emotionless delivery connotes a two-dimensional text even as it is meant for performance. It does not exactly have the feeling of spontaneity, but it builds and crescendos into a powerful moment that preceded Zuccotti Park 2011 and any echo of the Occupy chants or Black Lives Matter, while also harking back to Clifford Odets. Celestini does not attempt to hide the literary weight of his words. He does not perform the lines as though he were inventing them then and there. Rather, he speaks rapidly in a flat monotone, contrasting the grandiosity of the magical realism with a direct and matter-of-fact delivery. By the time he hits the last few words, “this is class struggle,” they resound with an unexpected precision. Preserving the pristine appearance of what Nencioni called “clean language” lends a formality to Celestini’s work that the rest of the presentation (casual clothing, no noticeable set piece or props) contradicts.
The theater’s ability to offer constant renewal with each performance can also work to the narrator’s benefit. While Celestini’s play uses anecdotes from the book and film as a base, he sometimes changes the protagonist depending on the location of the performance. As he explains, he adapts each show according to the public decrees, government inspections, and legal disputes surrounding temporary work in a given area so that they are current and relevant on a local level. In Rome he might reference the Atesia employees, whereas in Bari he might invoke workers in the Barilla factories or in Faenza the conditions in the garment industries. In doing so, he takes advantage of the author-actor dimension of the theater of narration, which allows him to change the script at will. Such decisions underscore the flexibility of the genre as much as they speak to the range of political commitments. Celestini takes a local issue in the community in which he is performing and highlights its national relevance, constantly balancing the two while focusing ultimately on the experiences of individuals.

The verbal choices during the final sequence also evoke the contentious political environment of the 1970s through the clashes with state police and the fight for legal and cultural representation for marginal groups. As the employee walks through “the walls of anti-missile glass” and then through the gated communities with their many antieverything gadgets, Celestini depicts an intensely controlled military environment full of phobias and aggression. The world through which the audience or reader accompanies him is home to people who are so paranoid that they are resolutely antieverything, from other types of people (Gypsy, Black, Jewish) to aging, allergies, and even, amusingly, food, in a pun on the Italian word for the first course, “antipasto.” The temporary worker in this final sequence renounces not only her job, but all of these conditions of contemporary life, including, importantly, the authority of the police, whom she walks right through as well. Such totality is particularly reminiscent of the 1970s in that people pursued many different angles of addressing the establishment in an effort to confront a multitude of unacceptable issues.

Celestini continues to evoke institutional exploitation by suggesting that financial establishments both materially and morally enervate ordinary people. As the employee walks through the state mints, Celestini broadens his original starting point from the corporate factory environment of the work space to state organizations, from asylums to prisons that exist to control people, in his Foucauldian rendering. Miss Patricia passes through them, allowing her to both acknowledge and renounce them. If she were to pass above them, it would be a denial of them, but walking right through them suggests more of a dismissal. In the book, he incorporates the other main characters from previous chapters, when Miss Patricia runs into them as they too are escaping the dystopia by walking through walls, marble columns, and fire doors in a revolt en masse. Despite the fanciful sorcery of people unaffected by the physical borders that divide a city or the social borders
that divide a population, Celestini is clear about the main feature of their lives: class. This leaves the audience with the memory of what they have heard about Miss Patricia earlier in the piece. In her job, where she earns five hundred euro a month, she has three-month contracts with zero benefits. The piece becomes a tale of fairness. What is the baseline for workers’ rights? What is the relationship between one’s dignity and economic necessity? Why are they benefits, and not just what society accepts as normal?

This energetic, performance-oriented language has made an appearance before in Italy, and not just on Italian stages but within more structural configurations of theater artists. Once the postwar period had given way to a stable, even prospering economy by the late 1950s, many leading theater artists found themselves frustrated by their profession and what they perceived as its confounding inertia. An effort to define and reinvent the state of postwar Italian theater reached a climax with the November 1966 publication of a manifesto called “Per un nuovo teatro” (“For a New Theater”) in the journal *Sipario*, still among the most important theater journals in Italy today: its contributors include many leading actors, directors, and critics. It is particularly noteworthy that this piece emerged before 1968, as it underlines the extent to which culture, and theater in particular, was in dialogue with the radicalizing political climate as it was unfolding, not just reacting to it.

The language in the manifesto reveals a combative climate, perhaps even more than the concepts the authors convey. They open by stating, “The battle for theater is something much more important than a question of ethics.” They denounce the “timidity of theater,” which is “subordinately” hidden under an “apparent state of flourishing” when it is, in fact, the exact opposite: moribund. They continue to lament the aging of and lack of adequate structure; the growing interference of political and administrative bureaucracy within the public theaters; the monopoly by powerful groups; the deafness regarding the most significant international repertoire; the total inattention for the experimental initiatives that have tried to breathe life [into the theater] over the course of these years.49

The accusatory rhetoric highlights the argument that quality state-run theater is suppressed under government bureaucracy and that an aggressive denial of this state of affairs blocks the creation of new work.

This type of antiestablishment tone that prevails throughout much of the struggles of ’68, sometimes referred to collectively in Italian as *contestazione*, stretched into the long 1970s. Since the theater of narration came on the heels of these debates with first-generation narrators, it reproduces the discursive environment of the period. The oral dexterity and inventiveness of narrators runs across media, as Celestini’s Temps Projects displays, echoing the call for ingenuity in the November 1966 *Sipario* manifesto, which itself
resounds with the demands that many groups voiced in 1968. In terms of the evolution of twentieth-century theater in Italy, the theater of narration is not a part of that experimental avant-garde movement to which the authors of the manifesto allude; rather, it evolved slowly over the next forty years. Still, a similar tenacity lies even in Celestini’s much later text. This time it rallies not against the state-run theatrical establishment but against an increasingly oppressive surveillance state.

The linguistic rapport between the theater of narration and the political movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s has broad implications considering that “the Left,” or many left-leaning organizations, slowly lost their facility with language as the decade wore on. To say that the theater of narration recuperates that language would be to overstate the case, particularly since most narrators do not align themselves with a specific political party, but one aspect of the success of narrative theater is its ability to restore the oppositional voices reminiscent of the 1970s that the neoliberal corporate tide of the 1980s into the Berlusconi era eventually drowned out. The Left was extremely loquacious during the 1970s. One need only recall the many journals (dailies, weeklies, monthlies, quarterlies) that sprang up during the decade. Yet it ultimately failed to provide a new and sustainable political vocabulary. A large part of the problem was the descent into terrorism characterized by the Red Brigades, as Baliani demonstrates in *Body of State*. In Baliani’s piece, the idealism is palpable as he faithfully attends meetings, watches his infant while his partner goes to pro-choice rallies, and refers to his old friends as “comrades.” He also demonstrates how, even before the kidnapping of Moro, his enthusiasm waned as the violence increased. Although Baliani does not overtly emphasize the issue of language, when he peppers his text with words that sound anachronistic, such as “comrade,” he points to the fact that this type of revolutionary language did not survive.

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

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

New ideas and modes of expression did increase and permeate during moments of that decade, including those that considered terrorism. Extremism sacrificed the very domain in which leftist contestation was at first quite effective: shaping and providing a creative vocabulary that was widely
available via print media. As the presence of radicals increased, the increasing isolation and self-referentiality of leftist terrorism grew apace, along with the separation of its jargon from everyday language. Where the theater of narration confronts this dynamic is through its embrace of verbal language associated with the Left, from “comrade” to “class struggle,” in a number of productions. It stops short of making any requests, of calling its audience to action, yet it performs that desire by giving voice to the underrepresented.

**Oral History and Journalism**

Along with microhistory’s ability to highlight ideological systems from new perspectives, the presence of testimony with its emphasis on language and interpersonal relationships influences the dramaturgical methodology of the theater of narration. Parallel to the discovery of microhistory, Italian historians in the 1970s reconsidered the value of oral history, both the inherent problems of ascertaining its accuracy and its unique benefits. Among the most dedicated to reclaiming the benefits of oral historiography is Luisa Passerini. She notes that this method privileges what is closer, ordinary, and normal, also underlining the significance of language in her analysis of marginalized groups. The very language of oral history, she stresses, is of ordinary people (*gente commune*), thus historians play witness to more than an educated turn of phrase and calculated diction. Rather, they hear dialects with codes from people with no official voice. This cultural consciousness demands a kind of detective work both for the historian and for the narrator, who must decide on the key words or phrases they find most accurately representative. Enia clearly dramatizes this by assigning *s’asciucò* the role of emphasizing associations with the ordinary and everyday life. It is not only regional but also common vernacular.

Considering Paolini’s *Vajont* in conversation with Passerini’s studies points to how narrators have uniquely positioned themselves to articulate tragedy multidimensionally. Some of Passerini’s early research uncovered the tension between written and spoken texts, which narrative theater exploits through its implementation of fabula and satire. In her book about working-class Turin during fascism, *Torino operaia e fascismo* (1984), Passerini explores the experiences of living under the Mussolini regime by comparing oral and written accounts. While in the process of interviewing a particular individual, she began to notice the person’s storytelling rhythms. She observed the particular moments when the interviewee sped up, the repetition of particular words, and the elements of comedy that she alternated with dramatic and painful memories. She realized that this comic tendency was the main difference between the person’s oral account and the one written in the person’s diary. The facts were the same, but the way the person told the story differed based on the medium. This finding, which corroborated with similar patterns in others’ accounts, led Passerini to conclude that orally expressing
one's memories veiled the most tragic elements, such as deaths and injuries, pain and fear. The interviewee revealed to her the defenses that people put in place in order to avoid the most difficult moments when they orally shared a story. Much like the fabula in classical oratory, comedic interstices dramatize the tragedy by temporarily distancing it, and narrators make use of this distancing function. Passerini’s observation also highlights the inherent vulnerability in performing live and sharing private histories with others. As performers, the narrators confront this exposure in every performance, but they also conjure it as they share the experiences of others and mimic their own dramatic rhythms, shifting between relief and tragedy.

As Nencioni stressed the challenge of ridding a stage performance of linguistic artificiality from its written corpus, Passerini’s findings show that the “everyday” rhetorical strategy of humor can serve as a method to reach the more desirous authentic portrayal. Paolini’s use of comedy clearly demonstrates these more instinctual elements of self-defense so that the structure and delivery of his performance might mirror that of actual people who experienced the 1963 Vajont tragedy. Were they to recount their stories orally, they might interrupt the heavy moments with mockery, irony, or other distancing tactics. Paolini himself, a native of the region in Italy where the Vajont dam tragedy occurred, assumes an even more intimate stance of identity with his audiences as one who shares this difficult story using similar linguistic strategies to those a local from one of the traumatized villages would.

Notably, members of the Laboratorio Teatro Settimo describe part of their early method as collecting as many testimonies (oral, newspaper, charts, and photographs) as they could in order to make a theater text. They defined the outcome not as a record of any particular event but as an exploration of how testimony reconstructs that event. They believed that collecting these varied sources and analyzing them as a whole would permit a universal truth to emerge on which they could base a new show. In creating a piece that was “near” a topic or that “surrounded” it through research and analysis of clues and seemingly insignificant details, they could demonstrate its depth from new perspectives. Here their practice overlaps with microhistory and what Ginzburg described as its autoreflexive dialogic practice that emerges through investigatory methods.

In addition to maintaining self-awareness during the research process, narrators also maintain a metadialogue that reflects in specific performative elements. Celestini’s linguistic poetics are particularly unique as he accelerates his speech, creating tension in his casual delivery. Because of this fast pace, the audience is always aware to some extent that Celestini relays the story by varying degrees of separation. He does not strive for realism. The automated tone of his speech highlights the fact that the audience is not hearing the story from the primary source. This type of meta-awareness comments on the story’s own pretenses to authenticity. Borrowing these elements from oral history and microhistory practices indicates a level of intellectual
rigor and poetical direction unique to the theater of narration. Much of the dialogue in these pieces is accessible to mass audiences, since the narrators base a significant amount of their texts on actual testimony and dialect, yet the practice as a whole employs a precise historiographical methodology.

Particularly in the more activist plays, such as *Appunti per un film* or *Vajont*, narrators encroach on investigative journalism territory. The subversion of traditional presentations of drama through the counterinformation journalist style is a common feature in Celestini’s, Paolini’s, and Musso’s more civic theater pieces. The attempt to confront issues from different angles recalls the counterinformation tendency of the 1970s, where the notion of “making information” changed so that the strategies of sharing news destabilized the traditional presentations of journalism. The goal of journalism then was not only to inform the public but also to offer the reader a more multidimensional perception of the present and to reach more diverse audiences.

Dario Fo explores the notion of “Living Newspapers” in the Author’s Note of the 1977 edition of his *Mistero buffo* when he refers to theater, particularly comic theater, as a primary vehicle for people to express ideas, communicate, and even provoke one another. He claims, “For the people, grotesque theater in particular has always been the first method of expression, communication and the commotion of ideas. The theater was the newspaper, spoken and dramatized by the people.” The classical dimensions of the historia, argumentum, and fabula triangle loom here as Fo, the jester, enacts this logic, though he does so in different ways than the narrators do, exaggerating the *fabula* and satire in his many plays in order to underline the absurdist elements of true—often tragic—situations. Although the poetics are quite distinct from Fo’s, the attempt to provide information and provoke discussion is intrinsic to the theater of narration.

Both Fo’s Living Newspapers and the narrators’ practice of historical documentation are in some ways a response to Walter Benjamin’s observations on modern storytelling. In early Teatro Settimo documents, Benjamin’s name surfaces, indicating that those first-generation narrators directly engaged with his work. A key element in how narrators theatricalize history is in their ability to transform “information” beyond facts and nearer to the Benjaminian vision of storytelling. In his famed essay “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” Benjamin laments people’s diminishing ability to tell stories “properly” and states that the reason for the lack in skill relates to expressions of experience. He exhibits a sense of unexpectedness and surprise along with his dismay that people are simply unable to convey experiences with each other, unable to share. For him, part of the problem lies in the role that modern technologies had in fostering a thirst for information at the expense of more timeless modes of social interaction, whose content and scope surpassed immediate concerns. His examination also turns to the listener. Technology may have corrupted the ability to tell a story, but, perhaps more importantly, does anyone care to hear one?
Related, a defining element in the communicative structure of the theater of narration is the adrenalin-energized quality of an informant who conveys new information. In the 1970s, the “making” of information changed, and news-sharing strategies subverted traditional journalistic methods. One of the positive outcomes of this time was the phenomenon of counterinformation that offered a different perspective from that of the mainstream newspapers, in which journalists reenvisioned what constituted relevant data. The goal of journalism became not just to inform the public but also to train the reader better to decode the underlying reality of the times. This more analytical approach also correlates with other influences from the 1970s, such as the success of semiotics, the recasting of sociology and social research, and the intense politicization of media studies and culture. Narrators subvert both historical and dramatic tradition in similar ways. Between the newfound seriousness in oral histories and Fo’s Living Newspapers, echoes of a Benjaminian desire for storytelling, and both investigative and counterinformation journalism, the theater of narration pulls some strategies, rejects others, contributes to the conversations, and takes them in different directions. What emerges from these many interrelated techniques and considerations is a clear desire for human connection and dynamic perspectives. The theater of narration with its soloist intimacy and research of the underrepresented offers just this.

In a final reflection on linguistic and oral strategies, one of the most relevant patterns regarding the dialogic mechanism in the theater of narration is the tendency toward a conversational mode of engagement among certain intellectuals during the 1970s. Both Italo Calvino and Pier Paolo Pasolini had embraced political commitment early in their careers. As Jennifer Burns explores, they began publishing more front-page editorials in mainstream newspapers such as the Milan-based Il Corriere della Sera during the 1970s; in fact, they actually replaced the usual political commentators. This offered them a direct engagement with a large readership. As Burns points out, they also began to respond to each other in editorials in a structure of requoting and questioning, in a “You say this; why?” pattern. Burns argues that for Pasolini, this type of exchange had greater value than mere “journalism” in its capacity to provide deeper explanations to the public. In addition to these explanations, these texts perform the act of questioning as Pasolini and Calvino favored dialogic prose with direct inquiry over narrative prose. Narrators mimic and adapt this practice for the stage as they perform a dialogic exchange on many levels between themselves and their research, the characters they discuss or portray, and the members of the audience. They are performing the intellettuale impegnato, or the politically engaged intellectual. Burns writes that “individual authors were claiming not just to be the spokesperson of the movements but to embody the plural, heterodiegetic voice of the protestors.” Indeed, as La Ruina shows in La borto when he shares the plight of southern women, or as Baliani shows when he wonders about the personal choices of his friends in Corpo di stato, narrators embody
these variegated voices in order to demonstrate how to arrive at the critical payoffs that wrestling with different perspectives brings.

As Benjamin laments the moribund state of storytelling, he places some of the blame on print media. Journalism, he suggests, contributed to the replacement of knowledge with information. As an example, he quotes Hippolyte de Villemesant (1810–79), the founder of Le Figaro, who characterized the nature of information in the famous formulation “To my readers . . . an attic fire in the Latin Quarter is more important than a revolution in Madrid.” Benjamin suggests the misinterpreted centrality of distance: that which is closer has more importance because it lays claim to verifiability. All that is necessary is that the information appears “understandable in itself.” But information does not live on, while stories that contain truth or wisdom do. Geography should not be a factor. The distance one has traveled, or the extravagance of the tale, matters no more than “listening to the [person] who has stayed at home, making an honest living,” and in fact “an orientation toward practical interests” is a worthy trait of many successful storytellers. The narrators, as storytellers “from home,” always close to their regional origins, find ways for a method that partially invokes journalism and therefore risks spouting information, even while they include a dimension that spurs a more deep-seated and lasting knowledge.

This dynamic is especially clear in Baliani’s Corpo di stato. As the 1998 program for the show notes, the play is closely linked to his first major theater of narration success, Kohlhaas (1990), because although the two are vastly different stories, they share “the conflicted relationship between the need for revolt against injustice and the acceptance of the role of the avengers.” Throughout the piece he quotes newspapers from the kidnapping, and he opens the show with what becomes a foreboding memory of when students occupied the school of architecture in Rome. He begins with information. But as the piece moves quickly to the end of the decade, he explores the violence of those years increasingly from personal memory.

What draws out the greater, more timeless themes is the combination of impartial journalism with his memories and commentary. Here the universal truths that Benjamin sees in the talented storyteller emerge through a combination of concrete inquiry and reflection. Themes of violence beget violence. Against headlines of skirmishes between students and police, Baliani explores his own rage while watching riot police beat his friend, followed by the seething desire to better prepare himself for future encounters. With the reflexivity characteristic of the theater of narration, he soon asks himself what that means. Should he be better armed next time?

I’d seen a lot of pictures of murdered bodies in those years. Lots. But this time was different, I don’t know why. It was as if all the others that I had tried to cancel from my memory had now come back all together, all of them, all those murdered in cold blood as they left
their homes or walked down the steps at the university, all the victims with no way out, without a chance for a fair fight, all those killings I could never find a good reason for. How had we come to this? How’d it happen that friends, comrades from my political group, from the marches, had suddenly started talking about weapons? From one day to the next they started using technical terms from specialized magazines, as though they were infatuated with weapons. But wasn’t it always the fascists who loved guns?

In dramatizing the hysteria, youthful passions, and fears, from scenes of brawls with police to reading about the murder of his friend in the paper, Baliani laments the confusion of those years. He asks the timeless question about that threshold of violence and clarity. “Arms” and the very notion of engagement with weapons symbolizes the turn from the rational to chaos. The Benjaminian ability to convey a larger question is here aided by journalistic accounts that ground Baliani’s story in a tangible reality, helping to explain the popularity of the theater of narration: as Villemesant acknowledged, his readers gravitated toward what they knew. The political import to which these factors accrue is that the oral dimension both gives voice to many underrepresented people and perspectives, and develops a process in which people can continue to add new layers.

While performers generally add depth to written text, especially works intended for oral practices, multiple layers of performative strategies in the theater of narration illuminate new dimensions of the logocentric. Dialect becomes an especially rich device. Its musicality and poetic figures of speech have spellbinding qualities, to the point that the language itself becomes one of the major actors onstage. Separately, accounting for the history of oratory through a classical tripartite method provides a means of unpacking the different rhetorical strategies in the theater of narration, while strengthening its links to classical traditions of the spoken word. Historia, argumentum, and fabula shift the focus from persuasion to narration; from civic to personal contexts; and from discourse to literature. Finally, if the word ultimately failed for leftist struggles of the 1970s, it was slowly revived and rehabilitated in the theater of narration. Many plays revisit central arguments of that time, but they also examine contemporary crises with linguistic approaches similar to the ones activists used in the 1970s. Their strategies unite to create stories through the specificity of lived experiences with which their audiences can identify. While most narrators continue with the staged minimalism characteristic of the practice, their use of language is complex, at times experimental, and as diversely skilled as the many itinerant troupes and commedia dell’arte performers so important to the history of Italian theater.