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Skills Training And Growth through Erasmus+ Theatre



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Theatre as a tool for growth and inclusion: an analysis of the social role of theatre in adult education

WP 2.1 – Local Report



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The social role of theatre: historical analysis

Since its origins, theatre has been much more than a simple form of entertainment: it has represented a powerful tool for collective reflection, denunciation, education and the construction of cultural identity. In Italy, a country with a very rich theatrical tradition, the theatre has taken over centuries a central role in social, political and cultural life, managing to renew itself and to dialogue with historical and social transformations. From the Roman theatre to medieval drama, from commedia dell'arte to contemporary civil theatre, the Italian stage has hosted not only actors but entire communities with their dreams, conflicts, tensions and hopes.

In Italy, the theatre has ancient roots, dating back to the Roman era, when performances were an integral part of city life. The theatre was accessible to all and represented a collective moment of recreation but also of political reflection. The texts of Plautus and Terentius, for example, were often laden with social irony and veiled criticism of institutions. However, the real leap in quality of Italian theatre on a social level took place in the Middle Ages and especially in the Renaissance, a period in which theatre also became an instrument of cultural literacy.

Sacred representations, for example, served to convey religious and moral values even to the less educated classes. In many Italian cities, theatre was a form of collective pedagogy with strong educational potential. The social dimension was reinforced by the fact that these performances were often organized in public squares or places, becoming an integral part of city life.

One of the high points of the Italian theatre, also for its social impact, was the development of the Commedia dell'Arte between the 16th and 18th centuries. In this theatrical genre, regional masks - such as Harlequin, Pulcinella, Pantalone - represented recognizable social types, with their flaws, their desires and their daily struggles. The commedia dell'arte was a form of popular theatre, accessible and immediately understandable, which dealt with current issues and spoke the language of the people, often in dialect.

The theatre thus became a place in which the dynamics of power, social differences and contradictions of the time were represented and questioned. The audience recognized itself in the



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characters on stage, creating a strong sense of participation and collective identity. This genre has had an extraordinary influence not only in Italy, but throughout Europe, becoming a model of communication between artists and the public that has also inspired modern forms of social theatre.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Italian theatre evolved, becoming more and more often a platform for civil and political reflection. With the unification of Italy, the theatre has contributed to the spread of the Italian language and the construction of national identity. Playwrights such as Alessandro Manzoni and Silvio Pellico staged works that reflected on the idea of homeland, sacrifice and justice.

In the post-war period, with the birth of the Republic, theatre took on an even more marked role in denouncing social injustices and promoting rights. Authors such as Dario Fo, Franca Rame and Eduardo De Filippo have used the theatre as a means of protest against power, corruption and ignorance. Fo, in particular, with his biting satire and popular language, has brought to the stage the contradictions of modern Italy, making people laugh but also reflect. His theatre, deeply linked to the tradition of the *commedia dell'arte*, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1997 precisely for its ability to "make the powerful laugh and give a voice to the last".

The civil theatre has continued to develop even in the 21st century, addressing issues such as the mafia, immigration, gender violence and precarious work. Shows like "La mafia uccide solo d'estate" or the works of Ascanio Celestini are significant examples of how theater can still today affect the collective consciousness and promote a social debate.

An emblematic example of the social role of theatre in Italy is represented by Naples, a city with a very strong theatrical tradition. In Naples, theatre has always been an element of identity, deeply rooted in popular culture. From the works of Eduardo Scarpetta and Totò to those of Eduardo De Filippo, the Neapolitan theatre has recounted with irony, pain and humanity the life of the people, their problems, their dreams.



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Eduardo De Filippo, in particular, is considered a master at representing the social, family and moral tensions of the South. His works, like “Napoli milionaria!” or “Filumena Marturano”, speak of poverty, war, justice, with a simple yet profound language. His theatre was able to give a voice to those who did not have one, highlighting the contradictions of a society marked by inequality and abuse.

Testing and evaluation

The meetings, online and in-person, organized during this first part of the project provided valuable opportunities to explore theatre through hands-on methods and critical discussion.

We carried out a preliminary questionnaire among mostly non-professionals figures of theatre world, as the aim was to better understand how non-experts perceive theatrical experiences and what expectations or barriers they associate with it.

After a thorough analysis, we can surely affirm a general knowledge and awareness of theatre as a cultural institution that is deeply rooted in nowadays society, together with its importance in the path of personal growth. Nevertheless, little participation to theatre “life” persists, mainly caused by a diffused lack of plays offer/promotion and educational activities, leading to the shared belief in the need for new ways to attract the participation of more and more people, especially youth.

Participants were, indeed, of various ages and all aware of theatre as a cultural institution but only half of them really attend it, and barely the 23,4% participates effectively as an operator.

Amongst the most appreciated theatrical genres there were entertainment shows (67.2%), musicals (60.9%) and dance (45.3%), followed by a 39.1% for classics and with discouraging rates (15.6%, 14.1%, 12.5%) for socially and culturally engaged theatre that is overpowered even by cabaret (34.4%) and circus (25%). What emerges significantly is the weakness of the appeal factor, and consequently of audience, for social and educational performances. This could suggest that despite the theoretical conscience of theatre greatness in the education field, as in fact amongst the participants those with a theatre operators background insisted on the skills they had developed

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thanks to the first-hand experience, such as: personal growth/knowledge of oneself, courage, the ability to get involved, discipline and respect for co-workers, still we are not willing to take it into consideration as a valid tool to be used.

It is, therefore, important to implement experimentation of up-to-date methodologies and educate at all stages of life and to different categories of people about the impact theatre and all its perks could have on everyone's life. For this reason, since the STAGE+T Erasmus project is very much committed to this mission, it'll be our duty to try to understand the difficulties and the obstacles one can find in the path to enjoy a wonderful experience, such as theatre.

Surely even more evaluation on the topic will be done in the next months, even more on theatre specialist that have the chance to work in theatre nowadays and could give us an insight into the other side of the "curtain". As in fact, each partner will be conducting thorough interviews to these experts within the end of the year and educational resources developed starting from that.