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ORATORY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE: HEARING ITALY THROUGH NARRATIVE THEATER[1]

Abstract

In this essay I argue that the performance genre known as narrative theater conceives of an engaged Italian public in contrast to the portrayal of Italians as passive pawns at the mercy of a tightly controlled media. By examining the role of oratory and how it sustains a dialogic practice between performer and spectator, I analyze the potential for the type of rational and rigorous public sphere that Habermas envisioned for the pre-industrial bourgeoisie. I draw upon revisions of that ideal in order to suggest that an alternative sphere exists through narrative theater where an Italian public engages important discourses of national interest.

The stage is sparse. The lighting scheme is uncomplicated and often colorless. There is one person who tells a story. Her costume is unremarkable. There is no music, or if there is, it is minimal. More recently, there are occasional live musicians on stage with the narrator. In the past, the artists might have projected slides at varying intervals. Today, there is sometimes a screen upstage with images at interludes. Narrative theater is not a spectacular experience in the way that entertainment connotes. It is neither visually stimulating like many theatrical endeavors are, nor is there much of an effort at auditory design. Why would someone see a theater performance such as this instead of a flashy blithe musical? Even more curiously, why would someone choose to watch a recording of such a performance on television when changing the channel could bring a visually gripping thriller? My essay explores what this widely popular performance practice says about the Italian mass public.

Inspired by the recent scandals in the Berlusconi empire surrounding an underage ecdysiast from Morocco, *The New York Times* ran a special debate in January 2011 inviting seven scholars and journalists, including Professors Alexander Stille and Chiara Volpato as well as *La Stampa*'s Maurizio Molinari, to comment on what the tolerance of Berlusconi's behavior might say about Italians.[2] While each respondent focused on slightly different hypotheses, they all touched on one common thread: media. As Stille points out, the crux of the problem is that Berlusconi reigns over a nearly 90 percent market share in the television industry in a country where 70 to 80 percent of the public gets its news from television. As prime minister, he oversees the three state-run channels, and his company Mediaset privately owns another three of the seven main networks. Regarding Italians' tolerance of their leader, the authors suggest that to some extent Italians are simply unaware of and isolated from ongoing international debates because this single player so dominates the flow of information. By contrast, through its alternative engagement and depiction of Italians, narrative theater or *teatro di narrazione*

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[2] "Decadence and Democracy in Italy," *New York Times* (26 Jan 2011), accessible at: http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/01/26/decadence-and-democracy-in-italy.

poses a counter-balance to the conservative media of Berlusconi. Without sacrificing its focused erudition, this performance practice, which almost exclusively researches issues of national interest, has proven its appeal across class boundaries and invites a reconsideration of the mass public in Italy.

The Berlusconi media situation is almost too perfect of a fit for the critique of the culture industry made by Adorno and Horkheimer. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* they argue that, thanks to capitalism, mass entertainment is an unequivocal tool for those in power to control and subdue the public. Berlusconi's media monopoly absurdly distorts their hypothesis since in their vision no single industry or leader has complete control over the media-viewing public. Domination is structural, and the culture industry is a sum of many parts. The situation in Italy, however, nearly parodies this thesis because it verges on a political-media dictatorship. One company, Berlusconi's Fininvest, owns the major Italian cinema production house Medusa, in addition to the leading publishing company Mondadori, as well as Mediaset, which in turn owns those three major television channels (Italia 1, Canale 5 and Rete 4).[3] Even if somewhat facile, there is an undeniable logic to the assertion echoed by the contributors to *The New York Times* debate that there is little uprising against Berlusconi because he so dominates and manipulates information through his hold over mass media.

The fascinating topic of popular communication with respect to Berlusconi offers many insights about contemporary Italy and requires sustained attention and analysis, but for the purposes of this essay let us accept that his control over Italian media is extensive.[4] At least in terms of Italy's public image in the United States via mainstream print journalism such as *The Economist, Time Magazine,* and *The New Yorker*, this relationship carries much weight for Italy's current identity.[5] Not only does the country's prime minister appear from the outside to patronize its citizens, but they seem to accept his belittlement. In this essay I propose an alternative account to the one that simply commiserates over Berlusconi's political and media control by examining how the practice of narrative theater offers a different image of the Italian public. In fact, one of the more intriguing aspects of this performance practice is that its intellectual rigor might make it seem academic and unattractive to a popular audience accustomed to spoon-fed spectacle, yet it has proven otherwise. The playwrights of narrative theater heavily research their scripts, giving their work a strong scholarly and factual basis that often pivots around sophisticated discussions of ideological discourse to the specificities of erudite subjects such as geological engineering or medieval hagiography. Over time, however, the practice has shown that its audience is not just the well-educated and cerebrally inclined. Rather, it purposefully and dynamically connects with popular audiences, which in turn makes a statement about how we can think of Italy today.

Marco Baliani (b. 1950 Verbania), Ascanio Celestini (b. 1972 Rome), Laura Curino (b. 1956 Turin) and Marco Paolini (b. 1956 Belluno), the narrators whose work I investigate, draw audiences into their stories and pull them face to face with a history that embraces both the private and public spheres. They

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[3] Fininvest also owns the insurance and banking company Mediolanum, the soccer team AC Milan, a digital TV broadcasting network and other companies related to TV broadcasting.

[4] For analyses see Cinzia Padovani, *A Fatal Attraction: Public Television and Politics in Italy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005); Paul Ginsborg, *Silvio Berlusconi: Television, Power and Patrimony* (London: Verso, 2004); Michael E. Shin and John A. Agnew, *Berlusconi's Italy: Mapping Contemporary Italian Politics,* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

[5] For instance see Beppe Severgnini, "Silvio Berlusconi: An Italian Mirror," *Time Magazine* (11 May 2009), and Alexander Stille, "Girls! Girls! Girls!" *The New Yorker* (3 Nov 2008).

are performing during a contemporary era when the general assumption is that the performing arts belong to an exclusive cultural system above the masses who instead prefer passive entertainment via visual spectacle. Narrators (so-named to distinguish them from actors) sit in a chair or stand behind a podium and tell a story, which is often based on a significant political, social, and/or historical event. They retell events that the audience usually knows well such as the Fosse Ardeatine tragedy during World War II, the plane crash in 1980 off Ustica, or the 1963 catastrophe surrounding the Vajont dam, and frequently explore these stories in relation to rigorous social issues from feminism to working class uprisings. While there are no surprise endings since the stories are based on historical fact, well-researched details shift the point of view of the narratives to focus them on accounts grounded from the bottom up. Instead of retelling the regal history of Turin, for example, the first capital of Italy replete with an elegant Savoy history of profitable markets, a narrator might look at Turin from the standpoint of a southern Italian who relocated to find work in the industrial north of Italy, revealing the everyday world encountered by that individual.[6] Narrators aim to expose and interact with a people's history, showing how the very core of a production, the topic of the performance itself, is concerned with a non-elitist perspective.

Importantly, narrative theater is a media synergy in many ways, which plays a large part in its popularity. It is primarily a performance genre, but certainly the narrators continue to broaden and develop their audiences through television exposure, newspaper coverage, experiments in cinema, script publications (often with DVDs) by major publishing houses sold in major bookstores, and pedagogic endeavors such as workshops. In order to maintain proximity to its origins in performance, I have chosen to analyze aspects of narrative theater through a method related to traditions of mass communication: oratory. Specifically, I am interested in what oratory can tell us about media's public sphere and citizenship. A medium such as television, for example, does not typically involve its audience in a direct manner, and yet even televised narrative theater reveals a space in Italy's public sphere for an oratory that invites participation, intellectual comradeship and growth. While television expresses its own mode of orality, narrative theater's orality is dialogic since it requires attention and collaboration from its audience in a way that television generally does not. If this theater is successful on television such as when Marco Paolini's uninterrupted performance of *Il sergente* broke viewing records in 2007 on *La7*, the one of seven major channels not controlled by the government nor Mediaset, with over 1.2 million spectators,[7] then there are strong implications for an Italian public who is interested in challenging discourse.

Relevant to narrative theater's dialogical engagement with mass audiences are the issues Jürgen Habermas raises in his seminal study *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and that Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge revisit in *The Public Sphere and Experience*.[8] Habermas's concept of the public sphere as an arena for rational discourse on social, political, and cultural issues that concern the

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[6] Narrative theater largely shares methodological practices with microhistory, the investigation of histories via smaller, often overlooked, units with a focus on social and cultural history. The practice originated in Italy in the 1970s with scholars Carlo Ginzburg, Giovanni Levi, and Simona Cerutti among others.

[7] Rita Celi, "La7 sorprende nella sfida degli ascolti con 'Il Sergente' di Marco Paolini," *La Repubblica* (31 Oct 2007), accessible at: http://www.repubblica.it/2007/10/sezioni/spettacoli_e_cultura/sergente-paolini/ascolti-la7/ascolti-la7.html?ref=search.

[8] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991); Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, fwd. Miriam Hansen, trans. Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

public is important for thinking about the work of narrative theater. In suit with Negt and Kluge, I disagree in part with Habermas about the modern decline of the public sphere. In his examination, the public sphere expanded during the industrial era beyond the boundaries of the bourgeoisie as the diffusion of press and propaganda gained momentum to the point where it lost its social exclusivity and with that, its critical rigor. From there, he argues, it was a field for capitalist competition rather than a discursive space. Narrative theater, however, proves that some variant on the ideal notion of the public sphere has been able to withstand the threat of capitalism upon an intellectually free domain, constituting what Negt and Kluge would call an alternative public sphere.

Various scholars have criticized Habermas's study, principally questioning its historical accuracy, its Marxist commitment, and its predilection towards utopian ideals. By examining the implications that narrative theater has on public space, I offer a vision of Italy that considers Habermas's conception, but is more in line with Kluge and Negt's adjustments. They present a counterweight by considering a proletarian public sphere that is concerned with experiences. Importantly, they stake their claims on the belief that not all experiences are governed by capitalist concerns of profitability. Although it might be similarly utopian, I argue that the practice of narrative theater creates a space analogous to Kluge and Negt's in which culture does not control the masses for capitalist purposes, but rather unites people to engage in discourse with the potential for action. Since my overarching goal in this essay is to better understand Italy, it might be more valuable to focus less on the extent to which narrators achieve such an egalitarian public sphere, and more on what the very fact that they strive for it might mean.

Critics sometimes consider Marco Paolini's narrative theater work "civic theater," which emphasizes his predilection for oratory and particularly the professorial way he addresses members of the audience. Païvi Mehtonen's scholarship on mass oratory and political power in the late roman republic helps clarify oratory's function in narrative theater. Mehtonen's work considers a tri-part system of Ciceronian rhetoric that consists of history, argument and fable. She also notes a poetical conception, closer in form to Horatian *ars poetica* and analogous to the epidictic branch of rhetoric that involves praise or blame of well-known characters, which is quite similar to conceptions of satire. Part of the value of this system is that it consists of both formal delivery and entertainment, which is a crucial blend for narrative theater.[9] This tri-part structure of history, argument and fable affords narrative theater a base formula that is valuable to its success across class boundaries.

As with classical oratory, there is a formal dimension to narrative theater since its performance structure creates the opportunity for the presentation of ideas. At times it might seem as though the theater were a classroom, but thanks to the movement's emphasis on improvisation, the narrator can present her story differently tomorrow, or the day after. Still, narrative theater is a site of performance where the narrator might bring her public both to moments of laughter and tears. This dichotomy, Brechtian as much as it is classical in its dual approach to education and entertainment, is helpful in creating a space that will ignite dialogue. It is somewhat different from Habermas's version of the public sphere, which corroded as it became available to middle and working classes. Since the overall frame of each performance is theater, it is not a public sphere in which a reciprocal dialogue can occur. Although

[9] Païvi Mehtonen, "Poetics, Narration, and Imitation: Rhetoric as *Ars Applicabilis*," in *Rhetoric of Cicero in Its Medieval and Early Renaissance Commentary Tradition,* ed. Virginia Cox and John O. Ward (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006), 290-291, 295.

narrators do sometimes give audience members direct opportunity to respond, as when Paolini passes around a microphone at the end of *Io e Margaret Thatcher*, the set-up is not comparable to the early nineteenth century coffee houses where the bourgeoisie debated social issues. The event then encourages dialogue more than it outright practices one. The performance space is not the site of the public sphere per se, but it is where the seed exists.

To some extent, narrative theater exceeds Habermas's views because, despite its intellectual rigor, it is not an exclusive practice in the way that a bourgeoisie-only sphere would be. It is also virtually void of self-promotion. Habermas contends that the corrosion of the public sphere, due to the rise of bourgeois capitalist societies, created circumstances where people presented ideas that quickly became overwrought with special interests and publicity schemes.[10] Such a transformation does not happen with narrative theater. There is no pretense for manipulation nor are there elements of political propaganda in the way that comedians or political satirists such as Beppe Grillo and Roberto Benigni might promote. While the more concrete site of discussion would be elsewhere, such as in a coffee shop after the performance, the dynamic of oratory does create an additional level of dialogic exchange within the performance space. By expressing multiple perspectives as they briefly inhabit several characters in different voices, the narrators model a mode of engagement for the spectators. This in turn creates continuity vital for discussions that can emerge from the performance. Certainly the fact that narrators are still performing shows written twenty years ago such as Marco Baliani's *Kolhaas* and *Corpo di stato* or Laura Curino's *Gli Olivetti* and *Passione* in repertory with new shows is testament to their continued relevance. Further, narrators have performed in many urban and non-urban locations across Italy, so their public is not just an educated set of the bourgeoisie or petit bourgeoisie but rather an economically diverse group. In this way, they promote a cross-class national identity that is thoughtfully rigorous and engaged.

One aspect of the relationship between the orator and the audience that merits consideration here is the power dynamic between the two. Narrators try to lessen this divide, though to some extent it is an unavoidable product of the performance structure. Referring to Althusser's notion that ideology "summons" individuals to assume positions pre-defined through existing dialogue, scholar Robert Morstein-Marx argues that the individual audience member is never actually free to assume a critical stance and reflect upon the speaker's discourse, since she is in fact already complicit in the speaker's framework.[11] This is true for narrative theater if we consider the performance as the framework with its inherent demarcations for the behavior of the audience member (passive) and the narrator (active). Even if the audience member disagrees with the speaker, it would not be appropriate for her to voice her opinion during the show. She must adhere to the framework in which she has entered.

Kluge, conversely, offers an alternative way to consider the narrator-spectator relationship that aims at a greater equilibrium in the power structure of a performance. By focusing on exhibition, he conceives of film reception in a way that endows the spectator with a high level of agency. Through what he terms "the film in the spectator's head," Kluge proposes that since the spectator will appropriate the film in her

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[10] Habermas, 55.

[11] Robert Morstein-Marx, *Mass Oratory and Political Power in the Late Roman Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 15.

mind's eye, we can also think of her as a producer of the film.[12] This idea gives agency back to the public since the construction of meaning becomes a dialogic exchange between the public and the performance. Similarly, narrative theater encourages audience members to "own" the story with their imagination by accentuating the many details left undeveloped. In its lack of set design, costumes, or properties, narrative theater allows the audience to choose how they want to envision various details of the given story—to produce the story within their heads.

Returning to oratory, the aspect of fable is important as it functions in a parallel way. The successful employment of fable was not only a form of diversion, but also an achievement that relied heavily on the hearer's imagination. Nearing the realm of fable we find satire where the speaker exaggerates certain attributes usually of a public figure. By employing similar techniques of praise or blame that classical orators used, narrators color their stories enough to reconnect with any wandering ear even while discussing a serious topic. Elements of fable, improvisation, and satire are among the most overt systems of spectacle in narrative theater, yet they are not extraordinary, but common everyday measures that ensure the listener's focus. This minimalist way in which narrators enhance their performances promotes active viewing on the part of the audience member, which in turn portrays an Italian audience that is very different than the listless viewers who apathetically tolerate media and media dominance via Team Berlusconi. Narrators strive to create an experience that Kluge and Negt might applaud, which grounds the public sphere in a performance event but also allows viewers to transport their own experiences of that event to a different space where they can share and process their ideas. There would be many variables to consider in order to declare satisfactorily whether or not narrators achieve such a goal, but their popularity over decades is promising, and the mere attempt to create such a sphere offers a much needed perspective on the Italian public.

On the most basic level narrative theater is different of course from classical oratory. Its environment is also different from the bourgeoisie coffee houses that account for Habermas's vision of the public sphere, insofar as it is, after all, a performance event. While there are dialogic exchanges that take place during narrative theater performances that range from direct interaction between the narrator and audience to direct address, narrative theater does not create a space for public discourse within the performance as much as it encourages and rehearses public discussions to come. After the narrator has finished her work for the evening, the goal is for the audience members to take up the agency that Kluge and Negt envisioned through alternative public sphere in order to create a space to share and discuss the issues raised by the show. That event, the dissemination of topics brought about by narrative theater, is where the performance practice makes a statement concerning Italians, and indeed Italy. While contemporary mass media conglomerates support spectacle-driven entertainment as much more financially and globally profitable than low-budget "experimental" presentations, narrative theater shows how multifarious social politics can resonate with a mass public. Could Italy be a place where a humane public sphere exists in which both the bourgeoisie and proletariat alike can rationally and rigorously discuss events that merit national attention?

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[12] Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Cooperative Auteur Cinema and Oppositional Public Sphere: Alexander Kluge's Contribution to Germany in Autumn," *New German Critique* 24/25 (Autumn, 1981 – Winter, 1982), 39.