

# Full-Scale Theater Production and Foreign Language Learning

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**Abstract:** *This article reports a case study designed to explore the effectiveness of full-scale, authentic-text theater production for second language learning. Based on the results of preproduction and postproduction tests completed by cast and crew members, as well as the observations of all involved, the authors maintain that the diverse communication tasks necessary for the project, and the motivation generated by a common and public goal, make foreign language theater production particularly conducive to learning. The findings in this study indicated general tendencies toward improved proficiency in speaking and reading and very positive student perceptions with respect to the gains they made individually in various skill areas. Finally, the study revealed increased levels of comfort in using the foreign language.*

## Introduction

Many aspects of foreign language theater production make it an effective means of teaching a foreign language and encouraging the continued study of the language and its culture(s). It involves students in a variety of communicative tasks on a daily basis throughout the numerous phases of production: auditions, rehearsals, textual analysis and discussion, set and costume preparation, performances, and postperformance reflections.

The Italian Theater Workshop (ITW) was a pilot study aiming to explore the various types of interaction and modes of communication that could take place between members of a foreign language theatrical troupe—actors, stage managers, designers, and directors. In this first, pilot year, it was designed as an immersion experience with a limited number of participants in order to gauge its qualitative potential within a postsecondary curriculum, and its quantitative potential for measuring students' proficiency. The ITW proved to be a positive and multifaceted experience that contributed to students' linguistic progress and cultural understanding. First, the long-term focus on a single text provided the opportunity for an in-depth and intricate study of authentic literature. Second, if only in very general terms, the immersion experience helped improve students' proficiency in different skill areas. Third, the physical representation of characters' ideas and values as well as the regular use of gestures and idioms allowed participants to gain an insider's view of certain cultural norms. Fourth, since students took great pride in the project and in its final, public goal, they were highly motivated to devote themselves to competent and accurate communication. Finally, the ITW inspired a true team spirit for learning about language and culture, leading to great satisfaction for individual participants, the theatrical troupe, and the university department as a whole.

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## Foreign Language Theater Production and the Communication Standard

While full-scale foreign language theater production promotes all five Cs (communication, culture, connections, comparisons, and communities) put forth by ACTFL in the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (1999), its greatest potential for proficiency building concerns the numerous communicative functions that theater production necessitates. "Communication is at the heart of second language study, whether the communication takes place face-to-face, in writing, or across centuries through the reading of literature." And since "the acquisition of the ability to communicate in meaningful and appropriate ways with users of other languages" is deemed the ultimate goal of today's foreign language classroom, the authors designed the ITW to investigate the extent to which the process of bringing a dramatic work to life on stage could engage learners in all three subcomponents of the "communication" standard (p. 31).

For one, the ITW required students to "engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, exchange opinions" (Standard 1.1) on different topics, far beyond the contents and context of the theatrical text they were learning to perform. While the general umbrella context of the project was "theater," conversations delved into the details of costume and clothing, fittings and body parts, body movements and facial expressions, the timing of movements and gestures, the use of stage props, the tone or volume of voice, general phonetics, the meaning of individual words or puns, and the expression of emotions according to script details. Moreover, students often had to discuss their daily routines in order to, for example, confirm rehearsal times or justify lateness or absence.

Next, the functions and discourse levels of the interpersonal communication taking place in the ITW also varied notably. Students had to agree and disagree, request, command, and invite and decline offers in different contexts and with different levels of formality. Each member of the troupe had to make suggestions and comments during discussions, set up appointments, provide explanations and clarifications, and execute endless commands. Designers and managers had additional interpersonal communication tasks regarding banking (e.g., withdrawing money, making payments), hunting in secondhand stores for props, buying and building set materials, transporting materials, and gathering props from cast members. Though the real-life interlocutors with whom they engaged in public places most often did not speak Italian, they planned and discussed these responsibilities with one another in Italian. The discourses of speech ranged from simple list making, to sentence-length dialogue contributions, to paragraph-length descriptions and explanations.

Next, the ITW required students to "understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics." (Standard 1.2) In addition to understanding and interpreting the primary authentic text with which they were working and the directors' spoken language pertaining to the text, students were also expected to work with a variety of topics and text types. These ranged from the numerous handout supplements provided by the director containing biographical/historical information, to organizational information about rehearsals, to detailed lists of stage vocabulary and costume and set elements, to notes on acting.

Finally, the ITW required students to "present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners and readers on a variety of topics." (Standard 1.3) That is, in addition to the final and collective project, which was the presentation of Dario Fo's (1958) play *La Marcolfa* to an audience of Italian students, instructors, and members of the surrounding community, workshop participants had presentational responsibilities throughout the 10-week experience. Actors had to present themselves from time to time in terms of their character's state of mind, mood, or reaction to another character on a given day or for a given scene. Stage managers and designers had to compile and present to the whole ensemble their research findings, ideas for costumes and props, and the drawings they made during different stages of conceptualization and construction.

In sum, members of a foreign language theater troupe spent one to two hours a day interacting with one another and with authentic literary and cultural materials, both at rehearsals and design meetings. These spontaneous daily interactions were based on a broad variety of information exchanges that represent all three subcomponents of the communication standard and were all essential to the success of the production.

## Drama Techniques and the Foreign Language Classroom

Drama techniques have comprised an important aspect of foreign language teaching methods for several decades. From the direct methods of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the communicative methods of more recent years, mini-skits and "situations" have played an invaluable role in helping students pool their resources, exchange information, and achieve greater oral proficiency in the language of study. Generally speaking, teachers, researchers, textbook writers, and students alike find drama techniques beneficial because they provide learners with opportunities to speak in less controlled and more creative ways. Within a classroom setting, they bring learners closer to what real-life use of the target language might entail. It is through the dramatic worlds of situations and role-plays, therefore, that learners truly begin to explore the sociopragmatic uses of verbal as well as nonverbal language, and have to employ

comprehensive publications to date is Bräuer's (2002) collection which reports the experiences and findings of educators in various countries who use theater games, techniques, and productions for foreign language teaching. Current scholarship, however, is by no means exhaustive; researchers have yet to study in detail linguistic gains made by students who participate in the complex process of producing an authentic play in a total immersion environment. Moreover, no study has discussed the effect of students' participation in other production roles, such as assistant directors, stage managers, and costume, set, and lighting designers. Finally, to date no study has discussed the benefits of theater for proficiency development or student motivation in any sort of quantitative terms.

### Study

The directors postulated that students would benefit greatly from participating in a full-scale theatrical production of an authentic dramatic text in a total immersion environment. The authors predicted that the wide range of communicative tasks necessary for actors, stage managers, and designers alike would lead to improved competence in interpersonal, interpretative, and presentational modes of communication. Furthermore, they hypothesized that the collaborative nature of the project, and the satisfaction to be derived from achieving a common, public goal would reduce students' inhibitions and help them feel more confident communicating in the target language.

### Experiential Description

#### Participant Selection Criteria and Profiles

The 11 participants in the ITW were at various stages of foreign language study and had various levels of proficiency.<sup>2</sup>

The only prerequisite for auditioning was a minimum of two semesters of language study. Graduate students and heritage speakers were not eligible. The multilevel design allowed the authors to examine whether the experience was particularly effective for any one specific level. But more importantly, this heterogeneous-grouping approach was the most efficient way to utilize the script; the more experienced students took on the demanding lead roles, while the less experienced ones had slightly smaller or less challenging roles. Had the experience been limited only to advanced students or only to beginning/intermediate students, some participants would have had roles that were either too difficult or too easy, making it more difficult to gauge their progress. Furthermore, the directors postulated that mixing the linguistic levels would provide for the creation of a tight-knit language community in which the more experienced students would serve as models for the younger community members not only in the context of the theatrical production, but also with regard to their Italian studies in general.

Once chosen, participants completed profile sheets with information about their backgrounds. The profiles revealed that two of the 11 subjects had studied Italian in high school. The rest began with their university career and ranged in terms of experience from two to seven semesters. Six of the 11 subjects had chosen Italian as one of their major or minor degree tracks, and six had studied abroad in Italy for at least one semester prior to the ITW experience. Nine of the 11 participants were enrolled concurrently in an Italian language or literature course and none of the subjects had L2 theater experience. The highest levels of oral proficiency, as determined by unofficial oral proficiency interviews conducted during the preproduction

**Table 1**

PROFILES OF ALL STUDENT PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR ROLES

Participant Category	Semesters of Study Abroad	Current Course 0 = no course 200-level = language/culture 3/400-level = literature/film	Years of Italian	Major/Minor Area of Specialization for BA Degree
A	2	499	7.5	major
A	2	385	1.5	minor
A	0	201	0.5	0
A	1	0	3.0	minor
A	0	236	1.5	major
A	2	499	2.5	major
SM	0	0	1.5	0
SM	1	499	3.5	major
SM	2	385	1.5	minor
D	0	385	4.5	major
D	0	201	0.5	major

*Note.* A = actor; SM = stage manager; D = designer.

mate space with a capacity of around 100. Each of the three performances was oversold including 30 spots of standing room. Italian professors encouraged their students to attend the show, and some made attendance mandatory. One even included the script in the class syllabus, while others offered extra credit for writing reviews of the show. The play also drew the attention of administrators and faculty from other departments of the university, as well as members of the local community who were interested in Italian culture.

### Roles and Responsibilities of the Actors

The actors' main tasks were to learn and deliver their lines and to develop their characters based on information in the script. Actors worked on delivery, gestures, pronunciation, and rhythm at every rehearsal. Midway through the rehearsal period, they were asked to submit a written character analysis discussing the character's motivations and personal history. During warm-ups and rehearsals, actors were routinely called upon to explain the motivating factors behind their behavior, share their character's unspoken thoughts or emotions, discuss their character's personal history, or comment on cause and effect relationships in their exchanges with the other characters. Actors had to collaborate with the costume designer to choose attire appropriate to their personalities, and be measured and later fitted for their costumes. They also collaborated with the set designer on the logistics pertaining to the use and storage of props and other scenic elements.

### Roles and Responsibilities of the Stage Managers

Stage managers had the widest variety of tasks throughout the process. In the beginning phases, they were responsible for keeping a detailed record of all instructions given by the director to the actors concerning blocking and stage business.<sup>3</sup> Thus in the beginning, accurate listening comprehension was crucial to the stage managers' role, as the directors often altered blocking and stage business from rehearsal to rehearsal.

Once general blocking was established and actors had begun to memorize their lines, the stage managers' duties shifted to include "feeding lines" to actors as they struggled to remember them, while modeling correct pronunciation. Once actors had memorized their lines and were able to run through the show without requesting prompts, the role of the stage managers again changed slightly. During each run-through at this stage in the process, the stage managers took careful notes on missed lines, mispronunciations, mistakes in blocking, forgotten gestures or stage business—in sum, they were responsible for keeping a critical eye on the production in much the same way as the directors did. At the end of each rehearsal in this phase, the stage managers would read all of their notes for the actors' and directors' consideration.

Other extremely important responsibilities for stage managers were the creation, assembly, and proofreading of a program for the show, as well as posters and other advertisements such as flyers and ads in the student newspaper. Finally, during tech week and during the productions themselves, stage managers had to coordinate the setup of scenic elements, the placement of props, the welcoming of audience members, and the sale of tickets. They were available to attend to any problems that the actors or designers encountered. And they were in charge of organizing the striking of the set immediately following the last performance.

### Roles and Responsibilities of the Designers

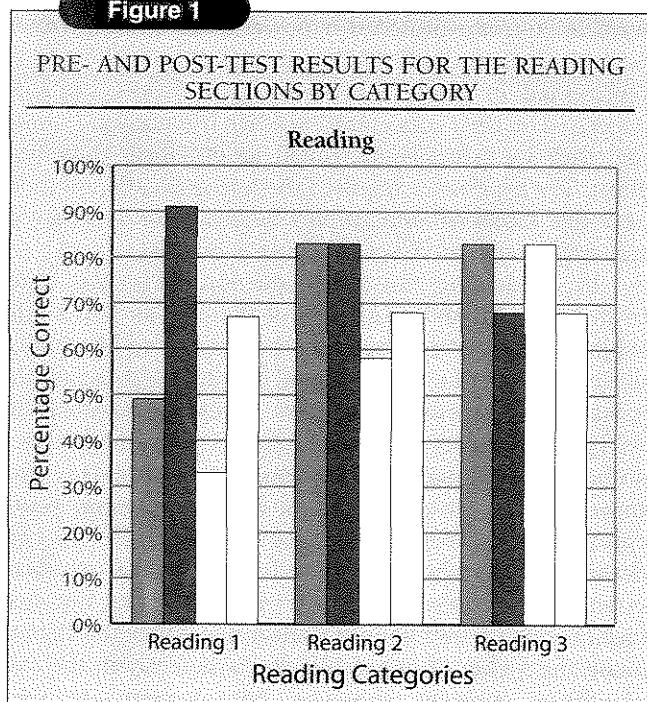
The costume designer was responsible for makeup as well as clothing, while the set designer saw to the details of the set, lighting, and sound. The designers attended about one third of the rehearsals in order to participate in daily warm-up exercises, further their comprehension of the text, and learn the nuances of actions and lines, which were crucial to the timing and precision of their work. At design meetings, they presented and discussed their ideas in the target language, using vocabulary specific to their tasks. The designers researched the trends in clothing and furniture in Italy in the historical period in which the play was set. The costume designer presented a collage of pictures and sketches for the costumes for each character, while the set designer presented a ground plan of the theater with placement of scenic elements included.

The designers were also responsible for seeking out needed materials and assembling their projects. This included constructing, borrowing, renting, or buying the necessary materials, according to projected budgets. Both designers spent one-on-one time with the directors searching for various costume or scenic elements in local stores, discussing merits and disadvantages of their findings in Italian.

### Experimental Description Preproduction Assessment

The preproduction testing phase included oral and written exams. First, each participant sat for an oral proficiency interview (OPI) with the faculty advisor/co-director trained in this field. Though they explored the variety of content and contexts typical of official OPIs, the interviews in this study were unofficial because they were not double rated by two certified testers. Second, each participant completed a written exam testing grammar, reading, and writing. It was based contextually on a five-page excerpt from another short comedy by Fo. The text selected was similar in style and structure to *La Marcolfa* (which they had not yet seen or read) but different in plot, social context, and vocabulary.<sup>4</sup> Students' knowledge of vocabulary was assessed broadly by asking them to circle every word they certainly did not know or could not guess by context

**Figure 1**



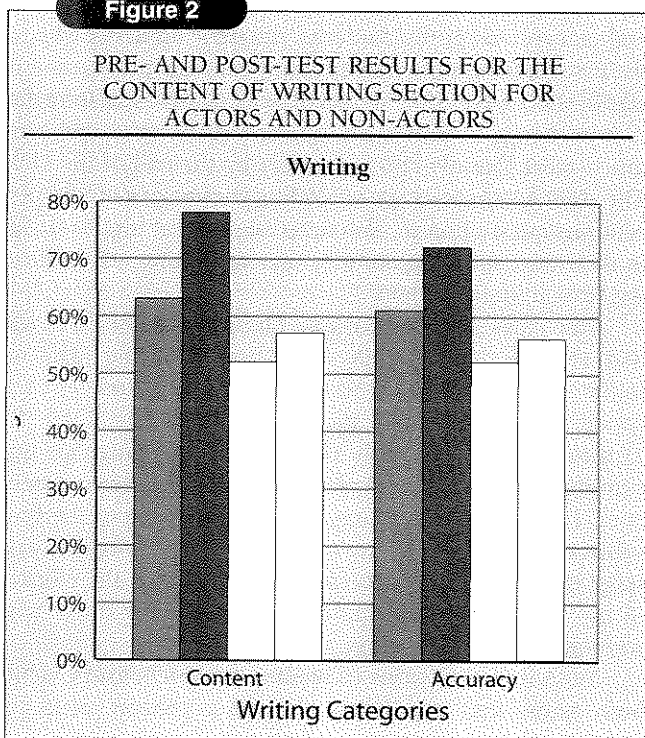
*Reading Comprehension*

This portion of the pre- and postproduction tests examined participants' ability to understand basic character motivations (Reading 1), plot details (Reading 2), and character identification (Reading 3). (See Figure 1.)

*Writing*

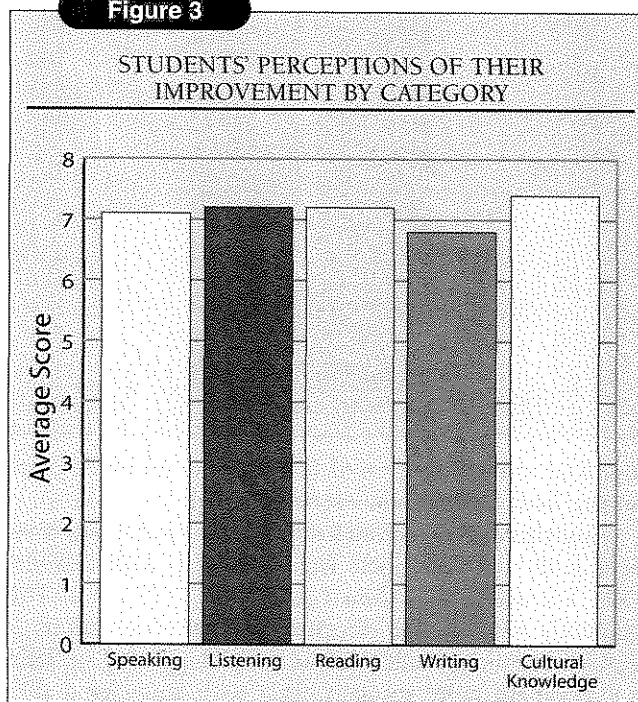
The writing segments of the pre- and postproduction tests

**Figure 2**



consisted of a 150-word summary of the same literary excerpt. Scores were based half on content (number and accuracy of points made about the characters and plot) and grammatical competence (number and type of errors made). Generally speaking, actors and non-actors showed tendencies toward improvement in both the content and accuracy of their writing. (See Figure 2.)

**Figure 3**



*Language Structures and Linguistic Expressions*

The sections of the pre- and postproduction tests devoted to language structures and linguistic expressions included grammar questions focusing on the formal and informal register, the subjunctive mood, and object pronouns; pronunciation questions asking where the stress fell on certain words, and translation questions based on idiomatic expressions. These results of this segment proved difficult to quantify and assess. Noteworthy, however, was the fact that non-actors (designers and stage managers) scored highest on the translation of idiomatic expressions in the posttests (50–70% improvement), and that the non-actors had better results even though they were not engaged in the memorization and use of such phrases on a daily basis.

*Students' Perceptions of their Improvements and "Feeling of Ease"*

Participants rated their perception of how much improvement they made in 27 different categories pertaining to speaking, listening, reading, writing, and culture. Unanimously, they gauged their individual improvements in every skill and subcategory of that skill (see Figure 3) as

improvement on questions about character motivations in the reading categories 1 and 2 (see Figure 1), they surprisingly scored lower on the questions about plot details (i.e., “who did what and when”) in the postproduction test. This result, however, was likely due to a fault in the wording of the questions, since the students’ writing samples suggest an improved ability to accurately summarize the plot of a theatrical excerpt (see Figure 2). Students’ self-perceptions also indicated a general improvement in their ability to read and comprehend literature. They reported perceiving much improvement in their reading skills (a general average of 7.5 with subskills such as “improved understanding of new vocabulary” and “feeling at ease reading” ranging from 7–8).

The most encouraging aspect of the various posttest results was the students’ overwhelmingly positive response to the ITW experience as a whole. There was no skill or subskill for which participants did not find the ITW to be helpful; all ratings ranged from “some improvement” to “much improvement” (averages of 6.75–8.25). Examining individual categories, it becomes apparent that the highest ratings were given to: (1) knowledge of cultural gestures, (2) use of new vocabulary in speaking, (3) knowledge of idioms, and (tied) (4) feeling at ease with reading, and feeling at ease with listening. The students’ responses pertaining to questions regarding their “feeling at ease” with each skill were also high (see Figure 4).

The notable scores for cultural gestures can be attributed to the fact that theater production made language living, dynamic, and physical. Foreign language play production required the use of countless gestures, whether to accompany one’s lines or to react to the lines or comments of others.

It is probable that students perceived improvement in their own ability to use new vocabulary first because new words and expressions were used with great frequency, and second because full comprehension of the words was essential to successful completion of their daily tasks. Students also perceived a high level of improvement in their knowledge of Italian idioms. This is substantiated by their gradual incorporation of expressions gleaned from the authentic text in their everyday conversations during “down time” at rehearsals and design meetings.

The authors maintain that students’ consistent practice with one text over an extended period of time helped them gain confidence in their ability to understand advanced, authentic materials. In addition, the authors postulate that the students’ comfort level with reading improved because of the depth in which the troupe studied the script, and the level of detail that characterized daily discussions about specific scenes, sentences, or character reactions.

Finally, students’ feeling of ease with respect to listening is attributable to the daily immersion environment. Since instructions, explanations, and discussions pertain-

ing to the text as well as to the details of play production always took place in Italian, students grew more confident in their ability to understand near-native Italian spoken at a regular pace and on a variety of subjects.

More generally speaking, the fact that students reported that the experience made them feel more at ease with all skills is revealing (see Figure 4). At the heart of the ITW was the fostering of a safe language community environment, which allowed participants to trust, inspire, and help each other in their shared struggle to master the difficult and sometimes rather abstract task of “becoming more fluent” in another language. Their comfort levels with using the language grew not only within the microcosm of this theatrical project, but also among Italian speakers in the broader university community. At the reception following the last performance, for example, the participants were enthusiastically chatting in Italian with faculty members about their experience. Several participants remarked that the ITW had prepared them very well for study abroad or for participating more freely in class discussions. And, very tellingly, every single ITW participant from 2002 who had not graduated or gone abroad returned for auditions in 2003, stating that in terms of personal achievement, the ITW was the best experience in their Italian “career” thus far. Their unflinching enthusiasm for the experience underlines its educational value and its potential for inspiring ongoing study of a language and its culture(s).

### Limitations and Suggestions

The pilot study production of *La Marcolfa* in March 2002 was an important first step that gave the authors insight into the manifold components of a full-scale foreign language theater production. Working with a small number of participants gave the authors a clear idea of how to balance the number and scope of activities that each category of participant (i.e., actor, stage manager, designer) could be expected to fulfill, and they found that certain roles could be expanded or changed by the alteration or addition of production responsibilities. The authors discerned that in a future production, a longer time frame would allow for the incorporation of written analyses of the literary work collected in a writing portfolio, and in-depth discussions of the play’s place in the literary canon.

The pilot study also made apparent several ways in which the pre- and postproduction testing could have been rendered more controlled and accurate, thereby lending itself to more statistically oriented analyses. As the nature of the ITW lends itself to the use of a cast and crew with various levels of proficiency, certain variables related to participants’ backgrounds, previous language study, or concurrent enrollment in another Italian course will always be present and are difficult to address. However, the authors suggest more fine-tuned testing with regard to grammatical structures, choosing, for example, one or two specific

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### Adverbs and Imperatives

Purpose: Practice giving imperatives, work with adverbs (alternatively, the game could be done with adjectives), create a sense of unity among students

Time: 10 minutes

Description: One student leaves the room and the director whispers an adverb to him or her (or they may choose their own adverb). When the person re-enters the room, the other students must give orders, using the imperative form. The person performs these orders according to the selected adverb. For example, let us say that Marco has chosen the word “nervously.” He re-enters the room, and Anna tells him, “Shake Patrizio’s hand!” Marco must shake Patrizio’s hand in a nervous manner. The class must guess the chosen adverb. Alternatively, the class itself may choose the adverb, and when Marco shakes their hands, the class members are the ones to respond according to the adverb. When Marco shakes Patrizio’s hand, Patrizio is then the one who gives a nervous handshake. In this case, it is Marco who must guess the adverb.

### Alibi

Purpose: Practice with the past tense, work with vocabulary words, encourage students to pay attention to details of the environment in which a work of literature is set, encourage spontaneous communication

Time: 10 to 15 minutes

Description: Two participants leave the room and must decide upon a story to explain what they were doing from 9:00 to 11:00 p.m. the previous night. They return to the room (one at a time) and are cross-examined by the “jury,” composed of the rest of the class. The jury asks specific questions to try and discover discrepancies in their stories (e.g., “But what color was the car?” “What did you order at the restaurant?” “How many minutes of previews were there before the movie?”).

### Create a Story

Purpose: Practice with past tense (in Italian, with the *passato remoto*), encourage spontaneous communication

Time: 5 to 10 minutes

Description: The group sits in a circle, and the director starts a fairy tale. Moving around the circle, each member must add to the tale. This can be done on the level of individual words, sentence fragments, full sentences, or even paragraphs.

### Distractions

Purpose: Teach basic principles of farce, force students to think on their feet

Time: 5 minutes

Description: Two volunteers are selected. They begin a scene in which one person has a strong desire to impress the other—a first date, perhaps. The other groups’ members interfere in the scene, moving chairs, scattering papers, making strange noises, etc. The actors in the scene cannot “see” physical people causing the distractions, only their effects. The person desirous of creating a good impression must try to smooth-talk his or her way out of the embarrassing situation.

### Minefield

Purpose: Energize group, practice giving accurate directions, emphasize the importance of specificity, and provide a starting point for a discussion about the art of theater in general

Time: at least 15 minutes

Description: Students are divided into two teams and separated by an empty space of perhaps 10 to 15 feet. All participants take off their shoes and toss them into the central space; each shoe now represents a land mine. One team is made up of soldiers who have been captured by the enemy, the other students are their comrades who are trying to free them. The enemy has performed medical experiments on the soldiers, however, so they are now blind (that is, blindfolded!) One at a time, students must talk a companion across the field, being very specific with their directions (e.g., “Now take a very tiny step to the right”). If the student touches a shoe, they are eliminated. The stakes can be raised by imposing a time limit, by having two pairs go at once, or by having other students create distracting noises (e.g., barking dogs, shouting prison guards, machine guns).

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**Appendix B**
*Italian Theater Workshop Postproduction Questionnaire*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Role in the production: \_\_\_\_\_ Years of formal Italian study: \_\_\_\_\_

Are you currently enrolled in a class? No \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

What classes have you taken at Notre Dame in Italian? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you studied abroad? No \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ How long? \_\_\_\_\_

What classes did you take during this program (offered in Italian)? \_\_\_\_\_

Please rate the improvement level you perceived of your own Italian proficiency:

(S = speaking; L = listening; R = reading; W = writing; C = culture)

	Much improvement		Some Improvement			Slight Improvement			None		
S- General pronunciation	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
S- Intonation	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
S- Accent	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
S- Use of new vocabulary	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
S- Use of grammar rules	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
S- General accuracy	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
S- General fluency	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
S- Feeling at ease	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
L- General comprehension	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
L- Vocabulary recognition	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
L- Grammar recognition	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
L- Inference skills	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
L- Feeling at ease	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
R- General Comprehension	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
R- Grammar recognition	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
R- Vocabulary	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
R- Inference skills	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
R- Feeling at ease	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
W- General fluency	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
W- Use of vocabulary	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
W- Use of grammar rules	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
W- General accuracy	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
W- Feeling at ease	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
C- General cultural knowledge	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
C- Knowledge of idioms	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
C- Knowledge of customs	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
C- Knowledge of gestures	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0

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