

How is Drama & Theatre taught in Italy ?

Drama & Theatre are neither a curricular subject in Italy nor there are “drama/theatre teachers”. School children and students are given the opportunity of experiencing theatre as well as dance, music and visual arts thanks to their teachers’ personal choice. The teachers mostly become partners or cooperative with drama experts working on a project . The project may be financially backed either by the school itself or the local government , since it has educational aims and artistic qualities . How long the project lasts depends on various factors, and the same goes for repeating it on the basis of an educational plan, which involves gradual knowledge learning and developing skills. Why a partnership is needed can be referred to the history of the Italian Republic as well as to the Italian school and theatre history, the way they have been developing since the postwar years up to the present day.

The Italian formative line turns towards four directions: *acting*, *seeing* (amateur or professional) theatre, *thinking* about the different experiences in order to increase the pedagogical and artistic research, *gathering* all information and material.

Different approaches are obviously set up according to different ages. Methods which are based on drama play activities, movement, space, disguise and so on, are mainly used with the youngest . All these activities substantially aim at making the children express themselves and easing their social relationships ; all their sensory stimuli (visual, olfactory, tactile and so on) are spurred on and different materials are used during such experiences, which therefore can be considered introductory or akin to theatre .

The young are generally offered preliminary activities based on how to use their body in space, their voice, to interact with people, to improvise, to improve manual skills, etc. , besides the specific activity aimed at putting on an actual performance . The script may be chosen among a wide range of theatre genres and art performances, such as the Classics or contemporary plays, the stage adaptation of a literary work from different genres, rewriting with variations, stage design and script or original script concerning topical issues, and so on.

The various genres of playwriting as well as the various theatrical forms and techniques are also taken into consideration: comedies, tragedies, farce, pantomimes , puppet and shadow theatre, physical dance theatre, musical dance theatre, storytelling, *mise en espace*, happening, multimedia theatre, etc.

Setting the stage in relation to the kind of the available performance space claims particular attention ; a few stage elements and functional props are often used, since Italian schools have usually very limited areas which are fit for drama performances. The same attention is given to recorded or live music as well to the sound effects and to the lights .

How the performers work , depends mainly on the kind of the performance “text” and poetics as well as on the professional quality and taste of the adult leading that itinerary. This adult may be either a Maths or even a Classics teacher, who is also a theatre expert out of choice , or a professional theatre expert; when a partnership has been made, it can involve two or more people.

What is highly stressed in Italy is that any drama activity must start from “the pedagogical situation” i.e. how that group of schoolchildren or students are like and what they can do. Once their situation is known, the drama experience which best fits those people and their background is a consequent choice. This means that theatre experts or partners must have clear goals to carry out a drama experience: a teaching and/or learning aim, social relationship improvement, beside emotional, artistic, aesthetical ...aims.

Consequently, first of all, performing / acting must start from the answers following to the following questions: what, when, how, where, why, with whom, to /for whom ?



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A brief historical outline

The School programmes of the Italian Democratic Republic (1946) gave the primary school teachers some suggestions about how “dramatization” and puppet theatre might be used with 6-10 years old pupils. Afterwards, the same suggestions were given to the teachers of the infant school (3-5 years old children). Compulsory school attendance was then extended from 5 to 8 years in 1962 by establishing the middle school (the so called Lower Secondary School, (11-13 years old pupils).

If a primary or secondary school teacher was keenly interested in theatre, a drama performance was put on at the end of the school year, and it was mostly related to religious or national festivals.

The literature subject, including theatre works in the senior high schools, specializing in classical studies or science education, (five years course of studies), or high schools, for training people to become primary school teachers and vocational schools, (four years course of studies), was the student’s opportunity of coming into contact with drama. This way students get to know and enjoy ancient Greek or Latin authors’ plays as well as the authors of foreign literatures, while learning L2 (French, English, German). A performance based on these works might have taken place, but it would still have happened at the teachers’ discretion.

Turning point

What happened in the ‘70s, over that decade of the last century, marked a turning point in the relationship between school and theatre. The phenomenon which is known as “*Animazione teatrale*” gave rise both to the so called *Teatro per l’infanzia e la gioventù* (drama groups of professional actors chose to address their works to children and the young as their main audience) and the *teatro “dei” ragazzi o della scuola*, (drama acted by and addressed to the children, the students and drama played in and supported by schools), arrived during the following decade. Education and theatre professional people joined their forces closely to recognize the central role of pupils, their right of expressing themselves by different drama and artistic forms and languages. Teaching how to be creative, to make plans, to communicate, became a crucial point both from the cognitive-educational point of view and the emotional and aesthetic one, thanks to their role played in growing and educating a person, facilitating his relationship with the group or the community to which he belongs, at the same time.

School is a laboratory, and drama performing is a workshop!

It is in the 90’s decade that this research based on theory and practice reached its peak, as School Theatre Seasons were set up: there were almost one hundred, different categories, when they were registered countrywide in 1999/2000. Such phenomena took place only in Italy and those drama performances became socially noticeable thanks to the artistic and educational qualities of the *Teatro Scuola*.

The first protocol was signed in 1995 and stressed how important it was for drama in school to grow so as to educate young pupils.

Other protocols were signed in the meanwhile. The most important among them, allowed an event called *Palcoscenico del Teatro della Scuola, (Drama school on stage Season)*, in 2007 and 2009, since the Ministry granted funding. It was a national event in which the different trends referring to the contents and the form of drama in Italian schools, were made public. Furthermore it was possible to test how teachers and experts teamed up and to appreciate the quality of their work; however, most of all students, primary and secondary school, professors, actors, theatre experts, parents had the opportunity of a retraining course on that same occasion.

(Note: compulsory school attendance was then extended from 8 to 10 years in 2006, however now it is not clearly understood yet if such a span of further years should be during school time or, partially, training as



Partner di

IDEA

Associazione Nazionale per la Promozione e la Ricerca della Cultura Teatrale nella Scuola e nel Sociale
www.agitateatro.it info@agitateatro.it ass.agita@virgilio.it

International Drama/Theatre and
Education Association

Ente di formazione con accreditamento al MIUR, decreto del 5/7/2013 Direttiva Ministeriale n. 90/2003 an apprentice, in regard to the several Government Ministries following one another and their different regulations . The high school has been liable to changes according to their course of studies and programmes to be followed in five years. At the present time reducing the course from 5 to 4 years is under discussion).

The present situation

The present situation of drama in schools is worrying, since it is tightly connected to the situation of Italian schools which are subjected to cuts and orderings that we consider having little to do with actual reform or European and international parameter adjustment.

The AGITA association has been pointing out the situation for a while by its “observatory” monitoring of the national situation. A swing from school theatre to community theatre is to be reported, and this might really be interesting, whether schools were open and interacting with its territory and other socio-cultural meeting agencies. Unfortunately this is not what happens, except for isolated occasions , in spite of their involving results.

- The School Drama Seasons have approximately been reduced to thirty, since schools do not offer “product” enough.
- There is a sharp drop in experiencing the Classics’ heritage.
- Professional drama performances specifically addressed to school audiences have been reduced because of the strict limiting regulations concerning field days (and the same goes for museums, exhibitions, concerts, etc.).
- Drama workshops in the high school are mostly out of school hours and are not compulsory.
- Drama activities may be economically supported by the pupils’ families if the school has no available funds.
- Teachers’ training and retraining is no longer compulsory and, in any case, the Education Ministry in charge does not support them.
- Decreasing work and job cuts concern both the educational and the artistic areas.
- University does not guarantee the future teachers or freelance experts’ drama training, not even information about such a heritage of experiences, studies, highly qualified practice which have been gathered over the past years, and whose documentation can variously be provided.
- Italy , together with other countries, has signed the protocol in order to celebrate the World Theatre Day on the 27th of March; however, the protocol signed by the Education Ministry and the Ministry of Cultural Heritage in December 2012, subscribed to by some national associations, Agita included, has difficulty to get off the ground.

Closing remarks

Agita, which is a national self-funding association, regularly struggles to claim attention and find the solution to such problems, by using all its available means, devoting all energy and mind to the cause, out of a sense of serving. The “Seasons web”, (*RA.RE project*), which we developed in 2013, is meant to try to find concrete answers to the Drama School situation and the training issue.

We are equally convinced that projects of Drama education can be strengthened, if European countries can develop better communications with one another, if they have more frequent occasions of meeting, exchanging ideas, views and planning. The World Congress of Idea which took place in Paris in 2013, highlighted that recognizing drama and arts practice in general, their educational role in developing critical judgement had the same difficulties in all European countries.



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The economical crisis is raised to justify school, culture, art and research cuts. The experts and all the Parisian Congress participants shared the same disheartening impression: does anybody really care about the young citizens, theatre, culture, art, research, beyond the appropriate scientific speeches and fitting words? Is that a nightmare?

The highest authorities should pay more attention, be proud of promoting and investing more resources... is this a dream?

Loredana Perissinotto
President Agita

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