Dramatic Interactions

Dramatic Interactions: Teaching Languages, Literatures, and Cultures through Theater— Theoretical Approaches and Classroom Practices

Edited by

Colleen Ryan and Nicoletta Marini-Maio

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To our students, who have inspired our work and friendship.

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PREFACE

DOING AND EXPERIENCING THEATER IN THE CULTURE OF THE DECIDEDLY FREE

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> Moral certainty is always a sign of cultural inferiority. The more uncivilized the man, the surer he is that he knows precisely what is right and what is wrong. . . . The truly civilized man is always skeptical and tolerant. . . . His culture is based on "I am not too sure."
> —H. L. Mencken

In my essay included in the body of this volume I argue the cultural and pedgagogical urgency for guiding our students through and toward theatrical uncertainty. In this preface I would like to situate my interest in uncertainty by outlining its relevance to the considerable shift in my research agenda in recent years. My current research project, tentatively titled "Images of American 'Unculture' in Contemporary French and Francophone Theater," might seem distant from "dramatic interactions" and performance pedagogy, unless of course we consider the essential relationship between theatrical performance and human culture. The project has broadened my understanding of the culture behind the theatrical art and has taught me a great deal about how the undialectical, "uncultural" orientation of my home culture affects the potential for understanding, approaching, and doing theater in America from critical, artistic, and pedagogical points of view. In short, we live and work in an undialectical culture of certainty that is correspondingly untheatrical. It is not that French culture, as opposed to American culture, has it right. French social codes and conventions are in some ways more burdensome, rigorous, and artificial than ours. But overall the French as a people have a more uncertain world view, which renders them more open than Americans to being wrong. They are more dialectically predisposed to acknowledging the fundamental contradictions of human culture and therefore to realizing

they will always need to evolve culturally. Consequently, they more readily embrace the fundamental theatricality of life.

My project examines how prominent post-1960 French playwrights represent "America" and "Americans," especially in terms of what the French (among other foreign cultures) perceive to be the extraordinarily uncritical collective consciousness of Americans and the alternative cultural "reality" it has engendered for the United States and the world. In our globalizing world, "American unculture" extends beyond the geographical location of the United States. Régis Debray, for example, refers to a "homo americanus," a creature and a perspective which is dominant in the United States but encountered throughout the world (203). Since Tocqueville pondered this anti-intellectual legacy in the nineteenth century, in today's context of the United States's global hegemony in an increasingly globalized world, the French conceptualization of it has transformed into what Jean Baudrillard has termed American "unculture." Baudrillard and others believe this unculture results from an undialectical approach to history and the present, one which tends to dismiss or oversimplify the contradiction, conflict, and nuance (read "uncertainty") underlying all forms of sociocultural practice, including and perhaps especially, theater. Unculture is reflected in those American values and practices that the French find fascinating as well as culturally and historically regressive, and consequently problematic, and, I would add, untheatrical at the core: individualism, hyper-patriotism, provincialism-puritanism, religious fundamentalism, materialism-commercialism, a pioneer-cowboy-lawman mentality, militarism, gangsterism, violence, a cultural obsession with spectacle and entertainment (Hollywood), and with all this, a refusal of social community.

Most of the essays included in this volume deal with pedagogical applications of theater/performance in the Western world. The United States stands out against neighboring Western cultures in that it is predominantly an undialectical culture, one which is less disposed to understanding or engaging what Terry Eagleton refers to as "culture as critique": "Culture in this sense arises when civilization begins to seem self-contradictory." All culture is contradictory (**"**civilization in the very act of realizing some human potentials, also damagingly suppresses others"), but it takes "dialectical thought" to flesh out the fact that "culture is not some vague fantasy of fulfillment, but a set of potentials bred by history and subversively at work within it" (22-23). A dialectical approach to life and to art will take serious account of this cultural uncertainty. The undialectical unculture of the United States is not comfortable with uncertainty, and consequently it has a problem with theatricality.

In an essay on the subject of "acting Italian" in the teaching of foreign language and culture, William Van Watson explores theater as a culturally specific practice by contrasting the intrinsic theatricality of Italian culture with American culture. He begins his discussion by reminding us that "the essence of drama is conflict," a conflict which responds to the inherent contradictions of culture. He then draws a noteworthy contrast between Italian and American cultures in the way that each culture works semiotically, that is, the way each one distinguishes signs:

> To be American is to want to mistake the sign of the thing for the thing itself. Italians do not make this mistake. . . . Theater as an art form is an amalgam of semiotic systems, and so consequently, two cultures having disparate conceptions of the sign will also have disparate conceptions of theater. In semiotic terms, then, Italians know that the signs are duplicitous, that they are constituted of signifier and signified, and that the relationship between these parts can be arbitrary and even perverse. . . . The Anglo-American position is comparatively semiotically naïve, believing in an imagined primordial wholeness of an Ur-sign. (51-52)

Sound familiar? Americans prefer the certainty of (illusionary) realism in their art and their culture, they prefer the non-conflictual illusion of certainty conveyed by happy endings, and "[a]s a formal aesthetic, Realism attempts to minimize the disparity between the signifier and the signified, a disparity with which Italians are relatively comfortable, while Anglo-Americans are not" (73). Jean Baudrillard has challenged this "referential" perspective insofar as his theory of hyperreality identifies the major paradigm shift from this sort of ideological (semiotic) understanding of cultural communication to what Baudrillard believes is the post-ideological, post-semiotic condition of hyperreality. But I agree wholeheartedly with the crux of Van Watson's argument, which, for me, amounts to the fact that, like the French and unlike the Americans, the Italians tend to discern and engage the inherently arbitrary, contradictory, dialectical nature of cultural awareness. Furthermore, the American lack of discernment is exacerbated by the increasingly high-tech and consumerist mediation of reality.

In Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, everyday reality has become indistinguishable from its mediated, commodified, high-tech representations: reality equals hype. In addition, Baudrillard points out the Americans' belief that they represent an "achieved utopia" (*America* 77), a belief that has been cemented by the "problem" of U.S. global hegemony: the more hegemonic we are, the more certain and the less dialectical and theatrical we become. Consequently, I would argue that the issue is not so much America's lack of cultural awareness as its developing indifference to cultural nuance and contradiction. Americans are comfortably yet

recklessly certain of the certainty of their culture (of their cultural superiority), within which they nurture a self-image of "achieved utopia." We foreign language teachers, with our "near native" attachments to non-U.S. cultures, might feel we are more dialectically sensitive to the biases of American unculture in which we live and work; but even if this is true, we do theater with students who are, for the most part, wholly immersed in a labyrinth of unculture of which they are more consummate, polished products than we.

Theater is culture. For our purposes, it is a product of the teachers who teach it and of the students who practice it. The understanding of theater and the theatrical sensibilities that we pass on to our students must take into account our students' undialectical preconceptions of theater. Doing and experiencing theater within an unculture consummated through corporate, consumerist, hyper-tech mediations is not the same as it was yesterday—it does not have the same implications—and it is not the same as it is elsewhere in the world. When I speak of American unculture, I do not want to imply that all Americans, all our students and our colleagues, are uncultured, but that all Americans—academics, artists, and intellectuals among others—must to some degree reconcile themselves and accommodate their lifestyles to a mass culture whose technocratic and materialist-consumerist lifestyle tends toward the undialectical and totalitarian.[1] We all must act and signify within this cultural system. We feel, of course, that we have both the will and the political and institutional freedom to create. American universities grant us a great deal of freedom to incorporate varying shapes, forms, and degrees of theater into our classrooms, without the threat of censure or control. We are convinced that America means freedom and there is no reason to doubt our solid institutional guarantee of freedom to create pedagogically and theatrically. However, as Tocqueville pointed out over a century ago, the political guarantee of freedom does not necessarily translate into social, cultural, or institutional freedom; and theater is culture. How cognizant are we of the invisible fencing that corrals us? We practice, after all, within an academy that endorses plutogoguery and brands not only its academic buildings and classrooms but also its chairs of excellence (those it identifies as its premier critical thinkers) with names of corporate and individual sponsors. Ever felt uneasy about attending a lecture by the Johnny "Bud" and Dorothy "B" Wilkens Professor of ... in the Toyota Auditorium of the Microsoft Center of ...?

Most American academics have well-honed critical skills and they assume a dialectical attitude within their scholarly fields and instructional methods; yet we partake in undialectical habits in our private and social

lives, habits that ultimately alter our cultural and political world views, the way we teach, and the cultural messages we convey to our students who are learning foreign language from a largely uncultural point of view. We theater faculty and foreign language faculty who do theater may be professionally and pedagogically enlightened, yet we are considerably compromised by undialectical social and institutional pressures of the academy when we set out to practice the dialectics of theatricality, which necessarily conflicts with the uncultural source of many of these pressures. More often than not, we teachers feel (or are persuaded) we need to adapt our methodologies to the most precise cultural (uncultural?) awareness of our students, that we need to teach to and through an approximation of the everyday culture with which our students are most familiar. Witness the call (and the pressure) to relate to our students' high-tech and consumerist conditioning through the use of high-tech media and to an acceptance of consumerism and the pursuit of wealth as cultural givens. Witness as well the call to oblige the students' appetite for entertainment?[2]

America's blind faith in the (virtual) virtues of a rapidly (r)evolving technology is not unrelated to its hyper-consumerist need to be entertained. Do most of us really know how supremely "wired" our students are? Benjamin Barber warns us of the "generational fallacy." Academics who were raised on books and libraries primarily tend to use the Internet as "a surrogate library, a substitute reference system" and we tend to believe our students will do the same: "But our children, socialized in the image-rich culture of television and the Internet, have little experience with books and libraries and will bring a different set of expectations to the new technology" (62). As I argue in my essay, "Rehearsing the Uncertainty of Theatrical Art," the "image-rich culture" that is raising our children, steeping them in virtuality and what Barber calls "the necessary solitude in cyberspace" (64), is fundamentally untheatrical. I assume, of course, that most of us still feel we belong to a technological and cultural generation that differs from that of our students, despite the fact that, in the information age, generations are so short and obsolescence so effective an economic force. So, beyond the moral, cultural, and pedagogical dilemmas of accessing and conforming to the culture of students who are adopting a world view which is increasingly alien to our own and to what we might call the corporal communitas of theater, our own immersion in an undialectical lifestyle coupled with our attempts to "reach" the lifestyle (rather than the basic humanity) of our students can foster an ultimately untheatrical pedagogy.

Contemporary Diversions from the Theatrical Core

In my essay "Rehearsing the Uncertainty" I examine at some length the relevance of uncertainty and theatricality to human culture through concepts such as the "meagerness" or the "absence" of theater (Bert O. States) as compared to the virtual illusion of fullness in film, and the actor's distention of her stage presence into a "body-in-life" (Eugenio Barba). To transcend the triviality and certainty (trivial certainty) of cultural reality, to theatrically translate human culture and produce an uncertain effect, and to prepare and render an intense and concentrated learning experience, we would do well to avoid losing sight of the performative body-in-life. Students must understand that the performance we are doing in our class is neither a poor or ancient relative of film nor a step toward achieving a filmic model—what they have come to indulge as the certainty and the totalizing illusion of film—but that we are deliberately engaging the less certain *absence* of theater. Living in a high-tech society that is going digital and high definition only makes our work both tougher and more vital. Those of us who do theater are now not only competing against the illusionary reality (stereotypical role playing) of routine and superficial social life, but also against our society's increasing participation in and consequent conformity to virtual reality that takes the illusion and the sociocultural mediation to another level. If in past generations mediated reality was generally limited to social role playing and cultural convention, since the postwar period, especially in the last several decades, then oh how intricately we've woven the web of mediation through consumer-oriented technological conditioning. While social role-playing and sociocultural mythology distract us from what we might call unmediated reality, they do not have the validating authority of a multifaceted, technologically-enhanced virtuality. If there is no such thing as "authentic" reality, there are different levels and different intensities of mediation. The layers of (enter-taining) mediation between our students, their bodies, their minds, their (deep) culture and "true" feelings, their teachers, and their fellow students and actors are growing in number, and their capacity to distract us from the body-in-life is becoming more determinant.

Today's theater students and foreign language students who do theater, even as they believe they are engaging in theatrical exercise and performance, probably have some idea of seeing themselves projected as a kind of "celebrity someone else" on a technologically enhanced screen of some kind. Numerous sophisticated tools and screens of mediation simultaneously reduce their direct contact with life and limit their

theatrical (theatro-performative) potential. Face-to-face conversation and confrontation seems increasingly to be an exceptional and uncomfortable pause between portable conversations and text-messaging. Who could have foreseen that in such a short time, since the beginning of the latest technological revolution, our daily routines would be so profoundly altered? Before we take (or before we believe we take) a short break from the technological, institutional, and corporate command of our lives—before class, before rehearsal, before the film, the performance, the lecture, or the sermon begins, and even before we do group meditation or hold a protest rally: "Please put your cell phones on vibrate." And we are obliged to ask members of today's audiences to "please refrain from text-messaging *during* the performance." Is MySpace really our space? Might it hamper our escape from a "body merely/virtually alive"? Can the high-tech and virtual social networking to which we surrender our body-minds nurture anything other than the mediation of mediated bodies in space?[3]

So call me a technophobic curmudgeon. I realize that the developing technologies of our civilization have the potential to participate in some form of evolutionary theatricality, but not when they mask or distract from the body-in-life at the heart of theater and human culture—at least not for now. I confess I am something of a luddite in my personal and my professional lives. If I'm not radically retrograde, I'm certainly a distance behind my peers. I expect to evolve, but to do so slowly, measurably, reflectively, and on my own, not in response to the shady certainties of market culture, not to what's available in the store, in my classroom, or online.[4] As a member of The Lead Pencil Club, I believe that the pencil and the book contrast in many ways with high-tech writing, research, communication, and the production of texts (word processing, text-messaging, and the Internet) as theater contrasts with film. I frankly don't have time for and don't miss the totalizing illusion of "reality" surfing through the massive bytes of instantaneous and flashy yet overproduced, unedited, unreflective, ideologically, and commercially tainted information that are electronically available to me at any given moment.

Instead of "twittering away my time," I find the meagerness of low technology and the absence of high-technology to be intellectually, culturally, and theatrically stimulating—and vital. In my theater practicum, the journal my student-actors keep and regularly submit for review must be handwritten. I want to reduce the grip of mediating processes by encouraging my student-actors to develop a corporal connection to the words they are writing, to feel them. I want them to produce for me an uncertain, unfiltered imprint of their body-mind's relation to the project and the world. As Lance Morrow puts it,

"Handwriting is civilization's casual encephalogram" (124). In short, handwriting is more theatrical. (For that matter, a manual typewriter produces a more direct, uncertain representation of the body-mind than a word processor.) Though I do use technology in my projects, I guess I'm behind the curve, or at least this is a thought which increasingly occurs to new generations of my student-actors. Much of the musical background and sound effects we use in our play productions, if not produced by the actors themselves, is recorded and played on audiocassettes, a technology which many of my students now consider outmoded. In our latest production, one of my actors, who had prior theatrical experience, was initially quite resistant to what she considered to be my very "low-tech" approach to sound—among other things. Another actor, one with no theatrical experience, told us that his turn at operating the "antiquated" audiocassette system was the first time he had ever placed a cassette in a player. However, both students finally reconsidered their reserve once they got a better idea of how the "hands-on" use of audiocassettes in a stereo system (in addition to actor-generated sound effects and music which, of course, is the more theatrical) would facilitate and enrich our collaborative operational tasks, and how it added to the overall theatricality of the production. (At least, this was the sentiment they expressed in group discussions or conveyed in their handwritten journals.) My actors collaboratively operate the sound system in full view of the audience and in a space that is intimate with the audience space; so the operation of the sound is part of the performance, an exercise which subverts any potential stage-audience boundaries.

Funny how one can feel revolutionary by being old-fashioned.

I also resist high-tech and try to nurture theatricality in my French literature, culture, and film classes whose content is not explicitly theater. I go out of my way to find classrooms with chalkboards instead of dry-erase boards, overhead viewers, and viewing screens, and my students do a lot of "hands-on," collaborative group work with chalk at the board. As strange as this may seem, many of my students see this board-work as innovative, as an invigorating relief from many of the prefab, ready-to-wear, spoon-fed PowerPoint presentations they now get.

When I teach film I avoid entertaining the students by showing the film in class. Once the students have viewed the film out of class, we engage its story as "meagerly" and theatrically as possible in class, avoiding the (enter-taining) "voyeur" effect of the totalizing illusion. In my intermediate French conversation and composition class, for example, I've adopted a text that helps me use film to theatrically approach the foreign language and culture. Once my students have discussed a French film and its new

vocabulary through the textbook exercises, I complete the study of the film by asking the students to invent a re-creative sketch representing an alternative conclusion to the film's story. For Jean-Paul Rappeneau's 1990 *Cyrano de Bergerac*, for example, I list on the board the four principle characters: Cyrano, Roxane, Christian, and the Comte de Guiche. Then I ask students to use the new vocabulary to collectively (re)invent two concluding lines for each of these characters. We write these lines on the board, theatrically rehearse their pronunciation, and then I divide the class into groups of four. Each student of each group assumes the role of one of the characters and chooses one of the lines which were collaboratively negotiated by the class and written on the board. Then each group invents a mise-en-scène to stage these lines. With bodily expression and gesture, character positioning and movement (an initial step toward experiencing one's body-in-space and toward finding one's body-in-life), they must create a performance context to accommodate the lines they have chosen and make them signify a new alternative conclusion to the story, one which is uncertain of course, but not unrelated to the original story. Since these lines were not originally written as a coherent scene, there is some obligation (however slight) on the part of the actors to discover their body's signifying potential and its communal context, to collaborate with others, and to do something with theatrical meagerness that was not accomplished within the totalizing illusion of the film and their voyeuristic reception of it.

The structure of this exercise parallels the structure of the *tableau vivant* exercise, which "Rehearsing the Uncertainty" examines in detail. In both exercises—within the instructional framework of an upper-level undergraduate-graduate French program at a public university, composed primarily of students with little or no theatrical experience and who are using a foreign language which pretty much remains foreign to most of them—I do my best to place the student-actors in a situation which will put them in touch with the dialectically oriented uncertainty of their bodies-in-life. I admit, however, that it is increasingly difficult to get the students in any of our classes to make physical contact with one another, or even to make eye contact, to look deeply and deliberately into something other than a Facebook face, especially in those non-theater classes that do not benefit from the preliminary theatrical exercises I use in my theater practicum to refamiliarize students with their body-minds.

Have we given up on the theatro-cultural core of life? Surely it is increasingly difficult to put our students and ourselves in touch with it. But before our students can learn foreign language and culture—I don't mean to learn to text message in the foreign language or even to interactively

engage a foreign image on a computer screen via Webcast, but to confront head-on the cultural aura of their own body-mind as well as that of the cultural other—they need to be culturally reactivated and resensitized, and "de-mediated" from within their own culture. We've got to point them back to their cultural core, to their cultural senses, to their body-in-life. They need to share our awareness of the diversions and distractions interposed by the virtual and voyeuristic reality shows of our twenty-first century and its frenzied quest for the clearest, most familiar, and certain image on a screen, be it television, cinema, computer, or phone. No matter how clear and "finished" our high-tech virtual images become, they will never match the unprocessed and unfinished depth, density, visceral complexity, and sociocultural subversion produced and conveyed through the meagerness of theater. Student-actors must understand that they are neither voyeurs watching a screen nor virtual (cinematic) images engaged in the communication of vicarious experience, but real bodies alive with the potential to engage in the visceral experience of bodies-in-life.

But let me conclude this preface on a positive note. We teachers who think, research, and write about our experiences with the pedagogical merits of performance are probably as close to being on the right track as we can be—to the extent that we remain open to fundamental questions about the cultures and subcultures in which we work. How we should teach theater depends to some degree on where we teach it and to whom we teach it. A good starting point is the observation that we teach it to human beings who have "voluntarily" (or ostensibly, at least) placed themselves in a learning situation which requires the shedding of layers of an (un)culturally-conditioned identity. Unadulterated, uncompromising dramatic interaction is a sound pedagogical method, one which requires a serious approach to dealing with the alienating effects of an uncultural, untheatrical world view.

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Notes

[1] Speaking about "the economic structures and technological forces that are propelling our [American] civilization relentlessly forward," Mark Hertsgaard notes that Americans "don't necessarily like all this; it's simply what we've gotten used to. Some of us find it exhausting to live in a society where time seems always to be speeding up, where every new gadget—email, cell phones, Palm Pilots—promises us more freedom and convenience but also further separates us from the larger community and our inner selves." Though we complain about the stress and our diminishing quality of life, "in the end, we are creatures of our society, and we neither recognize the full damage being done to us nor see any real alternative" (118).

[2] Neal Gabler discusses the makeover of the American campus into a "theme park," in which "entertainment came to modify intellectual discourse itself by changing the common conception of what intellectual discourse was" (139). "For how could anyone, even the most hermetic of intellectuals, resist entertainment?" (142).

[3] Neil Postman speaks of technology as having become a kind of religious belief, where we worship the "god of Technology—in the sense that people believe technology works, that they rely on it, that it makes promises, that they are bereft when denied access to it, that they are delighted when they are in its presence, that for most people it works in mysterious ways, that they condemn people who speak against it, that they stand in awe of it and that, in the 'born again' mode, they will alter their lifestyles, their schedules, their habits and their relationships to accommodate it," and "nowhere do you find more enthusiasm for the god of Technology than among educators" (198). He provides the example of a former Assistant Secretary of Education who represents the deterministic point of view that "The technology is here or will be; we must use it because it is there; we will become the kind of people the technology requires us to be, whether we like it or not, we will remake our institutions to accommodate technology. All of this must happen because it is good for us, but in any case, we have no choice" (200). On the other hand, Benjamin Barber sees technology as a mirror of (our materialistic) society. "Although we like to think of technology as a radical modifier—even as an absolute determinant—of how society is shaped, new technologies tend to reflect rather than to alter the culture that produces them. . . . If [the dominant moments of modern society] are primarily commercial, private, material, and consumerist . . . then the technologies will also become commercial, private, material, consumerist. Technology cannot save us from ourselves; it can only reflect all too candidly who we are" (62-63). Take your pick: Either we are victims of the anti-humanist god of Technology or technology is a symptom of our anti-humanist materialism.

[4] I do not own a cell phone, watch commercial television, or have the Internet or email at home, dubious innovative "conveniences," which my wife and I also spared our two children, currently university students.

A cartoon by P.S. Mueller makes a point about the way cell phones intrude on our intellectual processes of reflection and contemplation. The single-panel cartoon shows a male customer purchasing an electronic gadget that looks much like a cell phone. Gazing gleefully at the gadget in his hand as a satisfied salesclerk looks on, the customer remarks "You say it's guaranteed to interrupt my thought process every two minutes?" (2). As early as the 1940s, Henry Miller lashed out against the "instruments" produced by American technology for popular use. His harsh claim that they were "crutches that have paralyzed us" (229) would seem mild in the face of the cell phone and the Internet. In theoretical writing, discussing Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio and their interpretations of the "society of the spectacle" and hyperreality, Sylvère Lotringer concludes that "technology is now everywhere, both outside and inside our bodies, and this makes the resistance to technology (and the fascination for its invasive capacity) even more inexpungable [sic]" (35).

INTRODUCTION

DRAMATIC INTERACTIONS: TEACHING LANGUAGES, LITERATURES, AND CULTURES THROUGH THEATER—THEORETICAL APPROACHES AND CLASSROOM PRACTICES

COLLEEN RYAN
AND NICOLETTA MARINI-MAIO

The famous statement made by the character Jacques in *As You Like It* has never been as true as it is in our globalized society today: "All the world's a stage." We live on a public platform where, to continue with Shakespeare's metaphor, we are "merely players" acting "many parts," all exposed and deeply embedded in a specific culture and moment in history. Therefore, the world stage is both a literal and metaphoric place for sharing and engaging with the other—for exchanging cultural products perspectives, ways of living, and ways of behaving. This stage is a space on which we not only meet others, but also on which we come to know ourselves more deeply. At the same time, this global platform is ever more precarious and insecure. Mutual understanding among peoples and cultures is no longer a choice or luxury; it has become a baseline necessity. For this reason, in today's foreign language and literature programs, the study of language and literature alone does not suffice to reach multicultural and, especially, intercultural learning goals.

Dramatic Interactions addresses the need for intercultural curiosity and understanding as endorsed by the 2007 *MLA Report* and subsequent *Whitepaper to the Teagle Foundation*.[1] An integrated curriculum—one that develops multiple literacies (visual, informational, cultural, etc.) through the use of numerous texts, disciplinary materials, and active learning experiences—will hopefully lead to greater subjective investment in the

meeting places of different cultural beings. Within the variety of materials and approaches aimed at fostering these literacies, literature, argues Nicoletta Pireddu, shall remain primary.[2] However, drawing upon some theoretical considerations by Appiah, De Lauretis, Pavis, Pireddu, and De Marinis to begin, we maintain that of the literary genres at hand, theater is that which most actively or completely engages the cultural learner and, thus, maximizes his or her ability to appropriate what is other.

"When Jews from the *shtetl* and Italians from the *villagio* [sic] arrived at Ellis Island," writes Kwame Anthony Appiah,

> "they brought with them a rich brew of what we call culture. They brought a language and stories and songs and sayings in it; they transplanted a religion with specific rituals, beliefs, and traditions, a cuisine of a certain hearty peasant quality, and distinctive modes of dress; and they came with particular ideas about family life. It was often reasonable for their neighbors to ask what these first-generation immigrants were doing, and why; and a sensible answer would frequently have been, 'It's an Italian thing,' 'It's a Jewish thing,' or, simply, 'It's their culture.'"[3]

This, a hundred years ago. Since then our view of the world has changed, says Appiah, and it is dramatically different in the panorama of the post- 9/11 era. Not only do we live in a globalized reality, where cultural difference may cause misconceptions, communication deficiency, or failure, but we are also too aware of the sense of vulnerability that affects us as individuals living in a "world of strangers."[4]

In order to navigate through this risky condition, Appiah maintains, we need to actively engage in "cosmopolitanism," which implies the paradoxical status of being both citizens (*polites*, in Greek) of a local community and of the world (*cosmos*).[5] The ambivalence, indeed, the polysemy of such a condition presents the fields of Second (SL) and Foreign Language (FL) studies with unprecedented challenges and demands. Examining the state of language teaching in the United States, the 2007 MLA report, entitled "Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World," claimed that our culture "must become less ethnocentric, less patronizing, less ignorant of others, less Manichaean in judging other cultures, and more at home with the rest of the world."[6] Overall, the report recommended that the FL curriculum produce "educated speakers who have deep translingual and transcultural competence."[7]

The recommendations of the 2007 MLA Report caused widespread debate and various reactions on issues pertaining to foreign language teaching methodologies and content. Among these, Pireddu's response, featured in *Profession*, is particularly meaningful, for it affirms the

centrality of FL instruction in higher education as a natural vessel of culture. Here Pireddu suggests that the proposal for curricular change presents an opportunity for foreign language programs to not only maintain their status, but also resolidify their central presence in the evolving landscape of higher education, "by preserving the centrality of the literary text and highlighting its specific dynamics," and by "capitalizing on the skills that we can export from literary analysis to other disciplinary areas." Rather than downplay the value of literature with respect to stronger humanities disciplines, writes Pireddu, FL professionals should present their discipline "as able to throw light on other cultural phenomena, as the forger of messages and interpretive strategies that modify or even create those adopted in other areas."[8]

Pireddu's faith in the power of literature is very much in line with some of the most original philosophical positions of our times: Adriana Cavarero, for example, maintains that "literature is a polysemous language that undoes the arrogance of every system claiming stability,"[9] while Appiah, still discussing the notion of cosmopolitanism, explains that:

> "what makes the cosmopolitan experience possible for us . . . is . . . a different human capacity that grounds our sharing: namely the grasp of a narrative logic that allows us to contribute to the world to which our imagination responds. That capacity is to be found up the Amazon. The Mississippi, the Congo, the Indus, and the Yellow River, just as it is found on the banks of the Avon and the Dordogne. … And the basic human capacity to grasp stories, even strange stories, is also what links us, powerfully, to others, even strange others."[10]

In this framework, it becomes clear that literature needs not be surpassed by more "useful" or "appealing" subjects for our student population, but it should be taught in ways that show intrinsic and lasting connections to those topics or disciplines of interest.

Another critical contribution to the notion of transcultural change evoked by the MLA Report comes from the field of theater and performance studies. Back in the 1980s, Marco De Marinis and Teresa De Lauretis had explored the "pragmatics of theatrical communication" as seen in its relationships with the audience and the historical, sociological, and generic context of a given work. [11] Their innovative perspectives raised a great deal of interest and triggered a host of new of studies on the relationships between theater, performance, and culture. Since the 1990s, Patrice Pavis in France and Erika Fischer-Lichte in Germany have focused on the analysis of intercultural performance, placing performance texts "within contexts and cultures . . . to appreciate the cultural production that stems from these unexpected transfers."[12]

Dramatic Interactions proposes its own response to the call for transcultural, translingual, and cosmopolitan change, and one adaptable and applicable to any level of foreign language study. By affirming the relevance of the philosophical and pedagogical views that posit literature and culture at the core of FL and SL teaching and learning, this collection of essays treats the flourishing and interdisciplinary subject of teaching foreign languages, literatures, and cultures through theater. Here theater is intended in the most comprehensive sense of the term: from innovative approaches to specific theatrical texts, to critical treatments of the genre, to physical and interpretive improvisation exercises, to theater's integral value for numerous aspects of FL teaching, such as oral proficiency, intercultural competence, and the fostering of positive emotions and intrinsic motivation. Our hope is to inspire and facilitate the use of theatrical texts and techniques in FL courses far and wide.

Structure, Content, and Goals of the Book

The “dramatic turn” that this book proposes stems from a fertile terrain. In the last few years, the use of theater and drama activities in foreign language teaching has developed as a pedagogical perspective, theoretically informed methodology, and vibrant classroom practice. Original and inspiring research and materials are circulating in the field, and this volume both builds upon and continues their discussions. In engaging with current theories and materials on the subject of theater in the foreign language class, *Dramatic Interactions* presents a comprehensive approach which goes beyond the mere practice or integration of certain texts or activities in class. Indeed, it conceptualizes theater as much more than course material. This work conceives theater both as a cultural product and as the substance of a teaching philosophy about what it means to interact with a text and with others. Several contributors to the volume emphasize the development of an intercultural stance (see Ware and Kramsch) through a holistic (mind, body, disposition) encounter with a theatrical text. These authors show how the experience of what Patrice Pavis has called the “gap” between text and performance can be central to the process of validating and appropriating the target language and its culture(s).[13]

In their volume on multiple literacies, Swaffar and Arens maintain that the intellectual charge of foreign language programs should be that of guiding students to the discovery of how a language other than their native tongue produces and distributes knowledge within certain communicative and cultural frameworks.[14] The authors further suggest that at the heart of