

***Communication of Cultural Heritage Through Performing Art:  
Theatre and Memories of Former Mental Asylums***

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**Abstract**

Traditional theatre performances contain many other arts such as singing, acting, and dancing, consisting of diverse design processes including masks, costumes, people, stories, and place settings. They are perfect examples of synthesis of arts that create a perfect dialogue between space and body helping people to feel, empathize, and experience the culture, history, and the place for themselves and others. This paper discusses the power of theatre as a 'total art' to communicate difficult memories and tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The former mental hospitals and mental illness in history are problematic heritage contents in terms of valorization and communication, and they become a challenge requiring new and creative strategies to share with citizens. Besides, most of these huge heritage complexes have become completely or partially abandoned and stigmatized due to their recent past. Starting with the power of theater performances in communication, the paper focuses on research-based theatre as an artistic methodology in heritage communication and its appropriateness to be applied in marginal unspoken memories. '*Chille de la Balanza*', an Italian Florence-based theatre collective, and their performances dedicated to Italian former lunatic hospitals as the places of human marginalization and containment, and their works related to mental illness as unsettling parts of history with a varied number of individual testimonies and unspoken difficult memories, will be discussed to show the success of theatre in heritage communication.

Keywords: Performative Practices, Heritage Communication, Difficult Memories, Former Mental Asylums, Participatory Theatre

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## Introduction

The world of performing arts includes various disciplines such as theatre, dance, and opera, from the traditional ones to the popular ones including live arts performed in a specific place as well as non-live arts in the form of broadcast or mass media. While some performances are produced by artists, some performances are conducted by amateurs and volunteers led by artists or professionals. In addition to these, the types of audiences are also important dimensions that influence the concept and content of the performing arts (McCarthy et al., 2001). Traditional theatre performances are considered one of the important ways in the creation of a relationship with a particular discourse, and they contain many other arts varying from music to dance through acting and interacting with others helping people to feel, empathize and experience the culture, history, and the place. Theatre performances have been used to educate, communicate, and entertain people since ancient times, and the places of theatre and avenues have been considered public spheres to create dialogues (Grile, 2021; 2022).

Recently, using art performances has become an important participatory strategy to engage people and communities in the process of social transformation as well as social and cultural development (Sloman, 2012). In parallel to this, participatory art performances started to be widely used in culture and heritage communication, benefiting the positive contribution of art and culture in the process of knowledge sharing, socio-cultural transformation, education, self-expression, and readaptation. 'Applied theatre' or 'participatory theatre' (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014) is an effective communicative methodology performed as the popular practices structured according to theatre-based techniques to explore and learn the history, culture, heritage, as well as social and cultural contemporary issues such as marginalization, migration, stigma, or climate change. The power of heritage narratives and revoking the living experiences of the past through these art practices and performances also lead the emotional reactions improving the understanding of a particular discourse from the participants' standpoints. Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty is one of the important foundations of participatory theatre methodology, where the physical involvement and provocation of the audience are at the core of the scene. In time, theatrical techniques have developed aiming to change the traditional relationship between audiences, spectators, drama, and actors. The method itself has also become popular for socio-cultural and urban development projects (Sloman, 2012), moreover, Italian scholars call this technique the social-theatre method (*teatro sociale*) which was discussed in detail by various theorists and theatre practitioners such as Claudio Bernardi, Monica Dragone and Guglielmo Schininià (Thompson and Schechner, 2004). Participatory theatre activities are quite rich in diversity, there are either projects based on social movement perspective or projects based on institutional perspective. Despite their diversity, they have three common characteristics: participation, critical thinking, and creativity (Bishop, 2006). Social theatre is described as a theatre performance with specific social agendas which usually takes place in various public and symbolic places performed by communities led by activists or artists, and the aesthetic is not the guiding theme (Thompson and Schechner, 2004).

Cultural heritage and heritage sites have various meanings including conflicted and sensitive contents which necessitate the new ways of communication strategies to transmit them to a wider public (Macdonald, 2009). Former lunatic asylums and the history of mental illness are the focus of this paper representing the difficult memories and cruel parts of human history which are the living experiences to learn from the past as a reason for regret. Besides, despite the abolishment of asylums in the 1980s through de-institutionalization, the major part of these former caring places is still stigmatized, and they represent the marginal areas

perceived as dark sides of contemporary cities by the people who dwell in them (Bianchi, 2017; Roberto, 2017; Bianchi 2023).

Based on this conceptual understanding of participatory theatre performances and cultural heritage communication, this paper focuses on how difficult memories of mentally ill people and their marginalized or stigmatized lives might be reflected, narrated, and interpreted collectively through participatory theatre method or social theater by performing within the former caring places constructed for those segregated people. This will be discussed drawing on the Florence-based theatre collective, *Chille de la balanza's* genius loci, and memory-related participatory activities in Florence and Arezzo. Active participation is reinforced by participatory theatre methodology aiming to educate participants on sharing and transmitting the history of mental illness to learn from the past as a reason to regret while addressing today's social and cultural problems to reflect on critically. More specifically, in this paper, we will discuss several examples of participatory theatre performances as useful strategies to communicate culture and heritage with citizens which aim to educate participants to be more aware of contemporary social and cultural problems by empathizing with the past and living experiences. In addition, this paper also offers different approaches to heritage education, critical thinking as well as creativity.

### **Understanding the Cultural Context and 'Heritage Walks'**

Design thinking, storytelling, performative arts, and creative narratives are important tools to communicate complex information. Cultural heritage and culture itself are direct consequences of complex historical processes including landscapes, buildings, people stories, events, crises, and intangible and tangible elements. Based on this complexity of heritage discourse, using innovative and creative narrations as alternative communication tools through art and culture becomes essential to transmitting the memories and spirit of a particular place (Faro, 2005). 'Heritage Walks' are participatory community activities aiming to valorize and comprehend a particular heritage place by engaging the local communities. They are usually planned as cultural routes or a sort of guided tour aiming to re-discover a particular heritage place, memory, and history through interactive ways aiming to create links with the people who lived or who are living in this place. 'Heritage Walks' have been considered as an operational strategy within the Faro action plan, and they were discussed during a meeting in 2013 encouraging all member states to adopt their heritage agendas (Tasso, 2017).

Italy is the prominent nation applying this heritage strategy in diverse social, cultural, urban, and heritage projects whose aim is to promote and share the values and spirit of heritage sites by establishing a local community and sense of identity between place and people. Heritage Walks have become a popular approach to valorize former Italian lunatic asylum complexes and share the knowledge of these historical heritage places with a wider public. *Chille de la balanza* is a Florence-based theatre collective, and they are one of the primary actors of famous Heritage Walks in former lunatic hospitals. The theatre collective was born following the Street Theatre<sup>1</sup> movement in 1973 whose aim was to narrate stories with actors and spectators in various urban places. The movement itself is a participatory approach to

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<sup>1</sup> Street theatre was born as folk Indian theatre performed on the streets or in public places to trigger activism, social emancipation, and political reform. They were used as a tool to raise attention to social issues such as women's rights or working-class rights. In time, they were developed as 'theatre for the oppressed' by Boal (1979) based on Freire's (1972) 'pedagogy for the oppressed' (Saxon & Vitzthum, 2012).

communicating social and cultural issues, thus, it is more of a social communication process with a participatory approach rather than a simple art form. The collective's activities related to these former caring places date back to 1997 when they were searching for a place to perform one of their works on Antonin Artaud's 'Van Gogh il suicidato della società', and in 1998, their efforts resulted in the realization of a permanent cultural presidio in San Salvi in Florence that was still an asylum complex at that moment. The last director of the former lunatic asylum of Florence, Carmelo Pellicanò, confirmed their permanence in San Salvi by linking their existence to the open city concept. In time, these efforts turned into a project, namely San Salvi-open City, aiming to rebrand the stigmatized image of the former caring place while opening it to the citizens through art and culture by making it a cultural node to meet and exchange ideas and culture. The project of heritage walks, known as '*la passeggiata*', was projected by Chille de la balanza in 1999 for San Salvi, and it was legitimized in the following years by the European Council through the Faro Convention.

The University of Siena with the Department of Social, Political, and Cognitive Sciences (DISPOC) has also launched an urban regeneration process to valorize the negative image of the former lunatic asylum of Arezzo, known as Pionta, which is currently being used as partially university campus, partially local health authority and partially abandoned (Roberto, 2017; Bianchi, 2017). The project 'Genius Loci, Memory and Identity: Towards a Permanent Cultural Presidio' is led by the University of Siena in collaboration with the theatre collective Chille de la balanza, ISIA Firenze, and the Province of Arezzo, and it aims not only to rebrand the negative image of Pionta by constructing new modes of narrations with the local community but also to establish a cultural presidio which will be able to valorize and animate the heritage site following the example of San Salvi and Chille de la balanza.

The project is structured in two main research axes with different activities, the first one concerns producing collectively the various narrations in different forms including digital, artistic, and artisanal, while the second focuses on the realization of a permanent cultural presidio to provide continuity. Within the scope of the project, various creative and innovative participatory methods have been used for diverse social objectives with different target groups. Here in this paper, the participatory theatre method will be presented as one of those creative ones aiming to narrate collectively while raising awareness of this difficult heritage by the people of Pionta. To do this, during the first phase of the project, a local community and target groups were constructed engaging with associations, university students, inhabitants, and primary and secondary schools of the territory. The heritage walk - *la passeggiata*- was one of the subprojects of the main project, and it was designed and realized in collaboration with Chille de la balanza and the University of Siena. The Heritage Walk project was articulated upon three fundamentals: research on the history of Pionta and cultural values based on the historical and archival documents; the contemporary state of Pionta to understand the strengths, threats, and potentials; and social theatre approach.

The research team first identified the chosen places to conduct the heritage walk which are culturally and politically significant places representing the genius loci, identity, and memory of Pionta as well as current problematic parts of the heritage site. During the second phase of the project, the thematic discourses to address through chosen places were defined and designed, and they were used to construct the creative narrations in the form of art (dramas or scripts) to be performed collectively but guided by the theatre collective team. To do this, the research group organized and realized a formation course on artistic narration held by the founder of the theatre collective during their courses at the university whose aim is to create a spect-actor community to educate with heritage, social critical discourses, and art. Following

this, the laboratories were conducted to articulate and co-design different narrations prepared for each chosen place integrating various theatre-based techniques into the narration scripts. While some places were narrated through poems or dialogues by students, some of the others were narrated through dance or pre-registered voices selected from the archival documents which are useful communication tools touching the emotional appeals of the audiences. Following these initial non-formal educational activities, the project heritage walk was conducted with a high number of participants where actors, spec-actors, and audiences interacted with the place by getting closer to genius loci, memory, and history as well as contemporary problematic parts of the heritage place.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we discussed the participatory theatre method and its appropriateness to be applied in urban regeneration projects, heritage communication, and sharing heritage knowledge through performing arts. Heritage walks are important strategies not only to communicate the culture and heritage, difficult memories, marginal stories, and cultural values, but also to educate participants about culture, heritage, critical thinking, and art. Thus, we consider that participatory theatre is more than simply art, it becomes a process of social communication to address past, present, and future. Besides, they also provide opportunities for participants by letting them get involved in a cultural practice that is a pure right of every citizen. The method supports self-esteem by building confidence for the participants, and it represents an important approach to heritage education.

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