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USING DRAMA TO TEACH LANGUAGES

Judith M. Melton

HOPING to brighten what students often consider the somewhat dull task of learning a foreign language, instructors always seek stimulating, successful teaching methods. I should like to recommend a method that is both successful and stimulating: using drama. Staging a play, bringing dramatic techniques into the classroom, or even attempting as challenging a project as writing and performing an original production create superb language-learning situations.

Staging a play in a foreign language is more than a tremendously rewarding experience, it is excellent pedagogy.¹ The rehearsals become a super language lab where, instead of grudgingly repeating isolated dialogues into a microphone, the actor-students will avidly go over and over their lines until they have mastered the sounds, inflections, and intonation. Students who mumble in class will begin to enunciate clearly as they practice parts they know they will perform before a live audience. Moreover, in rehearsing their roles the students will usually achieve something much more subtle. They will begin to get a “feel” for the target language. On their own, in response to the other actors, they will begin emphasizing the nuances of the dialogue through inflection and intonation. Such use of the target language is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve in the classroom, but it comes easily and naturally in play production.

Taking part in a production also gives the student an opportunity to understand, really understand, a play in the foreign language. For the upper-level student studying drama theory and technique, participation in such a project can be of unlimited value; for first- or second-year students, the experience can be overwhelming. In addition to truly comprehending a full-length play on their limited level, they fully experience the complex style of the spoken target language. Indeed, they even feel the language flowing off their own tongues. Such students have a rare glimpse into that territory called proficiency. Instead of being confronted continually with new, progressively more difficult material—a necessary but psychologically defeating practice in language learning on this level—the actor-students during the production briefly become “proficient” in the target language.

When I began my long use of drama in teaching German, during my first year as a full-time instructor, I did so at the insistence of my department head. I had had no stage-production experience, and I was teaching only lower-level courses. To make matters worse, the second-year class was a rather disgruntled group. My second-semester freshmen, by contrast, seemed to like the idea. Three months later, when we produced Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *Abendstunde im Spätherbst*, my first-year students amazed me and themselves with

their ability. To be sure, the early rehearsals were discouraging. But the day did arrive when the students realized they were no longer just repeating words that were difficult for their mouths to form but were actually talking to one another. The language became meaningful, and the students quickly settled down to refining and polishing the dialogue.

Performing a play in a foreign language is a structured way for students of that language to use their skills and have a good time doing so. Anyone who has ever been involved in amateur theater knows the esprit de corps that a cast develops during a production. Encountering such feelings in German students is a comforting experience indeed in an era when some students exhibit resentment, if not outright hostility, to studying a foreign language. Onstage language learning is a lot of fun, not drudgery, and I have found that the students usually come back for more.

Since my first production, nine productions ago, my conviction that language learning through drama is a valuable teaching method has never wavered. Eagerly I have launched plays as well as applied dramatic techniques to all facets of teaching German. At Clemson University our language department emphasizes this method on every level. Our second-semester classes voluntarily compete by performing two- to three-minute original skits, which are videotaped and judged by upper-level students and faculty. Third-semester students willingly participate in a drama contest, presenting a fifteen- to twenty-minute scene from memory before a panel of three judges. In addition, each year we stage 60- to 90-minute plays in French, German, and Spanish. After performing on campus, we take our productions to nearby high schools. We also videotape some scenes for possible use in the language lab. Our language plays were not originally done for credit, but they proved so successful that after several years the college curriculum committee passed our recommendation for a one-credit course—"Foreign Language Drama Laboratory."

For the past five years our department has also sponsored an annual foreign language drama contest and festival called Dionysia. College and high school language teachers are invited to bring casts to our campus to perform twenty-minute scenes before a panel of outside judges. We have had as many as thirty casts of five or six competing in one year. (Clemson students do not compete, although they participate by helping to run the contest.) Knowing our emphasis on drama, our colleagues in liberal arts have become accustomed to strangely dressed groups of language students rehearsing in the hall and to language professors carting scenery across campus.

In the classroom, dramatic techniques provide a welcome relief from the text. Role playing and situational improvisation are good ways to get students to speak, whatever the level. A student playing a member of a group-therapy session, for example, is more motivated to speak than one just answering questions from the text. Role playing also helps to overcome self-consciousness. In upper-division drama courses, performing scenes is both profitable and stimulating. Certainly the trial scene in Dürrenmatt's *Der Besuch der alten Dame* is more chilling when it is staged than when it is merely read. Ill's omission of "mein Gott" the second time around is an ironic silence best understood in performance. In rehearsing this scene, the students are stunned by its complexity, something they may have missed reading it silently at home. The third scene of Max Frisch's *Biedermann und die Brandstifter* highlights the absurdity of that play; acting it out, students see the humor in Schmitz's and Eisenring's rolling drums of gasoline into the attic under the nose of Herr Biedermann and in the vaudevillian antics of the two arsonists who improvise a hair- tonic commercial to distract the policeman investigating the drums. These farcical elements only underscore the play's deeper implications for the students.

For many years, despite my enthusiastic use of drama in teaching, I resolutely resisted the idea of staging a production written by students, an idea broached by at least one member of almost every cast I have had. Although the notion seemed pedagogically attractive—since the students would be highly motivated to practice writing, one of the most difficult language skills to acquire—I persistently rejected such an undertaking as too ambitious to be feasible. Admittedly a second-year conversation class of mine had once successfully written and performed a short radio play, but this production could not be compared with an

hour-long German script. I did not feel that students could easily sustain the writing of such a project.

If we were to try an original production we would need something other than the format of a play, something with a flexible structure; and when we finally hit on the idea of a cabaret, I was willing to try. Since a cabaret encompasses a variety of forms—skits, vignettes, music, and so on—a unified story would not be necessary. The burden of the writing would not fall on just a few students. Everyone could contribute something. The students apparently liked the notion, for twenty of them, bursting with ideas, quickly enrolled in the play-production course.

The students wrote the entire show, which I and other members of the faculty corrected and edited. Predictably, we edited right down to the final dress rehearsal, but this last-minute flexibility turned out to be one of the best aspects of the whole venture. Indeed, the students progressed to the point where they even ad-libbed in German during the performance! In the end, we had three major segments, some smaller skits, three musical numbers, a chorus line of sorts, one poetry reading, and two emcees, who tied the show together. I didn't feel any compunction about not insisting that "Cabaret" deal exclusively with subjects inherently German. Practice in using German was the class priority, and I felt that the students should use the language on subjects that sparked their imaginations. Consequently, the major segment of "Cabaret" was an onstage re-creation of the sinking of the *Titanic*.

In directing a foreign language play, I stress the learning process, not the actual performance. For this reason I always try to keep the project from becoming too great a burden on the students. Rehearsals are kept short, for I have found that sessions lasting more than an hour are not useful, particularly in the beginning. After about an hour the student's ability to pronounce German diminishes rapidly; unintelligible garble results. Of course, I warn the students that the schedule will be very heavy for the two weeks before the performance. By that time, however, they are usually asking for extra rehearsal time. I also try to keep a light atmosphere during rehearsals; after all, I am interested in improving the students' language capability, not their acting ability, and I certainly don't want to cause the students anxiety by demanding more than they can give. I also stress that the audience's reaction is less important than the reaction of the participating students, although it is always nice to have a good audience.

Our "Cabaret" turned out to be a success in all the areas I have mentioned. Because the show consisted of disconnected segments, the whole cast did not need to attend all the rehearsals until close to the performance. The subject matter was certainly conducive to maintaining an easygoing atmosphere throughout. And finally, the audience's reaction was excellent. At Clemson our foreign language play audiences are primarily students from our classes, mostly first- and second-year students whose German, of course, is limited. They are generally receptive, although a few students usually complain that they cannot understand the "whole" play, even though we give them a good synopsis of the action and drill them on some of the unfamiliar vocabulary. The "Cabaret" audience, however, including the first-year students, easily followed the action, since the script had been written by students and the language complexity was, consequently, not great. As a result the students in the audience were much more enthusiastic about having been "urged" to attend.

The students who participated in "Cabaret"—eight first-year, seven second-year, and five third- and fourth-year—found it to be a rewarding experience indeed. On a budget of \$30, we performed in the campus nightclub of the Union Building to a capacity crowd of almost 140 people, a first for the "German Players." In the past we had only been able to muster audiences of about sixty or seventy. The cast were proud and pleased, not only by the exhilaration that the audience's reaction triggered but also by the success of their own creativity. Needless to say, the students learned a lot of German. I also think they learned a lot about themselves.

There is no question in my mind about the advantages of using drama to teach language, whether the students perform plays, write their own show, or benefit from dramatic techniques used as an adjunct to the traditional curriculum. Such experiences offer the student truly challenging language-learning situations.

The final days before any performance always become a little frenetic. Last-minute details must be tackled — getting props, costumes, and sets together; polishing performances; and, with “Cabaret,” making sure that the language is as refined as possible. Students suddenly realize that they will be performing before a live audience, and usually the fledgling actors begin a litany: “If I just get through this, I’ll never do it again.” Opening night comes, however, and five minutes after the performance, someone is asking, “Well, what are we going to do next year?” I like to think that the next time someone complains about foreign language study to a graduate of my play-production course, my former student will reply, “Hey, it’s not so bad. We actually had fun learning German.” We have not attempted to gauge long-term results, but an immediate, discernible result is the student’s language improvement. A second discernible result is the smile on the student’s face. Teaching languages by means of drama is certainly not a new method, nor should it ever be considered the sole method. Variety in the classroom is prerequisite to good language teaching. From my experience, however, using drama to teach foreign languages is one of the best methods—pedagogically sound, eminently flexible, certainly rewarding, and above all fun.

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NOTE

¹ German departments have staged plays for many years, as Horst F. Richardson shows in his articles “German Play Productions in the U.S. and Canadian Colleges and Universities since 1959,” *Unterrichtspraxis*, 7, No. 1 (Spring 1974), 142–47, and “Addendum: German Play Production in U.S. and Canadian Colleges and Universities since 1959,” *Unterrichtspraxis*, 8, No. 1 (Spring 1975), 104–05.

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