Palermo's Vastasate: Staging a Multilingual Reality. Class-Conflict and Linguistic Barriers in 18th-Century Sicilian Farces

Alberto Iozzia
Department of Italian, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey

Abstract. At the end of the 18th century, the majority of the members of Sicilian lower classes were monolingual and this condition was preventing them from actively participating in the political life of the city: made by poor people and for poor people, the vastasate were among the few forms of self-expression they could comprehend. These farces were a social commentary on the condition of the lower classes and a picture of the multilingual city of which they were the core and from which they were somehow excluded.

Keywords: Theater; Sicily; Comedy; Multilingualism; Vastasate; Streetporters; Italy (late 18th century); Franco e Ciccio; Ignazio Buttitta; Palermo; Folklore

1. The Lost Meaning and the Forgotten Stage

For many years, between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, Palermo's most popular form of theater were improvised farces called *vastasate*. More than two hundred years later, the majority of Sicilians have little or no idea of what such performances were about. The word *vastasata* is still widely used, but few Sicilians would relate it to actors and theaters. Therefore, before proceeding with the history of these farces, I must trace the history of the word *vastasata*. Later, I will position these performances in their historical context, and explore their themes and their language. I argue that the linguistic contrast presented in the *vastasate* reflects the multilingual contest of 18th-century Palermo and the class struggles inherent in such condition. Finally, I will comment on the disappearance of this little remembered theater form: I will show why it vanished from the Sicilian stages and yet how, somehow, it survived.

The English translation of the Sicilian *vastasu* would be "rude, unkind, discourteous" (Bellestri 1985 p. 328). Although correct, this definition is not quite sufficient. *Vastasu* is semantically stronger than "impolite". Modern Sicilians would accuse of *vastasaggine* a young rascal misbehaving in a classroom as well as an old man cutting the line in a post-office. *Vastasu* would also be the shopkeeper who shows little consideration to a loyal customer and, in turn, the same customer who commits the awful sin of shopping somewhere else. A couple of indiscreet lovers would be *vastasi* (or worse, *vastasunazzi*), and so will be that man who passionately compliments a woman — *vastasune* — as well as the same woman who inspires so much passion — *vastasazza*.

The word *vastasu* and its derivatives thrive in modern Sicilian, and the inhabitants of the island use them constantly and with a remarkable creativity. Still, not many Sicilians are aware

that the word *vastasu* used to define a specific group of workers: the porters or the dockers. Now, it is certain that neither all the porters nor all the dockers are ill-mannered people (just as not all sailors curse).[1] It is also true, however, that a tough working environment, generally populated by men of low-class origin, seems ideal for the flourishing of swear words — especially when considering the high risk of a heavy load landing on one's feet. Over time, the modern Sicilian word *vastasu* has lost its original embodiment (the porter in flesh and blood), but it has retained all the stereotypical attributes. The figurative use of this word — the only one known to the present-day Sicilian speakers — was also in the linguistic habits of the past generations, although not as its most salient meaning. The Greek origin of the word is the verb βαστίζω — 'I carry' — and it was used in Sicily and along the coasts of the Mediterranean Basin at least since 1292: either carrying weapons, books, or generic merchandise, any porter would have been referred to as *bastasu* — always starting with 'b' until the 15th century (Varvaro 2014). Sicilian vocabularies published up to the end of the 19th century still listed "porter" as the main meaning, placing the figurative one as its second or even third sense. Vincenzo Mortillaro does it in all the three editions of his dictionary, translating *vastasu* into the Italian «portatore, facchino», and only after that into «zotico»[2] (1844, p. 913). As early as 1790, Abbot Michele Pasqualino, a member of the *Accademia della Crusca*, points out that *vastasu* was «*quelli che porta pesi addosso per prezzo*» (Pasqualino 1790, p. 289), "a man who is paid to carry heavy loads". Pasqualino enriches the definitions of his etymological vocabulary with philology, and just after a long series of arguments about the derivation of the word *vastasu*, he places what he perceives as its least salient meaning: «triviale, zoticone» — "vulgar, lout". Pasqualino eventually provides a list of derivatives of *vastasu*: *vastasarìa*, *vastasazzu*, *vastaseddu*, *vastasiscamenti*, *vastasiscu*, and *vastasuni*. It is by observing this list that any modern Sicilian would immediately notice the absence of the currently most common derivative of *vastasu*: *vastasata*. Nowadays, Sicilians use this term — absent from Pasqualino's vocabulary — to define the action of a *vastasu*. We finally find it in 1844, when Mortillaro translates *vastasata*, synonym of *vastasarìa*, into the Italian «malcreanza, scortesia» (p. 484) — in English, "inappropriate behavior or discourtesy": the most salient meaning still in use.

Vastasata, however, can indicate something quite different. Most of the Sicilians have forgotten that *vastasata* is in fact the name of a specific kind of theater performance that was particularly popular in Palermo in the last decades of 18th century, when Abbot Pasqualino compiled and published his vocabulary (1790). It is not easy to guess why the Abbot decided to exclude this word from his text, especially if we consider the attention he devoted to other derivatives, as well as the resounding success that such shows were achieving in the city. Perhaps the phenomenon was still ongoing, and it was too early for it to be "catalogued" in Pasqualino's book. Indeed, one needs to wait until the second edition of Mortillaro's dictionary (published in 1853) to find *vastasata* defined not just as an action of a *vastasu*, but also as a type of play. Marquis Mortillaro, who does not mention the term *vastasata* in his 1844 work, nine years later defines it as a «rappresentazione teatrale che espone fatti popolari e ridicoli in lingua nazionale, sovente aggiungendo nel momento ciò che credono i recitanti a proposito, senza stare rigorosamente ai detti del suggeritore» (Mortillaro 1853, p. 913). In other words, a *vastasata* was

[1] In Italian, being a docker (*essere uno scaricatore di porto*) is figurative speech for being vulgar. Very similarly, in the English-speaking world, sailors are known to use bad language.

[2] "Porter" is probably the best English translation for the Italian *portatore* or *facchino*, while "boor" maybe be the proper translation of the Italian *zotico*. All the translations from Sicilian or Italian, unless otherwise specified, are mine.

a comic theater play focused on the working class, performed in the national language and with a considerable element of improvisation. The research on the reasons why the word *vastasata* did not appear in previous texts is more suitable for the philologists, and to them I happily leave it. In my view, the content of Mortillaro's definition is much more thrilling than its publishing history, especially his emphasis on working-class themes, on the use of the "national language", and on the improvised acting based on scenarios. At the end of the 18th century, the majority of the members of Sicilian lower classes were monolingual and this condition was preventing them from actively participating in the political life of the city: made by poor people and for poor people, the *vastasate* were among the few forms of self-expression they could comprehend. These farces were a social commentary on the condition of the lower classes and a picture of the multilingual city of which they were the core and from which they were somehow excluded.

2. Dangerously Multilingual

With about 200,000 inhabitants, in 1770 Palermo was one of the most populated cities in Italy (Porto 1980, p. 11) and among the liveliest in Europe. The Spanish Crown had suspended its control on the island in 1713, and Sicilians — according to Santi Correnti — resented the House of Savoy (ruling from 1713 to 1720) and the Austrians (1720–1734). The future royal family of the Kingdom of Italy operated a rough growth of fiscal pressure, which did not help in keeping high the spirits of the population (Correnti 2006, pp. 37–38). It was instead a clash of cultures to create great problems of compatibility between the Sicilians and the German-speaking occupants sent by the House of Habsburg (Correnti 2006, p. 39). The Spanish eventually came back in 1734, and they brought along a new series of reforms that Sicilians seemed to appreciate (*ibid.*, p. 40). Some very enlightened viceroys administrated Sicily in those years, introducing Enlightenment values and attempting to renovate an obsolete society. The Inquisition was dissolved in 1782, smallpox vaccination was introduced, and forcing a minor to become a monk or a nun was finally forbidden (*ibid.*). In spite of this, the distance between the aristocratic citizens and the underprivileged remained enormous. This enlightened reform that the Bourbons had introduced in their Italian territories actually contributed to the creation of the social consciousness that would eventually lead to the end of the Spanish dominion on Sicily. I claim that the *vastasate* were an expression of such rising collective awareness, and most of their power — as I shall explain later on — lay in the very gap between the poorest and the richest classes.

The Spanish viceroys had planned to transform Palermo into a European city, and they were confident that this transformation entailed a concrete renovation of the theater and a real revolution of the way Sicilians would experience the theatrical performance. However, as Giovanni Isgrò explains in his *La forma siciliana del teatro*, the urban nature of Sicilian theater — so closely connected to rituals and traditions — was very hard to change (Isgrò 2000, p. 93). For the people of Palermo the performances of actors associated with seasonal celebrations and religious festivities; and they performed in the streets and in public squares, rather than in theaters. Indeed, as Isgrò claims, carnival farces are probably at the origin of the *vastasata* (*ibid.*, p. 443). These periodic performances, staged by improvised actors during the Sicilian carnival, were rich in vulgarities and triviality. Soon, Isgrò observes, actors started to put on these shows also outside the carnival period, because of the great success and because of the increasing demand. The entire performance was improvised and the linguistic register was very loutish

(*ibid.*). Such actors had a *scenone* (scenario), on which they would build what in the context of *commedia dell'arte* was called a *canovaccio* (*Sul teatro popolare siciliano,* 1834, p. 37). The craft of improvisation, for which the *commedia* was famous, had been known along the Italian peninsula for a long time and it had been practiced in Sicily at least since the first Greek colonies of the 8th century B.C. (Marzullo 1955, p. 3). The *vastasate* and the *commedia dell'arte* — which had managed to spread in the island only for about a century — shared the acting based on improvisation and a series of stock roles. In the case of the *vastasate,* all the actors played unmasked, and the characters were not the celebrated ones that had become famous over the stages of Italy for the past two hundred years. However, if the servants were the absolute protagonists of the *commedia dell'arte* shows, the main character of a *vastasata* was always — as Giuseppe Cocchiara observes — a porter, a *vastasu* (Cocchiara 1979, p. 35). And what is a porter if not a servant?

The *vastasate* were originally staged in the so-called *casotti* — not actual theaters, but rather some sort of huts. The price for a ticket was ludicrously low, the shows — according to testimonies — could not be funnier, and the small, wooden buildings would always end up bursting with spectators (Cocchiara 1979, p. 27). Despite the trivial plots and the vulgar language of the *vastasate*, the lowest classes of Palermo were not the only spectators: representatives of the middle class and even of the aristocracy would join these unorthodox theaters and enjoy the shows (*ibid.*, pp. 26–28).

The Spanish authorities were still attempting to lead the show business of Palermo in a different direction and they were trying to protect the two main theaters of the city, the Santa Cecilia and the Santa Lucia, and their more elevated repertory. For this reason, they carefully legalized and regulated the *casotti* in 1774, requiring — among other things — that they were made of wood and easily removed (Cocchiara 1979, p. 30) which placed them at the mercy of the government. In 1784, another administrative order was issued in the effort to control the number of *casotti* (Isgrò 2000, p. 100), which was steadily growing.

The authorities supervised even the repertoires: it was by law that only improvised performances could be staged in a *casotto* (*ibid.*, pp. 119–120). An improvised play could not possibly be as good as a written one, the city administrators seemed to think. Not allowing canonical plays in the *casotti*, they hoped to insure attendance at the official theaters of Palermo. But in fact the *palermitani* still favored the impromptu humor of the *vastasate.* The theater owners complained about the lack of spectators and they blamed the companies and the producers of the many *casotti* for their failure.

In those years, theater companies performing *vastasate* had indeed multiplied, and it seemed that everybody in Palermo wanted to invest in a *casotto* (Cocchiara 1979, pp. 30–32). In 1795, the Court of Naples itself tried to minimize the damages: only one casotto in the whole Palermo was licensed to perform vastasate (Cocchiara 1979, p. 32). The transclass success of these shows, however, was not restrained by any regulation: in 1797, the same *casotto* was still made of wood and it could still be disassembled at the end of the theater season (as required by law), but it was much bigger than ten years earlier (Isgrò 2000, p. 103).

At the end of the century, the *casotto* dedicated to the *vastasate* counted at least ten employees in addition to the cast, and it was even equipped with dressing rooms for the actors and a theater curtain for the stage (p. 103). Up to five hundred spectators could fit in the stalls (Nicotra 2015). Year by year, the distance between the *casotto* and the real theaters grew shorter, and it was eventually King Ferdinand who made one world merge into the other. On January 19, 1800, Ferdinand decided to see for himself what was going on. Naturally, he did not go to a

casotto. Therefore, for the first time, a *vastasata* was performed in a real theater, the Santa Cecilia in Palermo (Isgrò 2000, p. 105). The King immediately became a great enthusiast of the *vastasate* and a passionate admirer of the most successful duo to perform on those stages: Biagio Perez and Giuseppe Marotta (Porto 1980, p. 18). On July 12, 1801, the King was in the audience of the Teatro Santa Lucia for a performance of what was considered the *vastasata* par excellence: *Il cortile degli Aragonesi* (Isgrò 2000, p. 105)[3]. At that point, the *vastasata* had considerably changed. The farther it moved from the streets of Palermo, the closer it resembled other forms of theater. Its triumphs led to the natural downfall of the genre, but we must examine its origins before dealing with its end. Among the reasons for the success of this theater form, we must consider its language.

Actors performed *vastasate* in the Sicilian language, which is important and not to be taken for granted. Sicilian was not the only language spoken in Palermo, where different people, in different contexts, would also use Italian and Spanish. Schools were not teaching Sicilian, and there were no intellectuals publishing in that language — as Fara Misuraca points out. Some local scholars, such as the Abbot Pasqualino, mentioned above, would have wanted the people of the island to choose literary Sicilian — the direct descendent of the 13th-century poetry of the Sicilian School — to be their official language (Misuraca 2005), but this improbable dream of linguistic isolation belonged almost exclusively to aristocrats. The bourgeois intellectuals were already pushing towards the use of Tuscan Italian as a lingua franca that would allow easier communication with the continent, and in 1797 the Bourbon central administration had indeed declared it mandatory to issue all public documents in Italian (*ibid.*). The language of the streets, of course, was neither the Italian of the official gazette nor the Sicilian of Frederick's poets. People from the lower classes were often able to speak just Sicilian, and their monolingualism excluded them from the political life of their city. Of course, there was no real interest in educating the masses and one would need to wait until 1860, Garibaldi, and the *Legge Casati* to establish a public school system in Sicily. Before that, linguistic differences considerably increased the unbridgeable distance between classes — a gap that was perfectly represented on the stage of the *casotti*.

Mortillaro tells us that the *vastasate* were performed in the national language (1853, p. 913). What does this mean? Certainly, he does not refer to Italian. In 1904, Giuseppe Pitrè wrote, that the *vastasate* were indeed called *commedie nazionali* — national comedies — and he reminds us of the 18th-century struggle to make a national language out of Sicilian (p. 94). Vincenzo Mortillaro was himself something of a nationalist, and denounced the colonialist attitude of the Neapolitan central administration towards Sicily (Fiorito 2012). However, he is probably not referring to the *siciliano colto* that Pasqualino and the other intellectuals would have wanted to be the official language of the island (Misuraca 2005). The Sicilian language of the poets would not be used to tell the story of a porter. The Sicilian of the *vastasate* was perhaps the very same as that spoken by the engulfing crowd that would populate the stalls of the *casotto*. They constituted, after all, the heart of what Mortillaro might have called the Sicilian Nation.

In its heyday, the *vastasata* was the main entertainment of Palermo's lowest classes and, as Isgrò suggests, it soon inspired their political outburst as well (1981, p. 448). As Michael Silverstein (2003) claims, an ethnolinguistic identity is a fact of a psychosocial sort (*ibid.*, p. 532). It emerges — Silverstein continues — "where people ascribe a certain primordiality to language and a certain consequentiality to language difference" (*ibid.*, p. 532). Since antiquity, and especially since the Muslim conquest, foreign powers had dominated Sicily, and so spoken

[3] The English translation of the title would be *The Aragonese courtyard* or *The courtyard of the Aragoneses*.

languages had been important indices of social status. The *casotti* of the late 18th century would then become what Silverstein calls "ritual sites": certain times, places, and modalities for which an ethnolinguistic group's denotational code or register is licensed (*ibid.*, p. 543). The restrictions ordered by the Court of Naples in 1795 (Cocchiara 1979, p. 32), limiting the spaces of the performance, are to be interpreted in these terms, as a process at once of isolation and assimilation.

On the stage, meanwhile, another process was taking place: both the privileged and the unprivileged classes were represented, and they were powerfully interacting in dynamics that mirrored the social realities outside of the theater. The counterpart of Nofriu — this is the name of the porter who is the protagonist of many *vastasate* — is *lu Baruni*, the Baron. The symbol of all underprivileged men and the personification of the wealthiest Palermo constantly stand one in front of the other. If Nofriu speaks Sicilian, the language of the lower classes, the Baron speaks Italian, creating the dramatic tension that was at the core of everything happening on the stage. As I stated above, language is creating a gap in the city by distancing the lower classes from the aristocrats and the bourgeoisies. In the *casotti*, two actors physically represent discontinuity between a porter and a nobleman, and they dramatize the seeds of a class conflict that was yet to be fully understood. The interactions between these two extremes — the porter and the baron — were based on their linguistic difference and on their mutual incommunicability. The performance shows the gap and, by doing so, it fills it up: the distance is reduced by the satire and, as a result, it temporarily disappears.

Nofriu, the embodiment of Sicilian humor, is the great protagonist of most of the *vastasate* (Cocchiara 1979, p. 37)[4]. He is the all-Sicilian character, an urban descendant of the comic *persona* that had belonged to Sicily since long before the first *casotto* of *piazza* Marina: Giufà, the simpleton hero of the Sicilian oral tradition[5]. Such a continuity is the expression of a national humor that survived the influence of many other cultures. It represents a solid core of identity, an image of a whole island. The deeply Sicilian character of Nofriu, whose essence belonged to the Sicilian folklore, explains the reasons for his popularity among the community.

3. Actors, Tradition, and Reformation

The long lasting fortune of this character and of his adventures, however, was also due to the talent of some excellent actors. Biagio Perez and Giuseppe Marotta, mentioned earlier, were the most celebrated.

[4] Cocchiara collects in his book thirty titles. Licata claims they are about fifty (La rivincita di 'Nofrio 208). In most of them Onofrio (Italian for Nofriu) is mentioned. The titles Cocchiara reports are (in Italian): *Onofrio ed Elisa, cavaliere e dama per forza, ossia il fanatismo dei facchini*; *Onofrio ladro in campagna e galantuomo in città*; *Onofrio disertore*; *I due anelli magici*; *I contratti rotti; Testalonga e Guarnaccia*; *La nascita di Onofrio dall'uovo*; *Le metamorfosi di Onofrio*; *Onofrio, finto sordo e muto per non pagare i debiti*; *L'equivoco del manto*; *La pentola*; Le torce dei diavoli; La magia di Corvastro e Gagioni; Onofrio, finto principessa; *Lo spirito folletto di Elisa*; *Il fuori fuori*; *Onofrio, servo sciocco*; *I quattro rivali in duello*; *Quattro Onofri in un punto*; *I vecchi burlati*; *Il cortile degli Aragonesi*; *L'anatomia di Onofrio*; *Onofrio, re dormendo*; *Onofrio, marito geloso*; *Le novantanove disgrazie di Onofrio*; *Onofrio finto imperatore del Gran Mogol*; *La calata di Baida*; *Lo spedale dei pazzi*; *La venuta dello sposo dalla tonnara*; *Venuta di Lappanio da Cianciana*.

[5] Cocchiara himself unwittingly proves this overlapping by reporting a story he believes belonging to Nofriu (pp. 28-29), but that is part of Giufà's corpus (Corrao, 1991 pp. 23–25).

Perez had had the idea to build the very first casotto in Palermo and to have his company performing Sicilian farces in it (Cocchiara 1979, p. 30). He was a skillful organizer and a brilliant scenarist. Among all the companies that had tried to take advantage of the exploit of the *vastasate*, his was the best and in fact the only one in business after 1795 (p. 32). He had been the *capocomico* since the beginning and had successfully played the role of Nofriu for a long time (Licata 2013, p. 208). Marotta, on the other hand, was — in Giuseppe Pitrè's opinion — the funniest actor Palermo had seen in a century (Isgrò 1981, p. 445) and the best Nofriu the audience could desire. Perez would step back, leaving the center of the stage to his partner and granting the biggest profits and a definite success to their company. Salvo Porto describes Marotta as very similar, in features, to his own mask: like Nofriu, he was a dumb, illiterate drunkard who would have wasted his days consorting with real porters (Porto 1980, p. 18). It is not for us to judge whether Marotta's conduct was a methodological approach to acting (although Stanislavski's system was still far from being developed), or whether it was just the genuine expression of his devotion to wine and idleness. What we can evaluate are his results on stage, which were outstanding. When Perez's *casotto* became the only one in Palermo, Marotta turned out to be the only "legal" Nofriu in town.

The pressure on Perez's company must have grown year by year, together with their success. At a certain point, they stopped relying on scenarios and improvisation, and started writing down their lines. Perez was, according to Pitrè, the «intellectual soul» of the company (Pitrè 1950, p. 80). He would make up the plot, write down the play, have his actors memorize their lines, and he would even direct their acting (*ibid.*, p. 80). The most sordid areas of Palermo were the source of Perez's inspiration: he would walk around — writes Pitrè — and let the fighting, yelling, chatting, loving, and behavior of men and women become his plays (*ibid.*, p. 80). The absence of texts, unfortunately, prevents us from an extended linguistic analysis of the *vastasate*. Already at the beginning of the 20th century, Giuseppe Pitrè was lamenting such an absence (Pitrè 1950, p. 85). Of all the *vastasate*, only *Il cortile degli Aragonesi* remains. Cocchiara suggests that Biagio Perez might have been the author (1979, pp. 38–39), but we do not know for sure. No one of the plays that Perez wrote for his company, the *coppia grande* (Pitrè 1950, p. 87), has survived.

Perez's written reform of Sicilian popular theater — in some aspects similar to Goldoni's — was at once the index of its great success and of the beginning of its end. The authors, as Isgrò notes, will soon be the absolute protagonists of Sicilian dramaturgy (1981, p. 430). Sicilian will still be the language of their theater, but not for long: the next generations would start their own tradition, in Italian. The text will become as important as the performance and, in less than a century, Sicily will be exporting world-famous dramatists. The impromptu farce of the streets had been the only kind of performance resisting all the dominations suffered by Sicily for more than a millennium. In the 19th century, it eventually got lost. It changed and it evolved. It left the *casotto* for the vaudeville theater at first, and eventually it came back on the public squares, for the country festivals on summer nights. The comic strategy lying at the bottom of any *vastasata*, however, survived: the dynamics of oppositions between the baron and the porter did not disappear together with hundreds of forgotten plots. That was, after all, the secret of their success. The austere nobleman and the rowdy docker, meeting face to face, had been the proxemic foundation of the *vastasata*. Their complementary relationship, of course, was not the invention of Perez and Marotta.

Humor has always been a matter of upsetting a balance (Minois 2004, p. 102), of «seeing the duality of connected disconnectedness», as Ron Culberson puts it. There is a degree of normality

that the audience naturally determines in relation to itself, a linearity that is expected to be constant (Propp 1988, p. 47). Suddenly, such linearity is interrupted and the norm gets overturned: that is humor. Vladimir Propp points out how any feature or oddity that distinguishes a person from his environment can make that person funny (p. 47), and this applies to two characters one by the side of the other: if their features alone make them stand out as a living contrast, the comic effect is guaranteed. It is the white clown and the Auguste or "red clown" type in their perennial psychological and physical skirmish: the former is tall and the latter short, the former thin and the latter fat, the former honest and the latter a scoundrel (Fo 2001, pp. 178–180). All the most effective comic duos in recent history have embodied a version of such a scheme: Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. One of them (the white clown) simply wants to go through with his number, while the other (the Auguste) will keep messing things up. That is it: the successful show is after all nothing but the display of a frustrated performance. The real protagonist is of course the heckler — Nofriu, in the case of the *vastasate* — and yet his act would simply be incomplete without the counterbalancing presence of the baron. Giuseppe Marotta's explosive performances could not live in isolation. The comic pairing with the *Baruni* was the essential core of the farce and, finally, its surviving nucleus.

When Biagio Perez started writing down the dialogues of his plays, distorting their nature, he destined the *vastasate* to an evolution that would have coincided with their end. The great success had transformed the *vastasate* in a form of theater still focused on the working-class, but no longer told by working-class members. After the French Revolution, Europe had changed. Eventually, Sicily changed as well. It changed at least its skin, going through the Unification and the early years of the Kingdom of Italy. There was space for other forms of theater, at least until cinema came along. Even then, Sicilian performers and playwrights persisted. Western Sicily was violently bombed during the Second World War and a few theaters were destroyed. That was the end of many things, but not of everything. Witness Nino Martoglio, Angelo Musco, Luigi Pirandello: many other names of writers and actors had come after Perez and Marotta. However, if there was somebody who would follow in their footsteps, it is actors like Franco Franchi and Ciccio Ingrassia.

Very much like those Sicilian farces that had flown into the *vastasate*, Franco and Ciccio started their career improvising in the lowliest districts/neighborhoods of Palermo, and they ended up performing in the most important theaters. There was no king to impress in the 1960s, but cinema and television brought the fame of Franco and Ciccio much farther than Perez and Marotta could have possibly dreamed. Their popularity and their success were enormous. They were protagonists of more than one hundred films that, like the *vastasate*, tell different stories and yet have just one plot. For their entire career, Franco and Ciccio often proposed a variation of the two Sicilian characters that had been representative of the ongoing class conflict of the late 18th century: the Baron and the Porter — a lasting conflict that was not over, but only relabeled. They did this perhaps unaware of their political potential (Licata 2013, p. 206), and yet with great consistency. Franco and Ciccio never gave up their "Sicilianicity" and never seemed to forget where they had come from and who their main audience really was. If they lost sight of the intrinsic social power of their act, it was very much like when Perez and Marotta forgot what *vastasate* were actually about. The two actors embodied Sicilian humor, which had had its own nature at least since the arrival of the ancient Greeks and that — at a certain point in history — had found expression inside the *casotti*. The attempt to explore the details of such continuity would certainly be complicated, probably pointless, and certainly long. One solid link, however, connects the porters of *piazza* Marina to the most popular duo of Sicilian cinema: on the night of

September 6 1973, probably more than one hundred years after its last mise-en-scène, *Il cortile degli Aragonesi* was performed at the Teatro Biondo in Palermo. *Il cortile degli Aragonesi* was the most beloved *vastasata* already in their heyday, and in 1973 there is little doubt on who is going to be cast to play the script that the Sicilian poet Ignazio Buttitta has based on the anonymous scenario. Franco and Ciccio, the absolute protagonists of Italian mass-cinema, are to play the leading roles of this revived play of the people. Ciccio Ingrassia is the Baron and Franco Franchi is, of course, Nofriu the porter.

4. A Matter of Proxemics

The distance between the characters is primarily expressed — as suggested above — with proxemics: at the opening of the very first scene, Franchi/Nofriu is at the center of the stage, while Ingrassia/Baruni stands inside the balcony of his palace, on the top left. By doing so, the director Piero Panza immediately sets the status of the roles, as well as their mutual relationship: one is up and the other is down. The first line of the play is Baruni's. He reads from a book — clear index of literacy, and therefore of his cultural superiority to the rest of the characters in general and to Nofriu in particular. This line alone contains all the elements of the entire plot: "Miser pargoletto, il tuo destin non sai?", [6] "Poor little boy, don't you know your destiny?". The Baron speaks in Italian and, in some way, he is already referring to Nofriu: at the end of the play, the porter will discover that his biological father is no less than the Baron himself.[7] Of course, Nofriu cannot understand him, because the language is the barrier preventing him (the lower class) from owning the truth — on the stage as well as outside the theater. The finale of the *vastasata* is unveiled a few lines later, when Buttitta's Baron — still reading from his book — says: "Ah, non gli dite mai qual era il genitor!" (Buttitta 1973, p. 27), "Do not ever tell him who his father was!" The most shocking (and yet the most traditional) backstory of the play is immediately revealed, but this cannot surprise us: this *anagnorisis*, or recognition scene, has belonged to classic theater since its origins. Such an opening is an elegant rhetorical device used to link together the beginning and the end of the play.

While the Baron tries to read his book, Nofriu, his sister Betta and their father Cosimo are having a very loud conversation. Their squalls disturb the Baron's reading and, by doing so, complete the auguste/white clown dynamics. The same structure is repeated at the end of the first act, set inside the apartments of the Baron: the nobleman is sitting at a small desk, in the attempt to write a letter, but he is disturbed by the presence of Nofriu and Cosimo. The porter and his father entered the Baron's house when he was not there. Trapped in the apartment, they are now

[6] This opening line was already in the canovaccio that Ignazio Buttitta used to develop the play in 1972. I use as reference a copy of the canovaccio included in *Teatro Siciliano* (Mango 1961). The same text had already appeared in Giuseppe Cocchiara's book published in 1979, *Le vastasate*, and in the 1926 edition of Cocchiara's book, entitled *Le vastasate*:*Contributo alla storia del teatro popolare*.

[7] The final anagnorisis does not appear in the original text, and it may be an invention inspired to Buttitta by the opening lines of the Baron. However, the possibility of a different source (oral?) is not to be excluded. In the article titled "La rivincita di 'Nofrio", published in the Sicilian daily newspaper *L'Ora* on September 7, 1973 (the day after the performance at the Teatro Biondo) and reprinted in *Storie e cronache della città sotterranea* (2013), Salvo Licata quotes Buttita. The Sicilian writer would have said that the original canovaccio of *Il cortile degli Aragonesi* was nothing more than a little hint and that everything the audience was about to see that night was absolutely his. An overstatement, in my humble opinion, that deserves further studies. Here is the original excerpt: "'Na cosa grossa, picciotti! 'Na cosa grossa! Il testo originale era 'na nucidda. Io ho preso solo l'intreccio, tutto il resto è mio. Tutto quello che vedrete stasera è un testo mio" (Licata 2013, p. 209).

hiding inside two bags supposedly full of charcoal. The scene is based on physical humor: the two bags move around, stopping every time the Baron looks at them. The nobleman is puzzled, he eventually gives up his proposal to write and decides to sleep. Like in the first scene, the Baron is interrupted when performing an action indicating his literacy and his belonging to the upper classes[8]. If reading aloud had been stopped with an even louder tone of voice, the physical act of writing is now disturbed with a physical performance. There is always balance and complementarity in the actions of Nofriu and of his counterpart. Franchi and Ingrassia play their roles with their usual energy, providing the characters with the right amount of austerity (the Baron) or jocosity (Nofriu) and constantly keeping stable such a precious asymmetry. In the last scene of the third act — the finale of the play — the linguistic miscomprehensions reach their peak: a notary joins the rest of the characters in order to ratify the marriage of Lisa and Nofriu. The *notaro* is representative of the bureaucratic apparatus, unintelligible to everyone by definition. He fills his discourse with Latin expressions and technical phrasing that, of course, create the most hilarious misunderstandings with all the inhabitants of the courtyard — the Baron included. At the end of Buttitta's play, Nofriu has the chance to inherit the Baron's properties together with his title. The porter is stunned by the news, and he reacts using the power of his language: while Ingrassia/the Baron explains how he happens to be Nofriu's father, Franchi "translates" all the nobleman's sentences into his own. It is not a mere translation from Italian into Sicilian, but a cultural one as well. It is a translation capable of stripping the Baron's words of their hypocrisy, presenting them for what they actually are. The actors are still playing with word-puns, but now the linguistic distance is contracted into some sort of two-voice monologue.

NOFRIU: Iu fiugghiu du Baruni sugnu?
COSIMO: Pazzu è, pazzu!
BARONE: Un peccato di gioventù.
NOFRIU: Pazzu è!
BARONE: Era bambina e lavorava a casa nostra.
NOFRIU: Mittitici a camisa' fuorza.
BARONE: Io ne abusai con la forza.
NOFRIU: 'U puorcu fici!
BARONE: Uscì incinta.
NOFRIU: Nove mesi di gravidanza!
BARONE: Nacque un angioletto.
NOFRIU: Con le ali di carta.
BARONE: Mio padre chiamò Cosimo.
NOFRIU: E ci retti i rinari!
BARONE: Cosimo acconsentì.
NOFRIU: E s'accullò i cuorna!
BARONE: E la portò all'altare.
NOFRIU: Vergine! Pazzu è. No, pazzu è. Nutaru, è veru chi è pazzu?
NOTAIO: Non è pazzo. Un fatto di coscienza.
NOFRIU: Ma quali coscienza?!
(*Abbracciando* COSIMO) Chistu è me patri. Anchi si fitusu, chistu è me patri.
NOTAIO: Rifiutate l'eredità?
NOFRIU: 'A riufiutu!
NOTAIO: E il titolo di baronato?
NOFRIU: 'U rifiutu!

[8] The original text does not specify the recipient of the Baron's letter, while Buttitta has his nobleman addressing a letter to a certain *onorevole Colantonio* (Buttitta 1973, p. 50). A politician, as its title indicates. Buttitta wants to link the fictional upper classes of his play to the actual public administration of his time.

The following is my transcription of the play as it was aired on September 19, 1973. A rough translation into English would be the following:

> NOFRIU: Am I the Baron's son?
> COSIMO: Crazy, he is crazy!
> BARONE: It was the sin of a young man.
> NOFRIU: He is crazy!
> BARONE: She was just a child, working in our house.
> NOFRIU: Get a straitjacket!
> BARONE: I abused her.
> NOFRIU: Pig!
> BARONE: She got pregnant.
> NOFRIU: Nine months of pregnancy!
> BARONE: A little angel was born.
> NOFRIU: With paper wings.
> BARONE: My father called Cosimo.
> NOFRIU: And he paid him!
> BARONE: Cosimo accepted.
> NOFRIU: He accepted to be a cuckold!
> BARONE: And he married her.
> NOFRIU: Virgin!
> He's crazy. He must be. Notary, he's crazy, isn't he?
> NOTARY: He is not crazy. This is a matter of conscience.
> NOFRIU: What are you talking about?!
> (he holds COSIMO) This is my father. Even if he stinks, this is my father.
> NOTAIO: So, do you refuse the inheritance?
> NOFRIU: I do!
> NOTAIO: And the titles well?
> NOFRIU: I do!

Nofriu must refuse, politically and literarily (Calaciura 1975, p. 7), the possibility to become himself a nobleman, because it would mean to enter into a linguistic paradox. He will always interact with the Baron, physically and dialectically, but he will never replace him. Their dialogue has to continue in the very terms their roles impose. As Franchi says in his closing monologue, Nofriu dies and comes back to life always the same, he lives his adventures stuck within the borders of his own character, and yet he is free. The distance separating the porter and the nobleman is not meant to be permanently dissolved, because it represents a gap that no one would probably manage to fill. It can get smaller and almost disappear during the acts, but it needs to be restored before the final curtain. Ignazio Buttitta was indeed very much aware of the important role the *vastasate* had always had as a potential social commentary. As Anselmo Calaciura observed, Buttitta knew that putting on stage an 18th-century urban farce without linking it to its new audience would have meant to distort its original sense (Calaciura 1975, p. 5). *Lu curtigghiu di li Raunisi* had been able to depict reality and to denounce its inequality (*ibid.*). Without updating its cultural language and its references, Buttitta's rewriting would have been nothing more than an academic exercise (*ibid.*).

Reality cannot be expressed by old means (Calaciura 1975, p. 6) and, in fact, Buttitta did not simply expand the original text: the Sicilian poet managed to connect the farcical motifs of the late 18th century to the critical events of his time. In 1973, Nofriu mirrors the themes of Palermo's *Lumpenproletariat*, speaks the language of ZEN, the economically deprived quarter constructed in 1969, and still suffers a political marginalization. Already in the original text, the Baron threatens the people of the courtyard with eviction (Anonymous 1961, p. 93) and Buttitta

links this to the occupation of public buildings and the overpopulation of Palermo outskirts. In Buttitta's play, the wildest dream of Nofriu is not to become a nobleman: he would rather become a rich bourgeois, and use his money to settle the Baron's debts and to obtain his final revenge by evicting the aristocrat from his own palace (p. 42). Even in the 20th century, as one can read in the opening poem that Buttitta added to the anonymous play, the "king" speaks a language of his own (p. 26) and he still has the right of life and death on his subjects. The underprivileged classes, meanwhile, will play the masochistic game of fighting each other: the generational clash that Nofriu and his father Cosimo represent is a literary trope, but in the context of this play, it is also makes a socio-political statement. Members of the lower classes will always struggle with each other, resulting in the paralysis and the perennial failure of their unfinished conflict with the upper ones.

5. Conclusions

There is still a lot of work to do on the *vastasate*. In more recent years, *Il cortile degli Aragonesi* has been performed again in Palermo at least in three different occasions by three different theater companies. A comic play should always speak the cultural language of its audience, and it would be quite interesting to explore the angles these new writers and directors have taken on the ancient carnival farces of piazza Marina. Multilingualism had been a strong concept long before the idea and the effects of globalization would emerge, but nowadays Palermo is not less polyglot then its 18th-century self. The discriminating power of a linguistic code is not a concept belonging to the past, and perhaps these new *vastasate* say something about that, rather than be mere philological ostentations. For the same reason, it would be a good idea to go back to the origins of the *vastasate* as well. Once again, we should dig into the archives and libraries to find out whether the illustrious scholars who have studied Sicilian folklore managed to learn everything, or if rather some forgotten *canovaccio* still lies unread.

References

Anonymous. 1961. *Lu curtigghiu di li Raunisi.* In: Achille Mango (ed.), *Teatro siciliano.* Palermo: Editori Stampatori Associati, Vol. 1, pp. 87–116.

Balarm. 2015. *"Il Cortile degli Aragonesi": una vastasata al Finocchiaro.* Balarm — Idee, eventi, persone che muovono la Sicilia. [Online] November 26, 2015. [Cited: February 4, 2016.] http://www.balarm.it/articoli/il-cortile-degli-aragonesi--una-vastasata-al-finocchiaro.asp

Bellestri, Joseph. 1985. *Basic Sicilian–English Dictionary*. Ann Arbor: Joseph Bellestri.

Biundi, Giuseppe. 1857. *Dizionario Siciliano–Italiano.* Palermo: Pedone Lauriel.

Buttitta, Ignazio. 1973. *Il cortile degli Aragonesi.* [dir.] Piero Panza. [perf.] Franco Franchi and Ciccio Ingrassia. Teatro Biondo, Palermo, PA, Italy: RAI Radiotelevisione Italiana, September 6, 1973.

———. 1975. L*u curtigghiu di li Raunisi*. Catania: Niccolò Giannotta Editore.

Calaciura, Anselmo. 1975. "Prefazione". In: Ignazio Buttitta. *Lu curtigghiu di li Raunisi.* Catania: Niccolò Giannotta Editore, pp. 5–10.

Ciprì, Daniele and Maresco, Franco. 2004. C*ome inguaiammo il cinema italiano - La vera storia di Franco e Ciccio*. [DVD]. [perf.] Ciccio Ingrassia and Franco Franchi. Cinico Cinema; Lucky Red, 2004.

Cocchiara, Giuseppe. 1979. *Le vastasate*. Palermo: Il Vespro.

———. 1926. *Le vastasate. Contributo alla storia del teatro popolare*. Palermo-Florence: Sandron.

Corrao, Francesca. 1991. *Giufà il furbo, lo sciocco, il saggio.* Milano: Mondadori.

Correnti, Santi. 2006. *Breve storia della Sicilia.* Rome: Newton Compton.

Culberson, Ron. 2013. "The 4-Step Formula for Seeing Humor in the World". In *Speaker Magazine*. [Online] National Speakers Association, November 14, 2013. [Cited: January 29, 2016.] http://speakermagazine.com/the-4-step-formula-for-seeing-humor-in-the-world/

D'Amico, Masolino. 1985. *La commedia all'italiana*. Milan: Mondadori.

Fiorito, Filippo. 2012. "Mortillaro, Vincenzo". In *Treccani.* [Cited: January 28, 2016.] http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/vincenzo-mortillaro_(Dizionario-Biografico)/

Fo, Dario. 2001. *Manuale minimo dell'attore*. Turin: Einaudi.

Gallo, Agostino. 1834. "Sul teatro popolare siciliano". *L'indagatore siciliano,* Palermo, I, p. 37.

Isgrò, Giovanni. 1981. F*esta Teatro Rito nella storia di Sicilia*. Palermo: Vito Cavallotto.

———. 2000. *La forma siciliana del teatro*. Palermo: ILA Palma.

Licata, Salvo. 2013. "La rivincita di 'Nofrio". In *Storie e cronache della città sotterranea*. Palermo: Sellerio, pp. 206–211.

Mango, Achille (ed.). 1961. *Teatro Siciliano*. Palermo: E.S.A.

Marzullo, Benedetto (ed.). 1955. *La commedia classica*. Rome: Edizioni Casini.

Minois, Georges. 2004. *Storia del riso e della derisione*. Bari: Edizioni Dedalo.

Misuraca, Fara. 2005. "La nostra lingua nella storia". In *Il portale del Sud*. [Online] February 18, 2005. [Cited: January 19, 2016.] http://www.ilportaledelsud.org/lingua_fara.htm

Mortillaro, Vincenzo. 1844. *Nuovo Dizionario Siciliano-Italiano*. Vol. 2. Palermo: Stamperia Oretea.

———. 1853. *Nuovo Dizionario Siciliano-Italiano*. Palermo: Stamperia di Pietro Pensante.

———. 1876. *Nuovo Dizionario Siciliano-Italiano*. Bologna: Forni Editore.

Nicotra, Giuseppe. 2015. *Le Vastasate: alla scoperta della Palermo del popolo*. www.cafebabel.it. [Online] December 13, 2015. [Cited: January 29, 2016.] http://www.cafebabel.it/palermo/articolo/le-vastasate-alla-scoperta-della-palermo-del-popolo.html

Pasqualino, Michele. 1790. V*ocabolario siciliano etimologico*. Palermo: Reale Stamperia.

Pitrè, Giuseppe. 1950. *La vita in Palermo cento e più anni fa*. Vol. 2. Florence: Berbera Editore. The opublication history of that work is as follows:

———. 1944 [1904]. *La vita in Palermo cento e più anni fa.* 2 vols. (Opere complete di Giuseppe Pitrè, Scritti vari editi ed inediti, 27.) Florence: Bàrbera. [Vol. 2 appeared in 1950, as Opere complete, 28.] http://www.liberliber.it/online/autori/autori-p/giuseppe-pitre/la-vita-in-palermo-cento-e-piu-anni-fa/ http://www.liberliber.it/online/autori/autori-p/giuseppe-pitre/la-vita-in-palermo-cento-e-piu-anni-fa-2/

Porto, Salvo. 1980. *La vastasata*. Turin : Edidrama.

Propp, Vladimir Jakovlevič. 1988. *Comicità e riso*. Turin: Einaudi.

Rémy, Tristan. 2006. *I clown*. Roma: Robin Edizioni.

Silverstein, Michael. 2003. "The Whens and Wheres — As Well As Hows — of Ethnolinguistic Recognition". *Public Culture*, 15(3), pp. 531-557.

Vàrvaro, Alberto. 2014. *Vocabolario Storico-Etimologico del Siciliano*. Vol. 2 (of 2). Strasbourg: Éditions de Linguistique et de Philologie, and Palermo: Centro di studi filologici e linguistici siciliani.

Alberto Iozzia is a 2010 graduate from Università di Siena — Arezzo, where he completed both his laurea triennale and his laurea specialistica on Literature and Performing Arts (Letteratura e Spettacolo). Right after his graduation, he started teaching at Oberlin College, in Oberlin, Ohio, where he worked as an Italian teaching assistant for two years. Alberto Iozzia is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Italian at Rutgers University. He mainly focuses on the study of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narrative, with particular attention for contemporary films and media. He has worked also on the history of Sicilian humor, exploring its variation throughout the performing arts. His other academic interests include the Italian *Teatro di narrazione* and the performing arts in general.

Address correspondence to Alberto Iozzia, at alberto.iozzia@rutgers.edu