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INSPIRING PEOPLE: PLANT PROTECTION ON THE STAGE

Science & Entertainment:
How theatre puts bioeconomy in the spotlight

by **Laura Vivani**, *Moverim*, et al.

The EMPHASIS project – dealing with plant protection – is putting the topics of food security, biodiversity and different ecosystems in the spotlight. The theatre scene in Turin now includes an eclectic mix of plays, music, debate and poems addressing issues more commonly tackled by bioeconomy scientists.

In 2016 the actors of the Teatro Stabile di Torino reached the hearts and minds of an enthusiastic audience of more than 400 spectators in one evening, with dramatic and musical work addressing the grand themes that underpin the EU-funded research on integrated plant pest management. So inspiring was their success, that Turin's theatre producers went on to explore another scientific topic on the stage: with the EMPHASIS project's experience, the RESPIRO project provided another piece based on Mark Twain's *The Diary of Adam and Eve*. With the support of the Teatro Stabile Di Torino, and Tangram Teatro, RESPIRO was performed at the Teatro Carignano in June 2017, entertaining another 450 spectators and drawing huge national media attention.

Andrea Masino and Maria Lodovica Gullino, researchers from the University of Turin, together with Lamberto Vallarrino Gancia, President of the Teatro di Stabile and Laura Vivani of Brussels-based Moverim Consulting all contributed accounts of these experiences to the *Bioeconomy Innovation* magazine. Reporting on the play-based method of science communication that appeals not only to the cognitive parts of our brains, but also to the emotional ones, they summarise: 'Theatre can explain to the public, through a very original format, the role of plant health for the environment and landscape protection, food production and human health. It ensures the effective and efficient spread of the scientific results to a wide public.' The President of the Teatro Stabile di Torino adds that, from his professional viewpoint, 'Communication should combine sciences with entertainment, especially when addressing a young audience. The right communication, therefore, is fundamental, but it must be concrete and innovative as well as having useful methods and timing.'

Since 2004, Agroinnova, the University of Turin's Centre of Competence for Innovation in the Agro-environmental Sector, has dealt with European projects. EMPHASIS, coordinated by Agroinnova, touches on highly relevant issues, such as market globalisation, the effects of climate change on agriculture, technological innovation and new challenges for Europe. The project aims at a multi-actor approach, with new ways of engaging with civil society and policymakers.

Communicating scientific messages is not the easiest task, as the simple facts and figures generated in labs and institutes are difficult to translate into popular formats. Sponsored by Dow AgroSciences, a company inte-

rested in innovative communication, Agroinnova liaised with renowned experts seeking to entertain the public using scientific and environmental topics. This was the moment when the musical piece EMPHASIS per l'Ambiente was born, combining guest stars and testimonials from an American architect, an oenologist and a travel writer, and exhibiting the performances of Italian actors and a pianist, all directed by Ivana Ferri, Director of Teatro Tangram.

'When Lodovica and Lamberto suggested that I bring science to the theatre I was not sure of the results,' reveals Ivana Ferri, 'now I am really satisfied.' Research has to be closer to people, she explains; 'No other communication format can inspire more passion or credibility than theatre.'

Contemporary works addressing scientific topics through theatre are more common than might be assumed. The UK-based Protein Dance Theatre, working with voice and text, was founded in 1997 by the Italian Luca Silvestrini and the Swiss Bettina Strickler. They have produced award-winning stage works on consumerism and obsession with body-care image. Protein's most recent show, *May Contain Food*, examines our complex relationship with food.

Physics, chemistry and biology have long played prominent roles in literature and theatre, as evidenced by Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Physicists*, and Heiner Kipphardt's *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (first performed in 1964), which both explore the political and moral dilemmas of the scientists who developed the atomic bomb.

More recently, Alain Prochiantz, Director of the Department of Biology at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, has brought science to the stage. His *Biology in the Bedroom* — named after Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom* — explains, through didactic dialogue, notions of embryology and neurobiology, and thus the concept of individuality, to a young girl.

As a final thought, we may note that 'theatre' has the same etymological root as 'theory'. The two words derive from the Greek *théa*, which means 'a view'. Though science is strongly connected to observation and vision, there are an increasing number of plays dealing with the moral, political and philosophical aspects of science — paving the way for a change in the perception of science. Science is a part of our culture; the researchers involved in it need to communicate their findings more clearly and more regularly.

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