

Staging Life: On Da Ponte's *Memorie*

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According to the two editors of the book, *Ästhetik der Inszenierung*, the “‘staging’ factor” has become so popular in the past twenty years that “it has apparently established itself as a new keyword;”¹ so much so, that there is hardly any aspect of politics, fashion, gender, football, history, the body, publishing, or eroticism that has not been examined in terms of staging. Indeed, it is not too far-fetched to suspect that the concept has become an empty shell due to overuse.

However, there is no doubt that someone who is telling his/her own story is telling it to an audience or readership – one that still needs to be found for the story – and that this requires a dramaturgy for the narrator to stage him/herself as the protagonist, to assign the other roles to selected members of the cast, and to structure the story in acts and scenes to be chosen and arranged. To do this requires cultural models which the narrators of their own biographies can emulate. In a number of studies,² British historian Peter Burke has demonstrated the importance of acting in public – displaying an orientation towards the theatrical – in the urban centres of Italy since the sixteenth century, as well as the significance not only of language and speech, but of the emergence of discourses self-reflexively concerned with language and speech. In eighteenth-century Venice, the idea that the public arena was a stage on which people played themselves (or where they concealed themselves behind masks as they pretended to be other people) was so widespread and deeply ingrained in society that one could rightly call self-staging second nature to those who played their parts. So when a seventy-year old teacher of Italian hailing from the province of Veneto tried to sell Italian books to New Yorkers in 1819 and published *Extract from the Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte, with the History of Several Dramas, Written by Him*, and when four years later this man started writing and publishing a detailed biography telling the story of a rather turbulent life, not only [...]

1 Josef Früchtel, Jörg Zimmermann, “Ästhetik der Inszenierung. Dimensionen eines gesellschaftlichen, individuellen und kulturellen Phänomens”, *Ästhetik der Inszenierung. Dimensionen eines künstlerischen, kulturellen und gesellschaftlichen Phänomens*, ed. Josef Früchtel, Jörg Zimmermann, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2001, p. 9–47, here: p. 9.

2 Two publications are interesting in this context: Peter Burke, *Städtische Kultur in Italien zwischen Hochrenaissance und Barock. Eine historische Anthropologie*, trans. Wolfgang Kaiser, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer 1996 (Orig.: *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy*, Cambridge: University Press 1987); and *Reden und Schweigen. Zur Geschichte sprachlicher Identität*, trans. Bruni Röhm, Berlin: Wagenbach 1994 (Orig.: *The Art of Conversation*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1993).