

## Teatro Povero di Monticchiello: Community-based Social Innovation and Intangible Heritage in Rural Tuscany

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The author develops a conceptual framework for studying community-based social innovation and intangible heritage, emphasizing the drivers of place, participation, social values, collective memories, and collaborative leadership. This paper examines the practice of autodrama, staged annually for over fifty years by the Teatro Povero di Monticchiello in rural Tuscany. From the perspective of the local population and surrounding area, autodrama is regarded as heritage, yet its social outcomes also exhibit characteristics of social innovation.

• **Keywords:** social innovation, heritage, rural area, community, creativity

Avtor razvije konceptualni okvir za preučevanje na skupnosti temelječih socialnih inovacij in nesovne dediščine s poudarkom na dejavnikih kraja, participacije, vrednot, kolektivnih spominov in vodenja. V prispevku je obravnavana praksa avtodrame, ki jo že več kot petdeset let vsakoletno prireja gledališče Teatro Povero di Monticchiello na toskanskem podeželju. Z vidika lokalnega prebivalstva in okolice velja avtodrama za dediščino, vendar ima zaradi svojih družbenih učinkov tudi značilnosti socialne inovacije.

• **Ključne besede:** socialna inovacija, dediščina, podeželje, skupnost, ustvarjalnost

### Introduction

By integrating the concepts of intangible heritage and social innovation, new insights can be gained. Interestingly, social innovation has rarely been linked to heritage, despite the fact that creative development of community-based approaches is common in both intangible heritage and social innovation contexts. The lack of literature at this intersection can be traced back to the temporal dimension. Although heritage tends to refer to the past, while innovation seems to strive to “break free from tradition”,<sup>1</sup> both are influenced by what has gone before and both are constantly in the process of reimagining the future. In support of this view, Lowenthal refers to two great German thinkers:

“Since all depend on what previous generations have transmitted, creative activity is never purely innovative but rather modifies the heritage”, observed Wilhelm von Humboldt two centuries ago. “There is all this talk about originality, but what does it amount to?” asked Goethe. (Lowenthal, 2015: 147)

<sup>1</sup> Innovation has been often understood in Schumpeter’s (1911) sense as “creative destruction” (e.g. rail transport replacing horse-drawn carriages), with the past and tradition often seen as a constraining factor for innovation. Innovation has traditionally tended to be associated with future-oriented concepts such as social entrepreneurship, progress, growth, etc.

The aim of this paper is to develop a framework for the study of community-based social innovation and intangible heritage, using the theory of social creativity and social innovation through the arts in rural areas, as proposed by André et al. (2013), and to apply the framework to a case study of an autodrama organised by the Teatro Povero di Monticchiello (Poor Theatre of Monticchiello). Monticchiello has just over a hundred inhabitants and is located in the picturesque Tuscan Val d'Orcia, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2004. From 1967 to the present day, every year the local community has staged conceptual plays under the name of autodrama, with an emphasis on personal and social narratives about their own experiences, past, problems, values, aspirations and views of the future in the context of everyday life in the village.

What makes Poor Theatre's autodrama a social innovation can be understood in several ways. The first aspect is mainly related to the word 'innovation'; it is about difference and novelty in the context of the Tuscan countryside, i.e. its "uniqueness", as one of the promoters of the practice pointed out. Indeed, one of the main characteristics of social innovation is "new ways of achieving goals" (Zapf, 1989: 179). In this context, the notion of creativity is very important. The second aspect is more nuanced and focuses on the meaning of 'social', which can refer to "the basic idea of social innovation as a motor of change rooted in social collaboration and social learning, the response to unmet social needs as a desirable outcome, and society as the arena in which change should take place" (Bock, 2016: 554–555). As Vrtovec Beno points out, "contemporary folk theatre is certainly a response to the current situation and needs of society, adapting to the current situation and wishes of the local community" (Vrtovec Beno, 2023: 118). The third aspect relates to the notion of 'place', as some argue that the civil society response to a particular need, desire, aspiration or search for a solution is necessarily locally constructed (e.g. Tiran et al., 2022).

The Poor Theatre's autodrama can be understood in a similar way as intangible cultural heritage is defined by the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage:

[...] intangible cultural heritage [e.g. Poor Theatre's autodrama], transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. (UNESCO, 2003: 4)

In this paper I refer to heritage as a creative engagement with the past for the needs of the present and the future (Harrison, 2012). Heritage is "an active process of assembling a series of objects, places, and practices that we choose to hold up as a mirror to the present, associated with a particular set of values that we wish to take with us into the future", because "thinking of heritage as a creative engagement with the past in the present focuses our attention on our ability to take an active and informed role in the

production of our own ‘tomorrow’” (Harrison, 2012: 4). Understanding heritage in terms of creativity and the future makes it clear why it can be linked to social innovation. In the field of critical heritage studies, the term “heritage making” (e.g. Smith, 2011) is often used, strongly suggesting that it concerns an active social and creative process. Heritage making can also be socially innovative in the sense that it can respond to social needs, it can create social value and/or it can be the result of social cooperation and social learning (e.g. Bock, 2016). Smith argues that the process of heritage making “can have both conservative and socially progressive outcomes” (2011: 23).

### **Community-based social innovation and intangible heritage in rural areas: A conceptual framework**

Communities in rural areas have rarely been associated with social innovation, but in recent years there has been an increase in this stream of research (e.g. Bock, 2016; Castro-Arce, Vanclay, 2020; O’Shaughnessy et al., 2023; Vercher et al., 2023). Social innovations are context-specific and explicitly perceived as innovative in their local context (innovations new to the community) (e.g. Vercher et al., 2023). The importance of communities in the study of social innovation is recognised by many authors, who usually link social innovation to participation and bottom-up approaches (e.g. Castro-Arce, Vanclay, 2020; O’Shaughnessy et al., 2023). Waterton and Smith argue that among community-related concepts, such as community heritage, “it is the phrases ‘community collaboration’ and ‘community-based’ that are the more promising, both in terms of describing the range of aims for community engagement and in allowing the most room for the development of effective engagements” (Smith, Waterton, 2009: 16). Community-based approaches to heritage are increasingly recognised, including in rural areas (e.g. Šmid Hribar, Ledinek Lozej, 2013; Fakin Bajec, 2016; Beel et al., 2017). When studies refer to communities in rural areas, they are mainly local communities based on close relationships and face-to-face communication. This perspective is also relevant to my case study. I understand communities, following Waterton and Smith, as “social creations and experiences that are continuously in motion, rather than fixed entities and descriptions, in flux and constant motion, unstable and uncertain” (Waterton, Smith, 2010: 8–9), and as “an ongoing process in which identity is explored and (re)created” (ibid.: 12). It is important to stress that the focus of both social innovation (e.g. Christmann et al., 2020; O’Shaughnessy et al., 2023) and heritage making (e.g. Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2012) is on a social and collaborative process rather than a product. In addition, as mentioned in the introduction, the temporal dimension is another important common feature, as both approaches aim to meet present and future needs.

In developing a conceptual framework for the study of community-based social innovation and intangible heritage, I draw on the existing one developed by André et al. (2013), who identified the fundamental aspects for the emergence of social creativity

and social innovation through the arts in urban and rural areas. André et al. (2013: 247) identified the following issues to be key in the development of social innovation in rural areas: i) participation (neighbourhood networks and relationships, cooperation based on personal trust), ii) collective references and memories (intangible heritage – stories, poetry, music, etc.), iii) leadership (importance of personal charisma and of personal ties), iv) geographical scale (place – daily spaces of the local community) (ibid.: 247). The aim of this paper is to complement their framework with a heritage perspective, and to apply the new conceptual framework to a concrete case study of the Poor Theatre's autodrama. I refer in particular to this framework because of its emphasis on the link between social innovation and social creativity, the latter of which, as we have seen, is very closely linked to processes in the domain of intangible heritage. When I examined my ethnographic data, the same aspects as in André et al. (2013) emerged as key to the development of social innovation, except that I recognised the dimension related to social values as very significant. Therefore, I added this category to cover the missing aspects. In my view, linking intangible heritage and social innovation can contribute to a theoretical understanding of both mainly through a research focus on the place, participation, social values, collective memories, and collaborative leadership (Table 1). In what follows, I do not discuss each of these drivers in detail, but only outline the basic aspects that may be particularly relevant to the analysis of different case studies.

Place has often been discussed in the field of heritage, because “heritage is about a sense of place. Not simply in constructing a sense of abstract identity, but also in helping us position ourselves as a nation, community, or individual and our ‘place’ in our cultural, social, and physical world” (Smith, 2006: 75). Place “is not necessarily subsumed by the national or global, rather the national or regional are made up of innumerable places” (ibid.: 76). In the field of social innovation, an increasing number of authors argue for the place specificity of innovation (e.g. MacCallum et al., 2009; Brandsen et al., 2016; Tiran et al., 2022; O’Shaughnessy et al., 2023).

Encouraging participatory processes is important, as Smith argues that social networks and relations generate “a sense of belonging and identity” (2011: 24). Hafstein and Skydstrup (2020) write that community participation is playing an increasingly important role in heritage making, not least through the UNESCO conventions. In recent decades, there has been an increasing international focus on the issue of participation also in social innovation research (e.g. Brandsen et al., 2016; Neumeier, 2017). Social innovations are often understood as being “created mainly by networks and joint action” (Brandsen et al., 2016: 6).

While a values-based approach to management has become established in the heritage field (e.g. Clark, Maer, 2008; De la Torre, 2013), in the field of social innovation, ‘social’ is often understood primarily in terms of creating social value, i.e. benefits for the public or community as a whole (Phills et al., 2008). It is important to distinguish social value from private value (e.g. Van der Have, Rubalcaba, 2016).

In heritage studies, social values can be understood “as a collective attachment to place that embodies meanings and values that are important to a community or communities” (Jones, 2017: 22). Values are therefore “inextricably tied to emotions” (Horlings, 2015: 262) and places (e.g. Altman, Low, 2012).

Collective memories have been largely overlooked in the field of social innovation,<sup>2</sup> while they play a prominent role in the field of heritage (e.g. Halbwachs, 1991; Macdonald, 2012; Hrobat Virloget, 2021). Heritage incorporates “a range of activities that include remembering, commemoration, communicating and passing on knowledge and memories” (Smith, 2011: 23). In this context, heritage can be understood “as a cultural tool in the performances of commemoration, remembering and forgetting” (Smith, 2011: 22). Collective memories can be distinguished in some respects from the concept of heritage. The former is a less institutionalised and strategic process – whereas the latter is an action-oriented and strategic process – of selecting from past events, objects, and practices (Rogelja Caf et al., 2020).

The notion of (collaborative) leadership (e.g. Ansell, Gash, 2012; Sørensen, Torfing, 2013) has played an important role in the social innovation literature, mainly because of its close links to entrepreneurship and governance. However, in the field of cultural heritage, the leadership concept is more limited, with the emphasis being on the management aspect. It is worth adding here that leadership is not necessarily linked to an authorised heritage discourse (AHD) (cf. Smith, 2006). While AHD is associated with standardised, formalised and official top-down approaches, collaborative leadership emphasises the importance of shared responsibility and collective decision-making (e.g. Shier, Handy, 2020). Leaders may not have formal titles or positions, but are recognised by other community members for their knowledge, expertise, or influence.

Table 1. Conceptual framework for community-based social innovation and intangible heritage in rural areas.

Common features	Key drivers	Key aspects
TEMPORAL DIMENSION	PLACE	daily spaces of local community; sense of place; local-global context (e.g. touristification)
COMMUNITY-BASED DIMENSION	PARTICIPATION	community engagement and joint action; social networks and relations (e.g. intergenerational relations); a sense of belonging and identity
SOCIAL PROCESS DIMENSION	SOCIAL VALUES	preserving and creating social values; place attachment: emotional connection
	COLLECTIVE MEMORIES	commemoration, remembering and forgetting; passing on knowledge of the past (for the needs of the present and the future)
	COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP	importance of personal charisma; personal ties based on trust; facilitative role

<sup>2</sup> One of the exceptions is the study of “industrial culture” in the city of Velenje in Slovenia (Kozina et al., 2021; Tiran et al., 2022). Through collective memories and remembering, the collective values of industrialism and socialism are preserved. These are “embedded in the shared consciousness of citizens, companies and institutions, and are translated into numerous social innovations and services” (Kozina et al., 2021: 9).

## Methodology and the context of Poor Theatre in Monticchiello

My fieldwork in March–April 2022 and August 2023 in the areas of Val di Chiana and Val d’Orcia in south-eastern Tuscany was an opportunity to explore social life in Monticchiello and to follow the contemporary development of the Poor Theatre with a focus on autodrama. It is performed by local people as (amateur) theatre actors in the summer for a span of two (in the past three) weeks. During this time, there are daily plays and many people visit the village, mainly from other places in Italy. Andrews (2004: 49) argues that Monticchiello can be considered a success compared to other Tuscan villages facing similar problems of emigration, as there is more prosperity in the village than its inhabitants could have imagined half a century ago. Empowerment has been achieved by the villagers through the activities of the Poor Theatre, both on an individual and collective level (Andrews, 2004: 54). Monticchiello is located in the neighbouring Tuscan region of Val d’Orcia, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It belongs to the municipality of Pienza and is about 5 kilometres from the medieval town of Pienza, also a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The focus of my study is on contemporary analysis from a variety of perspectives, with less attention paid to the historical aspect of the development of the Poor Theatre, as this has been extensively researched. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the documentation produced by the local community of Monticchiello (Rosa et al., 2005; Profili, 2010) and the academic contributions (Andrews, 2004; Berti, 2017; Ruffini, 2018).<sup>3</sup> Briefly on the historical context: until the early 1960s, the agricultural economy of much of the Tuscan countryside was based on sharecropping, a system in which peasants lived in harsh conditions and rented land for half of their own harvest. In the past, these areas were highly marginalised, largely because of poor transport links, and in the 1960s they fell into even greater economic crisis as a result of the so-called “economic boom” in Italy’s major industrial cities, to which many rural inhabitants migrated (Gaggio, 2017). The Poor Theatre began in 1967 and eventually evolved into the Cooperative of the Poor Theatre of Monticchiello (Cooperativa di Comunità del Teatro Povero di Monticchiello) in 1980, which today also owns a restaurant and the only museum in the village. Since the beginning of the autodrama, an additional source of income has been the restaurant, which is now located in the crypt of the church and in a former granary (Andrews, 2004: 48). Like in many contemporary folk theatres (e.g. Vrtovec Beno, 2023), the economic aspect is not based on performances, but in the additional offer that the organisers prepare for the visitors.

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<sup>3</sup> The autodrama of the Poor Theatre has also recently attracted the attention of filmmakers, and in 2017 the American directors Jeff Malmberg and Chris Shellen made the film *Spettacolo*, which presents the community theatre work of the villagers of Monticchiello.



Figure 1. Il Bronzino, the restaurant of the Poor Theatre, before the autodrama performance. Photo: Marko Senčar Mrdaković, 2023.



Figure 2. The office, museum, shop and restaurant Il Bronzino of the Poor Theatre are located in the former granary. Photo: Marko Senčar Mrdaković, 2023.





Figure 3. Bringing the rural past to life in the TePoTraTos museum in the former granary. Photo: Marko Senčar Mrdaković, 2022.

In 2004, the representatives of the theatre, in collaboration with the Sieneese museums, established the TePoTraTos museum – Scenes from the Traditional Tuscan People’s Theatre (Scene dal Teatro Popolare Tradizionale Toscano). Today, the museum plays a significant role in the presentation of the theatre and rural culture of the past.

The Poor Theatre is therefore constantly evolving and is pursuing certain socio-economic sustainability goals by creating additional jobs. A concrete example is the creation of an e-bike recharging information and service point, Le Ciclofficine del Teatro Povero, in Bagno Vignoni, a few kilometres from Monticchiello. It is regarded as “a new model of social innovation where citizens are both producers and users of goods and services” (Le Ciclofficine del Teatro Povero, 2024). In this paper I am not focusing on these broader aspects, i.e. the various activities of the Poor Theatre, although they are very important for the development of the community, as I am concentrating exclusively on the current practice of autodrama, which is a key anchor of identity and a binding thread of the local community.

The research is based on semi-structured interviews and informal conversations, as well as participant observation in the village of Monticchiello. I spoke to the people who have a leading role in the Poor Theatre, as well as to the directors of the autodrama. It was important to have conversations with people who have recently joined the Poor Theatre, as well as with those who have been in the theatre for decades. So, I had conversations with both older people and younger people. Visiting the autodrama in 2023 and the village at different times is an important aspect of understanding the local context.



I was able to use the participant observation method when I visited the autodrama, I was involved in setting up the venue and I spoke to the people who were responsible for setting up the stage and other equipment. The aim of this paper is to find out how individuals involved in the conduct of autodrama experience this innovation-heritage practice. I am interested in what aspects of practice unfold without tension or conflict, and when and why major challenges arise.

### **Poor Theatre's autodrama as social innovation and intangible heritage**

#### ***Place***

André et al. (2013: 246) highlight the importance of an adequate daily space where the local community can meet. In this case study, this is the square (*la piazza*), where villagers meet and carry out activities, and where economic and social relations are formed. Smith (2006) believes that thinking deeply about a place reveals a lot about the heritage process itself. Gathering in the square has been of great importance in the village throughout history, even before the start of the theatre, as described by Giovanni:<sup>4</sup>

*On 25 July there was a cattle market [La Fiera del Bestiame]. They sold cows, bulls, calves and sheep. It was a time when the whole community came together to have a big celebration, a big moment of being together. When the village stopped being peasant, agricultural, sharecropping, the Poor Theatre began. The first year of the Poor Theatre is the last year of the cattle fair. It is a ritual linked to the calendar, linked to the time of year when everyone is together. They rediscovered the joy of being together of being together in the open air and telling stories. It is a very old thing, but at the same time it has found a modern form.*

Through the square, people identify themselves, construct their own identity and reflect on the world, while at the same time the square “provides an anchor of shared experiences between people and a physical demonstration of continuity over time” (Smith, 2006: 76). In the case of Monticchiello’s historical experience we can observe that the square is “recognised as the most important public space, a source and symbol of civic power” (Low, 2000: 35). The “power of the place” (e.g. Smith, 2006: 74), i.e. of the square, is invoked. As the community itself has written, the Poor Theatre was

<sup>4</sup> For reasons of personal data protection, all informants are anonymised in the article. All interviews and conversations were conducted in Italian, and translated into English by myself using the DEEPL translation tool.

“born” in the piazza,<sup>5</sup> “every year the piazza is transformed into an extraordinary stage, an ideal venue for the staging of an autodrama. In addition to its theatrical function, the square has always been a centre of civic gathering, of confessions, of decisions, of self-analysis” (Profili, 2005: 23). “Doing theatre is called ‘going to the piazza’ [*andare in piazza*], and in theatre ‘on the piazza are put’ [*mettono in piazza*] the problems, ideas and points of view of Monticchiello and its people” (Profili, 2010: 35). In 1981, the villagers also dedicated a series of performances to the square, entitled *La Piazza*. In this show, *piazza* is always written with a capital letter, “because the piazza is, above all, a place-symbol of the community, the centre of collective life that has regained life and dignity thanks to the theatre” (Profili, 2010: 35). It should be noted that the square has become an inspiration for creativity and innovation.

It is also necessary to look at a wider spatial scale. Monticchiello is part of the municipality of Pienza and is only about 5 kilometres from the town of Pienza. The whole region has gained heritage recognition over the last few decades, with Pienza being inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1996 and the Val d’Orcia as a cultural landscape in 2004. Today, the region’s tourism status brings new opportunities for economic growth, but also threats (e.g. gentrification, touristification, centre–periphery tensions) (e.g. Moreschini et al., 2016; Giovannoni, 2017). However, compared to Pienza and some other towns in the region, Monticchiello is considered to be less under pressure from tourism: “*In some places yes, there’s too much tourism. [...] It’s clear that when you enter the UNESCO circuit, people come. In Monticchiello it is quiet*” (Bruno). It was important for me to understand these wider heritage processes and the rise of tourism in relation to the practice of the Poor Theatre, hence my conversation partner:

*UNESCO is like a medal, it’s a bit of recognition of the beauty and importance of a place. And then the fact that this place should in any case be protected in its identity by not selling out to tourism, that is a community thing. It is we who tend to want to remain as we are and not sell out to the tourist market. We in Monticchiello are like that. If we like ourselves, the tourists will be happy. [...] But we do not change our menus, then our plays, according to what the tourist market demands. Otherwise we would be doing plays in English, for example. We live our lives and open ourselves up to everyone, and so far, we have been lucky because people appreciate that authenticity.* (Giulio)

<sup>5</sup> The autodrama plays were originally held in Piazza San Martino, but since 2005 in nearby Piazza della Commenda.



Figure 4. Piazza della Comenda at a time when there are no autodrama performances. Photo: Marko Senčar Mrdaković, 2022.



Figure 5. Piazza della Comenda during the preparations for the autodrama performances. Photo: Marko Senčar Mrdaković, 2023.

As can be seen from the above statements, tourism has not boomed in terms of numbers, nor has it had a major impact on the mentality of the local community itself. Strong community cohesion and a sense of place, including language and traditions (e.g. food), have prevented the negative impacts of tourism. Interestingly, as described by Gaggio (2017: 251–269), Monticchiello was at the turn of the century at the centre of disputes over the shaping of the cultural landscape of the Val d'Orcia. In the 1980s, the idea of expanding the residential area of a town became more and more vocal and the conflict continued until the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Of course, the Poor Theatre also played an important role in this period, with plays addressing the problems of depopulation and the deterioration of the cultural landscape. This conflict is one of the examples of how the autodrama approach has been used to address key issues in the local community and the wider region.

### **Participation**

André et al. (2013) highlight the importance of participation in rural areas, particularly in terms of the development of neighbourhood networks and relationships and cooperation based on personal trust. *“If you want to share with the community, Monticchiello is the place to be”* (Veronica), remarked one of my conversation partners. Poor Theatre, like folk theatre in general (e.g. Vrtovec Beno, 2023), is about the participation of the whole local community, i.e. inhabitants of Monticchiello and the surrounding areas. They take part in the preparation of the plays in many ways, such as making props and costumes, contributing to the text by telling stories, etc. Giulio was delighted with the performance of the 2023 autodrama, where several generations were visibly involved:

*I am so excited this year because the kids who play the characters are all grandchildren [...], grandchildren play grandparents [...]. So, it's like you're doing a play and you're acting as your grandfather. This is nice because [...] you bring a piece of your family on stage. It's a beautiful thing.*

Giulio added that this year about fifty people took part in the autodrama, which is a significant number for them. Both younger and older generations are involved, with young people being brought up in the theatre from childhood. Giulio has observed: *“Children who do theatre are different. My child was very shy, and when he started doing theatre he became more confident.”* The importance of a continuing link between the generations should be emphasised, whereby tacit knowledge and experience is passed on from one generation to the next. It is about fostering social learning and collaboration, which are often seen as essential in social innovation processes (Bock, 2016).



Figure 6. Panoramic view from the village of Monticchiello. Photo: Marko Senčar Mrdaković, 2022.



Figure 7. The people of Monticchiello, young and old, applaud the audience at the end of the performance. Photo: Marko Senčar Mrdaković, 2023.



Giulio described the process of assembling an autodrama:

*Imagine that there are a lot of people at the beginning, then five to six people come together to make a summary. Then they take the thing back to the assembly, and it's reworked again and again until there's a plot, a text and a script. So, at the final point, rehearsals start. It's a long building phase. (Giulio)*

The process of creating plays is long and takes almost the whole year, at least from January to August. The work is therefore very demanding for the community and challenges them not to fall apart before the play is performed. Problems can arise in practice for simple reasons that are not obvious to outside observers:

*I mean, we arrange everything as if we're sure it's there. But we're not sure until it's staged. Because there are so many variables, so many people. [...] It's not like it's a company of paid actors, that there's a contract [...], maybe one of them says enough is enough, I'm not coming anymore. (Giulio)*

Participation in social innovation processes and in the case of intangible heritage is often of an informal and voluntary nature, and therefore requires a specific engagement, which is primarily recognised in the desire to address societal goals and needs (e.g. Fakin Bajec, 2016; Beel et al., 2017; Shier, Handy, 2020). Thus, it is important to note that such collective efforts often face obstacles and problems in practice. The effort required by an individual to participate in the community is clearly illustrated by the following account:

*I hope that this thing will continue despite all the difficulties. [...] When I find myself talking about it, I talk about it with great enthusiasm and I think it's really something to take as an example. But then, when I live here, I realise that sometimes it's a bit difficult, because it's like in all families or all places. Relationships are never idyllic, they have to be built, and the beautiful thing is that this experience leads you to be there, to always be there, and so in a way it forces you to deal with it, and then you understand that it's possible to go on. So it is not an idyll here, despite the fact that it has this very ennobling project. It brings you a lot. You can overcome certain difficulties. There are moments when you notice the limiting negative aspects that all small communities have. On the other hand, this is a project that has been going on for so many years and that also pushes you personally to overcome many things, and to move forward. (Veronica)*



As Waterton and Smith point out, communities are “not always sources of empowerment” (2010: 9). Veronica continues her statement on the aspect of how it is sometimes necessary to adapt in the community:

*I'm feeling a little bit less emotionally involved in some aspects than last year. [...] Because there was a scene with the women, it was us and we contributed to making this flag of peace, and it moved me more emotionally than this year's play. [...] Yes, it belonged to me [...]. Not because there's no important content in this year's edition. [...] In fact, in the last play it was probably the scene with all the women that made me participate more emotionally. (Veronica)*

I observed that there is a kind of expectation that people would participate in the activities of the community. For example, an elderly longtime actor said: “*I'd like to see more participation on the constructive level, more participation of the people who go to the square to do it*” (Bruno). Beneath the surface, there are many problems of an objective nature. From the 1960s to the present day, as in other places in the Tuscan countryside, the ageing population and the emigration of young people have been a key problem. Daniela, a middle-aged woman, highlighted:

*With young people it is more difficult, because they have other interests, maybe they go out to study or go on school holidays with friends. So, there is an objective difficulty. Because when the theatre started there was nothing to do, there was no alternative way of getting together. Now it's more difficult for people between the ages of fifteen and twenty, twenty-five, when you finish university. (Daniela)*

Giulio added: “*They leave, they come back, participate one year, then participate two years [...].*” Difficulties with the participation were also raised in regard to changes in the employment situation:

*Youth started to do also tourist activities, so in the summer there is a high concentration of work. Emerging new jobs are less compatible with theatre activities in the summer. Whereas before there were farmers, and when it was dark enough there was theatre. But sociality has also changed, now there's TV, there are mobile phones [...]. (Giulio)*

Interestingly, in the winter there are more participants, “*because in winter many here do nothing*” (Giulio). The reason why some (young) people return year after year and continue to participate in the theatre's activities, as do local residents despite their other

work commitments, is usually because of “a sense of belonging and identity” (Smith, 2011: 24). However, it can be recognised that some of the aspects of modernity (e.g. digital devices) pose additional challenges to this sense (on the relationship between tradition and modernity, see Gaggio, 2017).

### ***Social values***

In order to identify the reasons and understand why individuals participate in community practices, or what hinders them from doing so, it is important to pay attention to values. At the outset, it should be pointed out that social values are very closely linked to emotions and affects (e.g. Horlings, 2015), and to place (Jones, 2017). Giulio is one of the few people who does not come from the village of Monticchiello – he lives a few kilometres away – and is deeply involved in the work of the Poor Theatre.

*Imagine, when I was little, I had my grandparents who had a farm, and they too had left the farm. The fields, the animals, the traditions [...]. And here I grew up with lumberjacks, so I grew up with people who really had a heritage of identity and traditions [un patrimonio di identità e tradizioni]. When I went to the city, I completely lost that dimension [...]. (Giulio)*

Here the values refer to the distinction between the rural and the urban, to the individual's recognition that the rural area has a “dimension” that he has lost in the city. In a similar sense to Giulio, the director of autodrama refers to his own disappearing rural past as a value that drives him to collaborate:

*I no longer had so much passion for theatre, how to say bourgeois, commercial. Here I found a type of theatre that had many consonances with what had been my past, my identity, my life. Perhaps also because I had grown up in a place that I had seen dying, that had disappeared. (Giovanni)*

Giulio describe his first experience of the theatre:

*When I was five, six years old, my grandmother took me to the Poor Theatre in Monticchiello. It was December 1982. She takes me there, I see this play and I kind of fall in love with it, because all those things I was losing, those traditions, the dialect, the dimension of the country, the identity, they not only, let's say, transmitted it, but they put it on a stage, so they gave it importance [...] and that gave me serenity, security, because someone was still attached. (Giulio)*

As the above statement shows, values are closely intertwined with the rural past and everything that concerns it, such as dialect, identity, memories, or traditions. Performance plays a key role in creating social value in places (e.g. Jones, 2017). The dialect aspect appears to be particularly important as Giulio illustrated: *“When I was a boy, one thing about theatre that I will never forget was a simple thing. The peasants would shout the words of the dialect into a box and then close it. So as not to lose them.”* Similar findings were made by Vrtovec Beno, who showed that dialect is the part of the community’s heritage that performers want to portray, that they are most proud of, and that helps them express themselves: *“Dialect is not only an easier ground for creativity, but also a ticket to the hearts of the audience”* (Vrtovec Beno, 2023: 128–129). From the whole of the past, individuals choose what is important to them and decide how to present it, display it, or handle it in the future (e.g. Harrison, 2012). In other words, it is a process of social value creation.

For another conversation partner, who is also closely involved in the work of the Poor Theatre and who comes from Pienza, a few kilometres away, it wasn’t her peasant past that tied her to the theatre, but the desire to experience and learn something new and, in the end, to be part of it: *“Let’s say, for me it is also an opportunity to rediscover myself in different aspects, either in tasks or in roles in which I would never have wanted to find myself”* (Veronica). She went on to share her belief that the way of working together in the community of Monticchiello *“gives importance to the exchange between people”* and *“preserves values that are actually beginning to crumble around us”* because *“people [in Monticchiello] have always lived their values, what is important to them.”*

I also spoke to individuals who grew up in Monticchiello and have been part of the theatre throughout their lives. An elderly gentleman, reflecting on the importance of the theatre in his life, pointed out: *“It has meant a lot to me. It is the fact that I did not do some other thing outside Monticchiello, but that they invented something for me to stay here. Forty years ago, the theatre also had a big impact, because it was a very beautiful period of theatre. And so, I liked staying here for that, too. [...] I quite liked acting”* (Bruno). With Daniela, middle-aged woman who has been acting in plays since the age of four, I discussed if the branding and commercialisation of theatre for tourist purposes can make it lose its meaning. She emphasized that autodrama *“is not just a play, it’s like a ritual. There is also an intimate aspect.”* She thinks that *“it is difficult to do this for others. You do it for others but also for you.”* Giulio added that *“sometimes, to do it for others you should also do it in simpler, even more natural language. For us irony is important. The content is not for the audience, mainly it is for the community.”* Indeed, one of the most important aspects of autodrama is that individuals decide what they want to talk about in the plays. It applies to all members of the community, *“they tell about the situations they feel, they have to tell”* (Daniela). Individuals do not see autodrama as a mere “play” or “performance” and often insist that it is something more, for example, a “ritual”. Interestingly, Vrtovec Beno, who has



Figure 8. Performers with things they want to take to the Moon. Photo: Marko Senčar Mrdaković, 2023.

studied a variety of folk theatres in Slovenia, has made a different observation that the actors no longer see the performances as having a “ritual function” (Vrtovec Beno, 2023: 138). The people I spoke to saw the ritual as something primarily intended for the community, whereas a mere “play” or “performance” is intended for a wider audience.

In the plays of the 2023 autodrama, named *Colòni*, I was able to observe for myself how values are closely intertwined with self-reflection in the autodrama. In the play, the inhabitants of Monticchiello wondered if tomorrow they would be forced to leave their land, as generations of sharecroppers have been forced to do, and head for the Moon: “What do I want to take with me? What do I really need? What can I not give up? What unnecessary things can I do without, so that I do not have to reduce myself to the essential?” (Teatro Povero, 2023).

At the end of the play, the oldest actor in the theatre, Arturo, gave an emotional speech and said:

I’ll take the land, of course, because there’s nothing more beautiful and important for me and for all of us. The land has made us sweat, it’s true! But it has also given us food, it has given us work and it will give us more! In this land there are all the stories we have lived [...]. Those that have been told [...]. In each one of these grains, there’s a piece of our theatre [...]. Of our fathers, our brothers, our sisters, our grandfathers

[...]. And I take this land with me, of course! Because for me, this land  
[...]. This land is our theatre! (Teatro Povero di Monticchiello, 2023: 50)

It is interesting to note that in the autodramas, the community of Monticchiello is often portrayed as having a difficult past, for example the difficulties of the peasants' everyday life and exploitation in the context of sharecropping, but on the other hand, as can be seen from the above quotation, there is also a kind of "idealization of rural life [...]" as part of a more general valorisation of the relationship between landscape and identity, religion, and work" (Giovannoni, 2017: 15). In this way, the community gives value and meaning to a rural past that is both "difficult" and "idealised".

### ***Collective memories***

In relation to collective references and memories, André et al. highlight the importance of "non-material heritage (stories, poetry, music, ...)" (2013: 247). They argue that collective references and memories "provide the necessary anchors that ensure the resilience of places and their ability to embrace what is new without degenerating into fragmentation and 'negative' conflict" (ibid.: 246). It is important to note that an individual incorporates memories shared with others into his or her subjective perception, in a sense "personalising" them (Brumen, 2000: 25). Giulio highlighted: "*Points of view also depend on generations. For example, the war, it's normal that we see it differently as a boy of 18 or, certainly, a person of 80, 90. He sees it differently.*" However, each individual memory is a potential collective memory, "individuals can therefore think and talk about events that happened long before they were born" (Brumen, 2000: 27), such as the Second World War. "Collective memory is the carrier of information about seemingly lost and forgotten things, and it is the means by which we can place our personal memories in the wider context of the community" (ibid.: 27). Connerton (1989) argues that it is through performance of various kinds that collectives, such as communities, remember.

An important milestone in the staging of collective memory is the 1969 performance of the Poor Theatre, when the villagers decided to dramatise their own experiences of the war that took place in their area in 1944. The title was *That 6 April 1944* (*Quel 6 Aprile del '44*), the day when the German Nazis lined up most of the village population along the medieval walls to execute them in retaliation for their support of the partisans, but were dissuaded from doing so by a woman who was the wife of a local landowner and herself German, even from the same town as the Nazi commander. In some situations, the villagers actually played themselves, so the therapeutic value of such performances was obvious (Andrews, 2004: 41–42).

In the preparation of plays, the inhabitants of the village of Monticchiello always relate their collective past to their experience in the present and to their views of the future (e.g. Harrison, 2012). Veronica said: "*That's what I've learned here in Monticchiello,*

*that you have to start from the roots in order to move forward into the future.*” In the early years of the theatre, the community started to dig into the roots of the peasant world, and there was “a gold mine, in the peasant world they discovered so many stories” (Profili, 2010: 49–50). In an increasingly changing society, the tendency to preserve the peasant past has become increasingly important. The “invention of tradition” lies in “the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant” (Hobsbawm, Ranger, 2012 [1983]: 2).

The content of the performances is related on the one hand to what has been and is happening in the everyday life of the local community, and on the other to what is happening in the world (e.g. the COVID pandemic, wars, migration): *“In the seventies we did a play about abortion, or about the problem of the elderly [...], but always things attached to our reality. It was a microcosm that then later, naturally, also spoke of contemporary society”* (Bruno). Migration issues were one of the many examples:

*If there is a problem that is related to refugees, then there is a moment in which you reflect on this situation, and there is a moment in which you remember when we were refugees. Because people from Monticchiello went to France, to Germany, to Australia, to the United States, to look for work, because here they were poor and had nothing.* (Giulio)

Some people come to Poor Theatre’s autodrama as visitors every year because they are interested in what people have to say about their past and present ways of life. *“There are people who come back because they know the history [of rural Tuscany]”* (Daniela). What makes these events specifically intriguing is the fact that the known history changes in relation to the present views.

*Let’s say the difference is this: the museum is a static thing, isn’t it? It is fixed in the memory of a moment. And an experience like this is made up of people, so it moves, it is identity that is not static, it’s in motion. Our thinking keeps changing, our experiences keep changing, even our sense of identity keeps changing, because the plays that we, who are forty years old today, can create are different from those created by the first ones, who are ninety years old today.* (Giulio)

The above statement can be linked to theorisations of memory and commemoration in heritage making: “[W]ith each new encounter with place, with each new experience of place, meanings and memories may subtly, or otherwise, be rewritten or remade” (Smith, 2006: 77). This processual understanding of heritage making, in which generations play an important role, can be seen as an invitation and stimulus to innovation.



For Giulio, the Poor Theatre is “*a place where people meet, talk, tell each other things, exchange opinions, argue and also cherish memories. Because memories in life are a beautiful thing. I mean, if you don’t have a memory, you’re nobody, right?*”

### ***Collaborative leadership***

Here, André et al. (2013) stress the importance of personal charisma and personal connections. As all the actors in a theatre are usually locals, leaders have less difficulty in assigning roles and tasks within the community since they know the skills and knowledge of their fellow members (cf. Vrtovec Beno, 2023: 65). There were many important personalities who had a significant influence on the development of the Poor Theatre. Today, the people of Monticchiello are particularly attached to the directing work of Andrea Cresti, who recently died in 2021. He was a local resident who had previously been involved in art, painting, and took over dramaturgical work in 1981. His main characteristic, according to those close to Andrea, was that he forged close personal ties with the autodrama’s co-creators, so that their work was based on trust. Elderly villager Bruno, who had worked with Cresti for decades, spoke about him in a highly emotional and positive way:

*The theatre was really a cultural heritage [un patrimonio culturale], now let’s say it has mutated, it has mutated because the director died last year. He had a very strong capacity for theatre. He did it for forty years, you know? And I was very attached to him, so for me it has changed a bit. [...] Also, from a cultural point of view, this is becoming something else, it seems to me.*

From the above discussion, we can see the importance of personal ties, attachment and trust in the community. A change in leadership, i.e. the director of the plays, necessarily means a change in the way things are done, at least in some ways. In other words, the cultural heritage itself has changed, and part of it may even have disappeared with the absence of that person. It might be added that innovation, i.e. a new way of doing things, has led to a kind of “disrupting” (e.g. Christmann et al., 2020: 499) of the heritage. One important difference in recent years is that there are now two directors in charge of the coordination and preparation of the play. The directors have been working together for six years and both come from Chianciano Terme, a few kilometres from Monticchiello. I spoke to another inhabitant about the preparations for the latest autodrama, who said:

*It seems to me that we started a bit late with the preparation of all this. Actually, when I think about it now and see the result, on the one hand I say, well... Because when Andrea Cresti was the director, the preparation*

*was actually much longer. [...] I always had the feeling that the preparation was much longer. With this new direction it is a bit more streamlined. Let's just say that in some cases there is also a little bit of anxiety about being able to pull it off. (Veronica)*

However, there are also positive aspects of the new way of doing things. “Let’s say that before there was only one director, now there are two directors, so they can edit different scenes, maybe on the same night. One takes care of one scene, one takes care of another” (Giulio). When I spoke to the two directors about the new way of working, they highlighted the key advantage of working in tandem:

*It is the nature and the expectations of the actors, who are so many. And the more time passes, the more I realise that it is very fortunate that there are two of us, because the sensitivity of one would not be enough. We would run the risk of displeasing someone, which means that someone would probably be left out. Being two helps. Sometimes Nino might see something that I don’t see and vice versa. (Giovanni)*

One of the aspects of the new way of working is that it makes it easier for them to deal with multiple perspectives in the preparation of plays, which is crucial in the context of heritage processes. Smith (2006) used the concept of the authorised heritage discourse to present one of the most problematic issues in these processes, namely that some voices in the community are marginalised. By sharing tasks and providing leadership based on trust, respect and strong commitment, the meanings and aspirations of different individuals can be more successfully integrated. In this context, the second director commented: “We are happy to do it because it’s not a trivial task. It’s very difficult in such a multifaceted, collective, plural reality. It is difficult to see everything on one’s own” (Nino). I found their work to be highly ethnographic in nature, producing precise descriptions and nuanced interpretations from multiple perspectives, which they confirmed and also described their experiences:

*Very ethnographic. Because many of the stories we tell are not our own, we heard them from the people. We put them together, contextualised them, put them in a situation, in a context, you know? But the stories are theirs. [...] Before writing, we all have meetings together, assemblies where Nino and I take notes and hear what is important to people. We take stimuli. Then we put in some creativity of our own. (Giovanni)*

However, in practice, some obstacles, obligations and difficult choices cannot be avoided. “Then, we always confront them anyway because we propose our syntheses

*and they say 'ah, yes', 'no but'... and we slowly...*" (Nino). The second director added: *"Sometimes you have to write for that one person. This actor has to say this, wants to say that, and we write it so"* (Giovanni). If we assume that the end product is what the community brings forth, the process is very much about leadership and individual contributions. *"Yes, because what we do is not just entertainment, it's everything. Some people say, 'I thought that this thing would be put like this', but no, more beautiful, like this'. For every little thing we do, it's like that"* (Giulio). The main challenge in terms of social innovation is to pursue "a more distributive and collaborative leadership" (Sørensen, Torfing, 2013: 6). Although, as we have seen, in practice an extremely challenging process, leaders "must work within the constraints imposed by voluntary action and shared power. Typically, then, their role is to facilitate rather than to direct" (Ansell, Gash, 2012: 5). Leadership is a particularly responsible and crucial task in heritage performances, as also observed by Vrtovec Beno: "For example, performers must be careful not to offend or ridicule the shared heritage, which places a burden on producers to create an appropriate performance, and to communicate the content within the community" (Vrtovec Beno, 2023: 114). In our case, however, it is important to stress that this is a highly diffuse responsibility, as each individual involved in the Poor Theatre contributes ideas that are put into practice.

## Conclusion

The ethnographic research and theoretical discussions presented in this paper contribute to the broader theoretical reflection on the connection between social innovation and intangible heritage, emphasizing the drivers of place, participation, social values, collective memory, and collaborative leadership. Within the conceptual framework, I identify three fundamental common features of intangible heritage and social innovation. First, the temporal dimension: at their core, both concepts are oriented towards addressing present and future needs. In the case study presented, the community tackles its challenges primarily through theatre, confronting local everyday life and significant global issues while reimagining the local past to meet current and future needs (e.g. Harrison, 2012). Second, the community-based dimension: the role of a specific community is always pivotal, whether in heritage creation processes or in social innovation. These initiatives are typically created by the community and for the community. Third, the social process dimension: both social innovation (e.g. Christmann et al., 2020; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2023) and critical heritage studies (e.g. Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2012) emphasize a social and collaborative process rather than a final product.

Thus, I understand the autodrama of the Poor Theatre as a collective creative process of heritage making with socially progressive outcomes, engaging the drivers of place, participation, social values, collective memory, and collaborative leadership.

The development and maintenance of a cohesive local community depend on fostering all five key drivers. However, in exploring these various issues, it became evident that challenges continually emerge and that creativity is crucial in the process. We witness the changes that the local community must adapt to and the difficulties it must face. Heritage studies can significantly contribute to the field of social innovation by highlighting that local development is inherently fraught with tensions, difficulties, and challenges, as it involves considering multiple voices and diverse perspectives. While heritage studies have a long tradition of adopting such a critical perspective, only in recent years has the importance of multivocality – encompassing tensions and conflicts – in the field of social innovation been recognized (e.g. Brandsen et al., 2016; Christmann et al., 2020). Conversely, by integrating the concept of social innovation into heritage studies, we encourage consideration of the “socially progressive outcomes” (Smith, 2011: 23) of heritage.

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### **Teatro Povero di Monticchiello: na skupnosti temelječa socialna inovacija in nesnovna dediščina na toskanskem podeželju**

S povezovanjem konceptov dediščine in socialnih inovacij je mogoče pridobiti nova praktična in teoretska spoznanja. Zanimivo je, da so bile socialne inovacije redko obravnavane v okviru dediščine kljub številnim podobnostim, ki jih je mogoče opaziti, zlasti če dediščino razumemo kot ustvarjalno ukvarjanje s preteklostjo za potrebe sedanjosti in prihodnosti (prim. Harrison, 2012). Socialne inovacije so v literaturi večinoma razumljene kot inovativne družbene prakse, katerih cilj je zadovoljiti družbene potrebe na boljši način kot obstoječe rešitve. Cilj te raziskave je razviti okvir za preučevanje na skupnosti temelječih socialnih inovacij in nesnovne dediščine z uporabo teorije družbene ustvarjalnosti in socialnih inovacij na podeželju, kot so jo predlagali André idr. (2013), ter ga uporabiti za konkretno študijo primera.

V prispevku se osredinjam na avtodramo, ki jo vsako leto organizira Teatro Povero di Monticchiello (Gledališče revnih v Monticchiellu). Monticchiello je naselje z nekaj več kot sto prebivalci v toskanski dolini Val d'Orcia, ki je od leta 2004 na Unescovem seznamu svetovne dediščine. Od leta 1967 do danes krajani vsako leto uprizorijo gledališke predstave s poudarkom na osebnih in družbenih pripovedih o lastnih izkušnjah, preteklosti, težavah, vrednotah, težnjah in pogledih na prihodnost v kontekstu vsakdanjega življenja v kraju. Poleti jih (amaterski) gledališki igralci uprizarjajo dva tedna (v preteklosti tri tedne).

Družbeno prakso obravnavam kot socialno inovacijo in nesnovno dediščino, pri čemer opredelim tri temeljne skupne značilnosti nesnovne dediščine in socialnih inovacij. Prvič, časovna razsežnost: oba koncepta sta v svojem bistvu usmerjena v zadovoljevanje sedanjih in prihodnjih potreb na podlagi izkušenj iz preteklih praks in razumevanja preteklosti. Drugič, na skupnosti temelječa razsežnost: navadno je vloga skupnosti osrednjega pomena tako v procesih ustvarjanja dediščine kot tudi socialnih inovacij. Tretjič, razsežnost družbenega procesa: raziskave socialnih inovacij (npr. Christmann idr., 2020; O'Shaughnessy idr., 2023) in kritične študije dediščine (npr. Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2012) poudarjajo in osvetljujejo družbeni in sodelovalni proces in ne končnega produkta. Na podlagi etnografske raziskave poglobljeno preučujem te razsežnosti, ki so podlaga za celostno razumevanje ustvarjalne in inovativne družbene prakse.