

Performance Opera as a Research and Learning Device

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Preamble

Performance operates as a research device and refers to an approach in which artistic-performative activities function as forms of investigation. The collective creative acts that shape a performance opera employ the body and sound as raw materials for artistic creation and methods for generating new knowledge.

The cornerstone of performance opera is embodied knowledge, the process through which the mind is no longer considered separate from the body. Mind and body work together to ensure knowledge acquisition occurs not only on an intellectual level but also in the body via performance practices. In short, it is through the physical and sensory experiences of creation and execution that the performer-researcher acquires further insights that contribute to developing new ideas and concepts.

Another key factor is reflective practice. It involves constant critical reflection on the process and results of their creative work. During the co-creative process, the performers consider the implications and intuitions acquired regarding the themes chosen as the conceptual scaffolding on which the performance operates. Here, interdisciplinary approaches are consistently encouraged.

Rebecca Schneider analysed how artistic research conducted through performance produces contributions of interest to the political and social sciences. Performance is a tool that helps experiment with multiple challenges to existing norms. It proposes new ideas and transmits and expands understanding within artistic, social, and academic communities (Schneider, 1997).

For Schneider, the context in which the performance takes place is crucial since it is not limited to strictly artistic circumstances but is also influenced and modified from time to time by the socio-cultural, historical, and political situations in which it occurs. Consequently, it influences and informs research work, fostering a dynamic relationship between artistic creation and intellectual inquiry.

To adopt performance opera as a research device, it is also necessary to learn how performance research has evolved over the years and how the systematic investigation and analysis of various aspects of performance in different contexts have developed. For example, performance research has given rise to the theory of linguistic acts proposed by the philosopher and literary critic J. L. Austin.

For Austin, saying something is always doing something, but for the performative statement to be accurate and appropriate, it must adhere to exact procedures conducted by those with the proper authority to implement them (Austin, 1962).

The possibility of failure of the performatives identified by Austin (utterances that are expressed through both verbal language and body language) is taken up by Butler as the political promise of the performative. Butler asserts that since the performance needs to maintain its conventional potential, the convention itself must be reiterated, and in this reiteration, it can be usurped by unauthorised uses. However, at the same time, for this very reason, it can create new futures (Butler, *ibid.*).

VestAndPage's impulse for producing collective performance opera also springs from their studies in feminism, psychoanalysis, critical race theory, and queer theory. Theorists such as José Esteban Muñoz and Stuart Hall continue to influence their artistic practice and research, particularly regarding identity as a social construct (Hall, 1990). It is also essential for the German-Italian artistic duo to update their practice and continue to study co-creative techniques and processes to analyse the impact of their performance works. In their self-evaluation, audience reactions are included to establish the overall effectiveness of a successful performance, encompassing both behavioural and results-oriented aspects (Bishop, 2015).

Deploying the model of a performance opera as a research device means approaching 'performance' as a multidimensional and dynamic concept.

What are the beneficial components that come into play during a co-creative process?

How do we keep it alive and adaptable at every moment?

What has it surprisingly revealed?

A performance opera co-creative process is a non-linear path in constant evolution.

It is neither sequential nor can it be arranged or designed in a straight line.

It is like sailing between the ebbs and flows of the tides: when the ripples return, they are never the same.

Although they may appear the same, they have changed in temperature, debris, and the relics they leave. So, if performativity is the concept according to which the language adopted can bring about change (Butler, *ibid.*), fluidising research through the impulse of performance means allowing oneself to change the trajectories of investigation at any time. It means paying attention to what is perceived beyond the beauty of the reasoning.

In the process of co-creation and research that leads to the creation of a performance opera, imperfections go hand in hand with the pleasure of intuition. They allow the performer-researchers to understand whether their co-creation path requires revision.

Imperfections are always present in any system, but when using performance as a research device, the concept of performance invites us not to set them aside, as they are augmentative material for investigation, however magmatic it may seem. Making mistakes can be positive for a human being, a researcher, and an artist. It provides individuality. It allows us to distinguish ourselves from others and to identify with ourselves.

Accepting imperfections and failures as opportunities to learn and grow helps change ways, methods, and habits. Sometimes, the most extraordinary art is born from error.

Choosing to use the model of performance opera as a research device also means being aware that all those programmatic actions conceived to outline the various phases of an investigation may not be sufficient to resolve the unpredictable deviations encountered along the way. Thus, it will be necessary to entrust our creative capacity to remain intact in the face of new challenges.

Eventually, when the time comes to present what we have accomplished to an audience, what will it say about our longed-for artistic integrity? Will there still be something to fix? What if we want to change it again? Moreover, how do we prepare to achieve all this?

A Research and Learning Device

Performing arts practices, as well as the socio-political and cultural ones (protests, military parades, sporting events, religious celebrations, etc.), all include repetitive elements that are re-actualised with each new instance of such kind. They usually have structures and styles that both encompass and distinguish them from ordinary everyday practices.

Reformulation and re-contextualisation are constants in most creative and artistic endeavours. Once surprising, new interventions occur within a system or set of conventions, leading to genuine outcomes.

The distinction between being a performance and looking just like a performance is subtle. It changes depending on the time, space, and context in which it occurs. Actions of civil disobedience, resistance, defence of citizens' rights, and gender,

racial, ethnic, and religious expression, free speech, and identity—are performances, or is it as if they were performances? Or are they both at the same time?

It depends on how one frames such events. A theatrical production is a performance limited to what happens on stage. However, its scope could be broadened by including the type of audience who has access to the theatre, the urban area in which the theatre is located, and what happens around it (Schechner, 2002).

Beliefs and stances are also transmitted through bodily practices, including how a person understands their body and relates to others. For example, gender is the product of embodied codes enacted in the public sphere and changes depending on the historical, geographical, social, and political contexts (Butler, 1990).

From these viewpoints, performance opera is, therefore, an ontological and epistemological practice. It stimulates critical investigations into the structures and methods of knowledge (Turner, 1987). It is a creative operation functioning as a methodological lens on present reality. It allows the audience to confront themselves with an array of existential positions provided by the performative actions they observe.

A performance opera may serve as a learning research device to examine the interrelationships between the performing arts and socio-political practices that change or vary to mutual conditioning (Pagnes, 2024a, n. p.).

Looking at Friedrich Schiller's philosophical concerns about education (2010), for VestAndPage, people should not transcend their circumstances without learning, and art may help rediscover the meaning of humanity: coexistence, as "we live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime, within man lies the soul of the whole (...) to which every part and particle is equally related." (Emerson, 1841, p. 223)

Just as the mechanisms by which a co-creative process brings about the realisation of a performance opera, learning occurs through positioning and relationships between individuals. Awareness of positioning oneself affirms one's identity in difference (Fichte, 1993). Noting this Fichtean assumption, any VestAndPage performative action they carry out is a conscious experience of themselves as empirical individuals.

However, they also believe that to build individual freedom, a person should engage in dialectical relationships with others to develop into a morally engaged

subject who understands reality as the dimension of exercising freedom relationally (Pagnes, 2024b).

Since the underlying proposition of a performance opera co-creation process is to implement creative freedom and decision-making capacity to benefit the performance collective, the deployed performance practices become “the ground for (and critique of conventional understandings of) experimentation, analysis, and discovery” (Dickinson & Waterman, 2023, p. 1) in seeking new knowledge while simultaneously challenging the epistemological assumptions that produce the concept of ‘performance’.

A performance opera is radically unstable and visceral. It is not repeatable like a theatre show because it is not detached from the outside world. It produces meanings that could not be conveyed otherwise through actions that unfold like those in life—each action gives rise to the next, and no two moments are ever the same. The performers do not recall actions that have happened once; hence, they do not represent. Time passes, flying away between sweat, sounds, and blood. It marks the moments of the action and nothing else, which then passes into the following action non-linearly but without interruption (Handke, 1971).

The actions consist of movements and gestures, and the intensity of the movements is variable. During the co-creative process, various sequences of performative acts are developed without adhering to them at all costs to maintain a certain degree of freedom that allows each performer to discover new trajectories that may emerge while performing.

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Actions should arise spontaneously in that precise moment and respond to the performer's truth at that given moment. Thus, the performers avoid actions that give the illusion of what something could be.

They organise constrictive situations that cannot be misleading for performing within them: suspensions from the ceiling, narrow spaces of metal cages or glass cubes, and floors covered with slippery or sharp substances, such as oil, ice, glass, and mirror shards. These operations allow for deeper concentration to perform in survival mode without compromise.

Attuning to the risk helps one remain steadfast. VestAndPage developed a risk-taking mode in performance to attempt to make “art stronger than life so that people can feel it” (Sontag, 2009, n.p.). Their pedagogical activities on performance practices focus on the potential of the performing body: its malleability, resilience, and permeability, as if it were a sponge soaked in feelings and thoughts—an organic membrane where meanings, metaphors, and paradoxes are sewn into the neuro-musculature that structures it; a physiological and biochemical structure subject to gravity due to, firstly, the force of attraction that acts between bodies with mass and holds them together.

They draw from Grotowski’s research method—via negativa, aiming to eradicate the performer’s blocks rather than rely on expressive skills (Grotowski, 2017). Studying these properties helps to overcome the hindrances that prevent performers from accessing the full potential of their psyche and corporeality. Allowing oneself to be influenced by internal and external forces on the body benefits the fluidity of movement, resulting in a flow of actions determined by vital energetic factors.¹

Such an approach to movement helps to understand one’s body’s ability to transform, for example, volition into a state of openness to respond to unpredictable situations during a performance. The body knows far more than one believes. The risk is that placing too much ambition on finding movement and action may hinder a co-creative process.

Conversely, connecting creativity collectively through imagination helps to cultivate a vocabulary of mental images and possible metaphors that lead to new insights. Consciously sustaining a mental image for a certain period does not limit the process to an internal visual modality. When performers and musicians collaborate, attention to mental images can help them discover that they encompass auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory, and tactile signals; a single thought held for longer can make a difference, allowing a simple motor exercise to become a dance.

The ability to effectively use and embody mental images is essential for performers and experimental musicians creating a performance opera. It is a formative and fundamental element in the practice of movement and actions. Efforts must be made, of course, but it is precisely because of shared effort that emphatic, creative connections are built.

¹ The experience of movement flow is the sensation of moving and being moved. On the one hand, it is a distortion of temporal experience (the feeling that time has passed faster than expected) and a moment of total awareness on the other. It is the meeting between what I am doing and what is happening to me. It cannot be anticipated, explained, elaborated upon specifically, or repeated precisely.

Through guided mental images, even extreme ones, associating circumstances, experiences, and situations, a performer can bring their body (through movement and action) to where the mental image has taken their mind.

Here, sound's compositional and improvisational aspects are essential in helping the performers' mental images translate into actions so as not to appear too static, predictable, or one-dimensional. Sounds created in real time dispel the performers' desire for excessive control and provide the tonic against absolute indeterminacy.

In an opera performance, sounds that do not merely accompany but contribute to the life of the live images springing from performers' actions can also contradict the live image itself. However, in contradiction and paradoxical opposition, the points of attention multiply. It is like being in different places simultaneously but choosing which one to remain in. Each option holds the same truth.

Training in performance by focusing on contradictions and paradoxes can lead to higher concentration and imagination. It helps to achieve a state of effective reactivity in the creative process, assuming that the mental state prompting us to imagine this or that thing is as crucial as the movement.

A performance opera also functions as an anti-structural ritualistic device that fosters the idea of a "temporary artistic community" (Pagnes, 2022, p. 69). It is politically significant for being a semiotically open experiential event that escapes art's commodification. It focuses on the liberating expression of the human capacities of cognition, affection, volition, and creativity to disentangle the individual from restrictive norms and social mechanisms (Turner, 1987).

Therein, the result of a performance opera is the transmission of knowledge when the audience recognises that the artists' cultural identities harmonise with one another through their fertile differences, extend through creative relationships, and are open to mutual transformations (Glissant, 1997).

Theoretically, a performance opera can also be understood as a combination of coherence and indeterminacy emerging from dialogic and intersubjective relationships. Phenomenologically, it is both an enactment and an expression of embodied cognition, informed by particular social and cultural contingencies. In all this, the epistemological implications that the performance opera brings within itself are by no means negligible; they are a direct expression of human nature and its limitations, with multiple implications that extend beyond the disciplinary scope of theatre studies.

To situate opera as a device for producing knowledge rather than entertainment is to acknowledge that it is implicitly or explicitly informed by the social, cultural, and gender positions of those who create it. It supports the progressive idea driven by the desire to discover, change, build, develop, innovate, improve, and start again. It revolutionises the concepts of representation, authority, legitimation, accessibility, and inclusion by integrating alternative perspectives, personal narratives, and auto-ethnographies (Magnat, 2016).

Thus, the potential of performance opera, if understood as a knowledge-seeking device, resides in the experiential cognitive processes embodied in the materiality of the performers' bodies. To this end, it is essential to avoid considering the nonverbal behaviour characterising performance as though principles with direct equivalents in language govern it. This would grant language a hegemony over all other performative actions (and sound as well), contrary to what Ludwig Wittgenstein taught us: that is, language itself represents a limit to the understanding of reality and the world, as it is both limited and limiting (Wittgenstein, 1922).

Without neglecting the verbal and the conceptual, the embodied dimension of the co-creative processes that lead to the creation of performance opera underlines the fundamental importance of the sensory and visceral aspects inherent in human beings. Most cultural knowledge is stored in actions rather than words. This embodied knowledge is transmitted from individual to individual through their psychophysical involvement in the cultural process (Hastrup, 1995).

In other words, VestAndPage's performance operas do not arise from cognitive rationality alone. They are formed within an organic field to which each performer is inextricably linked through their corporeality, perceptive capacity, sensoriality, and motricity. This occurs because the experiences humans conduct and accumulate while living unfold through constant movement—thought is a living element that moves continually and shakes the body, as do sensations and emotions. The performer's body thus becomes an access path and propeller where the mind is undoubtedly an important component. Still, it does not hold any precedence since the body is the dynamic zone of poetic and performative indeterminacy—an area not yet fully explored where emotions, motivations, thoughts, ideas, perceptions, and sensations cannot be accurately predicted, nor can they be exhaustively described through the properties of verbal language.

In this territory, the limits of verbal language, sound, and ordinary bodily action can be further investigated so that meaning constantly emerges, is inscribed, and is altered but never taken for granted. The performer's body, therefore, does not represent the irreducible 'other' of discursive language; instead, it embodies its

qualities, conjuring sounds that integrate and disintegrate with it and that also integrate and disintegrate into it.

Eventually, performing with asylum-seekers, disabled and transgender performers, VestAndPage performance operas attempt to bridge the differences in life experiences—differences that certainly do not disappear during such performances, addressing vulnerabilities that traverse specific bodies for a possible social transformation that may be achieved—or not.

Often, performing in proximity to the audience heightens the ethical implications of intimacy, which reside in the power dynamics that the performer establishes with the spectator. In the performance space, the tension between hierarchical power moments in intimacy-related performative situations increases during the immediate encounter between the audience and the performers.

Generally, in relationships of power, people tend, more or less unconsciously, to sabotage emotional intimacy because they perceive it as placing them, compared to their partner, in a position of weakness and consequent inferiority. However, in the performance space, an intimacy-related performative situation is also a social situation: it can be open, welcoming, inviting, or unsettling, perturbing, and invasive. Indeed, when performers and the audience influence each other in the energy field of attention, care, attraction, or repulsion, the condition they both undergo is fundamentally intense.

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