DRAMATURGY and RESEARCH in DEVISED THEATRE

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NAMU

This book was written at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague as part of the project "Interdisciplinary research on the interaction of stage components in puppet and alternative theatre and in theatre production in specific groups" with the support of the Institutional Endowment for the Long Term Conceptual Development of Research Institutes, as provided by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic in the year 2023.

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ISBN 978-80-7331-798-0 (iPDF)

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Synne Behrndt
and
Sodja Lotker

INTRODUCTION

This booklet is an outcome of explorations on dramaturgy, devising and artistic research conducted by three dramaturgs over the past couple of years. The research consisted of practical work in rehearsals, as well as dialogues with artists and among ourselves. The three participating researchers in this small-scale project were Synne Behrndt and Jon Refsdal Moe (both Stockholm University of the Arts) and Sodja Lotker (KALD DAMU). While the focus of our individual research and practice differs, the project has arisen out of a shared interest in creative processes, contemporary dramaturgies and questions relating to the nature of artistic research.

This booklet is one of the different outcomes that the project produced and generated. For this part of the project we wanted to look more closely at the way in which devised dramaturgies could be said to be 'outcomes' of sophisticated research-based processes. Invoking dramaturg David Williams's statement that 'all devising is fundamentally an exploratory process of elaborating and activating dramaturgies' (2010: 198), the project initially set out to investigate more closely the relationship between dramaturgy and devising. Devising is best described as an approach within theatre and performance where a process begins

without a predetermined dramaturgy (or architecture) and, as Williams has described, here the dramaturgy is 'uncovered, worked and articulated through the process of making and rehearsing' (2010: 198). We have all worked as dramaturgs in devising and hence recognised that it was also in these open-ended processes where it became most apparent that performance-making is indeed a form of research and investigation. It is in shaping the dramaturgy through making and rehearsals that the devisers (and the dramaturg) also become active researchers.

So, to us, it is a given that research is integral to most contemporary performance-making and we wondered how we could begin to talk about the many different strands of knowledge and thinking that circulate in such processes. Devised theatre has a very specific relationship to research and many overlaps. In the following writings, we are trying to map the specifics of this relationship: How is devised theatre researched? How does that research happen? How does research become part of the dramaturgical equation? What are the outcomes of this research? What fields and strands of knowledge-creation does the research intersect with, and what kind of contribution outside of the artwork can the wealth of information and research make? What role does the artist, dramaturg or creative producer play in producing the research beyond the artwork? And how do we begin to articulate the innovative methodologies which these processes produce?

As has been the case for most projects, the global Covid-19 pandemic from early 2020 onwards played a part in delaying, postponing and shifting the overall project somewhat. There is certainly a lot to say about the ways in which a global pandemic can impact an entire world, not to mention 'reconfiguring' many art and research projects which have had to rethink and invent new ways of working and making. During this time, there was talk of inventing new approaches to artistic creation and new ways to reach and incorporate audiences; at some point we will be able to gauge the full extent of the imprint the pandemic left on dramaturgies and artistic creation. For now, it is important for us to look at our own practices, the way we do things, to start understanding them in order to make them maybe not more productive but more sustainable. Understanding the research aspect of the dramaturgy of devised theatre, both on the level of making and on the level of performance, is for us a way forward, a way to understand the thinking behind devised theatre dramaturgy and to make this thinking richer.

The project was made possible thanks to Stockholm University of the Arts and in collaboration with the Institute for Research and Study of Alternative and Puppet Theatre and Theatrical Creation in Specific Groups of the Performing Arts Academy KALD.

Special thanks to the artists who were thinking with us: Julian Hetzel, Miguel Melgares, Wojtek Ziemilski, Temporary Collective, Viktor Černický, Kolektiv Nesladim, Cristina Maldonado, Lea Kukovičič, Jan

Mocek, Fredrik Floen, Fredrik Petrov, David Harradine, Yvon Bonenfant, Martin Sonderkamp, Darko Dragičević, Milla Koistinen, Branislava Kuburović, Duška Radosavljević and many others.

CONVERSATIONS

Synne Behrndt

This small-scale project facilitated a process of research which led to the creation of three different formats and writings on my part: an article on devising as a model of creation;[1] a keynote address on the relationship between dramaturgy and artistic research[2] and the following companion piece in which I think more on the relationship between devising and dramaturgy. I will draw on conversations with collaborators and artists, as well as on observations on dramaturgical work within creative processes. I have previously and often come back to the particular relationship between dramaturgy and devising, and this small-scale project was an opportunity to align – or perhaps situate – my thinking on devising and dramaturgy with(in) discussions on artistic research, as became evident in said keynote. At the heart of my interest in the relationship

1 Published in *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary European Theatre and Performance*, eds. Ralf Remshardt and Aneta Mancewicz, Routledge 2023.

2 Presented at the CARPA8 conference *SOLVITUR AMBULANDO 'solved by moving': Dramaturgies of Artistic Research*, Helsinki, 24–26 August 2023. The keynote will be published and made available in the conference proceedings.

between dramaturgy and devising is the realisation that, in these open-ended processes, where the task is to shape the dramaturgy while simultaneously developing the methodologies and an architecture for the process, the dramaturg becomes a kind of researcher *in action*. If dramaturgy sits on the fault line between theory and practice, then a devising process calls on those skills because, when there is a genuine exploration, it is a form of research in which one *finds out something* through and in performance. Speaking on a personal note, dramaturgical work within devising has often felt like the most creative way to learn, investigate and find *something out* by way of making a performance because, on the level of principle, it is about inventing strategies for experimentation, extrapolating and naming potentialities while proposing methodologies for further development.

Throughout the project there have been various points of contact with my discussion partners Sodja Lotker and Jon Refsdal Moe. We came into the project with different questions but we shared an interest in the proposal that performance and its making embody sophisticated models of and for research. On 12 April 2023, this year we gave a seminar on dramaturgy and devising to staff and students at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (DAMU), and here Lotker talked about embodied knowledge in performance and the fact that knowledge is formed in the doing itself. She referred to dramaturgy as a gesture of watching, and I found both her question 'What does it mean for dramaturgy when you don't know what you're going to

find?' and her proposition that performance is a form of research, which is done together with the audience, deeply relevant. One answer to the first question could be that dramaturgy is not something which is articulated before 'the work' happens; rather, it is likely a process which happens together or *alongside* the unfolding process and hence in the shaping of a work. During the seminar, Refsdal Moe presented the provocative statement that theatre is not (always) about communication; instead, he advocated that performance give space for the spectator to *be with* the work. It's a good point: How do you create dramaturgies that give space to the audience? A question I have been thinking about myself in connection with two recent performance projects in which the dramaturgical structure was intentionally 'liquid' with a view to (also physically) giving space to the audience: when working with choreographer Milla Koistinen on her pieces *Breathe* (2021) and *Magenta Haze* (2022), one challenge was to conceive of the dramaturgy as an encounter or meeting between work and spectator(s). Certainly, dramaturgy always emerges in the spectator's meeting with the work, yet one question was how to build a dramaturgy in which the spectator would feel 'implicated' and invited to engage without forcing or coercing direct interaction or participation. More on this later.

1.

In this extended essay, I am not putting forward a linear argument about dramaturgy and devising; rather, I make a number of proposals intended to prepare the ground for a more in-depth and practical study to come. There is by now a comprehensive body of work and writings on dramaturgy and devising; thus, existing case studies and published interviews in which dramaturgs explain and narrate their contribution and work have been particularly helpful to understand processes where one, as Lotker put it, does not know what one finds. But I have been interested in another question: How may we start to describe, articulate and amplify these processes from the perspective of their often-innovative methodologies with a view to understanding how thinking actually takes place through many different means and materials and between collaborators? Contemporary devising processes are most often highly collaborative and the performance dramaturgy is a result of thinking and working together across a number of processes and approaches. Here, dramaturgical practice becomes about finding a common ground where these can meet and cohere, not with a view to erasing their specificity in favour of linear coherence or 'communication' but instead to understanding how different inroads to the same question or investigation can produce insights and knowledge. But how to articulate these knowings when the creative processes are sprawling and where 'data' comes in

more ephemeral forms?[3] And how may we contain and articulate the plethora of knowledge within these processes?

I concur with Marianne van Kerkhoven and Anoek Nuyens, who, when describing their endeavour to tell the story about Kris Verdonck's *End*,[4] write: 'How poor we are when it comes to describing "becoming"...' (2012: 21); capturing the complexity of the process of making is like 'the growth of an onion: it starts somewhere as a tiny bulb, around which more and more layers grow (...) the layers pile up, and they can be peeled off. A real centre is missing' (2012: 13). While they describe the challenges of organising the sprawling devising process into the book, the image of the onion also gestures towards the challenges of putting into words the complexity of a making process where an investigation grows, expands and sprawls. Around the same time as *Listen to the Bloody Machine*, director David Harradine, in collaboration with me, published the book *Invisible Things: Documentation from a Devising Process,* in acknowledgement that the process of making the piece *An Infinite Line: Brighton* (2008) had produced a catalogue of creative inroads and approaches in answer to the question 'How do we make a performance about the light of the city of Brighton?' In taking the time to reflect back and then

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[3] Further recommended reading on data and process: Yvon Bonenfant's article 'PAR produces plethora, extended voices are plethoric, and why plethora matters', in *Performance as Research*, eds. Arlander, Barton, Dreyer-Lude, Spatz, Routledge, 2017.

[4] *Listen to the Bloody Machine: Creating Kris Verdonck's* END, 2012.

deciding to formalise it in the form of a book (documentation), we told the story about the piece and the process, which then also became a story about the insights, accrued knowledge and wealth of methods which had been developed throughout the making of the performance. The book describes how the rehearsal space becomes a form of laboratory where the makers are oscillating between extrapolating ideas from the collected research while understanding what 'information' then emerges from the practical experimentation. The book ended up charting the work from Harradine's own research, before the rest of the team came on board, to the final performance, and it became a form of process map, which showed how the dramaturgy of the work developed out of – or perhaps in tandem with – a form of problem-solving in which you home in on the key questions arising out of the 'starting point' and then devise practical approaches or prompts which can make something happen in the space. The tangible outcome is the performance, but we made the book to bring into focus the many *invisible things* which are woven into the fabric of the performance itself.

In a later conversation, David Harradine[5] remarks that making a performance is like research: when you start with a question or topic and you have no architecture to begin with, then the process becomes about trying to understand what the question or topic exactly

[5] Harradine is both co-artistic director of Fevered Sleep and Professor of Interdisciplinary Practice at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, London.

consists of, and so it grows in what it is as one explores it from different angles (Harradine 2022). Harradine remarks that what also shifts the process from simply being about producing material for a performance to it becoming research is when one starts to have conversations about what something may mean or why it may be interesting (Harradine 2022). It is a deeper engagement at the level of exploration or investigation. One can, he says, quite easily generate material, but it is when asking more dramaturgical questions that one starts to 'figure out the framework' and the kind of conceptual hooks or guiding principles that emerge from the process of answering the initial question. And the figuring out of these hooks or principles is then closely connected with understanding what the work may be saying or proposing (Harradine 2022). The work may not offer up specific answers to the question(s), but it can make propositions and can be a way of thinking through or thinking about said questions.

2.

In my experience, devising as a model of creation is, and indeed implies, a form of research in action, and dramaturgical work arguably amplifies this. Having worked as a dramaturg within devised (theatre and danced-based) processes, it made sense to think of this approach as embodying what I would call an inherently *investigatory* approach, where the architecture of the process is built on the principle of creating the content,

form and architecture as the process unfolds and, as dramaturgs van Kerkhoven and Nuyens have remarked, 'the understanding of what one is actually doing emerges gradually' (2012: 4). Theoretically speaking, this is not exclusive to devising, but, unlike a process that starts with a play or pre-existing score, in devising the structure and material are, as Dee Heddon and Jane Milling put it, created *ex nihilo* (2006:3), or, simply put, one builds and devises the performance, its structure and dramaturgy from scratch. One could call it a kind of collective creation of the performance through doing and research, with whatever means necessary and available. And this then entails a careful consideration of the dramaturgy of process. I will borrow a phrase from Duška Radosavljević, who in a conversation used the wonderful expression that one looks for 'what may be the best methodological approach to answering the question' (Radosavljević 2023). And so the process becomes about building a performance architecture while inventing the tools with which to do so, a complex double-task which demands often sophisticated consideration for the design of the process itself: How and where do we start and which strategies do we need (to invent) in order to start creating? David Williams once described the conundrum of devising as follows:

> The task of devising is to try and locate the shapes of what it is you think you're looking for while often being largely in the dark as to exactly what that is (...) So, the deviser's – and the devising dramaturg's – role straddles tensions between structure and possibility,

known and unknown, fixity and fluidity, and so on. (Williams 2010:197)

Williams articulates the predicament of the deviser, and it is in this oscillation between known and unknown that the research also takes place. And so I am interested in the ways in which devising processes could (also) be mined for their often highly innovative methodologies and research design. By 'mining' I am not so much talking about 'untapped potential' in the utilitarian sense as I am referring to collecting methodologies. In a conversation with Yvon Bonenfant, he remarks that what artists and artist-researchers are particularly good at is 'decanting meaning from methodological chaos' (Bonenfant 2022), an observation that seems apt when considering devising but also – and this was perhaps more his point – pays dues to artistic creation itself as embodying complex methods that – when disseminated – can make genuine contributions. While I want to avoid making unhelpful utilitarian and naive arguments about the 'good of the arts', it seems critical to consider the extent to which the innovative methodological approaches within performance-making could contribute outside its own field.[6] It is a recurring

[6] I hesitate to refer to examples, as this has not been the focus for my research, but I thank Duška Radosavljević for pointing out Karen Savage and Dominic Symonds' book *Economics of Collaboration in Performance* (2018). The authors document how 'forms of collaborative labour found in theatre and performance produce models as yet not recognised by the economic theory' (Radosavljević 2023: 37) models of collaboration that have informed the field of economics.

suggestion within artistic research as a field that the definition of knowledge and what constitutes 'data' can be rethought in lieu of artistic processes. Moreover, as Laura Cull writes in her exhaustive overview of artistic research, it is worth considering how 'Performance is perhaps particularly well equipped to offer models for how to conduct research in public and indeed with a range of publics according to the growing, cross-disciplinary interest in methods of "inclusive" or participatory research' (Cull 2019: 158). This is, however, a discussion for another time, but while one can understand the resistance to instrumentalised thinking about the usefulness of the arts, it is worth considering the many complex ways in which, as Yvon Bonenfant put it in a conversation, 'the arts can lead in method-creation' (Bonenfant 2022).

A devising process calls on an integration of the creation of research, innovative strategies and practical doing. And, to circle back to my conversations with Lotker and Refsdal Moe, it makes sense to dovetail the discussion about dramaturgy and devising with ideas relating to performance as a form of thinking; Maaike Bleeker proposes, in *Doing Dramaturgy*, that making theatre, dance and performance is 'a thinking through practice' (2022: 5), a thinking that happens on a number of levels. Performance itself can of course represent, provoke or embody thinking, and it follows that the process by which it is created can similarly provide critical insights in terms of its subject matter and perhaps expand our understanding of how, where and through which means thinking occurs and manifests

itself.[7] As director David Harradine remarked in our conversation, 'performance is a way of thinking in all sorts of complex ways' (Harradine 2022). He goes on to say:

> You make something to find out, trying to answer a question and then you recognise it when you see it. The process of doing it is a way to think it (...) to try everything out in practice is a way to think about these ideas and investigate them. The process has to happen. We do not just imagine the things because then there would be no investigation. We have an image but then we need to find out what the image is about. (Harradine 2022)

This opens up the question of how may process and models of performance-making embed complex ways of knowing? It is fair to say that all art and performance-making involves investigation through problem-solving, and every process will call on a consideration of how to plan rehearsals or approach the material, but it is also fair to say that with devising we find an inherently investigatory methodology. Through labs, workshops and rehearsals, which often stretch over longer periods of time, the deviser works out how best to go about answering the question. In doing this,

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[7] Performance as thinking is also an argument well made within the discourse on artistic research; Riley and Hunter comment that AR has helped make the argument that 'creative production can constitute intellectual inquiry' and hence 'can contribute new understanding and insight' (2009: xv).

they may inadvertently invent innovative ways to think about or through something. If I apply this question to my own purposes, one could say that in devising we begin to create an architecture for the process by asking what kind of methodology may be sourced and extrapolated from the subject matter, question, theme or starting point. It is also this mechanism where the starting point sets off a chain of investigations, which make the process appear sprawling. And the exercise in connecting disparate things, as Harradine remarks, can then lead to unexpected connections, so, for example, in the case of the performance *On Ageing* (2010), a comment from a surgeon could unlock an idea for the space and design, or a comment from an expert on ageing was able to unlock the idea for the piece's structure (Harradine 2022).

The dramaturgy is created by way of finding answers to questions (which then lead to new questions) and with different types of research finding its way into the work. In a conversation with performance and visual artist Darko Dragičević, he describes his collaboration with choreographer Martin Sonderkamp as ongoing processes that allow 'different kinds of research material to flow in' (Sonderkamp and Dragičević 2023). While he was talking specifically about processes taking place over longer periods of time, I find his expression that a process 'allows research to flow in' to be a very useful way of thinking about the organic way in which a process is amplified by research. It is rarely a case of the linear application of ideas in practice from theory; rather, it describes

well the way in which the exploration will actively prompt a direction, which then needs more research. One could add that the research flows in and out and then back in when 'something' reappears in the work as one begins to understand why and how it felt useful in the first place.

And so a collaborative process develops its own particular methodology, design and inner logic, yet we can still talk about an overall principle and process design. To use a metaphor: when you start a process with only an idea, topic, statement or question, you simultaneously invent the tools with which you build the house while also working out the principles behind its architecture, which necessarily includes consideration for how visitors should enter and inhabit it. You create while simultaneously attempting to name, with a view to opening up potentiality. It makes sense to think of this kind of process as a laboratory where devisers do research together and individually. It is also a process where the artist and the researcher dovetail. David Harradine remarks that he makes no distinction between being an artist and a researcher:

> The creative process is a process of investigation and enquiry that leads to a certain kind of end point, and a research process is inherently creative because you are trying to create something that didn't exist before in terms of new ways of thinking or knowledge (...) Research is creative and creative projects involve research or they are research. The creative process is always an enquiry because we make projects that

> start with a question or a problem or a subject matter, rather than wanting to stage something, a text or make a new production. There is of course research within those kinds of processes but in our processes, everything is research. We start with a question (...) for example what is ageing. But we have made projects that are more formal enquiries, for example water or light; you start with a thing. Or what if you started the whole devising process with a lighting design and that's already the beginning of enquiry, about light, design and how they work in theatre. We can start with form or elements of theatre and see how far we can push them and that is a formal enquiry. It's an enquiry into form (Harradine 2022).

In other words, one becomes a kind of expert on a subject, and you discover that the question or subject is connected with other strands of knowledge. But performance is not a container for all the pieces of information that one finds; the point is still to distill it into a kind of complex essence in which the reality in the rehearsal space is brought together with the research and the personal. In our conversation, I am reminded that past processes and performances continue to be a kind of repository of ideas and thinking. In *Above Me the Wide Blue Sk*y (2015), the starting point was the question 'What is our relationship with nature?' and here the dramaturgy attempted to connect ideas relating to memory, the past and the slow, gradual loss and erosion of nature and species. And, reflecting on the process eight years later, Harradine

proposes that what we were essentially exploring in the theatre space, together with an audience, was what it would be like if a performance was disintegrating and disappearing right before our eyes. It seems that the question 'What is our relationship with nature?' had yielded an exploration into how to stage *change*, not to represent the ideas of loss and erosion but actually to stage them and to allow the process of change to be reflected within the form of the piece. As I write this in 2023, the performance we made in 2015 now seems even more urgent, and so does the research that flowed in. And so it makes sense to understand (previous) works as repositories for thinking and valuable research.

3.

To return to my earlier point that dramaturgy happens together and alongside the unfolding process; from 2021 to 2022 I worked with Milla Koistinen on two pieces: the solo *Breathe* (devised and performed in an outdoor public football field 2021), which was then adapted to an indoor ensemble piece *Magenta Haze* (2022).[8] In both pieces, Sandra E. Blatterer's design, in particular the materiality of the two big multicoloured air-filled 'bubbles', played a central role in developing

[8] I will reflect in more detail on the devising of the two performances in a forthcoming article.

the choreography. Both processes began with, among other things, an exploration into the relationship between the individual and the crowd (or group). The idea was to give the spectators freedom to move within the site and space and so there was an interesting challenge (and opportunity) to build a structure with a clear intention and direction while at the same time allowing a degree of 'liquid-ness' for the spectators to also become a self-organising group or crowd of sorts. Thus, there was from the outset a question about how best to create a sense of coexistence and even cooperation in the theatre space with the audience without forcing or coercing them into situations or asking them to do something specific. As the devising got underway, it became clear that shaping a dramaturgy would need a deeper understanding of the relationship that the 'bubbles' facilitated between the spectators and the dancers, and this relationship also became key to understanding how coexistence may work and what it may mean.

What emerged during the process was that the interaction between dancer and design (the bubbles) was at its most interesting when movement or actions were not forced onto the bubbles. Rather, the potentiality was in observing what would happen when they were interacted with in particular ways and hence the idea became to let the choreography grow and develop from this point. And this question, which we could call listening to what may be there instead of imposing ideas onto something, also extended to the relationship with the audience and the challenge of creating a piece

and structure that would invite them to be with the work in a way that made sense to them. And so for the dancers the performance moment would also become a form of ongoing research in that they would be able to observe the many different ways in which spectators would choose to interact with the piece. And for me as dramaturg, it became an ongoing investigation to observe the decisions on the part of the spectators and the ways in which their decisions changed and affected the dramaturgy of the piece.

A further note on process: in a conversation with Milla Koistinen about how she prepares and works with the dancers, she refers to a certain sensibility where, instead of 'performing' a gesture or being 'in flow', the performer slows down the movement, gesture or gaze,[9] as if doing it for the first time, the purpose of which is to *find out how to do something while doing it*. While this approach helps the performer on the level of method and approach (and there is less pressure for the dancer to keep producing material), the slowing down also makes the performance moment an opportunity to actually *find something out* about the ways in which the attention and energy of the audience can be guided and focalised and how very ephemeral factors can shift something in the room. Interestingly, this also helps slow down the spectators, which makes them alert to micro changes, micro gestures and subtle shifts in tension. It is also a way to coexist with the

[9] Conversation with Milla Koistinen, July 2020.

audience.

During a conversation with choreographer and dancer Martin Sonderkamp, not related to *Magenta Haze*, he describes the ways in which he, as a performer, is helped by the presence and watching of others in the space (be it spectator or collaborator) because the presence of others can 'bring out the intensities in the doing which allows me to hyper focus, and by this I mean that I am aware that I need to slow down in my thinking and make it available to someone else' (Sonderkamp and Dragičević 2023). While Sonderkamp is here referring to his own process, his description of the way in which the presence of others produces a heightened sense of what one is doing, opened up the idea for me that a dramaturgy could be an exploration of the relational by inviting spectators to negotiate the presence of others, not at a distance but in 'their midst'.

4.

In his book *And then it got legs* (2022), Jeroen Peeters foregoes explaining dance dramaturgy by way of academic discourse, and instead he illuminates and describes dramaturgical work from a place of actual experience and practice. His approach makes good sense as a way to write not just *about* but also *alongside* practice, to use Laura Cull's expression (2021). It is less about explaining the process and more a way to amplify. Choreographer and dancer Martin Nachbar

refers to the idea of rehearsals as a *learning process* which calls on the participants to be open to what the work and process may unlock. Nachbar explains:

> To me, the idea of rehearsals as a learning process that unlocks the different pasts of the people involved is vital for any creation process. Even if a group doesn't share a past, they all share the fact of a body that is full of patterns, memories, traumas, i.e. full of continuously actualizing pasts that don't need to be or even cannot be shared outspokenly. The learning process then concerns the process of understanding the piece and its needs, of figuring out methods to make it. This requires open-mindedness from all the people involved in the creation. Throughout the rehearsals you construct a shared history, which then becomes a shared past for the piece to thrive on. (Peeters 2022: 92)

It makes sense, of course, that the collaborators would come away with their individual 'learnings', insights and knowledge, but it is also an interesting point that a form of learning takes place as collaborators work out together what the piece is and what it needs. And it follows that if the process of dramaturgy creates the grounds for common sense-making with a view to understanding what the work is becoming, then we can also understand dramaturgy as the facilitation of shared learning.

5.

So what is dramaturgical work in these processes? Dramaturgical work is also a way to amplify, and while a lot happens in and through conversation, a lot also happens by way of writing: dramaturgs in process write to figure something out and to think through the material. Some write *for* the work. They write to communicate to others, to make the ephemeral and abstract manifest and concrete. Writing appears in notebooks and as notes, questions and emails sent to the choreographer and director, or scribbled notes on an article in the rehearsal room, an attempt at a synopsis, text for the programme and online platforms and documentation and post-event writing. There is lots of writing and words which shape-shift depending on the intended reader and context. It is also this writing that 'amplifies' what is happening in the room. It is not a critical assessment or discours but rather way to create a form of 'parallel commentary' or 'amplification' (to highlight and give focus) and to help clarify and move the work forward. It is a way to take stock and attempt to formulate an appropriate methodological strategy. I recognise in Laura Cull's proposal of 'scholarship as a mode of application' (Cull 2021: 4) how dramaturgical work in the devising process is not so much 'analysis' as it is amplification' or 'circling in on' and 'mirroring back' or extending, or making louder and magnifying what is there. Within a creative process, dramaturgical work thus also becomes about 'decanting meaning and sense from methodological

chaos'[10] (Bonenfant 2022): documenting, tracking, mapping, formalising and translating multiple strands of information, 'findings', 'data' and 'somethings' into not only the work itself but in some cases into the documentation or, in research terms, the dissemination of the project. I have not come to the end of my thoughts on this, but it occurs to me that if much of the above is also the task of the reflective practitioner who engages in artistic research, then the role of the dramaturg in professional collaborative devising processes is strongly connected with the role of the researcher in action.

6.

Finally, an afterthought: I should clarify that while my proposal may imply that (some) collaborative devised performances are themselves a form of research in action (without calling themselves so), I do not take issue with artistic research as a field or discipline. I acknowledge, as Jan Kaila has helpfully noted, that some forms of practice (and the work of doctoral students) may be able to develop differently within

[10] Bonenfant did not coin the expression with reference to the dramaturg or dramaturgy; he was talking about the artist more generally. In the conversation he was referring to what artists can also contribute to other fields, for example to the work of data scientists. He proposed that because artists have to decant things out of data (e.g. a show, an article) they are good at 'decanting meaning from methodological chaos'.

an artistic research context than what would have been possible under the conditions of an 'ordinary artistic practice' (2013). And this also seems to be the point that Mika Hannula makes when he reflects on doing artistic work within an open and independent university, which, for him, 'enabled and secured the research aspects in my work within the modern cultural atmosphere, which at least in theatre, is commercial and artistically quite narrow' (Hannula 2014: 150). There is of course a risk when you devise a performance, which essentially has an investigative sensibility that it will fail or be poorly understood in the context of what Hannula calls 'ordinary artistic practice'. Moreover, it seems critical to support a space for dedicated artistic research; in our conversation, Martin Sonderkamp pointed out that framing something as research can be helpful because sharing the enquiry with an audience is more like hosting a situation where it is not merely about what others will make of the work but rather about how the work can 'be a question to myself' (2022). This seems to me to be an important distinction between, on the one hand, inviting people to respond or react to the work and, on the other, to hosting a situation where the work can be the prompt for a conversation and exchange. And this exchange and conversation, where the artist can think together with others, be they spectators, audiences or colleagues, is critical to furthering the thinking around the arts. But one thing does not rule out the other.

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DYNAMIC SYSTEMS

Sodja Zupanc Lotker

I work as a dramaturg in contemporary performance. The projects I work on range from contemporary dance and text-based theatre to site-specific, audio performances, performative perfume and the auction of a performance. What connects all these projects is the way they are made: they are developed throughout research and rehearsing – the explorations. These projects often start with a topic or a question or an experience. And they are never based on a pre-written text. These performances are never interpretations of a literary work or play. When there is text, it is mostly written during rehearsals. In this article I will use the term 'contemporary performance' to mean the complete variety of forms and formats that I work in and which are built in devised-theatre ways. I am not interested in the difference between the forms but in the similarities that I have noticed in the processes of making and structuring these performances in my own working process.

Dramaturgy, as I understand it, is engineering or constructing the unfolding of a performance for the audience. I work in devised theatre and dance as a dramaturg and devising collaborator. I often join

processes from scratch, where it is not enough for me to be a critical outside eye, but I have to become a nourishing inside eye, one capable of foreseeing, envisioning and noticing what is 'already there' – in what the artist is saying, or doing or making, in the material, in the situation of the making, etc. I will not explore the knowledge traditionally connected to dramaturgy – critical, analytical or contextual knowledge – but will map other knowledge that happens during the process of making a performance and during the process of spectating, and try to understand the role of a dramaturg in these processes.

The structure of the unfolding of the performance for the audience is the construction of a dynamic system of performances. And in this article I would like to describe why I find the word 'systems' functional for my work and to try to unfold what dynamic systems in dramaturgy means. But, most importantly, I would like to consider these dynamic systems as places of thinking, or research. There are many levels of exploration in contemporary performance. Of course, the building of these dynamic systems is an exploration in dramaturgy itself. Often the system itself is completely new and needs to be thought through, challenged and nourished. But there is a fair amount of other research that needs to be done to 'feed' the making of these systems, connected to specific topics or lines of investigation of the performance. Finally, these dynamic systems of contemporary performance are usually built in such a way as to be open, to allow for a multiplicity of experiences, and very often this openness is created to allow

for the possibility of new ways of seeing things, new attitudes, new knowledge. This happens to both the makers and the audiences. This is what this article is mainly concerned with – mapping the tight connection between dynamic dramaturgical systems and research.

Artistic research brings its own specific set of problems connected to academia, in addition to the validation of the knowledge connected to artistic research. I will not go into this set of problems, which include artistic research and its ambiguous relationship to theory, which of course differs in different countries. I also find *artistic research* problematic in the sense of requiring artists to prove that they are doing something useful – producing knowledge – and that is another reason why I do not want this article to be connected to that set of problems. But in devised theatre we often do exactly that: we produce new ways of thinking, attitudes and knowledge, except that that knowledge is not always grasped or even fully graspable. So, for the sake of this article, I will use the term 'research' to mean the exploration, the investigation and, most importantly, the creation of dynamic systems of thinking. I will use these terms interchangeably without aiming to fully define them. They will serve their purpose mainly to help me define how devised theatre and contemporary performance become places of thinking. And I apologise in advance for the terminological mess. I am not building tight theories but trying to understand my own dramaturgical practice better and to verbalise things I have noticed in the making of specific performances.

The thoughts in this article are never only mine. They were thought during artistic processes with artists such as Julian Hetzel, Miguel Melgares, Wojtek Ziemilski, Temporary Collective, Viktor Černický, Viliam Dočolmanský, Lea Kukovičič, Jan Mocek, Fridrich Floen, Fredrik Petrov and others and with my students. I also write as a teacher, as somebody who is interested in understanding how creative processes work and how to share this understanding with students.

Finally, it might be enlightening to know that while I was born in Yugoslavia, I live in Prague and work in Europe. As a student of dramaturgy during the 1990s in the Czech Republic, I had to face operating as a dramaturg without a native language. I think and operate as a foreigner, as somebody who is not completely 'in', ever. I find this position inspiring because it gives me a vantage point of constant criticality. This position of 'strangeness' has probably influenced how I understand criticality and knowledge, so I think it's better to be transparent about it right away. As a stranger, one needs to understand new systems quickly in order to adapt to them. But also, since the stranger has a clear reference point (previous culture), the stranger sees more quickly what is important and what is not important, what is constant and what is variable, and the network between them. Without the reference point of comparison, we can think that things that are culturally specific are universal. The survival instinct of the stranger is to see these patterns. The criticality of the stranger is to see what could be changed.

Being a stranger/foreigner is probably the reason that one of my main examples of the dynamics of a system is 'dislocation'. As a foreigner, I had to learn to understand this violent gesture, of breaking off with something, as a constructive, creative or even critical gesture that allows for new points of view, or even the creation of new meaning, and a gesture that can produce new knowledge, as I will show in more detail.

Dramaturgical Systems

Dramaturgy as a system is a totality whose characteristics arise from the relationships of the parts. The parts, the ingredients, are of course important, but it is the relationships between them and the patterns in which these relationships are organised that are decisive for the system. Thinking about dramaturgy as a system, we must see it as composition, a set of relationships, a network of elements and the relationships between them.

This organisation of elements cannot be understood analytically, by looking at them individually, but only in context and through context. It also cannot be constructed analytically but has to be constructed by relating. The configurations and the relationships between the elements, their importance for the dynamics of the system, their placing, their development, can be decided only through the process of rehearsing, of trying it out live. So we can say that dramaturgy is

complex, contextual thinking, which can be perceived only while moving.

As a dramaturg, I try to map these relationships and look for repetitions and patterns. Certain configurations of relationships appear repeatedly and we see a pattern. Sometimes during the process of the making, these patterns are barely visible, almost not there, but as a dramaturg I make it my goal to find them and to nourish them. The pattern must be directly connected to the material in one way or another. Imposing a pattern on material that does not accept it can be disastrous.

Not all relationships in dramaturgy can be measured and weighted, or even perceived. Dramaturgical systems of contemporary performance are non-linear, non-causal organised complexities consisting of words, movements, space, audience, smells, concepts, experiences, expectations, moods, etc. They are systems made of subsystems like everything in the world, made out of people, objects, discourses, etc.

'Pattern' can mean something negative in colloquial speech. It can signify a meaningless, lifeless, inert repetition. For the dramaturgy of contemporary performance, the pattern is crucial for multiple reasons. First, the pattern is the only way for us to find the structure that belongs to the specific material. Second, in the vast multiplicity of new relationships and experiences of a contemporary performance, the pattern is what the audience can relate to as something that is known and knowable, even when perceived only on a non-rational level.

It is important to note that I don't think the audience needs to necessarily recognise the pattern, to understand it mentally, but they have to recognise that it is present; often it can be felt as a rhythm or recurring topic. The pattern, no matter how variable or visible, is what makes a system a system. And if we understand patterns as the reappearance of similar configurations of relationships in time and space, and not the copying and pasting of forms, we can understand them as dynamic.

It is highly important to recognise and nourish patterns coming from the material and from the makers, as I have said already. But it is also important to support their dynamics, meaning taking out and adding elements that can make the material dynamic in the appropriate way for the specific needs of the performance and specific moments in the performance. What makes situations dynamic in dramatic theatre are situations between characters, the dramatic conflict. In contemporary performance, the dramatic conflict can happen at different frequencies and between different elements of the system. And we can think of them as changes in composition: contrasts and shifts in perceptions for audiences. The moments of variation, points where the system departs in a new direction, moments of the emergence of new ideas and experiences, have to be placed in the system in such a way so as to make it dynamic, in such a way for it to stay true to its own self, to be structurally stable. It is this tension between crisis and transformation that is crucial for the making of the dynamic of dramaturgical systems.

Later I will describe some of the dynamics of specific performances that I have worked on in recent years. But first I want to elucidate a few more basic thoughts on the dynamics of dramaturgical systems. Dramaturgical systems of contemporary performance (but also of any theatre, to my mind) cannot be written down as scripts; they are more of a topography of a breathing, moving landscape. More of a living organism than architecture. If they are structurally stable, meaning that they have some basic centre of weight that keeps them in a self-regulating state, and if they are at the same time open enough to include the multiplicity of possible experiences and activities from the viewers' perspective, they become independent.

Independence is important to acknowledge. In the rehearsal process there is often a moment when the material gains its own logic, its own consciousness, that starts speaking back to the artists. This is the moment when the system is made and the artists have to start working in dialogue with the system. But I would say, that, because of its openness and variability, it is better to think of it as a living system rather than as a machine, and to understand its almost biological autonomy. In this moment, when the spectators can bring different things into the equation, such as thoughts, feelings, participation, etc., we might not be able to predict all the values of this variable, complex, chaotic system, but we can predict and guide the qualitative features of the system and the way it behaves.

Because these systems have their own autonomy, we can say that they are places of thinking, of

exploration, of research. It is the research of material and through material for the makers: listening to the patterns in the material, building from it, and later gaining new knowledge through the interaction of the material/system and the audiences. We can say that these performances are proposals with stable structures that make dynamic environments where new experiences, thoughts and attitudes are born. And here the dynamics are there not only to hold the attention of the spectator but also to allow and trigger new ideas to happen – ideas that are often new even for the makers.

The performance *A Show for Tourists* (2018) by Wojtek Ziemilski, which premiered at Mladinsko gledališče Ljubljana, researched things that cannot be expressed in words. The artist's website describes it as follows: *'Based on an original choreography by Marysia Stokłosa, made anew every time, this show tries the impossible – to guide the audience through everything that the movements of the body consist of – the person, the biography, the philosophy, the history.'*[11] While Marysia Stokłosa was dancing, two actors, Damjana Černe and Primož Bezjak, were following her as moderators of the event, trying to explain in words the things that Marysia was doing. The situations varied from extremely funny failures to express in words what we see to subtle poetic moments where the words and dance either complemented each other or were in sync.

[11] https://ziemilski.com/A-SHOW-FOR-TOURISTS Accessed 1 October, 2023

The tension between the dance and the words created the possibility of a critical and poetic investigation of language. We can say that here we have two systems working against/with each other to create one dynamic dramaturgical system.

In *Essence of Poland* (2019), a project that I also worked on with director Wojtek Ziemilski, we explored what is 'national' in a time of right-wing nationalism; we tried to look for national pride and a feeling of national belonging. It is *'a sensual treatise about "the essence" of things, about the contemporary return of the great narratives, paradoxical in a world of such variety and change. The volatile, yet concretely present, work is something difficult to escape, it imposes its apparent essence.'*[12] This lecture-performance starts as a lecture with factual information and a PowerPoint presentation but slowly, over the course of time, it starts to use poetic language to finish as a poem read out loud by the artist/lecturer Wojtek Ziemilski. It is the perfume, Essence of Poland, devised together with perfumer Andreas Wilhelm, that the audience opened in the middle of the performance and that consisted of crucial smells of Poland, according to Ziemilski's memories, that allowed the audience to experience what is national as something embodied, something made of sensory memories that allowed this performance to explore the concept of national as something that is beyond words. The dramaturgical

[12] https://ziemilski.com/ESSENCE-OF-POLAND Accessed 1 October, 2023

system juxtaposes smells, words and memories in such a way as to create the possibility for new ideas and thoughts to arise.

Insider (2019) by Cristina Maldonado also works as an exploration via sensory means; the performance takes place on two planes – the virtual and the physical/sensory: *'For some, the virtual world is a place to momentarily escape reality, others fear that it will replace it completely. For us there is no conflict between the virtual and real worlds, together they create a continuum of mixed realities. How we see it, is that we constantly perform complex maneuvers to navigate these overlapped realities. We adapt to these technological extensions and we coexist with them, they shape our perception and relationship with others.* Insider *explores how this mix of realities affect our bodies and our sense of being present. During the performance, the choices of each viewer create a particular way of investigating and experiencing this proposed world.'*[13] In this virtual reality performance for two audience members, spectators experience conflicting inputs between what they see and what they physically feel. The image in the glasses shows your virtual hands touching one thing but the hands are experiencing a completely different thing. Further, they are experiencing the performance in pairs, and the virtual part proposes a script for a series of sensory encounters between the two spectators. It is the meeting between the virtual

[13] https://cristinamaldonado.com/portfolio/insider/ Accessed 1 October, 2023

and the sensory and between the two spectators, that creates moments of confusion and the suspension of things we take for granted (see). Here we can say that performative thinking arises from direct relationships and is about encounters, friction, conflict and the in-between spaces.

Performative Thinking: Presence and Dislocation

There is not much writing about 'performative knowledge'. One can find some in philosophy/theory, for instance Vikki Bell's article 'Performative Knowledge' (2005) coming from the point of view of gender studies and performativity of identity and subjectivity. Most of the thoughts about 'performative knowledge' come from anthropology, ethnology and similar disciplines that explore the ways in which tribes and nations collected knowledge in songs, music, dances and stories. For instance, the phenomenologist David Abram, in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996), writes in detail how different people collected their experiences of nature and life into stories and songs that carried the knowledge for generations. Here, I am not interested in either of these two ideas of performative knowledge, but I am interested in mapping the knowledge that happens during the making of a performance and during the watching of the performance, which I believe can be amplified by dramaturgical systems that are made as open yet dynamic.

Dramaturgical systems are relational: their dynamics are based on the relations between them and so is the thinking that is part of the making and the thinking that is produced during performances. I think that this 'performative knowledge' that happens through contemporary performance is often not about discovering something that already exists or is truthful but it is appearing and being discovered at the same time, because it is based on relationships and compositions and not things outside the relationships. Often the knowledge that happens does not exist outside the moment. We are used to thinking of knowledge as something that should have long-term applicability, long-term truthfulness, but here I am also interested in the knowledge that we neglect, the extremely specific, moment-based knowledge.

I have noticed that the work I did in the last few years can be divided into two strands in the sense of research. I do not think of them as universal strands of research in contemporary performance. They more reflect my own interests and focus. The strands are presence and dislocation. Presence is the thinking that comes from embodied thinking, from dialogues between bodies, from thinking with material, thinking with the audience, thinking through doing. Dislocation is thinking that is based on moving systems of thinking (discourses) or on objects outside their initial context, or on combining them with not obvious other systems to create dynamics for thinking. One could say that presence and dislocation are at the core of any theatrical gesture, and perhaps that is not surprising, as

I have noticed these gestures as patterns in my own work. Nevertheless, I think this is a good beginning to unfold how dramaturgical gestures, patterns and systems provide space where rational and 'irrational' explorations and thinking can happen.

Presence: Amplifying the thinking in relations

The knowledge I am looking at here is not rational, not fully logical, not language-based understanding. It is a full-body understanding. When working on devised theatre, developing scenes and situations in the rehearsal room, performers think with their whole body: they think the space by moving, they think relationships by moving and touching, they produce attitudes using their full-body memory. This is why watching improvisation is so exciting: the body and mind are not separate; they explore, decide, imagine and think together.

Recently I was part of an experiment about how costume influences a situation, in which we repeated one scene from *Hedda Gabler* six times and recorded it while the main character wore a different costume every time. The project took place within a costume research project called Costume Agency (2018–2023) that I did with Norwegian costume designer and director Christina Lindgren. The three other actors have not been prepared and they have not seen the costumes in advance. It was extremely exciting to watch them adjust, adapt and deal with the new situation that the change of costume brought. Costumes carry different

cultural references but also different ways to carry the body, to move around the space, to relate. None of it could be prepared, logically thought through. They had to adjust in the moment. And one could follow how they work with their cultural reference, memory, but so fast that it becomes intuition, instinct. Everything happened so quickly that there was no time to think the thought but only to act the thought.

In *Thought in the Act* (2014), Erin Manning and Brian Massumi write about a variety of artistic practices in relation to perception, action and thinking. They quote choreographer William Forsythee, who said *'No body-mind separation. You have to go so fast as to "be ahead of yourself"* (Forsythee 2011, Nov. 23). *'Don't be adaptive, be predictive'* (Forsythee 2011, Nov. 10). *'That is, be speculative'* (Manning & Massumi 2014: 42). Forsythee is encouraging his dancers to think with their body. Now this might not be a new thought theoretically but in our everyday culture we are still used to understanding thinking as something that happens only on a 'mental' level, and we forget that our whole bodies are capable of thought, memory and understanding, despite the change of paradigm.

In *Prima* (2022), a movement performance by Slovak/Czech artist Viktor Černický that premiered at Ponec Theatre in 2022, a group of non-dancers work for three days on different patterned improvisations, improvisations with spatial and pattern scripts. The core dynamics are based on the repetition of movement of another performer. Movement is repeated, but as it repeats it gains variations, it changes, and these subtle

changes are repeated and further changed. What happens in front of audience's eyes is a mirroring between the performers in which it is not clear, even to the performers, who has started the movement or how exactly it evolved. In this way a group of 20 and more bodies think together, with no time to make conscious decisions, but decide, move, react, adjust, interpret, understand, remember all at the same time and all together. Perceiving and acting happen so quickly that there is no separation. As Manning and Massumi say, again writing about Forsythe: '*You entered a mode of environmental awareness in which to perceive is to enact thought, and thought is directly relational'* (Manning & Massumi 2014: 11).

In full-body thinking, the non-separation of mind and body also produces non-separation of self and environment. In rehearsals, of course, this happens with greater and less great success depending on the team, environment and different good and bad days, but we can say that if the thinking happens, it is always 'thinking with'. Theatre artists are thinking in a team with others. Theatre is usually a group effort, where the team ideally becomes one brain. This collectiveness of theatre is what *Prima* is amplifying and performing: its performative dynamics are based on series of attempts by a group of 15 people to think and move as one body.

In devised theatre, 'thinking with' material is one of the core processes. It is the dialogue with material that provides new situations, outlooks and processes. Rehearsals are labs where we explore relationships to

materials, their characteristics and potentials. Material in devised theatre can mean physical material – objects and spaces – but also non-physical material such as topics, activities, practices, events. I have noticed through my practice that the material is often observed, turned around, moved and explored in detail – in order for artists to understand what they have in front of them. Previous prejudices about the material, previous knowledge, needs to be suspended for the duration of the rehearsal in order for material to be seen better. *'The biggest challenge is not seeing what I want to see but seeing what's actually in front of my eyes.'* (Forsythe in Manning & Massumi 2014: 43). Listening to the material, thinking with the material, is a challenge in a world where we are used to taking short cuts in thinking, understanding and communicating. When we say 'grab a chair', we do not mean a specific chair that feels in a specific way, holds our body in a specific way, was designed by specific people, made by specific people, has a specific smell or colour, makes a specific sound, reminds us of specific things, places... etc., etc. All these potentials need to be explored in the rehearsal in order to see what we have in front of our eyes.

But 'thinking with' works also on a more basic level – spending time with material, moving it, touching it. I have followed Norwegian costume designer Friedrich Floen's work on his directorial debut *Totentanz* (2023), a piece based on choreography, movement and dozens of costumes. Floen's thinking starts with buying textiles. He remembers the place, the shop, the shop assistant where he acquired the textile. The textiles all

have similar expressive qualities and are a very specific collection. Further, he starts making the costume and forms it through sewing. The sewing is the thinking. The thought continues with costume fittings, when the actors try on the costumes. Costumes change on the human body and continue finding their shape. The way Floen is 'thinking with', in dialogue with physical material, is unique in its clarity of dialogue with the material. But it is also usual for the performances that come out of scenography, the performance design background in this or that way.

'Thinking with' during rehearsing and during performing happens on many levels. As I mentioned, the artists are thinking with materials while rehearsing, they are thinking with each other in the team, they are thinking with the space and with the environment, context... There is a certain moment during rehearsals when I, as a dramaturg, stop seeing the performance clearly. Usually at this point I know too much about the performance, I know many versions or scenes, I know what artists expect individual scenes to be doing... And at this point I need the presence of one person outside the team – it can be a random person working at the theatre, in order to see the performance again. I do not need to speak to this person, but the sheer presence of this person gives me something like an external hard drive and I can see things again. This is also a form of 'thinking with'. In the theatre we never think alone. We always think together.

'Thinking together' is the title of one of the performative dialogues done by the Building Conversation

collective that I was part of for many years. In this conversation we invited audiences to join by following simple rules that were established by quantum physicist David Bohm in his long-term research and defined mainly in the book *On Dialogue* (1990). Some of the rules include suspension of emotion (neither acting on emotion that you feel nor suppressing it – in order to create the possibility to hear the others); trying to say everything that comes to mind and not censoring yourself for this or that reason; letting the dialogue unfold freely without pushing it in a specific direction, etc. Bohm started researching dialogue because he realised that how we think and how we talk influences the results of scientific experiments, and that good-quality collaboration can influence scientific outcomes. Dialogues in the theatre happen intuitively, often hectically, without rules and methods, and maybe this is good: too much method can kill the thought. Still, I think understanding how we collaborate could make our processes more fruitful and pleasurable.

Thinking in the theatre can also happen as 'thinking through doing'. In dramaturgy, the actions of characters were always considered more important than the things characters say: 'actions speak louder than words.' And language, words, often works dramaturgically best in the theatre when they do not present true or false things but are action itself, are performative, like in poetry. In devised theatre, since it is often developed as 'full-body thinking with', where often the beginning of the process and the end product differ immensely, we are thinking through doing.

Doing and playing, moving things around, seeing them in movement, seeing them in different contexts, can open new knowledge about things, often beyond words. Playing with things can allow for 'seeing what is actually in front of my eyes'. Too much verbal planning, too much of a well-planned concept, can keep us in what we already know.

This 'thinking through doing' extends to the audience, especially in participatory performances. In recent years I have worked on a series of participatory performances with Temporary Collective in Prague. *Duets* (2019) consists of 12 micro-scripts for two people, a mix of people who have worked with us and audience members, in which those two people follow a very simple instruction in order to create an encounter together. Instructions vary from 'feel each other's pulse' to 'make a joke together'. Watching two people meet on stage, and make decisions and actions in the moment, in front of other people watching, seeing them negotiate in between them what is possible, what is appropriate, what is desired, watching them think through presence in the moment, and think with their whole body demands high concentration from the whole audience. And the results are always fragile and exciting.

In *Silent* (2021), an audio performance for public space also done with Temporary Collective, audiences met in the semi-public space of the piazzetta of the National Theatre, where they received headphones. The audio consists of a series of recordings done by different choreographers in different places around Europe. The choreographers' voices give instructions

to audiences that make them move, and through their own movement attempt to experience the place that the choreographer was in. It is the movement that creates the thinking, the understanding, the experience, while from the outside passers-by can see a flock of silent people moving in synchronicity. Theatre is a place of dislocation where things are seen in new contexts; it is a place of 'thinking together', 'thinking with', 'thinking with your whole body', 'thinking through doing'... So since this thinking is relational we can also say that it is compositional. How we set the relationships of elements, how we place the audience, how we set the situation, will make the overall situation of the performance more or less dynamic.

One could say that the frequencies of thinking that I am talking about are part of any thinking – all thinking happens as full-body, thinking with, thinking together, and thinking by doing... more or less. One could say this is how humans think. But I think that in the theatre and contemporary performance this is especially visible and supported by artists (sometimes unknowingly), this non-rational, non-logical thinking by playing, misplacing, mixing. And it is quite interesting dramaturgically when it becomes the basic gestures or dynamics of a performance.

Discourses and Dislocations

Discursive explorations are proposals that I have noticed in my own dramaturgical work, in which specific cultural ways of thinking – the discourses

– are challenged. Putting a theatre performance into a situation of economic exchange, such as in *For Sale*, questions both systems, the system of temporal, ephemeral, performative theatre, and the system of auction and ownership. In this project the two systems are put on top of each other – theatre performance and auction. The economic strategy of the visual arts was applied to a theatre performance; both the material and nonmaterial parts of the performance (costumes, props, words, silences, collectivity...) were sold while the performance was happening. Again, putting two systems together created a queering of both systems to question what is salable, what is ownable, what is collectivity, what is silence, etc. It created disruption in both systems, questioning both. This conceptual gesture was not done with a clear effect, image or outcome in mind. The two systems of thinking were put together to play out on each other, just like in a lab, to be observed in the new situation.

What I call discursive research, research where ways of thinking are challenged, often includes the gesture of misplacing, dislocation – putting two materials, two things that do not necessarily belong together, and seeing them in relation. Each system has its own rules and dynamics. But people and things do not belong to only one system. It is a combination of two or more systems that can cause friction, drama, conflict and consequently change. This is what I call 1+1 dramaturgy, where two systems meet. The relation between the two systems creates the possibility of criticality and transformation. The transformation

is relational, it happens, it is an event. In *Pardon, Petals* (2023), a solo dance performance by Norwegian choreographer Fredrik Petrov, we combined two bodies on top of each other. Fredrik Petrov grew up in Norway with a Bulgarian father and a Norwegian mother and in this performance he is looking into his Balkan roots. In a series of choreographies based on traditional Bulgarian folklore, his queer body attempts to host the Balkan macho-culture body, and by hosting both cultures he examines both. In this performance both macho culture and queer culture are queered in a way, they are seen in relations, both are dislocated.

In *All Inclusive* (2018) by Studio Julian Hetzel, there are three systems/discourses at work. A visual arts gallery is built onstage. This gallery is presenting work by artist Julian Hetzel: sculptures, installations, video work and paintings with the topic of destruction and war that depict upsetting images and strategies. A curator of the gallery leads a group of tourists around the gallery. The group consists of local refugees from Syria, Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries. The curator explains western art and the power of destruction in the arts to this group. Western art and its economies are in focus. The theatre provides the place of dislocation – a place from which we can watch. But there is the third discourse added to the mix in order to make things less clear, and that is the gaze of the people who are affected by war directly. And the audience cannot help but watch through their eyes. Hetzel often uses this strategy of mixing of discourses, where discourses play against each other.

Here, two systems are put next to each other to make dynamic tensions. In *There Will Be Light* (2022), Hetzel proposes a week-long gallery event consisting of public interviews with contestants who are looking for the possibility to gain a one-year basic income, to be given by Studio Julian Hetzel. Contestants are found through an open call and anyone can join. In a series of interviews, conducted by local homeless people, contestants have to answer multiple questions about their lives, aspirations, desires and capabilities. So we the audience watch people who are hoping to gain a one-year basic income interviewed by local homeless people. The gaze and the questions of the homeless people create an important layer to the issue of basic income in the mix. In the discursive performance we can say that thinking is created by placing things next to each other that question each other. This is the knowledge again created via relations; understanding is an event. The artist does not propose clear solutions but compositions that create the possibility of dynamic experiencing and thinking.

Numerous contemporary performances of recent decades have been based on taking things from the everyday and putting them on stage: objects, stories and people. I think of this gesture as a dislocation gesture. The first aspect of it is, of course, to put something into the zone of viewing, something that is not being paid attention to, until that time. This is an important gesture also in conceptual art: putting a urinal into the gallery or homeless people into a performance space is an act of displaying. It, of course, plays with the idea

of what should, could or would be displayed/seen. It is both a political act and a critical act. The criticality happens by juxtaposing a thing and a gallery or stage, the urinal. It is an interaction of things that seemingly do not belong together that produces the possibility of new equations.

Here are some examples from my own collaborations in recent years. In *All Inclusive* (2018), Julian Hetzel puts a group of refugees on stage together with actors playing museum staff and authentic debris from the bombing of Syria posing as art sculptures. In the world of Julian Hetzel, nothing is pure theatre, there always has to be a grain, a homeopathic grain, of reality in it.

Temporary Collective, in the dance performance *Duets* (2019), invites non-dancers and audience members to perform simple ad hoc encounters based on one-sentence scripts that they receive during the performance. Viktor Černický, in *Prima* (2022), invites a whole group of audience/non-dancers to join a dance performance based on simple rules and patterns that are agreed in advance. Both of these performances question what contemporary dance is by putting non-dancers on stage. *Duets* works with the fragile encounter of two strangers under the gaze of the audience, and the subtle nuances of expression, gestures, non-verbal communication of insecurities, decisions, offerings, etc. *Prima*, on the other hand, creates a frame for a large group of bodies to enter the joy of moving and being together through synchronised and harmonised movement.

In *For Sale* (2021), Lea Kukovičić reframes a whole performance. *For Sale* is an auction of a theatre performance, happening live while the performance is taking place. It's a performance on top of a performance. In this project, the performance by Slovenian group Beton Ltd, called *Ich Kann Nicht Anders* (2016), was sold by a professional auctioneer and with an expert in the field present to raise the value of the performance. Here, the dislocation is reated by the presence of another frame on top of the performance – so we see a performance as a product of an economic system and not as mere theatre. And we can say that the performance *Ich Kann Nicht Anders* becomes a ready-made in the equation of the *For Sale* dramaturgy.

For *Ode to Joy* (2022), all the actors had DNA tests to understand where they are coming from. In this performance about heritage in a time of right-wing populist nationalism in Poland, Wojtek Ziemilski works with two levels of ready-made. One is the DNA tests of the actors, their personal and physical heritage, things that one cannot change. And the second is a pile of old theatre props, theatre heritage that frames it. Through these two levels of heritage, two levels of ready-made are juxtaposed in such a way as to question how narratives are built, but also to propose that in a world where there is a lot of questioning of reality, we can find ways to know what reality is.

I must add that putting non-professional performers and other ready-mades on stage comes with great ethical and dramaturgical problems. Putting homeless people or refugees on stage is exhibiting them, and

exhibiting them is showing a simplification of what they are as humans. Making the audience dance on stage is inviting them into a very fragile situation, one that can also be precarious; artists cannot fully control what will happen to them. *Duets* comes with strong emotional engagement for the non-dancers that cannot be fully taken care of by the artist as it is often not easily detectable. Selling a performance comes at the price of entering a capitalist system that is not amiable. Doing DNA tests on actors is not an innocent gesture. This topic deserves a separate article, but what I am interested in at this moment is the criticality that these equations bring. Putting people/things from everyday life and juxtaposing them with the stage and other ready-mades does not provide a safe, seamless dramaturgy but invites crisis, conflict and contradiction. It opens gaps for new thinking and new seeing. Pretending that putting people and things from everyday life on stage does not create some kind of crisis would be hypocrisy.

Spafrica (2023), a project Studio Julian Hetzel did with South African artist Ntando Cele, with dramaturgy by Miguel Melgares, which I was a devising collaborator, is full of contradictions. From one scene to another the performance changes direction completely. The first scene is an 'aftertalk' with artist Hetzel. It's an aftertalk of a performance that did not happen. Julian Hetzel is Ntando Cele with a mask of a white male, responding to the questions put by a local moderator (performed always by a local curator or theorist). The questions are connected to a project that Hetzel and

Cele apparently made together, an artistic exchange of a collection of tears of white Europeans for water from a South African township. This controversial artistic act is depicted and defended by the character of Hetzel in the absence of Cele. In the next part, Cele takes off her mask in a scene of a 'meltdown' in which Hetzel whines about not being able to say anything anymore because he is a white cis male. From this transformation the character of Cele appears, she sings in Zulu, and we watch her sing and dance without understanding but at the same time being relieved that we are watching something 'authentic'. From this place of authenticity she meets the audience and invites them to cry with her. She shows the 'tear-catcher' system that she has developed with Hetzel and invites one of the audience members to come to the stage and cry. What follows is a moving scene which Cele and an audience member cry together. But after this there is another shift in dramaturgy where Cele sings a song about being a dog that bites the hand that feeds her – about how she does performances for white people and the artistic and ethical limits of this relationship. The performance continues with Cele telling 'black' jokes usually told by white people. And the audience is required to enter yet another level of Cele's authenticity; she crashes the white dream of a physically capable, authentic African person in the finale of the performance where she tells the audiences that she cannot perform her authenticity for them anymore just so they can get rid of their racism and the trauma of racism, that they have to deal with it themselves.

This performance, of course, also has a 1+1 dramaturgy at the core: two systems are combined in order to create tension. This performance is a dramaturgical roller-coaster. It is made to trap audiences at each step, always looking like it is going in one direction, just to shift gears radically in the next moment. It is a performance that might look like it does not know what it is saying, since it changes its mind at every step. But it was built in such a way to do exactly that – take away all the secure territories for audiences – and creates space for new thinking. The performance ends with the performer telling audiences that she cannot resolve their problems, their traumas, their feelings of guilt. That they have to do it themselves. So the expectation of white bodies – audiences to see a black body on stage resolve their issues, an expectation that is in high demand in the European touring performance circuit – is reversed.

This is a good example of how theatre can be a place of thinking and how a dramaturgical structure can trigger the thinking. But it is also an example of something that I feel is a problem for dramaturgy in contemporary performance. If contemporary performance is often made as a place that triggers thinking and does not provide for specific solutions, how do we resolve the performance? Resolution of a problem that the performance is exploring and resolution of the performance itself as an act and as dramaturgy is of course not the same. But the lack of resolution of the problem does pose an issue for the performance.

We feel something will end if it is somehow resolved. We identify resolution as recognition (anagnorisis in Aristotle), a moment of understanding. Is the moment of change in understanding, without posing a specific answer, but just by throwing away the old point of view enough? Can that be marked? Apparently yes. This is what happens in *Spafrica* when Cele tells audiences that she will not resolve their problems but let them go back home with them.

I am interested in the dynamics of presence and dislocation that produce space for thinking. I am interested in this dynamics as dramaturgical gesture, as a performative space for thinking. This space does not propose resolutions but dynamises the thinking. And I tend to think that it is at the core of theatre as an act, as a gesture. Theatre is a place of looking. It has always been a space designated for the sole purpose of exposing things, people, actions, processes to being viewed. And this looking produces thinking through watching. Both the words 'theatre' and 'theory' come from the same Greek verb meaning *to view*. Theatre is a place of seeing and understanding through viewing. This gesture of viewing, which allows us to see things differently or, even better, by putting them on stage to be seen, is the core critical gesture of theatre. But what exactly do we 'see'? In *Theatricality as Medium*, American theorist Samuel Weber says that '*[t]heater involves* [...] *neither the constitution of order out of chaos nor the solving of problems. It does not communicate contents or produce positive knowledge. Nor is it "performative" in the sense [...] of accomplishing*

an intention through an act. Rather, by isolating acts and gestures from their intentional context, it points to established frames of reference – and also to the conditions and contexts that those intentions suppose – but only in order to dislocate them" (Weber 2004: 305). So, if Weber is right, theatre does not sort out and analyse information, nor does it 'do things' – in the sense of performative acts – but it takes things out of context to view them.

Of course, by being taken out of context things lose something (something important) but gain something else (maybe not less important). It is a fragile gesture. A dangerous gesture. A futile gesture. But it is a gesture that can start a new process of seeing and thinking through seeing. Making things look strange in order to understand them is a gesture that is also used in science. Writing about the circle of language and education, Paul Feyerabend, an Austrian philosopher of science, says that *'we need a dream-world in order to discover the features of the real world we think we inhabit. The first step in our criticism of "facts" must be an attempt to break the circle. There is only one way to get out of the circle and it consists in using an external measure of comparison, including new ways of relating concepts and perceptions. Removed from the domain of natural discourse and from those principles, habits, and attitudes which constitute its form of life [it] will look strange*' (Feyerabend 2010: 15). We can say that there are great similarities between creative and scientific thinking. Both are working to challenge the existing rules, prejudices and norms.

Dramaturgy and Research

While making performances we also do research that is closer to the traditional scientific understanding of research. Documentary research is research of into existing people, events, relationships. It includes field research, exploration of documents, interviews with people. One example is *Den mě oslepy...* (Daytime Blinds Me..., 2021) by Kolektiv Nesladim, a performance about suicide. Kolektiv Nesladim is a theatre company in the Czech Republic that focuses on making performances about stigmatised mental disorders that include an educative layer, with an aim to create dialogue in the society about specific mental disorders, how to prevent and cure them and how to behave towards people who do have them. For *Den mě oslepy...*, the director did extensive interviews with people who have attempted suicide and relatives and friends of people who have succeeded in committing suicide, as well as psychologists, psychiatrists and other specialists in the field. The performance took place in three parts: first, the audience experienced a site-specific audio performance of following the voice of one of the characters and their experience with suicide; second, the audience gathered and followed five parallel monologues of the same characters in a theatre setting; and the third part was a discussion among the audience about the stigmatisation of suicide. The first two parts were written by David Košťák, based on the research interviews with real people, and performed by actors. For us, the third

part, the discussion, was the most important. The first two parts were an introduction to the event – the dialogue. The discussions were always exciting and touching and often revealing of our society. What happened during the making of this performance was that there was very rich research, research into a topic that is explored in different disciplines – psychology, medicine, sociology, etc. But what we did, of course, was a messier, artistic, intuitive exploration that combined different disciplines but also human experiences, and smells, touches, misunderstandings, misrememberings that gave the research a quality that is specific to the artistic approach. But the discussions were the main performative event and the main place of knowledge.

I think that this type of documentary research happens a lot in contemporary performance and I wish we could find a way to document and share this part of the research beyond what ends up in the performances. A lot of good work is forgotten after the performance is finished. But for this we would, of course, have to have additional people and funding and strategies. Nevertheless, there are companies that manage to create a whole body of work around one topic, issue or event. For instance, the Italian companies Motus and Fanny and Alexander work with one topic for many years, creating a series of performances, installations and videos.

Unfortunately, the artists I work with rarely do this for now. Lea Kukovičič, the director of *For Sale*, created the solo performance *Artist Talk* (2022),

in which she talks about her experiences with the selling of *Ich Kann Nicht Anders* by the Beton Ltd. company. In this lecture-performance she tries to share the overwhelming legal, artistic and economic research that has been done in order for *For Sale* to actually happen. She also shares the emotional side of the research, things that she regrets, things that she wished happened differently, things that have surprised everyone. *For Sale* was such complex research, which continued being researched while the auction was happening, that it was highly obvious that it is necessary to create another performance about it.

Studio Julian Hetzel, on the other hand, made a side project out of the project *There Will Be Light* called *Land of Plenty* (2023). In this living installation, the artist repeated only part of the projects – the interviews of audiences by the homeless people without giving the basic income. It is also interesting that a part of a project-performance can have its own 'life' separate from the rest of the performance.

Nevertheless, my own practice of dramaturgy has led me to understand the levels of thinking in performance making: from explorations on the form of the performance and the research topic-material of the performance to the dramaturgical system of the performance as a place for new thinking for both artists and audiences. In this text, the most important aspect for me was the third one, since I think it is underrated and underexplored. And I have tried to describe specific constellations of dynamic systems to unfold some of these dramaturgical potentials.

American performance theorist Philip Auslander says that, for German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, '*interpretation is neither a process of extracting a meaning from something that is simply there, waiting to be discovered, nor a matter of imposing one's own ideas on the thing. Rather, meaning is a never finished dialogue between the interpreter and the thing being interpreted. Gadamer says, "Understanding proves to be an event." In this sense, understanding is performative; it exists in and through an engagement with something, not as the end result of a finite process of interpretation'* (Auslander in Thun-Hohenstein, *Understanding Is Performative*).

Contemporary performance aims to offer dramaturgical equations where 'understanding as an event' happens. Where the relationships are composed in such a way to provide for new focuses and perspectives on things without in advance proposing 'meaning that is simply there', and in which meaning arises from the interaction or co-presence of elements and the engagement of the audience.

EPILOGUE: ADVICE FOR A YOUNG DRAMATURG

Performative knowledge might be hard to note down, the exact knowledge might not be possible to define, and it is hard to transfer. And it will take in-depth research to understand it and how it happens in the theatre. But I think it is possible for now to understand the theatrical situations that can trigger thinking/experiencing. I also believe that really exciting performances are dynamic in ways that inspire the audience to experience and think things that the artists did not plan for them to do. So we can say that dramaturgy is the engineering of the unfolding of a performance for the audience, but we want to create a space for thinking rather than illustrating a specific thinking. A dynamic performance is a performance where there is a flow of change, of the possibility to see things in a new light from one moment to another, a place of transformation and movement, a place of thinking.

The main dynamic element of all theatre is its dislocation: the thinking in the theatre can build on that by placing, misplacing, replacing, mixing, etc. Mixing and matching things that belong together, and things that seemingly do not belong together; like this, we can create dynamic synchronicities or dynamic contrasts; we can create intriguing ambiguities and scary unknowns. Like assemblage through rhythm, repetition, contrast, timing, placing, we create a composition that triggers audiences.

How can a dramaturg help the artists in the creation of these dynamic systems? First, the dramaturg has to pay attention. The dramaturg has to think with the artists and pay attention to the thinking that is unfolding. This is not easy. The thinking that unfolds often unfolds slowly and it takes a lot of patience to follow it. So thinking with the artists means following the thinking that is being born. Paying attention to the thinking sometimes also includes verbalising for the artist what they are thinking. Artists often follow intuitions and telling them what you as a dramaturg see or hear is often more important for them than telling them how to resolve situations. Thinking with the artists also sometimes means entering a way of thinking without fully understanding it rationally.

Paying attention is also about listening to the material, helping the artist feel and understand the potentials of the material, what the material wants, how it behaves, where it leads us. The performative potential of the material, the way it can trigger relationships, and trigger the audiences, is often hidden behind its everyday features. This also goes to the performative material, the scenes and choreographies, that the artists create – the dramaturg has to keep in mind the things that the artist 'wants from' the material but also to see what the artist actually 'has' in the material. Sometimes in devising, things develop in new, unexpected ways and having both layers in mind, both as potentially important, is crucial. Artists can be very focused on what they want and they can miss very beautiful and fruitful things that have happened

by accident. Things that 'happen by accident' are often the most important part of the research. They are often the most crucial new thoughts that could not come to being other than by accident, which of course comes from thorough work, research and thinking.

Or the artists can be so engaged with new things that develop that they forget the importance of the initial premise of the search, as well as the history of the development of the thought. So a dramaturg should ideally have the memory of the idea, and an archive of the development of thought, but also be able to notice unexpected potentials happening in the moment. But again simply verbalising what one sees and experiences during rehearsals, 'what one has right in front of one's eyes', is often the most important part of dramaturgy. And the dramaturg has to know how to trust their experience, how to note it and how to verbalise it. Here one has to trust experience as knowledge.

It is also important to be able to recognise patterns – rhythms and repetitions – that arise in the thinking in the material and in the performative material. Recognising patterns not fully visible, present only as a potential, can help the artist understand and develop the material better. And so the dramaturg also

needs to be a bit of a visionary, to see things that are in potential, not fully yet there, but possible, coming from the material.

On the level of overall structure, the dramaturg has to understand the main gesture of the performance, the core of the dynamics of the performance, and to understand if this gesture has been followed throughout the performance, and if it has been followed in its full radicality. If, for instance, in For Sale *we did not include the aspect of real money, the real buying, but treated the auction as a series of gifts, the main gesture would stop making sense. It is the money and contracts and the financial exchange that made the fiction real and painful.*

The dramaturg should also be able to be a 'destructive' force. Dynamic systems include contrasts, contradictions and paradoxes that create movement. So the dramaturg should also be able to see what is missing from the mix in order to make a thought more active, adding 'jokers', things that seemingly do not belong in order to make the system more dynamic. It also means creating possibilities of conflict between the materials; taking away beloved materials (kill your darlings); butchering material, adding seeming nonsense to it; blurring it, queering it, alienating it, making it foreign; creating possibilities of diversions and other roads, a dynamic thinking.

List of performances

Černický, Viktor. *PRIMA*, 2022, Ponec Theatre, Prague.
Floen, Fredrik. *We Shall Not Even Know...*, 2023, at Black Box, Oslo, produced by Fredrik Floen.
Hetzel, Julian. *Spafrica*, 2023, at Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne, produced by Studio Julian Hetzel.
Hetzel, Julian. *There Will Be Light*, 2022, at SPRING festival, Utrecht, produced by Studio Julian Hetzel.
Hetzel, Julian. *All Inclusive*, 2018, Campo, Ghent.
Kolektiv Nesladim. *Den mě oslepí*, 2021, at 4+4 Days in Motion festival, Prague, produced by Kolektiv Nesladim.
Kukovičič, Lea. *Artist's Talk*, 2022, Bunker, Ljubljana.
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Petrov, Fredrik. *Pardon, Petals*, 2023, at Black Box, Oslo, produced by Fredrik Petrov.
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Temporary Collective. *Duets*, 2019, Ponec Theatre, Prague.
Ziemilski, Wojtek. *Ode to Joy*, 2022, Teatr Studio, Warsaw.
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Dramaturgy and Research in Devised Theatre
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and Sodja Lotker

Published by the Academy
of Performing Arts in Prague (AMU Press)
Edited by Alfred LeMaitre
Indexing: Olga Svitáková
Design and Layout: Robert Konopásek
Praha 2023, 2026

ISBN 978-80-7331-798-0 (iPDF)