

Looking at Theater Through the Performers' Experiences: Practices of Political Engagement in Teatro do Vestido

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In this text, drawing from my participation as an actor in *Juventude Inquieta* [Restless Youth],¹ the latest of my collaborations with Teatro do Vestido,² I begin by acknowledging the ethical implications of my personal experience within the creative process. I then build on this reflection to further explore the possible ways of looking at theater projects, differentiating between ones that are oriented exclusively towards scenic outcomes and ones that put in motion a process of political engagement of the performers that transcend artistic results alone. I follow this proposal to foreground the importance of distinguishing between making theater that resembles the politics we can only envision and a theater that relates to another form of artistic circulation, in which the practices of learning, self-discovery, and critical thinking are privileged alongside the final stage performance.

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Prologue

A few years ago, I collaborated as an actor in a theatrical project called *Labour* by Teatro do Vestido.³ This project addressed histories of work in three towns marked by the industrialization processes put into place during António Salazar's fascist regime in Portugal, which ran from 1926 to 1974. Following the documentary nature of Teatro do Vestido's projects, each performer was responsible for interviewing a set of retired local working people from the dictatorship period. The personal testimonies of these individuals would, then, establish the groundwork for the final performances' dramaturgy – one performance for each town.

In the small city of Tramagal, the last of the *Labour* series, I contacted a man called José, who shared with me various local histories of political resistance and his own memories from his working past. José answered all my requests, told me countless stories, showed me several influential places, introduced me to other countrymen and women and even welcomed me into his home. During the period we were in contact, he decided to rehearse an old waltz on his clarinet, which was the first piece of music he had learned in his youth and that he, at the time, had shared romantically with his fiancée (who would later become his wife). After rehearsing the piece for several days, he invited me to his house to hear him play and record it – just as I had proposed to do with his consent, expecting from the outset to recommend its later use in Teatro do Vestido's final performance. I will never forget the moment when José played for me in his living room, after many years of not touching his instrument. I remember noticing his daughter and granddaughter peeking through the crack in the door, eager to hear him play a piece of music so reminiscent of the family past.

However, in the middle of the creative process, for reasons external to Teatro do Vestido, this project was abruptly cancelled. To my surprise, I only thought about José, his family, and the sudden interruption of his narrative. On my mobile phone, a piece of clarinet music retrieved from the confines of his memory was now suspended, unfulfilled. As I called to inform him about what happened, I asked:

- And now José, do you want me to delete the music from my cell phone?

To which he immediately replied:

- No, it's for you.

This episode made me realize how much Teatro do Vestido's projects had impacted me, as a person, beyond my role as an actor. I found myself wondering about this transformational itinerary that, although articulated by the creative process, led me to a process of self-questioning, nurturing in me the kind of political awareness that anticipates action – taking the shape of either scenic material or some other form of social interpellation.

In this text, drawing from my involvement as an actor in *Restless Youth*, the latest of my collaborations with Teatro do Vestido, I begin by acknowledging the ethical implications of my personal experience. I then build on this reflection to further explore the possible ways of looking at the creative processes, differentiating between the ones that are oriented exclusively towards scenic outcomes and the ones that put in motion a process of political engagement of the performers that points beyond the artistic project's lifespan.

A choreography of engagement in Teatro do Vestido

Teatro do Vestido's documentary approach has been, since its inception in 2001, characterized by a determination to fight against political oblivion by focusing on the memories of the forgotten, of those silenced by the macro-narratives of historicization or made invisible by the cacophonous noise of contemporaneity, offering them a central role as protagonists. In this context, the attention given to research and information collection is a constant feature of the theater company's working methodology – where information takes the form of existing documentation (texts, photographs, videos, or other media) or oral testimonies gathered by the artistic team. In fact, it is common to resort to both, even when the project does not address a particular community.

That was the case in *Restless Youth*, a theater performance that premiered at the National Theater D. Maria II in Lisbon in 2021. Differently from the *Labour* series, in this project, the dramaturgy

was inspired by a book – *The City of Flowers*.⁴ Written in the late 1950s by Portuguese author Augusto Abelaira, this book represented a form of resistance to the totalitarian regime ruling the country at the time. To elude the inquisitorial eyes of governmental censorship, the author situated the book’s action in 1930s Italy, using Benito Mussolini’s fascist historical context as a metaphor for what Portugal was enduring. The main objective of Joana Craveiro – Teatro do Vestido’s director – was to shed a light on Abelaira’s original political purposes. Not so much to re-enact the oppressive past of Portugal, but rather to take the book as inspiration to question and problematize current autocratic discourses re-emerging all over the world.

To begin with, Joana Craveiro assembled a generationally diverse cast of actors to juxtapose older people’s memories and political discourses with the anxieties and uncertainties of the present day. The book was the source from which the performers (considered in the project as co-creators) set off on their research – however, this was complemented by several other activities, organized to increase the performers’ knowledge and critical reflections regarding the issues at stake. These activities included reading several other texts, watching films about Italy and Portugal’s despotic historical backgrounds, and talking to various people that fought against the dictatorship in Portugal. This all served to engage the performers politically, thus expanding their abilities to articulate potential arguments, fostering in them the kind of *disputability* – to use Bruno Latour’s term – that prompts an urge to act in the public sphere.

These engagement strategies became clear from the beginning of the creative process. On our first day in the rehearsal studio, the performers were invited to participate in what Joana Craveiro called a “casting session” to (allegedly) explore the performers’ ability to play *The City of Flowers*’ main characters. As we soon realized, this simulation was much less about the performers’ “roles” and more about our thoughts and feelings regarding the issues raised by the book. At the time, driven by a determination to affirm myself within the “casting session”, I used the floor to make a speech about my political beliefs and life frustrations, setting the personal groundwork that would guide my following contributions. This dramaturgical provocation set the tone for what would become a recurrent practice throughout the creative process: the implication of the performers within the (ethical, political, and affective) questions at stake.

This beginning was so influential that some parts of the “casting” videos ended up being used in the final performance, including my own passionate testimony. It was, subsequently, hardly surprising that the artistic outcome resulted in a combination of the fictional dimension of Abelaira’s book with the texts and actions proposed by the performers during the creative process.

A cultivation of the performer’s personal voice is the basis from which most of the company’s performances are built, and this process has become one of Teatro do Vestido’s most renowned creative strategies. These voices may reflect either the performers’ personal experiences or third-party narrations and texts that emerge during rehearsals. This strategy reflects the fact that the company was founded by a group of performers moved by an urgent need for individual expression, by the desire to tell their own stories, present their perspectives, and question the world surrounding them.

In fact, it is common in Teatro do Vestido’s performances to hear the performers using their real names on stage – as was the case in *Restless Youth* (Fig. 1). All of Teatro do Vestido’s performances bears the mark of its performers, which is usually the result of a personal involvement that goes beyond traditional methods of dramatic character composition. Therefore, the priority is never to create a naturalistic illusion, even when a particular process requires that the performers embody another person’s perspective. In the latter case, the performers are asked to let those testimonies sound through them and to work on their presence and expressiveness as a function of the intimate reverberations that contact with an outer stimulus conveys. In short, creating a version of themselves – a mask, in the social sense given by Erving Goffman, where a mask is just an everyday form of *presentation of the self*.

In this sense, rather than working on the mimetic concept of ‘character’, in Teatro do Vestido, one engages with the idea of *personas* – a term that derives from the Latin *per sonare* (“to sound through”).⁵ For the performers, this means opening themselves up to a personal experience of contact with others, thus developing an empathic sense of alterity and, ultimately, exposing the result of that affective transformation. The development of *personas* is considered here as a means of exploring the performers’ self-awareness and personal expression and not as a technical tool used to compose



Figure 1. Scene from *Restless Youth* (2021) where the performers revealed to the audience their real names and other personal facts. Actor on screen: Gonçalo Martins. Photograph by © Filipe Ferreira

scenic figures. The primary goal is then to commit the performers to a critical attitude based on their own life experience, opening up the possibility for their development as politically engaged artists.

Along the same lines, the term 'role' is also not adequate, for the simple reason that there is no 'role' acquired from the outset from a fixed dramatic text, but rather through a process of transfiguration that is the root for the development of individual scores made up of action and generated text, which will eventually form part of the final performance. But the artistic outcome is not what I want to discuss



Figure 2. Scene from *Restless Youth* (2021) where I can be seen using a megaphone to incite the young to action. Visible actors (from left to right): Francisco Madureira, Inês Minor, João Raposo, Gustavo Vicente, Gonçalves Martins, Estêvão Antunes. Photograph by © Filipe Ferreira

here. Rather than debating the effect of all these creative activities on stage, I want to interrogate how it affected the performers – not the image of the performers confined to theatrical space, but the reality of the performers beyond the theater.

As mentioned above, in *Teatro do Vestido*, the performers are usually convened from the start to take part of the development of a common ground for sense-making, which often implies experimenting different ways of working together, as in a community. In *Restless Youth*, for example, right at the start of the creative process, the

artistic team spent a week together in a house located in a small town in the countryside. This artistic residency was Joana Craveiro's strategy to simulate an environment whereby everyday decisions had to be made collectively, thus foregrounding, in a more intimate atmosphere, the kind of conversations, discussions, compromises, and complicities that arise in shared spaces. Steeped in the politics of communal life, the performers rehearsed some of the central excerpts of *The City of Flowers* and found the time to reflect and give voice to their impressions on the subjects raised by the book. It was, perhaps, during this period that the contrast between the younger and the older performers' care most clearly to the fore. Simple actions in terms of how we organized our rides or how we chose our seats at the restaurant where we ate every day revealed a predisposition to be amongst our generational peers. A recognition of this sense of belonging associated with age made us realize and articulate more subtle distinctions across generations regarding the political matters at play – which led us to discover new dramaturgical relationships based on the crucial differences between “older” and “younger” perspectives on the past and expectations for the future (Fig. 2).

Working together is one of the most important common threads that link all of Teatro do Vestido's projects, and from which every other activity departs. This does not mean the performers are engaged in a sort of “chorus dance” but rather working between themselves and the others: moving in permanent negotiation with others, even if “out of step” from the rest. Building on the dance metaphor, I would suggest that Teatro do Vestido's creative approach is not one that promotes consensus but one that summons personal engagement within the collective. It is through what I call a *choreography of engagement* that the performers are led to search for and develop their political consciousness, striving for action within and beyond the artistic project.

Work implications for the performers outside the theater

As Matteo Bonfitto pointed out, the once utilitarian relationship between creative processes and the production of artistic results has become increasingly complex, particularly concerning the training of performers (2016). For a long time, training served exclusively

to prepare performers to embody dramatic characters; this has gradually changed, assuming a value that goes beyond the artistic needs of theatrical projects. Bertolt Brecht was one of the first theater directors to address this issue most assertively, defending the distancing effect of the actors in relation to their characters. For Brecht, performers should nurture and mobilize their knowledge of the world to pose questions in a dialectic form throughout the creative process. But even with Brecht, the ultimate objective of the actors' work was always the play, its aesthetic materialization on stage, and its potential impact on the audience.

What happens, though, to the performers when the play comes to an end? What becomes of them in the world beyond the spectators' gaze? How does the knowledge acquired by the performers, their internalized feelings and their incorporated memories, manifest? What is left of their political awareness? Can the performers' accumulated experience be seen as a training in human relationships? As ritual passages for different (and more subtle) ways of perceiving the world?

Jerzy Grotowski was probably one of the most vocal directors on this issue, as at a later stage of his career he questioned the very purpose of the performers' role, opposing the traditional notion of *theater as presentation* – where the “stage” is the end in and of itself – to *art as vehicle* (2007) – through which, in the words of Peter Brook, “theater is a vehicle, a means for self-study, self-exploration; a possibility of salvation. The actor has himself as his field of work” (66). Within this idea of *art as a vehicle*, a term Grotowski ended up adopting, borrowed from Peter Brook, the desire for action, for realization, is not directed towards the spectators' perception but is located rather in the performers' experience. In this context, the tone of poetic action moves from acting for a theatrical audience to performing for oneself. In *art as a vehicle*, theater is seen (primarily) as a platform to affect the performers subliminally, by which they can transform their everyday life into more subtle experiences. This does not mean, though, that the performers are exempted from trying to piece together the potential effects of their creative practices – from trying to configure something meaningful. On the contrary, for Grotowski, only in the confrontation with an aesthetic and/or ethical result, in some form or shape, can the performers reveal themselves, channelling their impulses for expression and affirmation with the same rigor as a theatrical presentation.

Transversely to the theatrical realm, Joseph Beuys had already addressed the possibility of applying the artists' critical spirit and exploratory drive to all sorts of social interaction – which was the premise that led to his notion of *social sculpture*: a paradigm that expanded the concept of art and the artist to daily actions (2011). For Beuys, all aspects of life could be approached creatively. As in Grotowski's *art as a vehicle*, Beuys also considered the way we conceive and relate to experience to be the central element of artistic transformation, inciting artists (which, for Beuys, could be anyone) to give themselves completely to their involvement in everyday life – with all the possible limitations each one has and the contingencies in which each one is enclosed. Only then would artists be able to take a step forward towards what Beuys called *self-determination*.

Following an acknowledgment of the social reach of the performing arts, recent decades have witnessed a surge of experimental initiatives dedicated to exploring the possible ramifications of the creative practices of performers – especially when considered separately from the closed circuit of artistic distribution. Founded in 1986, the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards was one of the first laboratories to fully embrace this kind of research, especially at the beginning of the 21st century when *art as a vehicle* became a relevant mantra for its exploratory projects and activities. Meanwhile, the growing field of artistic research set up the grounds for the epistemological problematization of art-making approaches, extending the possibilities for experimentation and collaboration within academia. This has enabled the appearance of several research platforms and networks that develop their work in close contact with art professionals, including performing artists. A paradigmatic example of this type of initiative is Cross Pollination – an international laboratory founded in 2017 that positions itself in the “dialogue in-between practices, both scholarly and performance-based, as an integral and essential part of a politics of embodied research in theater and performance” (Cross Pollination). Here, the aim is to bring forward the possible relations of acting with society at large as a way of challenging and transforming both the artistic and social fields – generating what the group calls “ecologies of knowledge” around the work of the performer.

Conversely, the search for new relationships between creative pro-

cesses and the world beyond theater is not an exclusively academic affair changes in the way dramaturgical approaches are increasingly being considered is playing a role, as well. The notion of *expanded dramaturgy* advanced by Peter Eckersall was already a response to the growing forms of dramaturgical practices that revive theater as a forum for social critique, thus taking the institutional, political, cultural, and economic contingencies of theater-making as central facets of the creative processes. As Gad Kaynar reinforces, dramaturgy, in this sense, is “predominantly ‘circumstantial’ rather than play-oriented, accounting mainly for the contextual performance conditions” (Kaynar 245). This turn in dramaturgical theorization and operationalization has opened a broader field of social concerns that transcend immediate artistic aims, revealing the inescapable intertwinement of theater-making and the material realities of everyday life. This entanglement is even more evident in the work of the performer, through which dramaturgical strategies may closely resonate and affect personal processes of subjectification.

In *Restless Youth*, we were continuously prompted to address our thoughts about the ideological stances and political attitudes raised in the book – including our own stories concerning personal doubts, aporias, or decisions that, at some point in our lives, had changed our way of seeing the world and acting within it. The work was steered by a constant sense of sharing and discussion that led to a permanent process of self-questioning from the performers (Fig. 3). We were regularly reminded to project ourselves out of the theater environment so we could come back to it with a different sense of commitment. As if the artistic question “What can I do with this?” was overruled by an ethical one: “What should I be doing with this?”

It was imbued with this spirit that, at one point during the creative process, in the middle of the night, I found myself sending a heartfelt message to Joana Craveiro about my urge to give a greater depth to my role as a performer: “I can’t sleep. I’m very sleepy. I don’t know if I am making sense anymore, but I really want to express my own voice of reflection. I do not want to be the ghost of the play. I’m suffering from it ...” (G. Vicente, personal communication, September 28, 2021). In the message, I went on and on regarding my anxieties about building a body that could transcend the confinements of the stage and my wish to create a different reality for myself. Joana’s response was direct, integrating the message literally into the final

dramaturgical score – thus, creating a perceptive disruption that blurred the gap between my image on stage and the image of my own memories off stage, between myself as presented to the theater audience and my perception of self beyond the stage.

A few notes on experience

Etymologically, the word 'experience' comes from the Latin *experiri*, which means 'to taste'. It is the repetition of this 'tasting' that enables us to acknowledge the singular over the regular, contingency within order, or the ineffable permeating the cognoscible. In this context, the attention given to 'tasting' is a central preoccupation of the performer, for whom a cultivation of lived experience has taken

Figure 3. Rehearsal of *Restless Youth* (2021) where I share some of my thoughts while testing different modes of discursive articulation. Photograph by © Filipe Ferreira



a historical role in their training. As performers, this attention is, of course, mainly channeled towards the creative process but, as Paul Rae reminds us, the acting experience cannot be isolated from the personal and social life of the ones who live it. Looking back at the Latin etymology of experience, the root of *experiri* is *periri*, which is additionally found in *periculum*: danger.⁶ In this sense, to experience is also to put oneself in peril – to expose oneself to the unexpected effects of the event in which one is involved.

When thinking about the implications of acting in everyday life, the etymology of experience is significant. Not so much experience thought of in terms of productivity, efficiency, legitimacy, or other regulatory forms of neoliberalism (including the ones that have dominated artistic production), but experience as a movement that opens up possibilities for something affecting oneself. As Jorge Larrosa Bondía puts it, experience “requires a gesture of interruption, a gesture that is almost impossible in current times”;⁷ because it entails the need to pause: a pause to think, to look, to listen, to suspend personal opinions, judgments, will, to cultivate attention and delicacy, to talk about what happened, to open to (and for) others, to be patient and give oneself time and space (24). For Bondía, the subject of experience is not defined by activity but by *passivity* - by the individual’s receptivity to be taken, moved, by the occasion that presents itself. This does not mean excluding the experience from the possibility of thinking about it, conceptualizing it, and considering it, in terms of the relation between action and knowledge. As Bondía states, experience always finds an ethical and epistemological order – not a generic, normative order, but a contingent, personal one, revealing a singular way of being in the world – which, in turn, is simultaneously an ethics (a form of proceeding) and an aesthetics (a way of living) (24). In practice, this means embracing the uncertainties raised by the circumstances at play without anticipating possible outcomes or trying to control the situation in which one is involved. For Bondía, to experience is thus to be open to plurality, difference, and heterogeneity, through which one may travel across many different propositions, maximizing the possible articulations of the world and, thus, expanding one’s ability for critical thinking (24).

Of course, this is easier said than done since people’s bodies are strongly formatted to respond to the rigid habits of “reality”, fostering

behaviours that arise in confrontation with a complex network of previous events. For the performer, these past events might include other performances, working processes and methods, artistic ideas, practical knowledge, but also everyday routines and personal traumatic incidents. In this context, questions of how experience is perceived and why it is perceived the way it is are central to recognizing the elements that make up the performers' sense of relating to others and the conditions in which they define themselves within the world. It is precisely this awareness that can bring the performers and their respective practices closer to an autonomous political and critical discourse.

The performance art philosopher Bojana Kunst recognizes the importance of shifting the meaning commonly attributed to experience, reinforcing the idea that it is only through the dispossession of the performers' inner sense of time – whereby their attention is no longer subdued by the kind of subjectification processes stimulated by the image of the artistic project – that they are able to recognize their autonomy as individuals. This entails creating a whole new working temporality whereby experience can be brought to the “surface” of the performers' consciousness and not subjected to the artistic timeframe of the project – which, instead of looking for how to do or achieve something, could allow them to wait for *something* to happen, to affect them. The *duration* and *rhythm* of the performers' work become, then, a crucial factor. It is by freeing the creative process from its utilitarian structure and fast-paced cadence that, as Kunst reminds us, performers can reveal how deeply their most intimate perception of time is conditioned by institutional and economic contextual forces - which, going back to Bondía, strengthens *passivity* as a disruptive agent of the performers' self-awareness, allowing them to receive what is still to come and, thus, to address their own potential for change.

In *Restless Youth*, I will never forget the time when, amid the creative process, we met with a former opponent of the fascist regime. The objective was for us to get an idea about what it meant to be part of the resistance of that time – an aspect deeply addressed in Abelaira's book. In this conversation, our interlocutor told us about the personal circumstances and ideological views that impelled him to take the side of the opposition, his main battles against the dictatorial oppression, and the clandestine lifestyle he adopted to

escape the police and preserve the safety of his family and friends. Of all the stories he shared with us, there was one that impacted me the most – the testimony regarding his arrest and prolonged torture, especially the description of what made him endure all the inhumanity associated with his emotional and bodily-inflicted scars.

Nothing in my previous life experience could have prepared me for that revelation. At that point in the conversation, the artistic context that involved the meeting was long forgotten. The urgency of just being there, listening to what he had to share, and opening up to being affected by his presence was all that mattered. The will to make sense of it all was still very far from my thoughts – from any of our thoughts, as I came to realize soon after the meeting ended when we shared our first reactions to what had just happened to us. At that point, one thing became evident: the realization of how much the conversation had exceeded the expected time and how much it had questioned the relevance of the following working timetable. Faced with that situation, Joana decided to give the rest of the day off. There was nothing left 'to do' – 'to produce' – immediately after that. We needed time for the whole experience to sink in.

Process of *stimulus versus process of experience*

When reflecting on the personal impact of my collaboration in *Restless Youth*, the experience of the working process is the first thing that comes to my mind. Not only the experience of developing a *persona*, composing a dramaturgical score, devising scenic material, finding a particular corporeal expression, or other kinds of strategies that point to the scenic outcomes, but the experience of exploring and discovering new perspectives on life through exchanging personal histories, sharing different working materials or simply listening to other people. This meant watching each other grow, watching each other gaining different levels of social awareness, creating new and stronger arguments, proposing singular articulations, shaping a form, a more consistent form that seemed to respond to each person's internal 'laws' (to use another one of Beuys' terms)⁸, to each one's sense of ethics and social commitment, to each one's responsibility towards the other, towards the world. In other words: the vivid experience of building and seeing others building worlds of difference. In a sense, it was as if the working process had pointed

in two directions: a vertical one that leads to the final stage performance and a horizontal one, more diffuse, harder to determine and understand in all its facets, that spreads internally at a different pace, inhabiting uncharted personal territories, insinuating itself along different scales and intensities, manifesting itself in subtle ways, occupying new places of questioning, of believing, reverberating through time, much after the artistic performance itself, in a continuous choreographic movement.

I am not advocating a theater without public performances. In the case of *Restless Youth*, it was precisely the objective of assembling a theatrical piece that drove the respective creative process and led to these reflections – I can hardly imagine the same personal impact without that objective in mind. On the contrary, it was only by taking into consideration the artistic outcome that one could raise these questions around the performers' experiences – around the *restlessness* generated. Grotowski also tackled this paradox, considering *art as a vehicle*, not as a replacement of *theater as presentation*, but as a form of bringing to the fore the practices involved in the creative process. For the author, both are bound together – as two poles of the same chain, belonging to the same family.

The difference that I want to stress here is the type of creative process a theatrical project can adopt, in terms of what concerns the performers' work. For this, I resort to Bondía's opposition between what he calls the *subject of stimulus* and the *subject of experience*. Following Bondía's dichotomy, as the *subject of stimulus*, the performers open themselves to a provisional experience - from which everything crosses them, excites them, and agitates them, but nothing happens to them. On the other hand, the *subject of experience* relates to a different form of theater-making, where the creative processes of self-exploration and discovery are privileged alongside the ultimate stage performance (Bondía). One may, therefore, look at performing arts productions through the mode of their respective creative processes, how they are conceived and operationalized, distinguishing between the ones that confine their focus exclusively on the artistic expression of the performers (*a process of stimulus*), and the ones that (also) point to their ethical transformation (*a process of experience*) - as is the case in Teatro do Vestido's creative processes.

In *Restless Youth*, both these drives were present, sometimes man-

ifesting separately, at other times overlapping with one another, blurring the differences between the artistic purposes of the project and its social reverberations. For example, many of the collaborators we contacted and talked with during the creative process ended up thanking the artistic team for listening, for taking care of their life stories, and for giving visibility to their testimonies, as if a community (even if provisional) was established in those moments of sharing, not only through the process of the encounter between the people involved but also through the artistic materiality in which this coexistence resonated. In this sense, I am not trying to consider theater in the radicalized debate between art-for-art and art-as-a-moral instrument, because that would imply homogenizing it in terms of an epistemological condition which is, for all intent and purpose, reductive – not only in terms of existing artistic diversity but also in terms of the relevance that different contexts of production may acquire. What I am suggesting is to look at respective creative processes in light of their ethical-political *praxes*, recognizing (possible) aspects of ideological, cultural, and social value at play within the work of the performers. This could be a way to establish the difference between making theater that resembles the politics we can only envision and a theater that engages the performers in the politics of everyday actions. In a nutshell: moving beyond theater through and with theater.

(Un)finished thoughts

For the performers invited to participate in processes of careful listening and research, to engage in a dilated timespan guided by the phenomenon of encounter with others, to reflect upon their own thoughts and perspectives, to be correspondents of their own experience, theater may become a powerful vehicle for their affirmation within the world. A vehicle that makes self-transformational possibilities more discernible and knowledgeable – more material. Not in terms of a materiality that manifests itself only at an artistic level but at the level of life praxis. By engaging performers through their own political drives, the creative processes may lead them to re-problematize and re-signify their place within the world. This is only possible through the instauration of a *process of experience*, in which the temporal materiality of the performers' work yields directly to life – enabling life in the process.

In the actual conditions of artistic creation, this remains quite difficult, mainly because it does not result in evident benefits for the artists who wish to leave a mark within the current economy of artistic production. It is, therefore, a practice dwelling on the margins of art making, manifesting itself through the working processes of the artists and groups pointing to a more direct (and critically informed) interpellation of life – as I advocate to be the case of Teatro do Vestido. But even Teatro do Vestido is not impervious to the demands of artistic production and distribution circuits, sooner or later bumping into the confinement of what Kunst calls *project temporality*: the temporal dimension that encapsulates the working conditions of artistic projects – which, for a long time now, means submitting creative practices to an intense acceleration at both collective and intimate levels. In *Restless Youth*, even though the performers engaged in self-questioning and research processes that aimed to affect the duration and rhythm of their individual experiences, we were eventually bound to the requirements and pressures of the art-making business - whether by having to respond to the solicitations of scenic composition, by having to show up for photo shoots, by talking to journalists, critics or theater producers, by having to give closure to our individual working processes or simply due to the need to anticipate the next project and, thus, our actions in the future. Project temporality eventually takes over, overwhelming the performers' sense of time and, hence, their attention to the experience of performing the self. The process that led me to make these considerations was only possible after a pause in my work as a performer. It is the result of an exercise of remembering: of reconstituting the residues, the ballast, that the creative processes in Teatro do Vestido has left me with. This drove me to recognize the parallel trajectory that both individually and collectively – in the political sense of the word – Teatro do Vestido invited me to follow over more than ten years of collaboration.

This consideration of the ways in which the creative process strategically frames the performers' work opens an alternative way of looking at the political dimension of theater. A political dimension articulated beyond the transitory effects on the audience and the critics attending scenic performances, which encompasses acting practices as a means for both artistic interpellation and everyday life. In this context, an acknowledgment and advancement of communicative networks organized around the performers' bodies,

movements, and discourse becomes crucial to understanding and deepening the material outreach of their theatrical experience within the world – and, consequently, to expand the research scope of artistic studies and the very knowledge economy, contributing to a more comprehensive reflection on the political ramifications of theater.

I never spoke with José again, although I think a lot about him. Not so much about his wellbeing, what he might be doing, or if he ever remembers those moments of sharing with me. I think about the prolongation in me of his music as I carry on with my life. His waltz forever caught between my memory and my urge to listen to it again – to give it a present materiality. And when I do listen to it, sometimes I dance.

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5 Cf. Lewis & Short.

6 Cf. Bondía.

7 My translation.

8 Cf. Beuys.

Notes

- 1 My translation.
- 2 Literally “Theater of the dress” [my translation].
- 3 Teatro do Vestido is a theater company co-founded by Artistic Director Joana Craveiro in 2001 in Lisbon, Portugal. The company usually takes a documentary approach based upon ethnographic observation, oral history, and autobiography, with an important site-specific input. Over the last ten years, the work of Teatro do Vestido has been increasingly centered on the historical, social, and affective questioning of the lives of ordinary people before and after the revolution of April 25, 1974 - which put an end to the dictatorial regime that ruled the country for 48 years - and often resorts to collecting testimonies of political resistance from the past. The seminal performance *A Living Museum of Small and Forgotten Memories*, a performative lecture by Joana Craveiro, premiered in 2014. This is perhaps the creation that most influenced the recent course of the company’s creative processes and the one that had the most significant impact within performing arts criticism in Portugal.
- 4 My translation from the Portuguese “Cidade das Flores”.

