

Experiences of Performativity in the Contemporary Brazilian Scene

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In relation to research in human sciences, and against the current opinions, Giorgio Agamben argues that the discussion of the method does not precede practice, but it succeeds practice (Agamben, 2008, p. 7). The investigation procedures are generally defined *a posteriori* as an explanation about the long and continuous habit of researching. The observation is recovered in order to justify some trajectories of research in performing arts that I have followed over the years of investigation in the area and that, in a certain sense, reflect my own path. The recent discovery that several Brazilian researchers have worked with contemporary theater assumptions of genetic criticism is part of this *a posteriori* methodological recognition, of which, until recently, we had no awareness.

It is clear that the methodologies are never pure, and they seem nourish themselves, at least in the case of the performing arts, of an inevitable hybridity resulting from the slippery nature of the object. The fact is emphasized in contemporary theater because it is a performative art of presence, ephemerality and deconstruction gestated in the creative process of the scene itself in a constant work in progress.

Getting back to Agamben, it is not possible to realize the elaborated reflection that he develops in his book on the method, *Signatura rerum*. But, in the interest of this argument, it is important to note that the philosopher defends the premise that the theory can only be exposed with legitimacy in the form of interpretation. This means that the method is never completely separated from the environment in which it operates and, even more, that there is no valid

method in any domain, as there is no logic dissociated from the objects. However, the archaeological prudence recommends that the researcher should backtrack on the steps of the creators in their analysis effort.

In favor of the approach done here, one may speculate to what extent the archeology of Agamben has affinity with certain procedures of genetic criticism. Perhaps the major difference in methodology, recently applied to the theatrical scene, is the concern of combining the theoretical analysis to the creative process and to the practice of theater, turning this transit into the performance focus. While the theatrical semiology, a wide influence in the 1970s and 1980s, with representatives of the caliber of Patrice Pavis, Anne Ubersfeld and Marco de Marinis, was dedicated to the definition of the spectacular signs, leaning over the passage of the text to the scene and focusing on an understanding of theater as writing the spectacle, the genetic criticism took its first steps in the territory of the processes of theatrical creation. It was the period in which the researcher Josette Féral initiated investigations focused on the creative procedures of *Théâtre du Soleil*, e.g. foreshadowing what would be one of the preferred frameworks for the analysis of the contemporary theater. At that moment, the essayist approached the genetic research, prioritizing the steps that precede the presentation of a theatrical work and foreshadowing a current analytic practice in contemporary studies. The monitoring, observation and study of the process, the understanding of the course of the director, the actors and the creative team, the investigation of the traces of the artistic workmanship of the spectacle are essential procedures for clarification of what is presented either on or off the stage. However, it is in this step that the work in process, unfinished, has to be taken into account at the same level that the issues related to the representation.

The genetic criticism applied to the theater begins, effectively, in the 1990s, after a long pre-history of annotated editions of major paradigms of the Western drama, which generally reproduce and analyze the successive drafts of the versions of the works. But the procedures that most closely match the specific approach of the scene itself only gain momentum in the late twentieth century with the pioneering studies of Almuth Grésillon and seminars organized for the discussion of genetic procedures at the theater, which disseminate the methodology (Grésillon, Mervant-Roux, Budor, 2010).

Preceding these initiatives, we highlight the studies of Féral, previously mentioned, the annotated editions of the stage directors' direction notebooks and several volumes of the *Voies de la création théâtrale* series, edited by the CNRS since 1972, with reconstitution of shows and creative processes of stage directors of the magnitude of Peter Brook, Giorgio Strehler, Tadeusz Kantor, Robert Wilson, Patrice Chéreau and Claude Regy, among others.

In Brazilian theater, with rare exceptions, the approach of the researchers in theater with the methodology of genetic criticism came more as a source of inspiration and less as a rigorous constitution of genetic dossiers from testimonies and documents. In most cases, what is retained is the initiative to break down the barriers that separate the analysis of the performance of the study of the processes of creation. Thus, it is possible to associate the methodology documentation about the various creative processes produced by IDART – currently the Research Division of Centro Cultural Sao Paulo –, publications on directors, such as Milaré Sebastião's on Antunes Filho and, more recently, studies of actors and directors about their own work, such as Miriam Rinaldi's and Antonio Araújo's, which are devoted to the Teatro da Vertigem, and Leonardo Moreira's which is referred to the Companhia Hiato and Ivam Cabral's on the group Os Satyros, to name only the closest examples. The common feature of those works is the privilege of the processes of creation and the development of reflections from the ethnography of essays. From reading those studies, it is clear that the genetic observation of the creation steps by actors, directors and dramaturgists is an effective way of clarifying the contamination of different practices of the creation of the scene, which is quite common in the contemporary Brazilian theater, especially that one that is produced in a collaborative process, similar to the devising theater practiced by international collectives. By the procedure, it is possible to check how the space, the light, the acting and the music combine to build a more or less stable scenic and textual collective dramaturgy, as the collective work of theater groups.

Besides the observation and the notation of essays, documents of creation, such as manuscripts by actors, direction notebooks, spatial sketches by stage designers and illuminators and so on, help mapping the stages of the work in progress. The video recordings, which are now carried out by the artists themselves, are another special way of indicating the various steps of theatrical

creation. Despite the dip in the practice of theater and the experience of sharing processes with artists from diverse backgrounds, the genetic researchings have never relegated to the background the theoretical concerns. Rather, the experience of the essays led many researchers to prospect, more accurately, the concepts that it suited the artistic pathways that bore witness. Furthermore, bringing together theory and practice of theater helped not only researchers and theorists, but also the artists themselves in the course of creation. Currently it can be seen that the theoretical essay and the studies of critical genetic are differential research strategies of many access routes to the theatrical phenomenon and they reaffirm the need to reflect upon the theater from the scene practices. To conclude such observations, I propose the notions of performativity and performative theater as conceptual keys to open new points of view of the construction processes of the hybrid scene of the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries.

Performativity

The concept of performativity is worked primarily in the field of performance studies, which was consolidated in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, especially with the team led by Richard Schechner, of the New York University team. The new discipline considers theater and performance art as a focus of analysis among others, delimiting their field of study in a vastly increased way. To Schechner, performance is an action that may be explored in different domains, including artistic practices, rituals, sports activities, daily behaviors, ways of social engagement and even statements of excellence in various sectors of activity (Schechner, 2006). Here, it is not possible to address the numerous approaches to performativity developed by the essayist. For this argument, it is interesting to retain the assertion that performance is never an object or a finished work, but always a process, because it is linked to the domain and the principle of action.¹ As for performativity, it would be both a theoretical tool and an analytical point of view, since all construction of social reality has a performative potential (Schecher, 2010, p. 123-127).

¹ If the definition the definition of Schecher is carried out, all areas of social life can be included in performance, since performing is the result of the actions of being, behaving, doing and showing doing. The performances are made of behaviors represented (twice behaved), restored behaviors and performed actions that people train, practice and repeat performing, the author notes in the presentation of the book *Performance studies. An introduction*. New York and London: Routledge, 2006.

In the interest of this approach, the studies related to the performance art are more productive, especially when they emphasize the presence of several performative features in the language of the contemporary theater. This is what the German Erika Fischer-Lichte argues when considering the performance as a natural extension of the field of theater, not a new paradigm, as spoken by Schechner. Following the European line of approach to the subject, it focuses its analysis on the work of directors and performers such as Frank Castorf, Einar Schleaf, Romeo Castellucci, Marina Abramovich and Christoph Schlingensief, affirming that the contemporary theater and the performance are processes, not finished works.

To Fischer-Lichte, since the performative deviation suffered in the 1960s, the theater can no longer be conceived as a representation of a fictional world that the public should observe, interpret and understand. The participation of the spectator in the performative experience causes such a wide range of sensations that transcend the ability and the effort of interpretation and production of meaning and may not be surpassed or solved through reflection. In this case, understanding the actions of the artist is less important than experiencing them, making the crossing of the proposed event involving the participants in shared common space and atmosphere, creating an experience beyond the symbolic. The result is an immediate physical affectation that, to the essayist, causes an "emotional infection" in the spectator (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 36).

Josette Féral agrees with Fischer-Lichte when presenting performance as a dynamic force whose main objective is to undo the skills of the theater, which tends to inscribe the stage in a specific and normative semiology (Féral, 1985, p. 125-140). While the latter is characterized by narrative and representational structure, handling codes whose purpose is to perform certain symbolic description of the subject, the first is the expression of flows of desire which is to deconstruct what is formatted. Although the two concepts are faced, it is noticed that one of the main intentions of Féral's study is considering theatricality is the result of a power struggle between two opposite realities: the specific symbolic structures of the theater and the energy flows - gestural , vocals, libidinal - which update in performance and involve creations in process, unfinished, generating unstable places of scenic manifestation. By refusing the adoption of strict codes, such as the precise definition of the character and the interpretation of a text, the performer is presented to the viewer as a "desired" subject, which

generally expresses itself in autobiographical movements and tries to escape the representation and the symbolic organization that dominates the theatrical phenomenon, struggling to define their expression conditions through momentum displays.

In a later text, the essayist attenuates the opposition established at this early test, arguing that performativity is of the elements of theatricality and the whole show is a reciprocal relationship between the two. While performativity is responsible for what makes it a unique performance in every presentation, the theatricality is what makes it recognizable and meaningful within a framework of references and codes (Féral, 2000, p. 3-12). The concept of "performative theater" is a natural consequence of those findings by the essayist. In disagreement with Hans-Thies Lehmann about the post-dramatic term, which exceedingly judges it as generic and ineffective, it believes that the most radical of contemporary theater experiences are the result of intense contamination between the theatricality procedures and the performance (Féral, 2011, p. 28-35).

Despite the disagreement with Lehmann, it should be noted that the theorist had already seen the emergence of a field boundary between performance and theater, as it approaches more and more of an "event and gestures of self-representation of a performance artist" (Lehmann, 2007, p. 223). It is exactly what stands out when Féral states that the contemporary theater has benefited greatly from some achievements of the performance art. The main one is to move the emphasis to the achievement of the action itself, not on its value of representation. According to the essayist, this mutation is responsible for an epistemological rupture such that it is necessary to adopt the term performative theater in order to qualify it.

Performative theater, procedural theater

The main interest of this argument is to highlight the procedural character of performative theaters. Perhaps the most constant aspect of this phenomenon, especially in the case of some Brazilian groups, may be the escape and refusal to formalize the creation of a finished theatrical work. It can be noted that a considerable portion of the collective practices of theater does not aim to create a piece only, or what could be considered a marketable product in the art market. Especially when opting for collaborative work, these collectives are

recognized for their involvement in the long process of research, even where intended, ultimately, to the construction of a text and a show, they seem to slacken in the production of a series of point events.

In this way, the work of some groups escapes from the relatively safe area of the finished "work", to break into the territories of political, anthropological, ethical and religious natures through the field research that apparently leave behind both the investigations of language and the explicit militancy. In fact, the processes themselves unfold in cases of recurrence mechanisms of direct intervention in reality, and they act as micro-creations within a larger work project. These interventions operate a shift in what is considered the most genuine intention of theatrical creation – the production of a dramaturgy and a show – and signal the proliferation of unorthodox creative practices, whose power of involvement within the social experience tends to overcome the strength of the aesthetic experimentation.

In a recent text, Jean-Claude Bernardet notes similar movement in the movies and the visual arts, which combines the procedures of genetic criticism in their efforts to understand the itinerary of the productions. At this sight, the development stages of the work are not the moments of a process that precedes an end goal or a mere preparation that must necessarily be surpassed by it. Bernardet notes that, in the works that inspire the reflections there is tendentiously no work itself. Or, the work is something else. It is not the result of a drafting process surmounted by a submission, but the process of creation itself. The reviewer sees in this procedural motion an attitude of resistance to the permanent and significant work (Bernardet, 2006).

For the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, the political dimension of the collective is evident in procedural practices like those, in which modes of discourse are mixed to the forms of life and in what it is up to artists create conditions so that a community experience can be externalized, acting in order to make public a particular political, cultural and economic reality. Rancière considers as "relational" the collective artists, since they aesthetically draw the figures in the community, or better, they recompose not only the visible landscape, but they favor its evidence. He concludes that these artistic and social practices are not the mere fictionalization of the real, because they find their

truth content in the mix between the "reason of the facts" and the "reason of fiction" (Rancière, 2005, p. 52-54).

A good example would be the groups that organize their work through painstaking field researches that are dedicated to collecting testimonies from various citizens, from exploratory trips to peripheral neighborhoods in big Brazilian cities, living in urban areas of trafficking, crime and prostitution, the theatrical occupation of homeless people hostels, prisons and psychiatric hospitals, the practice workshops, debates and public rehearsals open to the view of the spectators and especially highly socialized collaborative processes, which are keen to include interlocutors that were traditionally put aside from the theatrical creation and seek an approach with the spectator, not restricted to the timing of the show.

Hence the complexity of the dissonant chorus that emerges from those groups, formed by overlapping voices, knowledge and marginal cultures, where a fragmentation of enunciation that functions as exact mimesis of Brazilian social fracture is explained. Exemplary cases of this type of process are the experiences of BR3 and Bom Retiro 958 metros, the last work by Teatro da Vertigem.

Not coincidentally, the mentioned groups search public areas contaminated with high political and symbolic significance for their presentations, in addition to defining a geographic shift of interests and refusing to work in closed circuits of production and theatrical reception. In their work, what appears in the foreground is the express will of contamination with the most brutal social reality generally traveled in a body-to-body confrontation with the other, the different, the excluded, the stigmatized.

Most often, the show, which results from those long trajectories of research, cannot cope with the intricate social and artistic journey that preceded it. A good example is BR-3, the result of a process of over two years, which involved creators from various fields and was featured in a short season of two months in the bed of the Tietê River, Sao Paulo, in 2006. The procedural and unfinished character of the work is one of the indexes of a radical shift in focus from the product to the process, from the theatrical spectacle to the performing crossings, which are distant from the formalizations canonized by the critical tradition, to give vent to an extrinsic and hybrid performativity. This is not, of course, a

repudiation of the narrative forms, but of the projection of an "aesthetics of imperfection", which opposes the well finished and seductive images put into circulation in the "society of the spectacle" or even a "return of the rejected that does not undergo the assembly beneficitation" (Bernardet, 2006).

Maybe that's why the work of Teatro da Vertigem can be considered as a procedural theater, gestated in imperfection, dedicated to research pressing issues of Brazilian metropolises. In the beginning of the new millennium, the collective experimentation in public spaces became radicalized in the option for river crossings and urban held on the Tietê River and in a central district of Sao Paulo. The choice deepens the movement of spatial journeys that defines the scenic dramaturgy of the group since the beginning. But in previous shows, which made up the Biblical Trilogy, the indoors of a church, of a hospital and a prison somehow restricted the performative paths. In the works that were first performed in 2006 and 2012, the expansion process of the scene to the bed and the banks of a river, in BR3, or the corridors of a shopping mall, the urban traffic routes, the facades and the awnings of buildings and the ruins of an abandoned theater, in Bom Retiro 958 metros, radicalized the intimate relationship between the thematic core and the immersive experience that the spectator shall be submitted, both sensory and corporally. The result is that the center of power moves towards a dramaturgy that is built on the acute friction of the performative scene with the environment entailed in the crossing.

As to what had happened in BR3, in the case of Bom Retiro, the displacement by night on the streets of a deserted district and in the garrets of a theater in ruins is one of the limit experiences for the spectator, as it was six years earlier, the navigation during three hours in a sewage-river, such as the Tietê. Anyway, whether in water or on land, the actors and the spectators alike indulge in a procedural experience. It is noticed that the intent of this invitation to walk and "to tear up" is to maximize the experiment of the social catastrophe by their actual experience in the dead river or in the district that kills its story to turn itself into a good retreat of the kitsch fashion allegorized in the modest shopping centers, paradise of the commodity-form and of the labor exploitation of illegal immigrants.

In part, the intense interaction which is achieved in the scene-crossing of streets and public spaces of Bom Retiro follows the practice of drifts, the situation

inspiration, used as the urban intervention² device. During the creative process, the random wanderings in which the creators threw themselves into were a privileged mode of interaction with the neighborhood. In a way, they are repeated in the performative journey in which the marks of the process become evident in the construction of an expanded field of expertise, experience and immersion in space.

The drifts in the central region of São Paulo bind the intention of experiencing, in the urban area itself, the most burning issues that mobilize, in this case, the problem of immigration. The staging associates the immigrant handwork on clothing and garment trade, which is a characteristic of the neighborhood, to the current forms of exploitation – the services and flexible occupations embodying the structural logic of precarious work. Subcontracting and informal activities define the situation of most workers of Bom Retiro, who are forced to remain in uncertain employment areas, between the employment and the unemployment situations (Palamin, 2012).

By replicating this area of uncertainty, the screenplay-path moves through the scenic plot through occupations and evictions of space, with the aid of choreography, body movements, sounds, lights and rhythms, on a path that allows the coexistence between theatricality and performativity in the same flow. The poetic walk begins in the corridors of a shopping mall it continues on the night crossing of some streets of the neighborhood, it enters the theater in ruins and goes back to the street in order to completing the cycle before a debris dumpster.

In the shopping center, the staging highlights the fetish of the commodity on a script by tensions between the theatricality of the consumer world and the performativity the real city. The gates close in order to build a kind of barricade that prevents the entrance of the outside reality that is represented by a beggar who is dependent on crack. The dialogue of the obsessive consumer with a red dress, the defective mannequin looking for the inaccessible employment, the courier of goods who masturbates in women figures made of plaster, the Bolivian crippled seamstress on her machine, and the bride dressed for a wedding that will never come are allegories from such a consumption world, which crystallize the fetish associated to the fashion

² In a paper published by the foundation of the International Situationist (IS), its members defend the drifts as practices of psychogeography, stating that the random wanderings around town would stimulate reinterpretations of space based on the lived experience. In the same document, Guy Debord calls "the construction of situations" as the beginning of the destruction of the modern notion of spectacle", which relates to the non-intervention critics and the maintenance of alienation. See about Guy Debord, 2007, p. 56.

system. And they show, since the beginning of the journey, the interest in making the staging area of the mall as a script for deconstructing it.

The director presents the protagonists of this chain of informal activities through fleeting appearances without density nor dramatic continuity, creating uncertain areas of performativity. Brief, episodic scenes, similar to improvised workshops, seem to indicate, spatially, the precariousness of labor and the informal employment on the brink of dissolution. The procedure is most evident when it contradicts the image of the poor, ugly, poorly lit sweatshops of Bolivian seamstresses to the pasteurized beauty of the commercial shop windows. The incision exposes a critical state of affairs referred to contemporary life that spans the entire chain of production and consumption (Xavier, 2012).

The "archeology of memory" indicates the direction of the walk after leaving the shopping mall towards the Teatro de Arte Israelita Brasileiro (TAIB), an emblem of another time. Between a pole and the other, the composite shape of spatial dramaturgy is changed. On the street, the scene represents a conflict of occupations and evictions of space, on the tension that involves the movement of theater and the reality of the neighborhood with its flow of bystanders and vehicles. The two pathways become contaminated and potentiated so that the boundary between real and fictional remains unstable.

The points of higher tension of that intense coexistence are a fashion show at the corner of José Paulino street and a fight between naked women on an improvised ringside in the middle of the street. At these stations, the scene states with an intensity that contrasts with the reality of the bus and its passengers, the bewildered bystanders, the cars honking to clear traffic.

The occupation of TAIB, which was once the scene of resistance to the military dictatorship, is painful and uncomfortable. The abandonment of the place, the damaged seats, the worn out and darkened floor, the smell of mold and the suffocating gloom are momentarily broken by the dance of crack addicts performed on stage by the actors. In its long history, it is the first time which Vertigem Teatro da occupies an Italian stage. A spasm of excitement, music and light revives the scene for a few minutes before that spectators are removed by stagehands employees of sanitization. Out in the street, the impressive farewell takes place, with women-dummy discarded in the dump bucket, signaling the

end of the line of the production chain and the outcome of the performative dramaturgy of Bom Retiro 958 metros.

Undoubtedly, the radical immersion of the spectator in the experiment of the city is the differential trait of the work. And most importantly, it gives continuity to the movement of drift that guided the creation process, and it remains in the procedural crossing by actors and spectators at the Bom Retiro neighborhood. Towards this journey and this relational practice it is evident the revelation of indications of creation. The impression one gets is that it is not possible to separate the show, which is supposedly finished, from the process which still remains in it as a residue. In the area of performativity, which is triggered by the drift device, and accentuated on the shift and the slip from one territory to another, what is created is the continuous movement of duties among creators, observers and experimenters. In this sense, one can speculate on the new role of the spectator, who becomes a privileged witness of a kind of a genetic dossier in action, a living document of a scene that registers its unfinished process of making.

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