

The paper deals with different forms of the performance text, still a new phenomenon in contemporary theatre, which requires new instruments for its analysis. The structural transformation of the written text into the performance, including the role of the spectator in it, confirms the fact that the performance text does not simply mean a new kind of the written text – and even less a new type of theatre text, but rather an essentially changed hypertext. Instead, the performance text could also be called an open text of the performance, in the sense that it requires spectators to become its active co-writers. Can we, therefore, define the performance text as a *scenic écriture*, collective writing, hypertext, stretch text, or even *écriture corporelle*? Furthermore, how can it be translated from stage to page to be preserved for future studies?

The performance text is impossible without its author(s). Therefore, the paper deals with the performances of The Wooster Group, Motus, René Pollesch, Joris Lacoste, Milo Rau and Oliver Frljić, who are all constantly producing performance texts with their actors, without separating the process of writing from directing.

Keywords: contemporary theatre, performance art, theatre play, theatre directing, performance text, hypertext, dramaturgy, crystal image, storytelling, archive, repertory, performer, actor, narrator, theatre spectator

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From Stage to Page: New Forms of the Performance Text

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1.

For centuries, the theatre was accused of being exceptionally logocentric. The theatre play or drama was seen as a primary producer and transmitter of meaning and represented the main source of understanding a theatre production. It also represented a basic document for the history of the theatre. Yet, theatre and drama are two different phenomena, and their relationship to each other remains unresolved. According to Bernhard Dort, the unification of text and stage never really took place, always remaining a relationship of oppression and compromise (173). Especially the contemporary theatre confirms that a harmonious relationship between them is impossible but instead that there is a perpetual conflict between text and scene. Being a latent structural conflict of any theatrical practice, this inevitability can now become “a consciously intended principle of staging” (Lehmann 145). There is a significant distinction between two forms of texts: one that precedes the production (i.e., a play, dramatic text or any kind of written text) and the other that follows the production (text of the performance or the performance text). Therefore, instead of “asking what a dramatic text is, and what are the types of existing dramatic texts (a question as vain as it is desperate), it would be better to observe what we can do with texts, how *mise en scène* and performance art handle them” (Pavis 248).

For a few decades now, a dramatic text has completely emancipated itself from the stage and became a literary genre just for reading. It is no longer seen as an “authority” that controls and governs the process of staging and/or as the central and most important element of the theatre production. It is defined as something out of which the staging process departs as a source of conception and inspiration, but it can also stand on its own as an independent literary form. On the other hand, the performance text is seen as the final result of the theatre production, where the bodies of actors, the space, and the props have appeared in particular materiality, and thus its written form has become redundant or overpassed. During the rehearsals, the actors must internalise any kind of text and then externalise a new kind of text, the performance text. This

always happens in traditional or experimental theatre, regardless of whether the text is performed in full, with cuts and changes, or interspersed with additional material. The actors must seize and incorporate the text, or the texts, and embody them so that something other than the written text is created – first the text of *mise-en-scène* and then the performance text.

We could conclude that this tension or rupture with the theatre play started with Brecht's creation of epic theatre. In his analysis of Brecht's epic theatre, Walter Benjamin noted that dialectical images are by no means solely linguistic images because the text is no longer a basis of that performance but "a grid on which, in the form of new formulations, the gains of that performances are marked" (2). Thus, the function of the text in epic theatre is not to illustrate or advance the action but, on the contrary, to interrupt it and proceed "by fits and starts, in a manner comparable to the images on a film strip" (Ibid. 21). Epic theatre introduced a new way of writing that came closest to what we now define as a montage or collage of different texts or an anti-linear, fragmentary dramaturgy. Most importantly, it introduced how the performer's body creates meaning and, finally, the codes of meaning produced by the performance text. Brecht was probably the first who introduced the ontological status of live performance in his work by extensive use of Model books. These books came closest to what we today define as the performance text. However, any attempt to reproduce exactly how they were annotated always differed from the original production, becoming new performances and thus had nothing to do with Brecht's originals.

Hence, the time and space of the performance (*here and now*), its social and cultural context, and the relationship between performers and spectators are all interwoven in a texture and cannot be separated, constituting the text of the performance. A written and/or verbal text is then transformed into the performance text, which includes performers, their movements, their "body language", their reductions or deformations of the linguistic material (pauses, silence, shouts, murmurs), their relationship to the space and time of the performance, as well as to the spectators, including all the material elements used: costumes, props, lighting, screens, microphones, etc. The presence of human and sometimes animal, hybrid and cyborg bodies, gestures and voices also transform the written language into a "language" of tones, words, sentences and sounds that form a scenic composition through different forms of dramaturgy (visual dramaturgy, sound dramaturgy, actors' dramaturgy, and/or spectators' dramaturgy, etc.).

The structural transformation of the written text into the performance, including the role of the spectator in it, confirms the fact that the performance text does not simply mean a new kind of the written text – and even less a new type of theatre text,

but rather an essentially changed hypertext. Roland Barthes defines the theatre as “a kind of cybernetic machine” which, as soon as the curtain rises, emanates a variety of simultaneous messages, some of which persist over time (scenography), while others change continuously (words and gestures). This informational polyphony, this thickness of the signs, is a fundamental characteristic of theatre, which constitutes one of the most difficult challenges for the semiotic analysis. Thus, a whole performance could be seen as a text, where every structured combination of signs, regardless of what sort of signs they are, are seen as a text. From a semiotic perspective, however, the written text and the text of the performance are two different sign systems. Each has specific characteristics and limitations that influence its means of expression. Therefore, several questions arise about the function and role of the performance text because any kind of text is incomplete when it comes to the performance.

The performance text could also be defined as a *piecing together* of different elements, material and conceptual alike, that *exist only during a performance*, in the very *act of performing*, during an *event*, performance, or in *representation* that produces different performance texts, which Alain Badiou calls *theatre-ideas* (72). This also means that theatre-ideas could not be produced by any other instruments or at any other place; none of the elements by itself could produce theatre-ideas or even the text of the performance itself. The theatre-ideas *come forth* only in the (brief) time of its performance, of its representation. Therefore, all performance texts could be defined as “open” texts since they require the spectators to become active co-writers. Can we, therefore, define the performance text as a *scenic écriture*, collective writing, stretch text, or even *écriture corporelle*? Furthermore, how can it be traced from stage to page to be documented and archived for future studies?

Is the performance text a final document of the staging process or an entirely new kind of text? No matter how much the practitioners, theorists and critics are trying to describe the creation process from page to stage, something always remains lacunose and cannot be revealed. Perhaps a fairly recent concept used in the theatre studies – “*Genetics*” (a term borrowed from the study of literary manuscripts to describe the genesis of a text from an idea up until the moment of publication), could be applied to describe and apprehend this processes (Pavis 82). According to Pavis, in the case of the theatre, genetics is concerned with the creation of the text of the performance, from the study of everything that precedes the production, from a written text and/or texts, through the text of *mise-en-scène*, to the performance text, precisely all that is finally presented to the public.

Still lacking the right terms to describe this process from stage to page, perhaps we can turn to theories outside of the theatre. For example, the concept of “crystal image”

can come to the rescue when defining the performance text. Not only stage directions, the space, lights, sound, the set and costumes, but also the bodily co-presence of the performers and the public; altogether, they create that which could be defined as a crystal image. Deleuze examines how time discloses itself through the semiotic dimension of cinema. Subsequently, Deleuze identifies three distinctly different senses of cinematographic time: 1) time as the movement of image; 2) the movement of time-image; and 3) the appearance of time itself. In the cinema, the crystal image is a shot that fuses the past of the recorded event with the presentness of its viewing. Instead, in the case of the performance text, we could speak about the fusion of the presentness of viewing and its recollection in the future. Both in the theatre and cinema, the crystal image is an indivisible unity of the virtual image and the actual image. Based on the strength of this method, the main objective is two-fold: to demonstrate that the performance text could be approached not only as a special kind of semiotic phenomenon but to further our understanding of the materiality and completeness of the performance. Precisely, because contemporary theatre increasingly extends its borders with the help of visual and sound effects, and with the combination and juxtaposition between video and digital projections with the live presence and/or *liveness* of the performance, it has to refer to the performance text as a quality that can reflect and testify its crystal image.

2.

There are many texts used in the landscape of the contemporary theatre, such as scenic essays, political speeches, theoretical texts, discursive novels, epic poems, i.e. different texts that offer a public reflection on particular themes instead of traditional theatre plays. Theoretical, philosophical or aesthetic texts are taken out of their familiar context and reintroduced in different productions. Companies and directors use the stage to “think aloud” publicly or to exchange their ideas with the audience. In this kind of work, one can also find the actors who are more absorbed in different social and political debates than in their presentation, as in the works of The Wooster Group, Motus, Rimini Protokoll, Forced Entertainment, as well as in the productions of René Pollesch, Falk Richter, Joël Pommerat, Milo Rau, Joris Lacoste and Oliver Frljić, to name a few artists, who are all constantly making performance texts with their actors or companies and who do not separate the process of writing from directing. “I do not write plays, I write performances [...] the text is what comes afterwards, and what remains after the theatre” (Pommerat cited in Pavis 250).

In his famous document *The Ghent Manifesto*, Milo Rau states,

One: It's not just about portraying the world anymore. It's about changing it. The aim is not to depict the real, but to make the representation itself real.

Two: Theatre is not a product, it is a production process. Research, castings, rehearsals and related debates must be publicly accessible.

Three: The authorship is entirely up to those involved in the rehearsals and the performance, whatever their function may be – and to no one else.

Thus, the contemporary theatre “becomes more presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information” (Lehmann 85). This is certainly true for the works of René Pollesch, where, for example, one can witness a public debate among the actors about a given subject rather than a real theatre production. In all Pollesch's plays, there is neither a story, nor characters, nor a possibility of identification. Pollesch's characters become objects of total capitalisation, multiple interfaces and a presentation of the neoliberal society. In productions, actors are more like performance artists because their provocative presence and the liveness of their performing come to the forefront, more so than representing a character would do. The actors confront the audience, talking about their own existence, seeking to transform their ideas/texts into life so that the audience may be entirely “drawn” into those texts, which are usually theoretical and non-representational.¹ Therefore, the actors take a specific risk, like in performance art, because they never know how the audience will react to their performance and how they will end – Pollesch's performances deliberately seem unfinished, even like failures.² A typical Pollesch show is characterised by a fluent, chatty dialogue that combines the technological and neoliberal jargon with the philosophical language and high-energy performances from a group of charismatic actors whose creative input during the rehearsal process effectively makes them co-authors, like in *Life on Earth Can be Sweet, Donna* (2019).³

This principle of *polyglossia* proves to be universal for most of the contemporary theatre. It is asserted on several levels, “playfully showing gaps, abruptions and unsolved conflicts, even clumsiness and loss of control” (Lehmann 147). Most of the time, the audience is made aware of the physical, motoric act of speaking or reading the text itself as an unnatural, not self-evident process, like in some

1 Pollesch has written more than hundred plays in a thirty-year career – an average of two per season – and had directed nearly all of them.

2 In his play, *Pablo in der Plusfiliale* (*Pablo at a Plus Supermarket*, 2004), Pollesch used a selection of writings by a number of economics experts on the grey economy in Third World Countries.

3 The starting point was Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985).

works of The Wooster Group. They carried out a similar experiment in their famous production of *Hamlet* (2007–2013), based on the film *Hamlet*, directed for television by John Gielgud in 1964, with Richard Burton in the title role. The Wooster Group, in its distinctive style of “dance with technology”, used the film as a kind of reference text and, projecting it alongside the stage action of the actors, created the live interaction in a sort of “very sophisticated form of karaoke”. Thus, the show constitutes an emblematic example of the increasingly widespread practice of interaction between audiovisual technologies and knowledge incorporated in the theatre, a hyper-media show based on the highly refined use of the most up-to-date audiovisual technologies.

This sort of “karaoke” was already used in the theatre by the Italian author-actor Carmelo Bene, whose favourite technique was a kind of playback that often replaced dialogue in his shows. Bene was also famous for his detractions of different texts, a process defined by Deleuze as *amputation* (85). In the process of subtraction, Bene took away from classical plays the action, dialogue, characters and even the diction, so Deleuze rightly wondered, what was left? Everything, but in a new light, with new words, new pronunciations, new sounds, new gestures, new stage and audience relationships. There was no longer any dialogue but simultaneous and successive voices superimposed and transposed, enclosed in this temporal space of variation. The Italian critics have “accused” Bene of carrying out a work of “aphasia” on the language (whispers, stammering or deformed diction, barely perceived or deafening sounds), and an impediment work on things and gestures, practices that hinder movements instead to facilitate them, gestures that are too rigid or excessively weak, accessories that move with difficulty.

Similarly, French author-director, Joris Lacoste, started an ongoing project, *Encyclopédie de la Parole*, in 2002. With a group of poets, musicians, scientists, visual artists, theatre and radio directors, dramaturgs, choreographers and curators, Lacoste has ever since been collecting audio fragments of what is said or uttered in public and private. Lacoste’s work is deeply about language, not about what is said and what it means, but about how it sounds. “All the work I’ve done is based on speech, but we never use texts. We use the recordings themselves, as a kind of score. Including the pauses, silences and rhythms in what is being said” (Lacoste in Ramaer). During the performance, the language does not organically reside in the performer’s body but remains outside as a foreign body. Out of the gaps in speech emerge stuttering, failures, accents and flawed pronunciation that mark the conflict between body and word. The linguistic material and that of the staging interact with the theatrical situation, understood comprehensively by the concept of the performance text.

Even if the term “text” here is somewhat imprecise, it does express that each time occurs a connection and interweaving of (at least potentially) signifying elements. In fact, according to Pavis, the texture is a theatrical expression because it links the scenes, dialogues and all the materials brought into the space/time of a production/performance (251). As in texture, when only by touching it can we understand its materiality. We only believe in the performance text after we have been witnessing its spatial-temporal disposition, rhythmic quality, as well as its visual and sound aspect. The experience of seeing, listening, witnessing, perceiving and interpreting leads us to an aesthetic experience and the creation of meaning. Textuality, according to Pavis, is how verbal, visual, sonic, musical and rhythmic matter is used by authors and actors and then picked up by spectators and critics.

Sometimes, the actor is completely in charge, turning herself into a *narrator* (Pavis 147). In the production *MDSX*, by the Italian theatre group Motus, based on Jeffrey Eugenides’ novel *Middlesex*, the actor Silvia Calderoni inserts her autobiographical work, so the spectator is never sure what is her own text and what is the text of the novel. To this, Motus also added quotations from Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and *Undoing Gender*, Donna Haraway’s *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Paul B. Preciado’s *Manifeste Contra-sexuel* and other bits of the kaleidoscopic universe of Queer. However, Calderoni is alone on the scene, embodying and undoing her gender, using her own body to tell a story of violence, pain, confusion and acceptance. Thus, she challenges the tradition that tends to separate theatre from storytelling, the actor from a storyteller. She moves without warning from the role of the narrator-commentator to that of the character, without any dramaturgical justification, except for that of telling the story.

Then, one could ask, who is the real author of the text of the performance? For example, when not deconstructing a classical text, Oliver Frljić is presenting his own performance texts that are sometimes based on facts and sometimes on invented narratives. In several interviews, he stated that he is very sceptical towards theatre – for him, theatre is fake as a medium, and he feels embarrassed most of the time watching people on stage. It is interesting to note that Frljić, like Pollesch, is never concerned with what can be defined as a successful performance. On the contrary, most of his productions seem unfinished, a kind of mis-performance, a sort of bad amateur theatre, strongly influenced by performance art. The connoisseurs of performance art can recognise many citations from the works of Joseph Beuys, Carolee Schneemann, Marina Abramović, Vito Acconci, Paul McCarthy, etc. The audience has a similar reaction to his productions as it had to these performances: they are disgusted, they protest or leave the theatre, but they are never indifferent. Frljić himself claims:

When I started to think about the arts, of what and of how could do things, performance art was my first choice because of at least two things. First, it was available, you didn’t need anything: it was like conceptual art, you need your idea,

you have yourself as performer, you can perform whenever you want, etc. I prefer the original politics of performance art: no repetition, no rehearsing and no recording. So the only trace of each performance is an experience shared between you as a performer and the audience (Frlijić et al.).

Nevertheless, what are these traces, and how they can be tracked and conserved? The central goal of such a reflection should be to analyse with precision the creation and meaning of the performance text as a new and unavoidable theatre tool that enlarges the definition of contemporary theatre. In her seminal book, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor provides a new understanding of the vital role of the performance (in this case, for the history of the Americas). She argues that different performances, from plays to official events to grassroots protests, must be taken seriously to store and transmit knowledge. Taylor reveals how the repertoire of embodied memory – conveyed in gestures, the spoken word, movement, dance, song and other embodied practices – offers alternative perspectives to those derived from the written archive. By examining several performances in South America and the United States, Taylor exemplifies how people participate in producing and reproducing knowledge through performing it. Therefore, if performance could be a form that comes closest to the conditions under which we could understand our own experience, becoming a repertoire that “enacts embodied memory”, then the performance text could serve as its archive. Precisely, the embodied knowledge of the repertoire becomes the performance text in which different political, social and cultural positions are safeguarded in a kind of archive.

Many of the abovementioned live collaborative practices are made to motivate the audience to join in and activate the social context in which these practices unfold. According to Boris Groys, the tendency towards collaborative, participatory practice is undoubtedly one of the main characteristics of contemporary art and, we could add, contemporary performance. “Emerging throughout the world are numerous artists’ groups that pointedly stipulate collective, even anonymous, authorship of their artistic production” (Groys 200). However, only a few postmodern performance artists have tried to regain common ground with their audience by enticing them out of their passive roles using political or social engagement. This decision by the artists to give up their exclusive authorship would seem primarily to empower the viewer. “This sacrifice ultimately benefits the artist, however, for it frees him from the power that the cold eye of the uninvolved viewer exerts over the resulting artwork” (Ibid.).

This leads us back to Brecht, according to whom the most successful theatre will be the one that enters into a risky association between artists and spectators. It aims to realise the intellectual as well as emotional abilities of the spectators, looking for that which may be created in a new context of the performance. This position cannot

and may never be neutral. On many occasions, Brecht stressed that “the audience is a collection of individuals, capable of thinking and reasoning, of making judgments even in the theatre; it treats them as individuals of mental and emotional maturity, and believes it wishes to be so regarded” (78). Viewed in this way, the text of the performance comes closest to what can be defined as the “efficacy” of the performance, which means that the “real” essence of the performance is communicated by its public impact and not by the text itself.

Brecht’s demand that authors should not “supply” the theatre with their texts but instead change it has been realised far beyond his imagination. The strong urge of contemporary artists like Pollesch, Rau or Frlić to make their art useful could be seen historically as a new position and requires a new theoretical reflection. Their thesis is more or less similar: the theatre rejects the written text as a foreign body, as a “world outside the stage”. The central goal of such reflection should be to analyse the meaning and political function of the performance text with precision. Only then can this dilemma over the performance text be settled and such productions generally accepted, even if outside the mainstream theatre.

It should not be forgotten that the current consideration of the performance text was prompted by the transformations introduced in the theatre in the 1960s. Environmental theatre, participatory theatre, theatre of images, non-verbal theatre, documentary theatre, performance art, happenings, assemblages, social theatre, etc., all contributed to creating the performance text. Furthermore, scientific disciplines such as semiotics, theatre anthropology, theatre sociology, aesthetics and performance studies all offered valuable instruments for analysing the performance text. However, to invent a more substantial theory of the performance text, we need to create a new theoretical framework based on the common ground between artistic practice and theory. Without treating it as a side effect of the performance but as its vital component, a thorough study of performance text can contribute to a more complex dialogue in contemporary theatre. The development of such a theory could also contribute to how we look at performances and performance texts in the past. The performance text cannot exist without the performance, which is directly related to artistic practice. Therefore it is not enough to simply acknowledge its existence but to recognise its ability to transform contemporary theatre.

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