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Strategic Scientific Workshop “Embodied Futurities”

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This is the report on our research objectives, intermediary results, and perspectives on further investigation regarding embodied research on emancipatory theatre pedagogics with respect to the tradition of ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’. We have continued and shall continue and deepen the collaboration initiated at the Strategic Scientific Workshop: “Embodied Futurities”, held at the University of Bayreuth Center of International Excellence “Alexander von Humboldt”, on October 10th – 16th 2022.

We will limit ourselves here to key insights from the teaching and research event and promote further points of reflection. We will proceed in the following order:

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1. Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the University of Bayreuth Centre of International Excellence “Alexander Humboldt” for hosting and funding the collaborative event.

Our gratitude also goes to our international colleagues:

Dr. Stenio Soâres (Brazil), Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence, International Fellow

Prof. Christopher J. Odhiambo (Kenya), Senior Research Fellow, Alexander von Humboldt Foundation

Dr. Noemi Alfieri (Italy), Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence, International Fellow

Dr. Gilbert Ndi Shang, Romanistik, University of Bayreuth

Prof. Dr. Ute Fendler, Romanistik, University of Bayreuth

and Henriette Kachel, our teaching assistant.



Figure 1. From left to right: Celina Beck, Turid Hansen, Prof. Wolf-Dieter Ernst, Patrick Kobler, Prof. Paulina Aroch, Millaine Gerlicher, Maja Wagner

1. Research Outline

The Strategic Scientific Workshop, “Embodied Futurities” was aimed at strengthening Theatre Studies research trajectories on “Bodies” and “Education”, within the emerging field “Cultural Encounters and Transcultural Processes”. It deepened knowledge and practical expertise in critical, body-oriented teaching methods already developed over the last decade. The workshop tied into existing research (Ernst/Hutta 2020; Aroch 2019) as well as artistic research with artists such as Blast Theory/Matt Adams (Mapping Bayreuth 2016), and Sheela Mc Grendles/Dr. Rost (Drag-workshop 2017).

This workshop allowed for a grounded reflection on the epistemological paradigm that prevailed in our pedagogical on-site scenarios prior to the coronavirus. It experimentally developed scenarios for possible futures of (embodied) teaching, that ensue in the aftermath of social distancing contexts inscribed in our individual and collective bodies (at risk), our affective configurations and our historical imaginations. Because of the above, the workshop’s interest was of a keen insight into new ways of doing embodied research on cultural crisis and futurities.

2. Methodological Framework: 'practice as research in performance'

In this workshop, we pursued the method of practice as research in performance (PaRiP, combined with techniques and approaches of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO). The general aim was to question existing research methods in theatre studies. We therefore set up an experimental learning lab and created group experiences, combining hands-on teaching with research. Embodied research in performance according to Kershaw is characterized by three elementary tensions, which we used as the workshop’s epistemic framework: fact and fiction, inscribed ephemerality, unlimited embodiment. In terms of facts, we deliberately worked with starters taking this workshop as their very first encounter with academia in general, and their future career in particular. This group naturally brought in the fact of both different ages as compared to the teachers and more advanced students, and – as beginners – a radically different expectation of a future within the university. We contrasted this social fact with fictitious narratives, generated from the bottom up and focusing on the question of the future and futurities.

By means of concrete exercises, associative mind mapping, and daily guiding metaphors, we created an atmosphere to playfully approach desires and anxieties, as well as alternatives to given future scenarios. As part of our findings, we clustered the participants’ desires and anxieties about the future into closed scenarios, such as war or mental illness, and open ones, such as family values, creativity, and new beginnings. Some scenarios appear more real (right-wing politics), others more abstract (the apocalypse) or even not graspable (climate change). We recorded the results of ephemeral scenic interventions photographically and by means of audio recordings.

Next to doing research on teaching methods, both teachers organized themselves in team-teaching and alternating responsibility according to the thematic and pedagogic demands of each session, leading to a critically reflected supervision of sessions thereafter. All participants in the learning lab were asked to embrace, rather than judge their somatic and subjective dispositions as a source of knowledge. PaRiP as well as post-Boalian theatre thus engages and intensifies the issue of embodiment. With this method, Theatre Studies Bayreuth embarked into net approaches known in ethnography as well as the feminist discussion of situated knowledge. After the bodily turn in the humanities (Butler 1993), and

with the aid of post-Boalian theatre, the workshop was an opportunity to collectively consolidate a methodology, rather than a theory, of embodied thinking.

4. The Learning-Teaching Experience

In the workshop, all participants were introduced to basic principles of body work, including warm-up, movement and expression exercises as well as theatre games to start with. Drawing on the work developed by performers, researchers and educators such as the Californian dancer Anna Halprin, these activities focused especially on a heightened awareness of the senses and a rough introduction into movement techniques. Usually, a rehearsal following the warm-up would be output oriented, leading to a particular performance. Often production-centered work opposes emancipatory pedagogics: teachers/directors easily impose certain expectations and techniques on the participants' bodies.

This workshop's learning-teaching experience instead consisted of engaging in process-oriented work. We were interested in the different futures, which we thought of as already present in the rehearsal room, in the form of different biographies. We considered these 'assembly of differences' as not being fully conscious and visible yet. Loosely orientated to Jerzy Grotowski's *Via Negativa*, we thought of learning something as important as the un-learning of cultural habits, cognitive and affective blockages. Therefore, we also took advantage of techniques derived from Object Theatre, and had the participants bring in "found objects" with a history, which we had asked them to bring in from a second-hand warehouse. Object-work often helps to bypass psychological burdens and mimetic clichés. Our process-oriented way of working hopefully avoided moments of imposition, or at least allowed for noting them carefully and reflecting on them later.

From the teachers' point of view, the experience we can best be described as certainly one of productive uncertainty and liberation (not, however, in the sense of the pedagogy of liberation, but of a fruitful unraveling at the juncture of two distinct but akin methodologies and a group of students with the future ahead). Our approach reduced the pressure to produce both results and steep learning curves among our participants. What happened instead over the six days of training and collaborative work, could best be described in terms of the following observations: despite being radically thrown into a new situation, our participants grew together as a group, especially in terms of concentration and playfulness, a raised body-awareness, and their state of comfort and presence, all of which have been recorded in ethnographic notes taken on a day to day basis. Regular feedback sessions confirmed this impression. It was especially telling, that already existing patterns of behavior, learned in theatre groups and prior experience of theatre games, gave way to new and astonishingly permittable ways of embodiment.

Figure 2. Participants' body-painting session imagining the world's future after climate change



6. The Teaching as Research Experience

Our workshop was an opportunity to collaborate in the classroom space and to get to know each other's pedagogical methods, as it was an opportunity to deepen our discussions surrounding such practice, which we had already began virtually over two years ago. Having each separately developed a teaching as research methodology, this was a unique chance to compare and contrast our respective styles and techniques but, especially, to start consolidating a shared methodology that benefits from our separate experiences and their encounter during the strategic scientific workshop at Bayreuth. As a result of this intense period of intellectual collaboration, we are presently co-writing two articles to systematically record, reflect and theorize the experience and its aftermath.

The Strategic Scientific Workshop visit also gave us opportunity to set the foundations for a wider collaborative group. Given Aroch's background in African Studies, we met with a series of visiting scholars at Bayreuth who were researching theatre-associated questions in the Africa Multiple Research Cluster. Prof. Odhiambo, Drs. Soares, Ndi Shang, and Alfieri have accepted to read and give us feedback on our first drafts of the upcoming articles, and we hope to contribute to their work as well. The brief time of the visit was well employed, and we were able to also attend and a performance at the Munich Theatre Festival together and to initiate contact and/or begin informal conversations with colleagues in our area in and outside Bayreuth (Prof. Ute Fendler, Bayreuth; Dr. Marie-Anne Khol, Bayreuth; Meike Wagner, Munich; Dr. Christoph Holzhey, ICI Berlin; Prof. Alejandro Araujo, UAM, Mexico). These informal initiatives were crucial to place our project within a wider perspective, obtain critical feedback, and set the groundwork for expanded future collaboration.

7. Future perspectives

The workshop reflected on the epistemic regime of embodied teaching. We note that within the context of the university's practice-based teaching, theatre training is primarily output oriented. In this workshop, we radically questioned this orientation, since it can be assumed that the somatic potential of the learners as well as their biographies remain invisible or

even exploited. Instead of looking at the student's body as a kind of blank material that is transformed into an artificial figure with new knowledge and skills, we propose a more democratic and emancipatory approach. The learners are partners in a collective learning process. The focus is on the group. This goes beyond the usual group formation and motivational approaches known in group-psychology and human resource management, insofar as, in addition to playing and experiencing together, the reflection of one's own limits and of given theatre models is always up for discussion. Today, these models are still 'hero-centric' and individual. In the future, it will be a question of finding ways, in the spirit of J. Boal, of further reducing this 'hero focus' and opening up to shared time.

We aim at continuing to open up that shared time, as well as to record, consolidate and further develop our methodology to make it accessible to a larger community in Bayreuth and beyond, giving the work we have done international visibility. In practical terms, we are engaging in the following actions:

- 1) Co-authouring a German-language research chapter for the volume on "Performance and Utopia" a first volume in the new series "Proskenium", edited by Meike Wagner (speaker), Wolf-Dieter Ernst, Susanne Foellmer, Berenika Szymanski-Düll.
- 2) Co-authoring an English language research article for a peer reviewed, specialized and indexed, international journal ("Forum Modernes Theater" is our leading but note only option).
- 3) From November 21st to November 26th, 2022, Prof. Wolf-Dieter Ernst has been invited and funded by UAM in Mexico City to impart a follow up workshop and associated lecture at the Humanities Department.
- 4) We have concrete plans for continuing our collaboration (between ourselves, as well as to enlarge our team) well beyond the two articles and workshop in Mexico this year. For that purpose, we are currently looking actively into further opportunities to fund, consolidate and expand our project.