

Embodied knowledges: Physical theatre and the physicality of theatre

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While the general contours of virtuosity are the same across media, every sacred monster is unique; every technique organizes its own monstrosity, and every community engages its virtuoso monsters on its own terms (Hamera 2007: 42).

Journeys

Becoming(s)

being(s)

mapping

creating

reflecting

configuring

flashings

deflecting

confluence

disseminating

storying

confirming

shifting

questions...

Within

from

through

without

outside

Self

other

in-between

interstitial

The centrality of the body in theatre and performance is well documented. In recent years perceptions of the body *in* performance have shifted to include a notion of the body as performance. This special edition on Physical Theatre(s) in South Africa focuses on the body and its relationship to drama/theatre/performance, to self-exploration, and to the socio-political, cultural-historical and symbolic contexts and contours that encapture, or are

encaptured by, the performing body. The edition further maps the conceptual and practical terrains that physical theatre traverses and explores the ways in which physical theatre acts as site/sight upon which constructions of hegemony are cited, played out, subverted, questioned, inscribed, erased and reflected upon. Through the making of, and reflecting *in, on* and *through* physical performance, this edition celebrates these refractions, reflexions, deflections and intersections. The material contained in this issue thus explores both the inner and outer frames of drama/theatre/performance, as well as their interrelationship. The inner frame relates to form and content (Murray & Keefe 2007:22). The outer negotiates and frames 'meanings' taken from drama/theatre/performance that "do not simply flow *outward* from the piece we are witnessing" but indicate that drama/theatre/performance connects makers and observers alike, to the "world beyond" – the socio-cultural, political, ideological and philosophical contexts that drama/theatre/performance "inhabit" (Murray & Keefe 2007:22-23).

The material in this issue foregrounds the heterogeneity and fluidity that 'play through' interpretations and expressions of Physical Theatre. Murray & Keefe (2007:3) defined physical theatre by its conceptual rootings/routings and tropes of physical and visual performance languages, rather than by the various forms it can take. They see Physical Theatre as "a term, idea or concept" (Murray & Keefe 2007:6) that encapsulates some aims of counter-hegemonic theatre movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These Physical Theatre movements unite in their goal, which is to challenge the dominance of a literary and verbally driven theatre:

Physical theatre then traces its origins in our contemporary sense to those ideologies and manifesto's which sought to reverse a dualism and hierarchy of word over body. ... 'physical theatre' is a construction of forms, beliefs and dispositions which takes its place alongside other and continuing suspicions of the word as the embodiment of Enlightenment reason (Murray & Keefe 2007:7).

It is evident that not only the content but the form in which theatre and performance are framed reveal complex value systems and cultural constructs (Thompson 2004:105) that can support or subvert significations of cultural dominance in voice, gaze and representation. Further, as performance is "an art of body and an art grounded in body" (Sheppard 2006:7), the (re)inscription and self-representation of bodies and how those translate into performance strategies are central considerations in Physical Theatre. In destabilising potential hegemonic significations and in continuously re-inscribing bodies in and through performance, Physical Theatre creates "vernacular landscapes" and "affective

environments” and as such rewrites theatre, performance, bodies, cultures, relationships into space and time as well as the intersections between these (Hamera 2007:60). It is this embodied interstitiality that opens up spaces for the practice and products of Physical Theatre to be approached, interrogated and accepted as research. Such research would often:

...take place in and through bodies. It would transmit and proliferate between bodies, whose transformations would be irreducible, literally incomparable, eternally singular and irrevocable, un-write-down-able (Jones 2003: [s.p]).

It is the current trend in universities across the world to acknowledge artist-scholars within the departments that have creative and artistic work embedded in their disciplines. This is currently receiving much attention in South Africa as evidenced in Arts departments’ drives to gain recognition for such research in universities and at a national level, and conferences on practice-led research.¹ South African Universities each try to grapple with the way in which to recognise the practical/product as research.

The historical or traditional development of research accepted within academic settings follows a twofold trajectory. In the first trajectory, on the one hand, accessing and ‘ordering’ information (‘information’ used in the broadest definition of the word) about the world required a set of methods that could be used to do this. On the other hand, such ‘ordered information’ had to be presented to the world using set systems of representation. This ‘gathering data, manipulating data and then presenting conclusions,’ when applied to the creative platform is always/already fraught with difficulties, not least of which the presentations of the findings (in written, performance or both modes).

The second trajectory attempts to engage with the types of methods (and therefore types of engagement with data) that are to be used to constitute ‘valid research.’ The historical trajectory can be shown thus:

Quantitative methods (based on empirical data – the validity of the results are to be found ‘in’ the method) → Qualitative methods (based on accessing and making meaning of the ‘subjective lived experience’ – the ‘validity’ of the results must be found in the ‘recognition of the described lived experience by the ‘reader’) → performative methods² (tentatively based on ordering, and making meaning of, ‘the lived experience in the act of ordering’) (Munro, 2010:[s.p]).

The NRF in South Africa,³ and the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the United Kingdom highlight original investigation in the generation of knowledge or in furthering

understanding, in their definitions of research. Further, both acknowledge the investigation, invention or generation of “ideas, images, performances and artifacts where these led to new or substantially improved insights and the use of existing knowledge in experimental development to produce new or substantially improved materials, devices, products and processes” (RAE 2006 in Haseman 2007:149). This broadened view of traditional academic research celebrates the unique dimensions of knowledge-making and originality.

The above RAE definition clearly underscores a qualitative research paradigm. In broad terms, then, it can be accepted that a Physical Theatre production or process as research may fall into the category of qualitative research,⁴ where sense is found in a multi-levelled ‘lived experience’.⁵ The trends in such qualitative research include:

...academics emerging from practice-based...work, whose experience has been within the logic of performance studies; [and] whose... ambition is to research and teach through practice. Or artists who are entirely at home with submitting their practice to the reflective and critical discourses at work in the academy (Jones 2003 [s.p]).

In this way Jones points to the notions of practice-led, practice-based, practice-as research and/or performative research. These can be viewed as a continuum of various outputs between the ‘mainstream academic method’ of reporting on research – which is article writing about an issue where there is no practical element involved and where the ‘truth value’ is captured in the method, on the one side, to the production of an artistic output on the other. The output expectation trajectory parallels in many senses the methodological trajectory: Quantitative methods, where the ‘validity’ lies in the method (and article), qualitative methods, where the ‘truth value’ lies in the recognition factor following on from a thick description of context, and, tentatively now, where method is practice and the ‘truth value’ lies in the emergent dynamic of the performance or in the performance *per se*.

Although suited to a qualitative research paradigm, we would argue that the kind of research possibilities and processes that Physical Theatre offer has the potential to undermine hegemonic *research* conventions in the same manner that it undermines hegemonic *theatre* conventions. This hegemony relates primarily to logocentrism (Jones 2003 [s.p]) and scriptocentrism. Following Haseman (2007), we celebrate the possibility of a third research paradigm – a performative research – that can stand as a research

paradigm *per se*. Some of the material in this edition speaks strongly to this viewpoint whilst others fall into the mainstream research paradigms. Whilst we acknowledge differences in modes of performative research we do not wish to interrogate each mode, but rather present some of the broad tendencies in which research is pursued in and through practice (Haseman 2007:147) in this edition. As such, the material in this edition speaks to/about/through, and plays with, a heightened physicality, dance-based physical theatre and a theatre that foregrounds physicalised narrative.

We would like to thank the *South African Theatre Journal* for creating a platform for disseminating research stemming from qualitative and performative research paradigms in ways that (to some extent) speak against the tyranny of scriptocentric and logocentric research traditions. It has been an extraordinary journey as artists, researchers and a vast group of peer reviewers wrestled with the parameters of the quality of the research contributions, as we engaged with writing limitations to 'say' what needed to be said, articulated, explained, justified and shaped in the transliteration from performance to page. It is the nature of the written beast that something is lost in the interstices between image and word, between concept and articulation, between the visual and the language, between the kinetic and the linear, between the present/presence and the past. And yet something is gained and this edition, we hope, bears testimony to that.

Notes

- 1) For example the conference *On Making: Integrating Approached to Practice-Led Research in Art and Design* at UJ in 2009, to name but one.
- 2) See also Haseman (2007:151).
- 3) Fleishman, M; Hauptfleisch, T; Baxter, V. & Sutherland, A. 2009. *Testing criteria for recognizing practice as research in the performing arts in South Africa with the particular reference to drama and theatre 2006 – 2008*. Unpublished report: NRF (Knowledge fields development).
- 4) See specifically the writings of both Blumenfeld-Jones and Pelias in Knowles and Cole (2008).
- 5) Or the 'situated knowledge' as it is referred to by Barret (2007: 4).

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