

## 2. On a Praxeology of Theatre Historiography<sup>1</sup>

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We were lucky. The tour guide was a well-informed, communicative young woman who had a good sense of what would be interesting to a group of theatre scholars. We were one hour south of Stockholm<sup>2</sup> visiting the palace theatre, created in 1782 at Gripsholm Castle, which itself dates from 1537 (Figs. 1a and 1b). We heard numerous details about the architecture of the theatre, sited in one of the towers, about the history of the Gustavian period (1771–1792), and about the purposes of the theatre at that time. Our gaze was directed towards the pigeonholes placed high above the auditorium, which allowed discreet views of the performances on stage. We also had a behind-the-scenes look at the theatre machinery. However, despite such a highly informative tour, many questions remained unanswered. We had been given access to a precious historical artefact; we had been provided with information that permitted us to understand this theatre in its historical context, and yet the emptiness of the theatre stage before us was unsatisfying. Some scholars in the group wished they could have seen a performance that would have allowed them to experience the performative potential of the theatre; others wanted to know more about the functions of the Gripsholm theatre in the eighteenth century. Personally, I had a strong desire to go onto the stage, to feel the wooden planks under my feet, to inhale the dry, dusty air, and to sense the air streams that circulate there. I would have loved to speak and to sing in the space, to explore its sound quality. And I dreamt of operating the handles and wheels of the machinery to experience the gliding of the wings, the swift changes of the scenery. My desire to be involved practically with the theatre, however, did not spring from a wish to perform as such. I am neither an actress nor a singer. I rather felt a need to have a different kind of access to this historical

1. This is a revised and translated version of a book chapter that has been published in German: Meike Wagner, 'Theatergeschichte machen: Überlegungen zu einer praxeologischen Theaterhistoriographie', in *Methoden der Theaterwissenschaft*, ed. Christopher Balme and Berenika Szymanski (Tübingen: Narr, 2020), 59–80.

2. This anecdote refers to a visit by a group of theatre scholars to Gripsholm Castle on 17 June 2016, which was a part of the social programme of the conference 'Presenting the Theatrical Past: Interplays of Artefacts, Discourses and Practices', organised by the International Federation for Theatre Research, 13 to 17 June 2016.

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**Figures 1a and 1b.** The theatre at Gripsholm Castle, stage and machinery. Mariefred, 2016. Photos: Meike Wagner ©. License: CC BY-NC.

artefact and to know more about the aesthetic potential of the Gripsholm theatre and about the historical practices of the place. What I clearly lacked was the opportunity to explore the Gripsholm stage by means of a praxeology of theatre historiography.

So, what do I mean by a ‘praxeology of theatre historiography’? First and foremost, this indicates an interplay of theory and practice that allows us to gain practical knowledge of theatre history. Theatre has always been a fleeting, transitory practice that cannot be fully grasped through the textual and visual sources of the archives. Therefore, any performance analysis of contemporary theatre will remain incomplete without the theatre scholar’s own performance

experience. One needs to be involved in the performative event to fully grasp the dynamics, the flow of energy, the communicative strategies of the staging. The theatre scholar must engage in a conversation with her/himself, negotiating between her/his positions as a subjective participant and as an objective evaluator.

A praxeology of theatre historiography takes account of the fact that historical theatre practices also involved this kind of energetic and communicative ‘eventness’. How can a historian get access to the dynamics of performances that took place so long ago? The critical and experimental restaging of dramatic works from the past gives us an experience, perhaps not of real historical theatre practices, but at least of historically *informed* theatre practices. This practical approach to the theatre of the past can give us an idea of how the performance might have worked with respect to movement, to the impact of the historical space on the performative action, the acoustics, the energy flows, and much more. It goes without saying that this is also a pleasurable experiment for theatre historians: the historical study object suddenly comes to life and seems to speak to us on multiple levels. However, we encounter challenges similar to those that face the scholars who analyse contemporary practices. The experience of performance and the involvement in the performative practice demand self-reflection and a constant repositioning of one’s scholarly knowledge and epistemology. Engagement in performative experimentation will challenge our beliefs and methodological traditions. And it requires us to find a balance between the pleasure we take in the experience of the performance and our desire to gain knowledge and understanding of what happens in the moment of the performance.

In the following, I would like to discuss both the potentials and the problems presented by the praxeology of theatre historiography as practiced within the research project *Performing Premodernity*, which focused on historical theatre practices of the second half of the eighteenth century. Over the years, our practical projects – workshop

productions of eighteenth-century works for the stage – provided the impulse for our reflection on methodological questions. Hence, when I refer to a praxeological method of theatre historiography, I am referring to an approach that was developed deductively. Our practical work was based on thorough discursive, dramaturgical, musical, and other types of source-related research. In the process of creating and rehearsing theatrical productions, new questions and problems arose that fed into our academic research, and which resulted in publications, conference papers, and other academic communications. And these processes have not ended; we continue to be involved in an ongoing process of thinking, practising, establishing, and reconsidering the methodological frameworks. What I present here is a first attempt to conceptualise the methodological implications of our praxeological research into eighteenth-century theatre practices. I will begin by discussing some basic issues concerning the relation between theory and practice in theatre studies. In the second part, I will argue for the usefulness of praxeology as a method within theatre historiography. And in the third and final part, I will discuss specific questions that arose during the process of rehearsing/practising in an eighteenth-century theatre.

### **Practice and theory in theatre studies**

In the humanities, the generation of knowledge through the combination of theory and practice has a history of its own. In European historiography, attempts to gain insight into historical events through practical projects date back to the second half of the nineteenth century when history was being established as an academic discipline. Reconstructions of historical theatre performances and theatre practices have a long tradition too. One could mention John Philip Kemble's attempts to perform Shakespearean speeches with the proper historical pronunciation around the year 1800; or the historical research of the Meiningen Court Theatre in late

nineteenth-century Germany, which explored various historical periods through theatre in order to find historically appropriate means for staging plays; or the repeated attempts of student groups within classical philology and theatre studies to revive the theatrical practices of classical Antiquity.<sup>3</sup> The underlying creative engagement and scientific curiosity of these cases, as well as their overt positivism can create a particular fascination and at the same time a historiographical discomfort. These projects tried to fill gaps by creating historical evidence through practice: ‘Look, this is how it was! Now we know!’ Entirely lacking, though, was sophisticated historiographical and methodological reflections. The staging was supposed to speak for itself – which it did, while also having a powerful impact on the historical thinking of contemporaries. This was a problematic effect, since no proper consideration was given to either the personal bias of the historian, or to the problems caused by the combination of theory and practice, and the construction of historical narratives on the basis of practice.

So how can we develop a praxeological approach that subscribes to modern notions of critical historiography while continuing to draw on the rich epistemic potential of practical performance? More than thirty years ago, the so-called ‘practice turn’, or ‘performative turn’, began to gain momentum within the humanities, including within theatre research. In the field of theatre studies, new study programmes were established that incorporated practical experimentation into the scholarly approaches, for example at Giessen University and at the University of Hildesheim in Germany, and at almost every major theatre/drama department in the United Kingdom. While these developments have fostered new thinking about the relation between theory and practice in research, it is still difficult to find specific tools and methods that can be used for academic-artistic research within theatre studies. One of the first scholars to practice, teach, and make the interplay of theory and practice in theatre and performance studies mainstream was Baz Kershaw, who recently pointed to

3. On Kemble’s Shakespeare performances, see Michael Dobson, ‘John Philip Kemble’, in *Great Shakespearians, Set I*, ed. Claude Rawson (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 289–338; Reiko Oya, *Representing Shakespearean Tragedy: Garrick, the Kembles, and Kean* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). On the Meininger Court Theatre, see Steven Arthur DeHart, *The Meininger Theatre, 1776–1926* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981); Volker Kern and Manfred Koch, *Das Meininger Hoftheater* (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2004).

the ‘vertiginous traverse’ of the disciplines that followed the ‘practice turn’: ‘A key component in the “practice turn” in the disciplines has been a vertiginous traverse between discursive and embodied ways of becoming/being, doing epistemologies and creating ontologies’.<sup>4</sup> This points to a profound principle of Practice as Research (PaR): its capacity to dislocate knowledge itself.

Since the 1990s PaR has developed multiple approaches within theatre and performance studies that combine practice and theory. Both PaR research and teaching are widely recognised today. However, on the methodological level, PaR scholars still have difficulties conceptualising their research strategies and tools. We need to reflect more on the role of the scholar-researcher-artist investigator that takes fully into account the phenomenological and the epistemological aspects. And even though historical topics have been explored within PaR projects, there has so far been no interest in theatre historiography. Nonetheless key elements and concepts of PaR have been an important source of inspiration for the praxeology of theatre historiography.

Linda Candy’s distinction between *practice-based research* and *practice-led research* is useful for navigating this quickly expanding field. According to Candy, practice-based is an ‘original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice’. A full understanding of such a research outcome can only be gained through forms that are at least partly creative or artistic. Practice-led research, on the other hand, is ‘concerned with the nature of practice and leads to new knowledge that has operational significance for that practice. The main aim of the research is to advance knowledge about practice, or to advance knowledge within practice’.<sup>5</sup>

Our praxeological theatre historiography is situated more within the field of practice-led research. Its main goal is to create knowledge about theatre practices of the past through practising, negotiating between aesthetic experience, expert knowledge, and practical

4. Baz Kershaw, ‘Practice as Research’, in *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, ed. Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson (Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 63–85: 84.

5. Linda Candy, ‘Practice-Based Research: A Guide’ (Sydney: University of Technology, 2006), 1–19: 3: <https://www.creativityandcognition.com/resources/PBR%20Guide-1.1-2006.pdf> (accessed 25 May 2018).

episteme. However, certain aspects of practice-based research were also important when we staged historical works based on this complex of knowledge. Moreover, the reflection on our academic research practice became crucial when we tried to navigate the field of artistic research. The questioning of established methods and skills was part of the undertaking: practitioners and teachers of PaR often talk about ‘dislocating knowledge’,<sup>6</sup> about ‘cultural unlearning’,<sup>7</sup> and about the production of an alternative type of knowledge.

Both the critical dislocation and the creative production of knowledge are related to two discourses within academic research. The first centres on the idea that practical/artistic research is a *canonical provocation* to traditional academic research, which expands the thinking and the doing beyond well-known practices of reading and writing, and which questions established norms for academic socialisation and *Habitus*. The second discourse centres on a new understanding of *embodied knowledge*, which raises questions about the acquisition and transmission of knowledge through bodily practices. In the following, I will discuss both discourses with our praxeology of theatre historiography in mind.

## Canonical provocation

In ‘Research in a Post-Normal World’, published in 2015, Peter O’Connor and Michael Anderson offer a very critical view on the state of research at universities today, describing it as a business on neoliberal terms. Although they write from an Australian/New Zealand perspective, we may recognise aspects of this neoliberal research model in our own working conditions:

[Research as business] is cut-throat, competitive and often self-serving. It is an outcome of a neo-liberal business and market model imposed on universities, one which celebrates the individual at the expense of the collective, with highly attuned accountability measures based often on the likelihood of how the research will benefit both the university and the researcher.<sup>8</sup>

6. Kershaw, ‘Practice as Research’, 84.

7. Urmimala Sarkar Munsri, ‘Practice-Informed Pedagogies of Cultural Unlearning’, in *International Performance Research Pedagogies: Towards an Unconditional Discipline?*, ed. Sruti Bala, Milija Gluhovic, Hanna Korsberg, and Kati Röttger (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 139–149: 140–141.

8. Peter O’Connor and Michael Anderson, *Applied Theatre: Research: Radical Departures* (Sydney: Bloomsbury Publishing, eBook, 2015), 3–4.



To O'Connor and Anderson, 'applied theatre' is a method that allows us to counter these business-inspired principles of research, and to break away from the market logic of academic writing. We are all familiar with principles such as the linear structures of funding schemes, the commodification of knowledge items, and the way to market a study programme successfully, and the extent to which these principles impact our research and teaching designs, and how difficult it is to 'queer' such institutional and structural demands with innovative and non-aligned research ideas. In the humanities, and particularly in the field of arts studies, art-based research can challenge traditional ways of both representing and evaluating research:

If the world cannot be reduced to numbers or words alone, arts-based research challenges traditional research's demand for validation and verification. It rejects the notion of singular truths or clear answers, instead searching for contrasting nuances, revealing ambiguities and complex multiple truths.<sup>9</sup>

While it certainly seems appealing to turn to theatre practice in order to expand the scope of our scholarly research, I think there is more at stake. As German philosopher and critic Uwe Wirth insists, the progress of scholarly thinking and research relies heavily on the interplay of the canonising and de-canonising of methods, theories, and paradigms. He describes how the interplay of professional and dilettante modes might generate new thinking and new types of academic output.<sup>10</sup> In that sense, theatrical practice within the framework of academic theatre studies – which does not aspire to become professional – might allow scholars to operate in a non-normative (i.e. a 'dilettante') mode. Wirth claims that the dilettante mode within research flourishes when the 'intellectual mode of the frontier' interacts with theoretical and conceptual research frameworks. It follows then that the performative practice not only provides us with an emotional, unsettling experience; it also feeds back into the scholarly epistemology, enabling us to develop our field and modes of thinking.

9. O'Connor and Anderson, *Applied Theatre*, 24.

10. Uwe Wirth, 'Dilettantische Konjekturen', in *Dilettantismus als Beruf*, ed. Safia Azzouni and Uwe Wirth (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2010), 11–30: 24. My translation.



## Embodied knowledge

In a similar vein, dance historian Susan Leigh Foster advocates for the creation of a different type of knowledge when she takes the concept of ‘kinaesthetic empathy’ from dance practice and movement therapy and links it with historiographical perspectives on dance.<sup>11</sup> In her introduction to *Choreographing History*, she is critical of those types of historiography that affirm learned patterns of ‘disembodied’ research and writing:

From [authorial voices] they have learned that pronouncements about the past should issue in sure and impartial tones. They have deduced that historians’ bodies should not affiliate with their subjects nor with fellow historians who likewise labor over the secrets of the past. Instead, those voices within past histories teach the practice of stillness, a kind of stillness that spreads across time and space, a stillness that masquerades as omniscience. By bestilling themselves, modestly, historians accomplish the transformation into universal subject that can speak for all.<sup>12</sup>

Instead, historians should become aware of their own corporeal performances when writing, reading, thinking. They will then be able to activate their kinaesthetic and empathetic relationship to the historical bodies they are studying. By affiliating their own ‘bodily theotics’ – that is, their bodily practices, bodily knowledge, and meaning-making – with those performed by the historical bodies, they gain insight into past practices:

Circulating around and through the partitions of any established practice and reverberating at the interstices among distinct practices, theotics of bodily practices, like images of the historical body, are deduced from acts of comparison between past and present, from rubbing one kind of historical document against others. In the frictive encounters between texts, such as those expressing aesthetic praise, medical insights, proscriptive conduct, and recreational pursuits, theotics of bodily significance begin to consolidate.<sup>13</sup>

11. Susan Leigh Foster, ‘An Introduction to Moving Bodies: Choreographing History’, in *Choreographing History*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 3–21. Foster refers to John Martin as an inspiration when using the term ‘kinaesthetic empathy’; see John Martin, *Introduction to Dance* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1939).

12. Foster, *Choreographing History*, 7.

13. Foster, *Choreographing History*, 8.

When a past becomes embodied, says Foster, a dialogue emerges between the historian and the historical practices. Consequently, then, both the historian and the historical narrative undergo a transformation:

As historians' bodies affiliate with documents about bodies of the past, both past and present bodies redefine their identities. As historians assimilate the theories of past bodily practices, those practices begin to designate their own progressions. As translations from moved event to written text occur, the practices of moving and writing partner each other. And as emerging accounts about past bodies encounter the body of constraints that shape the writing of history, new narrative forms present themselves.<sup>14</sup>

Foster supports a corporeal investment in historical research on past practices and performances. While her main argument concerns the imaginative affiliation of past and present, she does not take reenactments of historical practices into account. I would argue, however, that the corporeal self-awareness and imaginative creativity of the historian is enhanced when we are involved in, or directly experience, historicising performances. The kinaesthetic empathy does not then rely on textual and visual sources alone; it can draw on the aesthetic experience as well. The historian's body then acquires tacit knowledge through her/his senses.

We deal here with the fundamental concept of embodied knowledge as 'tacit knowledge'. Michael Polanyi coined this concept in the 1950s, describing it as a 'knowing how', as opposed to a 'knowing that'. The latter can be acquired and transmitted through reading and writing; the former only through corporeal practices and experiences. In our case, these practices and experiences are related to the corporeal knowledge of performance. Doing practical exercises, performing on stage, and experiencing performances can give us access to a specific knowledge of theatre, and while we perform and participate, we also demonstrate or represent our knowledge of the art form.

This transmission of knowledge through corporeal experience and performance touches on both epistemological and historiographical aspects, as Diana Taylor has emphasised in her seminal book *The*

14. Foster, *Choreographing History*, 8.

*Archive and the Repertoire*, in which she introduces the concept of ‘the repertoire’ as an embodied archive that needs to be explored in order to give a full picture of past and present performing practices and cultural performances. While the archive provides us with texts and objects, these are unable to tell us about performing action and corporeal aspects:

Repertoire, etymologically ‘a treasury, an inventory’, also allows for individual agency, referring also to ‘the finder, discoverer’, and meaning ‘to find out’. The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there’, being a part of the transmission. As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning.<sup>15</sup>

A lived and performed repertoire both preserves and changes the performance while transmitting the corporeal action. Taylor introduces a practical historiographical approach, drawing on the concept of oral history but emphasising the performing body. The concept of the repertoire as a living archive and a corporeal transmission of knowledge makes us aware of the fact that the historiography of theatre only explores the performative past to a very limited extent so long as it is restricted to the study of text- and object-based sources.

Kinaesthetic empathy (Foster), tacit knowledge (Polanyi), and the historiographical repertoire (Taylor) are the conceptual pillars of my practice-led historiography of theatre. I will now turn to a discussion of the aesthetic dimensions of these corporeal approaches and how they contribute to the dislocation and production of knowledge.

## Aesthetic epistemologies

In the following, my argument will be based on a post-Kantian epistemology that links aesthetic experience to the creation of knowledge. In his *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Immanuel Kant locates an experience of cognition (*Erkenntnis*) within the process of aesthetic judgement.<sup>16</sup> The experience of beauty initiates a free play of the senses that animates our cognitive abilities. However, as he includes both art

15. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham NC and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 20.

16. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (vol. 4 of *Kant's Critical Assessments*), ed. Ruth F. Chadwick (London: Routledge, 1992).

and nature in his concept of beauty, Kant argues on a more general basis. Friedrich Schiller, on the other hand, in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), turns specifically to the encounter of human beings with works of art as an aesthetic practice that will lead to an aesthetic state of mind, and which harmonises the relationship between our physical senses and our cognitive abilities.<sup>17</sup> He embeds his concept of aesthetic education in the context of the political aim of shaping a new and peaceable humankind that will overcome violent struggles and oppression.

My praxeological approach to theatre historiography draws on the ideas of Kant and Schiller in order to promote the aesthetic experience as a methodological tool, a tool that we may use to investigate historical theatre practices. Our interest in historical practices from the second half of the eighteenth century did not focus on the formal and structural aspects of the texts, but on the reenactment of practices that embody specific cultural-historical frameworks and processes performatively. Our approach was based on the recognition that theatre and performance are human and cultural practices that may challenge our ways of thinking and living. As the German philosopher Georg Bertram has put it:

Works of art challenge human practices either by confirming or by changing them, and in either case expanding them through these processes. At the basis of such a notion of art is the view of art as a reflexive practice: a practice that refers reflectively to other practices in life.<sup>18</sup>

In this way, artistic practices – in our case, theatre – are linked to the cultural-historical realities by which they are framed. Theatre practices provide orientation in our lives; we reflect and reshape our thinking and doing through aesthetic experience within a given cultural-historical framework. We should not regard this as a simple pedagogical equation – theatre teaches morals, and we adopt them – but rather understand the theatrical practice we are involved in when

17. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, ed. and tr. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

18. Georg Bertram, *Kunst als menschliche Praxis: Eine Ästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2014), 98. My translation.

we perform, participate, perceive, in terms of a performativity that shapes our identities and our modes of thinking. But how might such a notion of theatre and aesthetic experience affect our scholarly search for a better understanding of historical theatre practices? Here we need to engage in *reflecting on the reflective processes* in art practice, while we collate past and present ideas and experiences of theatre. What happens in our minds when we witness reenactments of historical theatre practices?

Reflection on the aesthetic experience of participating in practical experiments and performances occurs on at least two levels. On one level, we expand our thinking through doing; we experience an ‘unlearning’ of learnt certainties, and acquire new and different kinds of knowledge. As a historian, I experience how my new embodied knowledge is at odds, or rather in negotiation, with past practices and the provided historicised experiences. And I get a Kantian ‘aesthetic pleasure’ from experiencing the enlivening of my mind and my thinking through the aesthetic encounter. I joyfully observe myself generating new knowledge through the sensual experience. On another level, I embrace the historicity of the revived practice cognitively as well as sensually. I try to find traces of the historical-cultural and epistemological practices in my aesthetic experience. What historical reality was made tangible, confirmed, and expanded through the historical art practice? My empathetically historicising experience creates a Fosterian<sup>19</sup> affiliation between past and present, a friction that arises when negotiating different documents, sources – and, I should add, aesthetic experiences.

The most difficult task involved in this kind of praxeology of theatre historiography is to verbalise the research results and fit them into the academic framework. How can we even talk or write about these experiences? The concept of ‘praxeology’, as used today within sociology, seems helpful as we articulate the practical and aesthetic experience on the basis of theatre historiography.

19. See Foster, *Choreographing History*, 8.

## Praxeology

Andrzej Wirth provided a concept of praxeology for theatre studies when he established the Applied Theatre Studies programme at the University of Giessen in the 1980s. He stated that praxeology was a method that allows us to pass from the space of theory into the space of practice in order to verify, falsify, or cancel theory.<sup>20</sup> New meaning is created in that in-between where there is neither right nor wrong. Although this concept is no longer used by theatre scholars in Giessen, I would like to examine its relevance and implications for artistic-academic research.

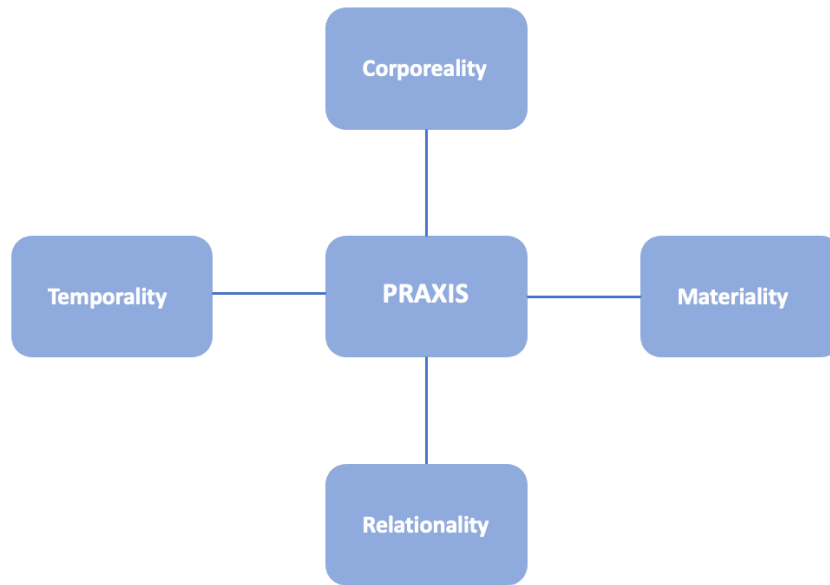
It is worthwhile looking at how the basic parameters of praxeology have recently been reformulated by leading sociologists. They re-examine their practice theories through the lens of the performative turn by returning to the thinking of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens. From the praxeological perspective of these researchers, the cultural and everyday practices of human beings are at the core of the establishment, and even the emergence, of society. In fact, we can regard theatre as one of these cultural practices that played a role in the establishment of society. And in this case, we merely operate with a sociocultural concept of theatre, as the aesthetic dimension of theatre as an art form has not yet been taken into account.<sup>21</sup> However, the sociological concept of ‘praxis’ includes important aspects that are worth considering. Hilmar Schäfer gives a basic praxeological definition of ‘practices’:

Practices are the doing, speaking, feeling, and thinking that we invariably share with others. The fact that we have them in common with others is a precondition for an understanding of the world that enables us to move and act meaningfully. Practices are established before the individual acts, and they enable, structure, and limit this acting. They are not only performed *by us*; they also exist *around us*, and in a historical sense *before us*. They circulate independently of individual subjects, though they depend on them in order to be performed and represented.<sup>22</sup>

20. Wirth borrowed this term from his teacher, the Polish philosopher Tadeusz Kotarbiński, and his examination of the parameters governing human agency. It combines the process of thinking and its logic (theory) with its purposeful implementation in practice. See Andrzej Wirth, ‘Adepten der Giessener Schule: Die Neuen Coolen’, in *Grenzgänge: Das Theater und die anderen Künste*, ed. Gabriele Brandstetter, Helga Finter, and Markus Weißendorf (Tübingen: Narr, 1998), 317–326: 317.

21. A fruitful discussion of the relation between art as a social practice and art as an aesthetic practice is found in Bertram, *Kunst als menschliche Praxis*.

22. Hilmar Schäfer (ed.), *Praxistheorie: Ein soziologisches Forschungsprogramm* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016), 11. My translation.



**Figure 2.** Model of Social Praxis. Graphics: Meike Wagner ©. License: CC BY-NC.

The relation between the concepts of ‘performance’ and ‘performativity’ becomes clear when Schäfer describes *relationality* (interactivity), *temporality* (process), *corporeality* (embodied knowledge), and *materiality* (relevance and use of artefacts) as the basic elements of social praxis (Fig. 2).<sup>23</sup>

Hilmar Schäfer writes that in constructivist materialism ‘practices can never have essential sources’. They emerge through performance. Formations of praxis must therefore ‘always be created materially anew from event-based practices’. And they can only be understood as ‘materialisations of practices in the act, which by definition are events’.<sup>24</sup>

The parameters *relationality*, *temporality*, *corporeality*, and *materiality* allow for a multi-layered approach to research in historical theatre practices. *Relationality* is relevant on two levels: in the ‘now’

23. Schäfer, *Praxistheorie*, 13.

24. Schäfer, *Praxistheorie*, 72. My translation. Schäfer uses the word *Ereignis* which cannot be directly translated as ‘event’. *Ereignis* involves an element of ‘it happens’ (as in ‘I am experiencing a happening’), which gets lost in translation.



of the performance (or rather, the theatre practice), and in the ‘then’ of the performance (or rather, occurrence) of the historical practice. On the historical level, we need to take the cultural-historical and aesthetic context into account, that is, the questions of the historical appearance, dissemination, and experience of this practice. And these questions are equally important on the contemporary level, although we can reflect on our own involvement in and experience of the practice at the same time, that is, who takes part in and enables the practice? What is their role in the practical performance?

The issue of *corporeality* also involves a negotiation between a present and a past situation. The actors and singers we work with operate with a different repertoire of implicit knowledge than the repertoire that was at work in the eighteenth century. Although the actors and singers have been trained in historical practices – which they might have learnt from a catalogue of historical gestures derived from textual and visual sources – they do not have ‘natural access’ to these historical acting practices. The same goes for the spectator and the theatre historian. The performance I see, hear, and feel is alien to my senses, which have been trained through watching modern performances. I can both get used to the codified gestures and even find pleasure in watching them, though this requires some adaptation, and I can derive a very specific pleasure from transforming this alien aesthetic experience into an experience of gaining knowledge on a corporeal level. In this way, I explore the embodied side of Kant’s aesthetic judgement: my senses are subject to an unusual experience, but this experience creates new knowledge inside me. The ‘alienness’ of eighteenth-century gesturing and acting, mentioned above, no longer remains alien to me, then, but rather becomes a welcome challenge to my intellect and my emotional senses – an aesthetic experience.

A focus on *temporality* raises the issue of the practical process that continually creates the social as well as the aesthetic. Within the historiographical theatre practice, reflection on the historicising of the performance is crucial. We have no direct access to the historical performance

situation, but the distance between the ‘now’ and the ‘then’ creates an important tension, and the model narrative of theatre history emerges as problematic. Our notion of ‘Baroque theatre’, for example, dissolves into multiple possibilities when we start to investigate individual theatrical practices from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>25</sup>

*Materiality* and the issue of the relevance and use of artefacts are central to my concept of a historiographical theatre practice. For me historiographical research into eighteenth-century theatre spaces involves an emphasis on material aspects, although the practical perspective is more important than approaches drawn from art history or architectural history. In the historiographical work of Performing Premodernity we have been truly inspired by the concept of *site-specificity*, i.e. performances that are ‘conceived for, mounted within, and conditioned by the particulars of found spaces, existing social situations or locations both used and unused’.<sup>26</sup>

To take Drottningholm as an example, we regard this theatre from 1766 as an instrument that demands a specific technique from those who perform (in) it. Its wooden space is a particularly sensitive instrument, the full aural, visual, spatial, and energetic potential of which unfolds only when the practice attunes to it. For example, a director who overstuffs the stage with scenography that disconnects the movements and actions of the performers from the surrounding theatrical space will tend to disturb the performance of the space as an instrument.<sup>27</sup> The question is then, whether such interesting *Regieeinfälle* are really staged at the right spot. However, we should not dogmatically historicise any theatre practice. In that case, every theatre space might be regarded as a historical space that only allows for a limited number of ‘correct’ theatre practices. This is not the aim of our historiographical theatre practice.

To summarise the benefits and risks of our praxeology of theatre historiography, I would like to make clear that critical theatre practices of this kind can offer valuable insights into historical theatre. At the same time, praxeology allows us to reflect on our own epistemological

25. See section 3, ‘Doing praxeological theatre historiography’.

26. Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2001), 23. On site-specificity, see e.g., Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (London: Routledge, 2000); Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Basingstoke NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Anna Birch and Joanne Tompkins (eds.), *Performing Site-Specific Theatre: Politics, Place, Practice* (Basingstoke NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

27. This happened, for example, in the 2016 production of *Don Giovanni*, in which the director built an extra theatre platform and wooden cage on the original stage, ignoring the material aspects of the historical space. For Willmar Sauter’s analysis of this performance, see chapter 11 in this volume, ‘An Aesthetics of Absence’.

and academic practices: our historical narratives are challenged through the practical experience; the doubts that praxeology raises enter our familiar ways of thinking and researching and provide intellectually stimulating impulses; and finally, praxeology demands a constant and creative repositioning of the theories and methods of the theatre historian.

### **Doing praxeological theatre historiography**

In the following, I will discuss three specific historiographical issues that arose during the rehearsals and staging of our experimental theatre productions: 1) the creation of sources and experiences; 2) negotiations between the Self and the Other; and 3) models of theatre history vs. the diversity of scenic practices.

### **The creation of new sources and experiences**

By mounting productions of historical works, we produce both historiographical sources and – as paradoxically as it may sound – historiographical experiences. Normally historians cannot experience the historical productions that they research. R. G. Collingwood first discussed ‘imagination’ as a source of historical narratives in the 1940s.<sup>28</sup> When historians are deeply buried in archival sources for weeks on end, only loosely connected to the outside world, visions of the past may emerge in their minds that provide their fragmentary findings with a coherent meaning. It is another matter altogether, though, to have a real aesthetic experience of a theatre performance that is closely linked to the historical sources that they research. In the now of a theatre performance, textual knowledge turns into a corporeal experience that feeds back into the reflection on the textual knowledge. The following example is drawn from a workshop that took place

28. Robin George Collingwood, ‘The Historical Imagination’, in *The Idea of History* (Oxford University Press, 1946), 232–249.



**Figures 3a and 3b.** Workshop of the Performing Premodernity research group: Laila Cathleen Neumann (Zerlina) and João Luís Paixão (Don Giovanni) rehearsing a scene from *Don Giovanni* by W. A. Mozart. Drottningholm Palace Theatre, 2015. Photos: Maria Gullstam ©. License: CC BY-NC.

at the Drottningholm Palace Theatre in October 2015, when the space revealed its potential both as a musical and affective instrument.

During the experiment, two young singers – Laila Cathleen Neuman as Zerlina and João Luís Paixão as Don Giovanni – performed the duettino ‘Là ci darem la mano’ from W. A. Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (1787) (Figs. 3a and 3b). We asked them to assume different positions on the stage to explore the sound quality of the historic stage. The more they approached the backdrop, the ‘duller’ their voices sounded. When they sang towards the sides of the stage, their voices seemed to be swallowed by the gaps between the wings. When they finally positioned themselves in the proscenium frame, we realised that the sound was projected very strongly into the auditorium. The

proscenium functioned as an amplifier of their voices. When they sang towards the audience from this position, the whole theatre was filled with a full and brilliant sound, which reached to the very back of the auditorium.

The proscenium also functioned as a channel for the affective energy of the performers. To experiment with the representation of their social status, their emotional relationship, and the mutual manipulation of the two characters, we again tried out several positions with the performers standing within the proscenium. Following depictions in historical sources on eighteenth-century performance, they stood a little apart from each other, not facing each other, but keeping their faces turned towards each other in a 45-degree angle, while their bodies rested in contrapposto, their arms slightly bent. This certainly does not agree with modern ideas on how to stage passion and eroticism. Nowadays a couple involved in passionate seduction would tend to be very close physically, probably embracing, or looking straight into one another's eyes. When looking at depictions of performances of such scenes on the eighteenth-century stage, we often wonder how this seemingly unemotional spatial and bodily arrangement could induce the audience to shed tears, sob, cry, and even faint, as sources often report. When I felt the presence of our young singers on the stage, however, I was overwhelmed by an almost tangible energy between the two, which moved me to tears. What had happened? Reflecting on the incident, I understood that it was the energy and sound of their voices that was directed towards the sides and along the frame of the proscenium, and which returned directly to the two singers, so that their voices blended, embracing them both. No textual or visual sources would have been able to communicate the experience of the impact of the proscenium on the channelling of energy. The stage simply turned into an affective instrument. The tension between the visual distance and the aural embrace, which was due to the spatial dynamics and the power of the sound, created a deeply emotional moment.

The aesthetic experience that emerged in this experimental situation led to an extension of my epistemological approach. It became clear to me that a praxeology of theatre historiography may grant us a deeper understanding of the theatre practices of the late eighteenth century. The historic stage of the Drottningholm theatre, with its original machinery and layout, demonstrates the effect caused by the interplay of spatial structure and proscenium with sound and transmission. It becomes even clearer how crucial the instrumental function of the stage was for historical theatre practices when we compare Drottningholm to such historic theatres as Confidencen (built in 1753) at Ulriksdal Palace outside Stockholm which is the result of a historicising reconstruction, and the Margravial Opera House (built in 1748) in Bayreuth where the stage was totally remodelled in the late nineteenth century. In Confidencen, the historiographic research resulted in the construction of a historicising proscenium, which is considerably smaller than that at Drottningholm. In the Bayreuth theatre, the modernisation of the stage led to a total deconstruction of the proscenium that now appears very flat and pushed back towards the main stage. Although the historical auditorium, which is mainly a wooden structure, still provides us with an excellent acoustic, we can only imagine how strongly the proscenium would have supported the sound quality in the eighteenth century. Such aspects of historical theatre practice only become apparent through practical experimentation. Hence, any reflection on historical staging needs to take the instrumental potential of each historic theatre space into account. However, the practical conditions and means involved in historical theatre productions cannot be accessed immediately.

### **Negotiations between the Self and the Other**

Praxeological theatre historiography challenges our ideas of the Self and the Other, forcing us to negotiate between different contradictory

experiences, or to accept their different-ness outright. When scholars study eighteenth-century philosophical and aesthetic theories, which had a great impact on the art practices of the time, they do not find it difficult to discuss them critically or to relate them to theoretical concepts from our own time. Our academic education has trained us to engage in sophisticated thinking on an advanced abstract level. It is more difficult for us to harmonise our inner aesthetic compass with the experience of historically informed performances. When we try to translate historical notions of ‘beauty’, ‘passion’, or ‘affect’ into an actual historicising staging, the results are not always aesthetically convincing. In Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s and Horace Coignet’s *Pygmalion* (1770), for example, the expression of the artist’s passion is of great significance. During the performance I attended at the Castle Theatre in Český Krumlov in 2015, I did not have access to those feelings.<sup>29</sup> I found the pathos-laden gestures and the sobbing declamation too alien for my modern sensibilities. Nevertheless, it did move me at certain moments, for example when João Luís Paixão as Pygmalion managed to create a musical flow in his declamation that gave full expression to his anguish, and when the transition between the actor’s voice and a musical interlude appeared natural, the music blending seamlessly with the almost singing quality of his declamation.

I found the moment when Pygmalion picked up his hammer and chisel and mimicked the percussive motif in Rousseau’s score – ‘toc, toc, toc’ – difficult to accept.<sup>30</sup> I felt this was a kind of ridiculously redundant acting that would be unacceptable in any modern staging. However, the illustration of the hammer motif appears to be quite demonstrative; it cannot be ignored. When I raised the issue with the production team, it turned out that other members of the group had had no difficulties accepting the synchronised action. We discussed whether the sound of a real chisel striking a stone offstage might have a better effect, and whether this was a question of historical vs. modern acting, or rather a question of good vs. bad acting.

29. For a video of the performance, see the Performing Premodernity homepage: <https://performingpremodernity.com/anthology/>.

30. Coignet wrote the original music for *Pygmalion*, assisted by Rousseau who wrote some parts of the score. These include the music that accompanies Pygmalion’s hammering. See Horace Coignet, ‘Particularités sur J.J. Rousseau, pendant le séjour qu’il fit à Lyon en 1770’, 1821, quoted in English by Jacqueline Waeber, ‘Introduction (English Version)’, in Horace Coignet and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Pygmalion: Scène lyrique*, ed. Jacqueline Waeber (Geneva: Éditions Universitaire-Conservatoire de Musique, 1997), xv–xxi: xvii.



But then I learned that Rousseau had specifically prescribed Pygmalion's strokes in the original score, for which he had composed this particular music. There was no way around it: one simply could not ignore or delete this stage action just to make the performance more accessible to a modern audience. So how could we deal with the situation? As this production had an important experimental element, we reflected on this stage action, not accepting it as a ridiculous repetition but concluding that it was a demonstration of a connection between music and gesture that brought us back to Rousseau's central ideas about the interrelation of music, acting, and declamation, and specifically to *Pygmalion* as Rousseau's particular theatrical experiment in which he was trying to build a bridge between the art forms.<sup>31</sup>

As a methodology, praxeology can help us become aware of our own perceptions during a performance while providing us with a framework for articulating and reflecting on the foreignness of our aesthetic experiences. My own experience of the performance led to further research, and in the end, it enhanced my knowledge of the historical practice. Rather than leading to a depreciation of that historical practice, my initial negative reaction led to further thinking, prompted by the aesthetic experience of the historicising performance.

### **A theatre history model vs. diversity of scenic practices**

Praxeology distances itself from fixed models of historical theatre, focusing rather on multiple performed practices. Within today's art and theatre practices, we acknowledge a wide range of performative practices and would reject the notion of a single, dominant model, whereas working within traditional, text-based theatre history, we easily accept certain ideal models as a natural part of the historical narrative. We tend to categorise historical theatre practices as such ideal models, stating, for example, that Baroque theatre practice

31. For a full discussion of Rousseau's motives for creating *Pygmalion*, and of the relation of the piece to his theoretical writings on theatre and music, see Maria Gullstam, 'Pygmalion's Power Struggles: Rousseau, Rameau and Galathée', in *Rousseau on Stage: Playwright, Musician, Spectator*, ed. Maria Gullstam and Michael O'Dea (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2017), 119–137; see also chapter 7 in this volume, Maria Gullstam, 'Rousseau's *Pygmalion* as Research on Stage'.

included certain fundamental features, codified acting being one of the most prominent in theatre historiography. When we take a closer look at the historical sources and works, however, we find a great variety of theatre practices that do not fit into a single formula. One traditional solution – which allows us to save and maintain the model – is to describe these practices as deviations from the rule, or as extra-theatrical practices that do not belong to Baroque theatre. An opposing strategy is to allow for deviations up to the point when the model is no longer recognisable, but dissolves into a general idea of ‘eighteenth-century theatre’. Today’s idea of a dramatic work as a single, unchanged entity also plays a role in the historiographical fixation of a theatre model for the eighteenth century. Often these texts, libretti, and scores have been transmitted in a coherent published form that no longer speaks about the many adaptations, rewritings, and transformations that the work underwent during the lived practice of eighteenth-century performance. Even though scores and texts were also circulated in printed form at the time, artists and audiences alike were aware that they were dealing with works in specific performative guises. Accordingly, we should not forget that the textual sources we find in the archives today document certain staged moments rather than represent the works as such. In their contributions to this volume, both Mark Tatlow and Maria Gullstam discuss the tensions between the idea of the work and its performative transformations through the theatre practices of the time.<sup>32</sup>

Praxeological experimentation allows us to rethink the categories of norm and deviation and to embrace the idea of a diversity of historical theatre practices. The historiographical theatre project is a way to represent and promote the idea of a more differentiated set of historical practices. However, we need to be aware that a theatre production always entails the danger of commodification, as it turns theatre practice into a product and then fosters the reception of this product as a historical model. Our production of *Pygmalion*,

32. See chapters 5 and 7 in this volume, Mark Tatlow, ‘Haydn’s *Arianna a Naxos* and the Search for an Affective Practice’, and Maria Gullstam, ‘Rousseau’s *Pygmalion* as Research on Stage’.

which was never meant to provide a model, in fact received a lot of attention from theatre scholars who wanted to purchase the production or its documentation as materials for teaching and scholarly research. To give in to these demands, however, is to run the risk of creating a model and commodifying our own work and research. We need to find a balance between these tendencies and our own attempt to communicate and distribute the results of our research. We need to insist that our research is an ongoing process, and not the creation of a product. Therefore, we will continue to create academic formats that counter and accompany the theatrical effects of our praxeological work. As for *Pygmalion*, this means transcribing the performance again and again to reopen our discussions on the piece and on the production, allowing for alternative versions of its praxeological historiography.

## Conclusion

Praxeological theatre historiography interrogates historiographical documents through practical experimentation. The historian's knowledge and epistemology are expanded and developed through the investigation of these performative formats. This approach is not invested in the 'reconstruction' of historical theatre works, but rather subscribes to a contested construction of historical practices, thereby providing the field of theatre studies with a new critical-historical narrative. The essential precondition of this historiographical method is the creative interplay of academic and artistic research, as seen in Performing Premodernity's work on theatre practices from the second half of the eighteenth century. The performative and experience-based negotiation between what theatre meant historically and what it means today is valuable for the creation of new historical narratives beyond the frame of reference of our research project, to other periods and other fields of theatre historiography.