

9. Swimming in the Water of Theatrical Conventions: The Performers' Perspective

Laila Cathleen Neuman & João Luís Paixão in conversation with Willmar Sauter & Magnus Tessing Schneider

The Performing Premodernity research project included several practical theatre activities, such as full operatic productions, workshops, and courses for singers and musicians. Two young artists participated in these activities: the baritone João Luís Paixão and the soprano Laila Cathleen Neuman, both of whom are based in the Netherlands. Their involvement with the project led them to continue their artistic research at PhD level. This interview was conducted online in December 2017.

Pygmalion

The production of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's and Horace Coignet's Pygmalion from 1770 was the first time that Paixão and Neuman were involved in the project. The team that curated Pygmalion included costume researcher Petra Dotlačilová, Rousseau scholar Maria Gullstam, tailor Anna Kjellsdotter, dramaturge and theatre historian Magnus Tessing Schneider, conductor Mark Tatlow, and rhetoric teacher and theatre historian Jed Wentz. The production premiered in June 2015 in the Czech Republic, at the well-preserved theatre originally built in 1766 as part of the State Castle of Český Krumlov. In August 2015 Pygmalion was revived for a performance in the grand hall of the historic House of Nobility in Stockholm, and again in 2016 as part of the annual conference of the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR). In 2018 it was performed in the Utrecht Early Music Festival.¹

Willmar Sauter (WS): João, as a performer how did you process and respond to the historical information that Magnus, Maria, and Jed gave you concerning the original production of the work?

1. For videos of the performances at Český Krumlov and at Riddarhuset in 2015, and in Utrecht in 2018, see the homepage of Performing Premodernity: <https://performingpremodernity.com/anthology/>.

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João Luís Paixão (JLP): In line with the work we had done with Jed on rhetorical *actio*, I tended to approach the action of *Pygmalion* from the outside, while at the same time trying to identify internally the causes behind every given expression. This is an ongoing process, of course, since we are not experts on eighteenth-century acting, though we are perhaps beginning to become more expert on some eighteenth-century acting techniques. The preliminary work on the piece also allowed me to try out various hypotheses regarding acting. Magnus' insights and views on eighteenth-century performance helped shape *Pygmalion*'s larger sections, and his eye for variety and contrast proved fundamental: it is dangerously easy, while handling unfamiliar acting skills, to fall into some kind of heavy and monotonous declamation style... Also, the original music for the piece proved to be an unsettling factor. The music fixes the pantomime and anchors the whole narration at certain key moments. We know that Rousseau put emphasis on the pantomimic passages, and on how they reveal certain intense, pathetic moments where words are insufficient. Since Mark, Jed, and I are all musicians, we are very susceptible to stimuli provided by the music, and the music sometimes highlights a specific passion over another, and sometimes surprisingly so, in a way that changed our vision and understanding of the text. Moreover, some particularly charged concepts, that are only graspable to those who have delved deeply into Rousseau's thought, turned out to change the course of the way we interpreted some scenes. For example, Maria's attentiveness to Rousseau's concept of *amour-propre*, with its negative connotations, radically affected the emotional tone in one of the scenes, from pity and self-indulgence to shame and aversion.

WS: Laila, how did the music make you react? Although as Galathée you were standing in a fixed position, you were nevertheless part of the performance, and you heard the music.

Laila Cathleen Neuman (LCN): It was a peculiar process of simultaneously trying both to be a part and not to be a part of the



Figure 1. Laila Cathleen Neuman (Galathée) and João Luís Paixão (Pygmalion) in *Pygmalion* by J.-J. Rousseau and H. Coignet. Ulriksdal Palace Theatre (Confidencen), 2019. Photo: Eva Frykevall ©. License: CC BY-NC.

performance. The music for Galathée’s ‘awakening’ (Fig. 1) has a very light quality. It was difficult not to open my eyes, or to step down from the pedestal in the same rhythm as the music. This would have created a doll-like effect, which would have disturbed the emotional effect of João’s performance. We rehearsed that scene many times so as not to destroy the effect of what went before. In every single performance, throughout the whole piece, the way João spoke, the way

the music was played, and the way he would strike me with the hammer, affected my internal motion, and the way that Galathée came alive. Was our short final dialogue a kind of marriage scene, in which Pygmalion and Galathée look into the future together, or is it their first encounter? Is the moment she comes alive the moment she wakes up, or is it the moment she is created?

JLP: In opera, the music and the text form a coherent whole, so one of the great challenges in *Pygmalion* – which must also have been a challenge in the eighteenth century – was to bring music and declamation into agreement. It took a long time to apply the musical parameters onto the text, such as making use of the whole range of my voice, giving the right length to certain syllables, using the monotone, emphases, or rhythm to intensify certain moments.

WS: You had to deal with many formal aspects when working on *Pygmalion*, but how did you arrive at your character?

JLP: My representation of the character may have been a bit superficial, admittedly, due to the necessity of searching for specific passions for each moment, and to the nature of the transitions from passion to passion, which took up most of my attention. I based some of my views of Pygmalion's character on mythological accounts such as those in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: the events preceding the action, Pygmalion's vows and subsequent moral struggles, his age and social status, etc. However, I am not sure whether Rousseau would have approved of this modern approach to character, where it is provided with more details than are given in the text. Also, there are some indications that the character of Pygmalion might have called for a single dominant passion throughout the play, or throughout larger sections. For example, one might be able to perform the entire role in a melancholy state while adding many nuances of passion, as opposed to performing the role in a kind of neutral state that allows for greater

contrasts between the passions. This interaction of Pygmalion's temperament and his passionate states is something that could be investigated further.

WS: Laila, how did Galathée become a character, given that her position was so different from Pygmalion's?

LCN: Practical circumstances – such as whether the stage is raked or not – end up influencing the way the character is performed. No matter what you may have thought about your character in advance, any performance should be allowed to create its own version of the character, in interaction with the audience. The most important thing was to figure out whether Galathée is alive before she wakes up. However, even that might change according to the way João's performance affected me. During the rehearsal process, I decided that I would not pretend that she doesn't breathe or blink, though I looked down as much as I could so that people would see my blinking less.

WS: Meike [Wagner, ed.] felt that the moment Pygmalion strikes the stones with his hammer was ridiculous, since the music simply repeats the sound of the strokes. I remember that people were laughing at this point, especially at Český Krumlov, although this effect is something Rousseau himself prescribes. Yet it created an interesting contrast to the moment when Pygmalion wants to strike the statue with his hammer, which he then drops (Fig. 2). This made a lot of noise, which gave me goose bumps. I don't think I would have experienced that contrast so strongly if it had not been for the 'ridiculous' hammering at the beginning.

LCN: The moment Pygmalion strikes Galathée is a moment when he loses control, and in the performance that moment might go wrong – he could strike her for real! – so I felt it much more strongly than it might have seemed from the outside. It was a moment when anything could happen.



Figure 2. João Luís Paixão (Pygmalion) and Laila Cathleen Neuman (Galathée) in *Pygmalion* by J.-J. Rousseau and H. Coignet. State Castle of Český Krumlov, 2015. Photo: Libor Sváček ©. License: CC BY-NC.

JLP: The combination of music and pantomime was probably the pinnacle of the art of acting in opera in the eighteenth century! Whereas today we associate pantomime with cartoons and clownery, and when we perform eighteenth-century operas, we tend to deliberately avoid these caricatures. Pantomime is an old tradition that was originally associated with more serious forms, but now has trickled down to what we regard as childish slapstick genres far removed from the

sublime passions. I think of the sublime passions as the door into eighteenth-century theatre. They call for emphatic body language. They are the only way to reach those peaks of expression.

WS: Let us go on to discuss the differences between performing at Český Krumlov and in the House of Nobility, with their different audiences, spaces, acoustics, and historical environments. What were your experiences, and what were the advantages and disadvantages of the two places?

JLP: Although Český Krumlov is a historical horseshoe theatre with an intimate acoustic, the visual and auditory experience did not seem to be in synch. The auditorium was darkened, which tended to make the audience disappear, and this led me more in the direction of fourth-wall acting. In the House of Nobility, on the other hand, we were trying to make a theatre out of a non-theatrical space, which perhaps was closer to that of the Hôtel de Ville in Lyon where *Pygmalion* was first performed. My gaze sometimes met that of a spectator, even when I was just scanning the audience. There were moments when I gained a lot from addressing the public directly.

Drottningholm

*The two artists also collaborated with the research team in October 2016 during a workshop in the Drottningholm theatre (see chapters 2 and 3 in this volume, ‘On a Praxeology of Theatre Historiography’ and ‘Aesthetic Historicity’). Instructed by Mark Tatlow, their first task was to test positions on stage in order to see and hear how various points in this theatre amplified or reduced the acoustics of the space. Two scenes from Mozart’s operas *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786) and *Don Giovanni* (1787) were used to experiment with acoustic and visual effects, both for the performing artists and for the spectators attending*

the workshop. In June 2016 the two artists illustrated stage effects during a lecture-performance by David Wiles, which was part of the conference of the IFTR (see chapter 13 in this volume, 'Presenting the Theatre of Drottningholm').

LCN: The power of the 'magical' spot at Drottningholm, in the middle of the stage, where the acoustic, the light, and the visual angle are all perfect, is not to be underestimated. When I was not standing there, I immediately felt less important, less powerful.

WS: I was surprised by the scene with the Count and Susanna from *Le nozze di Figaro*, in which you moved to different positions, even if we know from the historical sources that it was done this way. I was stunned by the effect it had on me as an audience member: the difference was much greater than I had expected. The books suggest that it solely had to do with social standing – the highest-ranking character standing in the middle, etc. – which sounds somewhat mechanical. I always found it difficult to understand how such a positioning of the actors on stage, when they might not even be looking at each other, could move the audience to tears in a love scene. However, I felt the erotic tension instantly, even though you were standing quite far from each other. It was illuminating to see what the stage itself does to the characters appearing on it.

LCN: In eighteenth-century France and Holland there were few or no rehearsals before a performance of a piece from the standard repertoire, but since the performers mostly used staging positions in a semi-circle, based on the ranking of the characters, it was possible to substitute an actor at short notice as they all knew where to stand. On the other hand, I learned that at Drottningholm, with its raked stage, and with its mechanical waves and thunder and lightning effects, you need to rehearse. One's singing, for instance, cannot be heard during an overlap with the thunder, and so one must choose the right moment for the sound effect.

JLP: I tend to think about these issues in terms of language. For example, you would never accuse German of being a less eloquent language because it lacks Portuguese words. Sometimes our demands on the theatrical conventions are unfair. I think the eighteenth-century audience would have felt very strongly if a certain duet was performed with the artists not standing in their usual positions. The actors worked instinctively: the conventions were the water they were swimming in. They would swim now in one direction, now in another, and they would do so gracefully.

WS: That is an interesting metaphor! The conventions are there to be altered, developed, and used in a dynamic way in the specific situation. Although they were fixed, they were dynamic: there was always room for the performer.

JLP: The dining room at the back of the theatre made a deep impression on me, and I always returned to it when I had the opportunity. Just imagine a whole family of actors, servants, and invited guests in that room, people who live and sleep in the building, while the sets are being carried inside through the big windows. And this happening with the courtiers attending all performances, and with Gustav III dropping by every day to check how the children's dance lessons were going, how that fencing scene was developing, etc. It must have been a very special experience to perform at home for your friends and masters, people you rubbed shoulders with every day, and going from your dining room to the set just ten metres away. You would not practice in some dry, uninspiring room before entering the illusion machine: you practised within the illusion machine itself! That sort of familiarity with the space and the court is inaccessible for us today, but it must have been an important aspect of the building for any dramatic artist at Drottningholm.

WS: It would have made a big difference for the audience as well, of course. We have to make that the topic of another workshop!

Historically Informed Performance

The principles and pitfalls of the Historically Informed Performance movement are discussed in chapter 4, 'Contemporaneity in Historically Informed Performance'. The artists next responded to their responses and experiences to this mode of production.

Magnus Tessing Schneider (MTS): What are the advantages of historical acting principles for you as modern performers communicating with a modern audience?

LCN: I use my knowledge of the stage and the historical gestures in each of my performances. It involves an extended knowledge of one's body and the reactions of the public to what you express. Once you practice the effect of what you express – the use of your eyes and your gestures – you will know better how the audience may react, and it gives you the tools to learn a text easier. Even when rehearsing an oratorio, I use small aspects of historical acting techniques, for example in the way I enter the stage, or the way I bow in a certain dress. I can also see that it helps the students when they learn singing. It has to do with bodily awareness, but it's more than that: it is about practising the thoughts that come before you speak, and about the interconnections of your thoughts and your bodily expression. One of the problems with historical stagings is that the people who are asked to perform in them often lack the tools or the time to practise on the stage itself, or to work with the props, or to get to know the theatre, etc. If you practise these principles, they become natural, which is ultimately what the public wants. 'Naturalness' on stage has been an ideal throughout history, but the idea of what looks natural has changed.

JLP: What looks natural to someone who has been raised among kings and queens might look forced and unnatural to others.

MTS: So, are you trying to initiate the audience into a different version of naturalness?

JLP: Hopefully, people won't notice. It should not be forced on them too explicitly.

WS: Naturalness depends on what is natural in relation to what you do, what you think, and on what your character and your environment are like, even offstage.

JLP: It can look very awkward if we ignore the acting principles that are inscribed into an eighteenth-century, or even a nineteenth-century, opera. The declamation is prescribed by the composition, and I find it sadly lacking to regard it simply as 'touching music'. I think it is possible to turn these conventions into a language that speaks freely to us.