

# Project “Etre et jouer”

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**“Creating protocols for research in acting theory”:** Determining experimental protocols for comparative analysis of methods and processes that the actor uses in order to perform, in today’s international creation.

## 1. Summary of the research project and its scope

The aesthetical changes witnessed in the last thirty years, as well as the circulation of artists and of works of art all over the world, open up a new field for research. The theory of practice finds itself put into question today via the confrontation of approaches between different countries. This is the context of the research project **“Creating protocols for research in acting theory”**. Its aim is to **conceive, experiment and validate practical protocols for a research on the theory of the actor** in today’s international context. These protocols will be used as a basis for a research project submitted to the FNS (or possibly resized to be presented to the HES-SO) under the title **“Being and Acting”**. This project will challenge the protocols in a larger international context, with the wish of establishing a complete theory of the actor, echoing artistic practices today.

The expected results for the first phase of the research consist in **a set of practical exercises displaying uneven acting practices**, repeatable and comparable under scientific standards. They shall then be tested at a larger scale for constants to appear, as well as oppositions and different nuances in the art of acting and directing, going beyond cultural contexts or individual practices.

The permanent intercultural dialogue between practice and theory being a fundamental principle of this project, a partnership that would reflect the large spectrum of occidental drama creation is indispensable. Built between Switzerland, Argentina and Uruguay, it allows a **comparison of dissimilar contemporary acting techniques**. These techniques examine under a new light the presence – may it be real or fictional – of the actor and the difference between the performer and the act. It also enables to **develop an existing network** between institutions and scholars who are close of the practice of drama as well as artist-researchers who are interested by theory. Thus a **universal reach** will be finally provided to the products of this research.

The scope of the research (made more elaborate in point 5. of the present document) consists in three consequential workshops in the three countries named above, in order to formulate a number of exercises that will be tested in different contexts. These will enable the final set of the most effective exercises to emerge, in order to compare the practices of the actor and of directing.

## 2. Latest researches on the subject in the field of performing arts

Since the turning point brought about by the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the birth of stage direction, occidental drama went through permanent evolutions, as well on its textual aspects than on the stage. Today’s diversity in dramatic styles is the result of these multiple changes. Each has been accompanied by (or followed by) considerable progress in drama theory.

May it be Peter Szondi (1956) and his *Theory of Modern Drama*, Hans-Thies Lehmann (2002) and his *Postdramatic Theatre*, or Jean-Pierre Sarrazac (2012) and his *Poétique du drame moderne* (which could be translated as “Poetics of Modern Drama”), drama theoreticians have managed to follow the multiple changes of drama and offer structuring concepts to analyse them. These concepts allowed in turns to display the dissolution of Aristotelian paradigms in theatre, to echo the evolution of written plays, which lost their fundamental status in the representation, being used instead as a material, made of fragments and considered as an equivalent to the other elements of live show: performance, scenography, lighting, sound, or digital arts.

More recently, the achievements of performance studies (Schechner (2008), Fischer-Lichte (2004)), gender theories, Butler (2007), research on devised theatre, Tackels (2015), documentary

theatre (Kempf et Moguilevskaia (dir.) 2014) or the virtual presence of the actor (Bourrassa et Poissant (dir.) 2013) can redefine the relation of the contemporary stage with the real world.

However these successive theories don't shed a direct light on the question of the creative process and almost don't confront theories on the art of the actor. With good reason: they are often based, even when deconstructing, on the concept of action, narration and character, inherited from Aristotle (who deals the question of the performer in a marginal way). They largely ignore the benefits of the theories produced by practitioners. These theories are in fact crucial for the evolution of theatre. Moreover, since most of them come from thinkers who are exterior to the creative process, they can only offer an incomplete vision of the issue of the contemporary stage, as an inverted mirror would do.

Meanwhile, the theories produced by artists have had a considerable influence on the changes in the aesthetics of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Let's bear in mind Constantin Stanislavski, Edward Gordon Craig, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba or Peter Brook. The writings of these major artists have established fertile grounds for the following generation, and – sometimes without any explicit reference being made – they still are at the basis of the actor's training in Western Europe. Even though, since 1990, there have been few essays written by artists that were effectively influential – or maybe because of this –, a proliferation of considerable scholar research took place in the last ten years. For example, Mc Auley (2012), Féral (2003 et 2011), Dusigne (2015), Proust (2006), Lupo (2006), Losco-Léna (2017). These authors ventured into the field of theatrical practice and led practice research to analyse the creative process, trying to reposition the performer in the centre of drama studies. Even if these studies represent an epistemological turning point in the writing on the history of theatre, the research field and its methodology seems to still divide scholars and practitioners.

### 3. Contributions and novelty of the project

In this context, the present project proposes **to reform the theoretical viewpoint on acting**, encouraging a theoretical production which would come directly from the artists and taking into account the contemporary questions on the actor's performance – i.e. the relation between acting and being, the notion of presence of the performer and of the actor, and that of fiction and reality in the performance – all seen from the viewpoint of the current aesthetic theories. It is also essential to **give the actors a word in this research on the creative process** and observing it in its multiple shades, the rich ways of practice in Switzerland as well as in Latin America. This would allow a conceptualisation that can be as complete as possible, having a large influence on the actor's training and practise and on the actor's stage direction in both countries. In order to achieve this, it is also important to propose **a genuine approach of scientific experimentation that can link experience and observation**. Having a comparative approach, this method can reach an universal value, beyond national frontiers and individual procedures. In fact, the research projects associating on the same level scholars and practitioners of different countries around the same object of study are rather new and rare, because generally they are centred on the work of only one practitioner, and the observation of a unique approach. The novelty of the project also consists in the intention of **exceeding the dichotomy between theory and practice** and, in the analysis of individual approaches, to bring to the fore a comparative procedure with a more universal value.

### 4. Fundamental issues

Starting from an overview of the latest researches on the question of the actor confronted to the diversity of contemporary stage practices, we can conclude on the following structural aims for the project's implementation:

Focus (of research) 1 : ***The presence of the actor : from truthful to false, from play to non play*** : This questions have been fundamental for the theory of acting since Diderot (1769) until the non-dance

theories (Bel, 1999), passing by the *distancing effect* conceptualised by Bertolt Brecht (Brecht, 1999). Divided between an indirect presence (through the character) and a direct presence (the one of the performer) in his artistic act, the actor finds himself confronted to a double gaze. The first look observes him as a media to penetrate a space of fiction, the second considers him in his real presence. Beyond these two extremes (real presence and acted presence), there is an entire **variety of presences** demanded to an actor, depending on the ways of acting expected to take a final form and as they are reshaping in an on-going process. The main approaches – more personified in Latin America than in Switzerland – are particularly relevant to these questions.

Focus 2: ***The material and the imaginary in actor's work***: the major theories of acting, in particular those of Stanislavski (1963, 1984), reveal the complex relationship between ***the physical and the material construction of the performance and its mental and imaginary structure***. The aim of this research project is to deepen and update these issues.

Focus 3: ***The difference and the cross-breeding of techniques***: When questioning the diversity of the contemporary aesthetics we are bound to understand better the practical approaches that are fundamentally different in their operating system and their results, often integrating several artistic disciplines. The experiences and the contexts of their realisation intersecting with the confrontations of acting as practised in the three countries, reveal the **difference of creation contexts**, of **national traditions**, of **scientific approaches specific to every practitioner**, or of **artistic objectives**. They may encourage the emergence of mutual (or comparable) concepts between practitioners of different origins working in different (or new) contexts.

Focus 4: ***The phases of the creation***: A creative process is above all an expansion in time of different techniques, mental as well as emotional, concerning drama and language. We must therefore identify how we can formulate, organise and determine the time-span of these phases during the work of different practitioners. There are two levels of questionings. The first is vertical and allows one to observe **the conditions in which an in-depth study of language and of the different actions of each process is possible**, and see how each of these phases are developed by each artist. The second is horizontal and questions the **complementarity of techniques, their organisation in time and the way they interact** one with the other.

In focusing on these four practical research areas, which imply different theories of acting, we may be able to establish a possible understanding and reading frame for the process of the creation of a performance. This will allow us to build up efficient experimental protocols for analysing and fully exploiting the data collected from the workshop development.

## 5. Research plan and prospects

### 5.1. Method

To allow a clear articulation between theory and practice, the research team is producing a series of scientific rigorous and repetitive protocols, so that the diverse artistic practices can be compared via relevant analytical parameters in relation to a common theoretical corpus. The three experimental sessions (one for each country) will be based on the double presence of practitioners conducting the experience of creative work and of outsiders observing the latter. The experiments' duration, the groups' organisation, the preparation of the material (literature, drama, or thematic material), the methods and the staging forms that are thus invented, are parameters that need to be identified and defined for the first workshop experience in Switzerland. These parameters will build up comparative observations to be developed further during the second workshops in Uruguay and the third one in Argentina.

Every workshop will associate for two weeks a research centre and an artistic practice centre (for education, creation and/or research). It is conducted by two stage directors with pedagogical input, one from the institution receiving the workshop and the other coming from abroad. They will address a group of local actors and/ or students, depending on where the experimental workshop takes place.

During a fortnight, a specialist of theatre acting, who can have a critical viewpoint on the process, will observe the work.

These workshops' aim is to observe and analyse the working process on two distinct levels at least:

**The exterior or objective plan:** thanks to video recordings and to direct observation we can survey the actions and the explicit discourse that appear in every workshop (visible actions, given instructions, vocabulary used, artistic results).

**The interior or personal plan:** during the workshop we can interview the actors and the stage director in order to capture the subjective experience of the performers and of the actors' director, which would escape to other means of exterior analyses of practical phenomena.

As an example, here are several types of propositions that cover the vast artistic field of this project and which can be realised during the workshops by building up a set of exercises that can be experimented later on a larger scale:

- A reproduction of a film sequence,
- A stage realisation of a fragment containing a dramatic material,
- A creation of a stage performance on a particular theme,
- A creation of devised theatre,
- A creation of a production form acting the *virtual presence* of the actor.

The progression of an experimentation day in the workshop will be as following:

Warming up according to the practice of each / rehearsal of propositions / At midday and at the end of the day: collective debriefing (creators and observers) on the work of every proposition / End of the day: individual debriefing on the work of each proposition / Compilation of the theoretical data produced during the day. The last day will be dedicated to the compilation of theoretical data resulted of the 10 days of workshop / Discussion on the theoretical advances obtained during the workshop.

## 5.2. Timetable

**February 2020 : Workshop 0 and Seminar** (La Manufacture, Haute école des arts de la scène, Lausanne)  
Practitioners: 4 actresses and 2 actor / 3 stage directors / 1 female Ph.D. student as observer and one junior researcher as observers.

**March/April 2020: Workshop 1 and Seminar** (*Montpellier University, Dramatic National Center Montpellier*)

Practitioners: 7 actresses and 5 actors students / 3 stage directors ; 1 female Ph.D. student as observer, one junior researcher and one senior researcher as observers.

**August 2020: Workshop 2 and Seminar** (*Montevideo's School for Dramatic Arts (EMAD) and National Institute of Performing Arts (INAE) (Montevideo, Uruguay)*)

Practitioners: 7 actresses and 5 actors / 3 stage directors ; 1 female Ph.D. student as observer, one junior researcher and one senior researcher as observers.

**September/October 2020: Workshop 3 and Seminar** (*Teatro Melico Salazar in San José, Costa Rica / University of Costa Rica, National University of Costa Rica.*)

Practitioners: 6 actresses and 6 actors / 3 stage directors / one junior researcher as observer.

**January 2021: Workshop 4 and Seminar** (*University of Québec at Montréal, UQAM*)

Practitioners: 7 actresses and 5 actors students / 3 stage directors / 1 female Ph.D. student as observer, one junior researcher and one senior researcher as observers.

**January-June 2021: Elaboration of a comparative research protocol on the actor** with a choice being made as well as commentaries on the **set of exercises** that should be used in the FNS project and writing the theoretical materials issued from this first phase which would allow us to prepare the following phase.

### 5.3. Results and impact

The last period (September-December 2020) will enable us to produce the scientific results for the project:

- **A set of exercises** showing the diversity of contemporary stage practices beyond cultural contexts and individual approached. These exercises have to devise the questions raised by the research as they are presented in point 4. – that way, they will be tested in different situations during the second phase of the research.

- **Protocols for the work** that will be used as a basis for the scientific procedure of the upcoming project and explicit the principles of the implementation of the set of exercises as well as the parameters and the observation methods of the latter.

- The grounds of **a lexicon of the art of the actor**: Through the data extracted from each experiment (recording of the exercises, interviews led with the performers and the scholars, etc.), the research team will start to gather a lexicon of the practice uniting terms originating from theoretical writings by practitioners, the vocabulary that was used during the process of creation and the personal terms defined by each practitioner throughout the summary following each exercise. This lexicon will then be completed during the next phase.

- **Scientific publications** depicting the procedure and highlighting the theoretical results of this first phase. Thus, a work of theorization will be concluded, taking into account each of the practices that will have been observed. In this way, **new issues will be expressed, combining theory and practice.**

- Horizon of the project: In its **second phase (FNS project)**, this conceptualisation work will continue with the **final goal** to describe the system with which the actor creates. The system must be described in the most complete way, and be able to display the variety of individual practices and stage aesthetics today. This reflection will materialise in **an essay on the theory of the actor**. Lastly, this research will provide theoretical results prone to **develop the techniques currently used by actors for the creation of a performance**, but also to entrench a pedagogical basis for instructors or student actors. The FNS research project additionally aims to develop the pedagogical counterpart of the theoretical results in the form of a **handbook for the actor**, full of the different exercises and techniques tested during the workshops of the present project and applicable in the environment of acting schools.

## 6. Team and cooperation

Our research team is made up of male and female scholars very close to artistic activities and researchers through practice (actresses, actors and stage directors) whose working experiences span over a long period of time and in a continuous way, regarding artistic pedagogy and experimenting. Furthermore, this team covers, as well from a theoretical point of view than a practical one, a vast field in contemporary aesthetics, from drama to performance art. The Swiss requestor has several important contributions (publications, practical laboratories, international scientific colloquiums) in the field of research. A **female Ph.D. student** is included in the project. She is pursuing the work she

has lead for her Masters dissertation on the relationship between a stage director and actors. Her thesis supervisor is the Swiss requestor. She will be studying **the role of imagination and the power relations in the creative process of the actor**. Thanks to the exterior point of view that she will offer, she will bring another eye on the experiments, complementary to the ones of the other researchers of the project.

The relations between the associates of the project are based on already existing exchanges in the field of pedagogy and of research through practice. In the end, this project will permit to develop the scientific dimension of these bonds and to expand the network to other countries in Europe and Latin America.

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