

Performance in Philosophy/Philosophy in Performance: How Performative Practices Can Enhance and Challenge the Teaching Of Theory

Jörg Holkenbrink and Alice Lagaay

Jörg Holkenbrink is the director of the Centre for Performance Studies at Bremen University (Germany) and the artistic director of the *Theater der Versammlung* (“Theatre of Assemblage”), the Centre’s very own theatrical ensemble. Alice Lagaay is a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer in the Philosophy Department at Bremen University.¹ *Theater der Versammlung* participates in university seminars (throughout all faculties), bringing its own “experimental settings,” open rehearsals and performances into proceedings in a way that has a profound pedagogical effect on the outcome of the class.

The theatre ensemble regularly accompanies Lagaay’s philosophy seminars, and together they have recently begun to present the fusion of their methods (philosophy and performance) on various academic and artistic platforms internationally (e.g., the recent Philosophy-on-Stage festival at Tanzquartier Vienna² or the 2015 Performance Philosophy conference in Chicago³). For the present “Performance and Pedagogy” issue of *Performance Matters*, Lagaay and Holkenbrink propose a dialogue in which they discuss the pedagogical results of bringing performance strategies into contact with academic themes in general, and with philosophy in particular. This approach gives rise to many questions.

What can performance do to enhance the teaching of theory? To what extent is philosophy a performance in itself, and how can certain performative strategies help make this tangible? Can the experience of fusing performance and philosophy help identify wider pedagogical issues within and beyond the boundaries of academia? What happens when the language of science (*Wissenschaft*) is confronted with the performative arts? What artistic methods can be applied so that people who are used to thinking *about* certain topics are drawn out of their comfort zone and brought *into* contact with unfamiliar topics that might, in turn, broaden the horizon and impact of their own theoretical reflection?

To help readers visualize what this cooperation between a theatre company and an academic philosophy seminar might look like in practice, consider this example of a seminar on “Theories of Failure” that was held in the philosophy department at Bremen University in the summer term of 2014. The four-hour seminar sessions took place fortnightly. On this particular occasion, the seminar is not opened by the course leader (Lagaay), but by a group of young performers who enter the stage (a space created between the tables and chairs of the seminar room). Their director (Holkenbrink) promises to make the evening’s topic (i.e., “failure”) accessible to the seminar participants by way of a public rehearsal of Hamlet. “To be or not to be” is the issue. The actor in the role of Hamlet starts out with her own personal perspective on one of the “greatest procrastinators in world history” and then proceeds to launch into her monologue. However, whenever she’s just about to immerse herself in her part, something pops into her mind that interrupts her, something that still needs to be pondered, discussed, or bemoaned. Increasingly eager to begin with the rehearsal proper, some of the other actors become irritated

Jörg Holkenbrink is Director of the Centre for Performance Studies at Bremen University and Artistic Director of *Theater der Versammlung*. **Alice Lagaay** is Interim Professor for Media Studies and Cultural History at Zeppelin University, Friedrichshafen. She previously taught in the Philosophy Department at Bremen University. She is the co-founder of the Performance Philosophy Research Network and is co-editor of the Performance Philosophy book series at Palgrave Macmillan.

and impatient. Some even begin to worry about the well-being of the Hamlet actor, while others wonder how they can save face before the audience in the light of such an embarrassing situation. Various ploys are attempted to encourage the Hamlet actor to start her performance. But they only result in the opposite: the actor remains silent and motionless, caught up in her own thoughts. Finally, the director takes the initiative and asks the seminar participants (who double as the audience) for suggestions on how to resolve the situation. This triggers an improvised lecture and a conversation. The performers take up and discuss the various propositions and eventually propose a solution: to let the pensive Hamlet actor continue her pondering in private and, instead of having her perform the monologue, move on to rehearsing the king's council scene, in which Hamlet's inconsolable grief disrupts the government affairs of King Claudius and his wife, Hamlet's mother, Gertrude. The Claudius actor and the Gertrude actor thus begin to involve the recalcitrant Hamlet so as to draw him out of his disconcerting grief. Although at the end of *this* rehearsal, Hamlet is even more desperate, the Hamlet actor, however, is finally in a position to perform the Hamlet monologue.

The philosophy seminar now proceeds to discuss “failure” in relation to notions of success, “hesitation” as a productive force, and the manner in which a performative situation can flip from commentary (on a particular subject) to demonstration (of a physical condition), both intentionally and non-intentionally. Far from simply playing an illustrative role in the seminar, the performative opening has clearly provoked alertness to an experimental setting which, in turn, helps sharpen the attention and engagement of those present through embodied thought in a way that conventional text-based work alone only rarely manages to bring about—in a seminar context.

*

The Bremen-based *Theater der Versammlung* (“Theater of Assemblage”) is one of the very first research theatres in Germany. Based at the Centre for Performance Studies at Bremen University, *Theater der Versammlung* brings together students and academics from all faculties as well as professional performance practitioners to work in partnership on themes and questions that arise within academic contexts, using various means and methods drawn from performance art and theatre. This results in an intense collaboration with people whose expertise is in a wide range of discourses. The performances that have emerged from this interdisciplinary process have been presented and discussed throughout the German-speaking world and beyond, and in several professional and educational contexts, including businesses, schools, health institutions, and cultural centres. The Performance Studies curriculum at Bremen University is explicitly geared toward training students in the forms and methods of the theatre's engaged, investigative, and interventionist approach to performance.

Lagaay: Jörg, as the artistic director of both the theatre company and the Centre for Performance Studies at Bremen University, why do you think it is important to find ways of “disturbing” the academic world by using performative strategies?

Holkenbrink: Well, a first answer probably resides in the fact that to begin with it is the academic world that disturbs ME! Take the following anecdote as an example: Once, a few semesters back, I was walking down one of the corridors of the university, looking for a seminar room, when I got confused and opened the wrong door by mistake. (Perhaps theatre people do sometimes walk around a little dreamily.) Upon entering the room I encountered a group of six or seven students who were huddled around a table in silence, their heads hung low and their eyes all sleepy, with a stack of unopened books in front of them. Not having expected them to

be there, I was so surprised at the sight of them that I couldn't help but exclaim, "What on earth are you all doing here?" It was then that one of them looked up at me listlessly and in a bored, monotonous voice stated: "We're preparing a presentation on motivation theory."

My experience at the university has made me increasingly sensitive to contradictions of this kind, like the difference between cramming information for an exam and really embodying knowledge. Performance Studies can help students and teachers become aware of the relationship between *what* is discussed and taught at university and *how* that learning is achieved. One of the main challenges for a research theatre like ours that uses performative strategies to intervene in academic seminars is to address people who are used to thinking merely *about* things and to bring them *into* situations that lead them to think about the issues from a new perspective. This movement between talking "about" something and getting "into" it constitutes in itself a subject for research and learning. Regarding the discipline of philosophy, this means questioning when, or under what circumstances, philosophy can be considered an academic science, and when, or under what circumstances (and with what consequences) it might make more sense to consider it rather as an art to be practised. In working with you, Alice, as one of the initiators of the Performance Philosophy network, I often find myself thinking of this quote by Nietzsche:

As for the superstitions of the logicians, I shall never tire of underlining a concise little fact which these superstitious people are loath to admit—namely, that a thought comes when "it" wants, not when "I" want; so that it is a *falsification* of the facts to say: the subject "I" is the condition of the predicate "think." *It* thinks: but that this "it" is precisely that famous old "I" is, to put it mildly, only an assumption, an assertion, above all not an "immediate certainty." (Nietzsche 2003, 47)

This quote often comes to mind when I hear you lecture. I experience you as someone who is not simply rehashing a pre-written, pre-rehearsed text, but as someone in whom "it" thinks. You demonstrate this "it thinks" in your lectures. One of the most concise definitions of "performance" that I know is by Richard Schechner, one of the founders of Performance Studies as a discipline. He speaks of performance as "showing doing" (Schechner 2002, 22). So I wonder if we might not get closer to answering the question "What is Performance Philosophy" by drawing attention to, and thematizing, the manner in which "it" thinks in you. And what would this "it" refer to from a philosophical perspective?

Lagaay: The idea is that it is not "I/me", no particular ego, that is "doing" the thinking, but that "it" is doing it "through" me, that I (anyone) could be a sort of medium for something that moves through me/them, and that the art of thinking, of performing and creating, has as much to do with a particular kind of letting something happen as it has with hard work and discipline. Yes, this all sounds very familiar. And it places the kind of philosophy that I tend to engage with closer to the boundary of what the art of performance is (or might be). It involves work of course—rehearsal, action and repetition, reading and re-reading—but also a form of *active passivity*, in other words . . . patience, which equates with a certain willingness and ability to expose oneself to and draw on the energy that comes from the present moment, at the risk that "it" might not come . . . but it always does.

Doing philosophy in this way is truly a creative process, and paradoxically giving way to the "it" requires that one give oneself over to the process completely. It is through giving oneself, putting oneself into the moment, not hiding—with all the vulnerability and risk that that might entail—that one invites, evokes, invokes, the "other" into the equation.

The history of philosophy, the history of culture, is full of references to a third instance that is neither you nor me, neither mother nor daughter, father nor son, neither this nor that, but something between all beings present that we can bear witness to and, in so doing, allow that something to colour the mood, atmosphere, timing, and rhythm of the event we have gathered together to attend.⁴ It is this instance, I think, that provides the kind of cohesion that is capable of revealing the political in the aesthetic, the ethical in the artistic.

It is of course intrinsically connected to the live quality of performance, which is why talking *into* and *out of* silence is so important—because silence is what connects one to the present. And being (A)LIVE means being able to respond to the new, being open and available to serendipity, surprise and wonder.

Holkenbrink: In the context of the relation between performance and philosophy, you emphasize the notion of active passivity. This makes me think of *absichtsvolle Absichtslosigkeit*, “intentional non-intentionality,” a common trope among theatre makers. Both formulations play an important role in describing staging processes in the theatre. So, for example, one of the important skills in directing is knowing when to interrupt players during rehearsals. Yet even moments before I intervene, I often don’t know that I am going to interrupt, or who I am going to interrupt, or what I am going to say. It all happens in a split second. And, conversely, it depends on the flow of my observation being interrupted, which is what provokes my need to say something. Despite this, or perhaps even because of this, I often find myself making further suggestions (even before I have had time to actually think them). And this in a world in which university teachers warn their students to “think first, then speak”! At the same time, my experience has shown me that the quality of my spontaneous interruptions has increased over the years. So are “active passivity” and “intentional non-intentionality” learnable and teachable? And what part do interruptions play in your profession?

Lagaay: I wonder if your somewhat Zen-inspired notion of “intentional non-intentionality” might echo in a significant way Freud’s “evenly-suspended attention” (*gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*, Freud 1958, 109–20)? This is a kind of neutral, directionless listening that tries not to privilege one particular narrative over another, nor to allow preconceived ideas to get in the way of the free expression of unconscious associations. Freud’s evenly-suspended or “hovering” attention describes an attitude or posture of being that is wary of the analyst’s (or in this case let’s say the philosopher’s) tendency to want to appropriate, to be inclined to want to “grasp,” focus and hold (and thereby often manipulate, for instance by means of reification) a certain train of thought, to make *one* thought, *one* narrative, *one* interpretation—the big bright one in front of you—somehow more valuable, more noteworthy than any other.

Resisting this tendency, in other words practicing a form of attentive disinterest, means being fundamentally open to the possibility that one might not be fully in control of the situation, nor fully in control of the thoughts or connections that an event provokes. It means letting go of the anchor provided by hierarchies of thought, and trusting in a radical form of immanence, by which one’s own subjective perspective *by virtue of its fundamental equality with any other imaginable perspective* becomes virtually irrelevant—but not quite. For, of course, the actor, analyst, director, or performance philosopher remains engaged.

Practicing evenly-suspended attention means learning to attend not just to the salient or intentional, to the “major” action, but learning to listen to the minor, the unintended, the unfocused or indistinct, the sub-beat, the slip, the glimpse or spark from the periphery . . . and to move in-between and to draw on these, not by method, nor even by acquired skill, but in the

way that a good jazz singer might sometimes let the note trail off and, in missing the mark however slightly, allow it to open a new phrase, or become something new.

Practicing this form of attentive disinterest also brings you back to the present moment and therefore to the body, to *this* body. This is, of course, something that Nietzsche understood clearly, that thoughts and ideas are not somewhere out there in the ether, nor are they simply in the brain; they are not random figments or indeed (to put it more positively) achievements of a purely intellectual journey. They are not pure maths. For any intellectual journey is the intellectual journey of an embodied person, with a biography, a history, a rich and multidimensional experience, drawn from all the things and events that have happened to them, situations they have come through, lessons they have learned, pain they have borne. . . . And the force of life (call it will-to-power) that is at the root of this journey includes an implicit knowledge, an implicit *physical* knowledge, of how to live, how to grow, and how to become.

So when you describe, Jörg, how in your work as a director, you often do not know and cannot predict how, when, or whose dialogue or action you will interrupt, and when you cannot even say why this happens, it sounds as if it is not so much you, or a particular conscious part of you, that intervenes, but the experience you embody, the wealth of experience that is lodged in your body, that takes charge and knows when to intervene.

With regard to interruption, there would be so much to say here. Interruption suffers something of a bad name in our culture, and this despite the fact that the modern technological age comes with many and various interruptions, such that it seems to be becoming more and more difficult, hopeless almost, to concentrate on anything. But the creative interruption you are referring to is not the kind that disturbs or is at odds with concentration. Rather, what it perhaps signals is the end of, or at least the tendency to relativize what some call the “grand narrative(s),” and possibly even the end of “drama,” and their replacement by a celebration of, or a newfound attentiveness to, the fragmentary, the incomplete, the non-linear, the inconclusive, the snippet, the snapshot, the infinitely repeatable . . . in a word: the aphoristic.

Holkenbrink: This is nothing particularly new. Attentiveness to the fragmentary has played an important role within the performative arts at least since the performative turn in the 1960s. With our performance entitled “C Copy A Encrypted,” the *Theater der Versammlung* has invented an experimental field in which the audience brings the ensemble into movement and directs the players during the show using computer commands such as “copy,” “cut,” or “paste.” The performers draw on snippets of movement and text extracts from roles they have played in other pieces. Over multiple rounds and at a rapid pace these fragments are randomly composed into new patterns of relation and meaning. The goal is to allow little islands of meaning to emerge from the random chaos. Everybody present has an influence on the outcome, but no single person drives the whole thing. The audience soon learns how to handle the commands, and their instructions end up mirroring themselves, insofar as through the speed of their calls they can create confusion or instead grant space for a particular role to evolve on its own without interruption. This click-performance can be seen as demonstrating whether, or to what extent, people remain able to act in complex systems and whether, or how, one can react to the ever-increasing interruptions in everyday life. It might also be read as revealing the political in the aesthetic, the ethical in the artistic, to refer to what you said earlier.

Fragmented worlds challenge the practices of the connecting arts. Our “Theatre of Assemblage” (*Theater der Versammlung*) between education, science and the arts attempts to offer a framework for just that. Here I would like to pick up on a few thoughts and formulations from articles I have written that take a closer look at these themes (Holkenbrink 2013; Bebek and Holkenbrink

2015). A typical production process that we experience in our “Theatre of Assemblage” can be broken down into the following stages:

- a) Free improvisation on the themes and questions that are being handled theoretically in the seminars we intervene in and cooperate with.
- b) Improvisation using theoretical, documentary, and literary texts that relate in one way or another to the themes and questions of the teaching context we are involved with (this could be a seminar held in any faculty of the university).
- c) Selection of the material arrived at through improvisation and its organization into scenic fragments/sequences that will continue to be developed until they are ready to be performed (using the principles of collage and montage/assemblage).
- d) Experimentation with various alterations and re-organizations of the scenic sequences within the framework of a context- and dialogue-oriented performance practice (*recycling*).

In concrete terms, within the context of “C Copy A Encrypted,” this “context-oriented performance practice” also refers to the fact that the same or a similar performance can generate a multitude of different meanings, connotations or questions depending on the context in which it is performed, be it for instance within the realm of computer science, cognitive psychology, political science, research on dementia, or philosophy. On the other hand, the dialogical aspect of our performance practice means that each performance is always discussed within the particular field in which it is performed. In turn, this leads to the experimental action continuously being developed further.

The strategies and methods required for this form of research are consciously acquired. Students at Bremen University can only sign up for Performance Studies as an additional course to be taken in combination with studies in another discipline. The curriculum is thus structured to allow students from various faculties to come together in trans-disciplinary projects, and it is explicitly geared to them bringing their knowledge from these different areas into the performative work of the Centre for Performance Studies.

Conversely, students receive training in performative methods that they subsequently learn how to apply to their respective disciplinary backgrounds. They soon begin to interrelate, both critically and constructively, the practical-aesthetical methods they have acquired with the more theoretical/traditionally academic approaches to reality they encounter in the course of their studies, thus combining and enriching both aspects of their education respectively. Needless to say, this remains an important resource that students can draw on later in whatever professional capacity they eventually choose. This may be in an artistic realm, where the ability to combine different forms of knowledge is increasingly valued, or even, and especially, in non-artistic work fields, where a wide range of artistic competences are also increasingly becoming acknowledged as fundamentally important. Another perspective and further synergies occur when both artistic and non-artistic worlds are combined, for example when someone is active as a performer while carrying out a second or third profession of a different kind at the same time.

It is important to remember, however, that people who are at home in both science/academia and the arts, and who actively seek to facilitate a dialogue between these two realms, are taking a significant risk. Indeed, seeking new forms of cooperation between the two worlds requires that each world change its habitual manner of dealing with that which otherwise falls outside its respective zone of knowledge. In other words, to embark on a process in which a certain “foreignness” with regard to particular objects and situations is responded to productively means being sovereign enough to risk one’s own sovereignty; being strong enough, one could say, to embrace one’s sense of weakness.

Carolin Bebek is a regular performer with *Theater der Versammlung* and also a qualified scientist of education (*Erziehungswissenschaftlerin*). As part of a qualitative analysis, she carried out a series of episodic (narrative) interviews with former students in Performance Studies at Bremen University. She recounts how these interviews reveal different forms of interplay between self-assertiveness and submission, in the sense of risking one's own sovereignty. Drawing on Judith Butler, she refers to the phenomenon in question in terms of "post-sovereignty" (Butler 1997, 139, 145). For Bebek, the notion of post-sovereignty captures a basic principle of movement:

It marks a tension between sovereignty and non-sovereignty that does not resolve itself one way or another, but hangs between letting oneself into something/exposing oneself and asserting oneself, between submission to the factors at work/acceptance of the given and transgression or exceedance towards something new. Post-sovereignty points to a kind of being in movement, within which it becomes possible to experience the other and oneself differently. Only a subjectivity that is capable of appreciating other foreign subjectivities, on the one hand, and its own foreign otherness on the other, can connect to this principle of movement. (Bebek and Holkenbrink 2015, 80, passage translated by A. Lagaay).

Lagaay: Thank you, Jörg, for bringing the notion of post-sovereignty into our dialogue here. It gives me the opportunity to relate once more to the one who might be considered the original modern performance philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, whom I feel has been our subliminal chaperone throughout the course of these reflections. For me, one of the most salient and troubling things about reading Nietzsche, and also therefore what I find to be most provocative and inspiring in his writing, is the clear tension that is to be found between, on the one hand, his unquestionable celebration of empowered subjectivity, the idea that it is all up to "Me," this damned "EGO," to create its own world, define its own values, launch into its own becoming, take what it needs, stop at nothing, embrace the plant-like drive towards the sun (will-to-power), etc., etc., and, on the other hand, his very idiosyncratic, at once incredibly compelling and hugely challenging, recognition and call to acceptance of a fundamental human powerlessness. On the surface of things, and even upon closer analysis, these two thoughts would appear to be profoundly at odds with each other, mutually incompatible. And yet, in Nietzsche they are not. And within this very contradiction, that is, in the challenge that resides in the Nietzschean call to become your own person, emancipate from the burden of moral traditions and define your own values on the one hand, but ultimately, on the other hand, to emancipate from your emancipation to reach a state of consenting being—*amor fati*—in which you accept everything that has been (the good and the ugly) and embrace "eternal return." What could be more preposterous than the latter for even the most humble of egocentrics? Yet within this very contradiction lies a mystery, which I take as a kind of guiding principle in my attempt to approach the teaching of philosophy through the lens, and drawing on the methods, of performance. It is therefore not so much a question of merging the two "Ps" (performance and philosophy) to create a new disciplinary field (and here I am referring to the on-going Mind-the-Gap discussion in performance philosophy circles, e.g., Cull 2014) so much as of allowing and welcoming, indeed actively preparing the ground (in the pedagogical sense of a "prepared environment"²⁵) for a dynamic movement to occur, e.g., from emancipation to the emancipation of emancipation, or from powerlessness to sovereignty to post-sovereignty. My passion is to facilitate the arrival of humble moments of recognition on this circular course and to help them be experienced not just in a consciously lived life, but also in the philosophy seminar. Here what can be witnessed is not only how performative practices can enhance and challenge the teaching of theory, but also—and more importantly still—how theory can enhance and challenge the experience of life.

Notes

1. Since completing this dialogue Alice Lagaay has been appointed Interim Professor of Media Studies and Cultural History at Zeppelin University Friedrichshafen where she continues to explore the pedagogical potentials of performance philosophy.
2. “SCORES N°10 // Philosophy On Stage #4 Artist Philosophers—Nietzsche et cetera” was a large international festival held 26–29th November 2015 at Tanzquartier Vienna. The event was conceived and organized by Arno Böhler and Susanne Granzer (Vienna) as part of the FWF-funded PEEK project “Artist Philosophers. Philosophy AS Arts-Based-Research,” in collaboration with Walter Heun (Tanzquartier Vienna), Jens Badura (Zürich University of the Arts), Laura Cull (University of Surrey) and Alice Lagaay (Universität Bremen). Retrieved December 29, 2015. www.tqw.at/de/events/scores10-philosophyonstage4.
3. “What can Performance Philosophy Do?” Second Biennial Performance Philosophy conference held 10–12 April 2015 in Chicago, co-organized by Will Daddario, John Muse, and Laura Cull. Retrieved December 29, 2015. www.performancephilosophy.ning.com/page/chicago-2015.
4. An example of this third in-between instance, “neither this nor that,” is the figure of the neutral e.g., in the writings of Maurice Blanchot or Roland Barthes (Blanchot 1993; Barthes 2005).
5. The importance of a “prepared environment” is central to many reform pedagogical methods, especially for example, the pedagogical approach of Maria Montessori (Montessori 2008).

References

- Barthes, Roland. (2002) 2005. *The Neutral*. Translated by Rosalind E. Krauss and Daniel Hollier. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bebek, Carolin, and Jörg Holkenbrink. 2015. “Denkräume in Bewegung setzen. Performance Studies: Möglichkeiten der Transformation in fächerübergreifenden Studienprojekten mit dem Theater der Versammlung zwischen Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kunst.” In *Teaching is Touching the Future. Academic Teaching Within and Across Disciplines*, edited by Heidi Schelhowe, Melanie Schaumburg, and Judith Jasper, 76–82. Bielefeld: UVW.
- Blanchot, Maurice. (1969) 1993. *Infinite Conversation*. Translated by Susan Hanson, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1997. *Excitable Speech*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Cull, Laura. 2014. “Performance Philosophy—Staging a New Field.” In *Encounters in Performance Philosophy*, edited by Laura Cull and Alice Lagaay, 15–38. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Holkenbrink, Jörg. 2013. “Alles eine Frage der Zeit. Performance Studies: Forschendes Lernen mit dem Theater der Versammlung zwischen Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kunst.” In *Forschendes Lernen als Profilmerkmal einer Universität. Beispiele aus der Universität Bremen*, edited by Ludwig Huber, Margot Kröger, and Heidi Schelhowe, 105–21. Bielefeld: UVW.
- Montessori, Maria. 2008. *The Montessori Method*. Blacksburg: EarthAngel Books.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2003. “On the Prejudices of Philosophers.” In *Beyond Good and Evil*, §17, translated by R. J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin.
- Schechner, Richard. 2002. *Performance Studies. An Introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Sigmund Freud. (1912) 1958. *Recommendation to Physicians Practicing Psychoanalysis* (7th ed.). London: Hogarth Press.