The Metamorphosis of Performing Arts

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Motto: “The barriers between the different performing arts are fluid: dance flows into theatre, which flows into music and song and stage pictures.”

(John Rockwell)

Abstract: This article examines the relationship between performing arts, the multidisciplinary aspect of them, thereafter seeking to address a few similarities and differences in approaching a live performance. The confluence between ballet, theatre and opera is obvious and a brief overview of the main interlaced stages in the development of performing arts will also prove that they have always been related and dependant on one another. Every performing art crosses its boundaries and not only does it explore issues or topics specific to the other arts, but it also uses their tools. Thus, this article integrates a few contemporary tendencies of intersection in performing arts, mainly the pervasive presence of ballet and theatre. Subsequently, in considering live performance, the impact on the audience is also assessed, as well as the harmony of perception created between the performer and the public.

Further on, the paradigm development in performing arts is determined due to the augmenting of the new technological tools being used. The aim of using these tools is to create special effects that emphasize the quality of the performance. In addition to a comprehensive influence, this article explains how contemporary social and political changes, scientific and technological progress have determined more changes in the performing arts than they had in the previous centuries.

Key words: artist, arts, ballet, culture, theatre.

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In a cultural period when copies become sufficient, the original loses its value, and real life in many areas becomes theatrical, performing arts must continuously prove their identity. Novelty does not find its expression in radically new forms, but borrows its ideas from new sources, such as information technology leading to the loss (or transcending) temporal and spatial boundaries. Hence, the most influential paradigm in the 21st century art is the covert hegemony of the IT image (moving or still, video or photography, special effects or global web). Contemporary artists have expanded their tools in all directions and all media, as art is also a process of inquiry. Due to the IT tools, the audience becomes more and more participative and the artist is not any longer an isolated island trying to perform and innovate for themselves and the critics, but to innovate elements that interest the audience, as their stronger feedback is needed.

Nowadays, audiences do not value art as a result, but rather as a process, fact that humanizes profoundly the work of art by bringing the artist closer to them. At the same time, the artist is more than ever a forerunner, a model, an example, an idol. It took humanity 2000 years for the world to shift the emphasis from the author and artwork to the performer. Public manifestations require from the participants artistic characteristics, regardless their aim: political, social, cultural. Theatricality is found in all spheres of life. Art practices spread from art spaces to cultural spaces. Hierarchical structures have been destroyed; low and high, elite and mass have equal access to culture. Social theatre is used successfully in education. “To perform” means to free and reveal one’s creative personality into an artistically manifested story that can be verbal and gestured, or movement and danced, or sung, or a cohesive mix, on a subject that interests both performers and audience. As the performance happens on stage (in a theatre or another place) at a certain time, its development confers its uniqueness.

Nowadays, choreographed parts are played in theatre and opera performances, and not only do they represent the view of the director, but they are expected to highly interest the public. Performing on an opera stage means
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a multitasking circumstance in which the singer deals with the aspects of acting, choreography, and singing at its highest.

Tracing the intersected development of the performing arts, we’ll see that the use of the expressive body in dance coincides very often in drama and opera as well.

We notice the importance of the body and movement as means of expression and communication in ballet and in theatre and performance, spreading towards opera. At times, it seems that ballet and theatre part on different ways, but only for very short periods: “there is a wound that exists between dance and drama.”¹ Then their similarities grow wider and stronger.

The picture of contemporary performing arts is contradictory. On the one hand, it looks as if performing arts are booming, as it gets so easy to perform today in formal and nonformal locations and the number of performers continues to grow. The audience seems to become more and more interested in opera, theatre and ballet performances.

There is a significant number of studies that provide a comprehensive overview of the performing arts. All these studies agree that the performing arts are undergoing an important shift: while the broadcast performing arts are increasing globally, live performances are expanding only locally. As the studies show, the most dramatic development has been observed in non live arts, despite the hundreds of thousands of people attending concerts, opera, ballet and theatre performances all over the world.

We must not forget to mention the impact of the new media on the performing arts, without considering to investigate the trans-artistic consequences of these new procedures. Performing artists who use new technologies in their work contribute to a cultural retraining of our senses and perception of arts and write art history fresh anew. Within this phenomenon however, Hans-Thies Lehmann has called contemporary theatre “a politics of

perception, in which the image is rediscovered as a heterogeneous entity that speaks to the spectator in a self-critical and magical way.\textsuperscript{2}

Technology adds a significant number of tools to the performance, but it’s the passion of the artist that leads the show to success. The new approach in performing does reflect an increasing interest in the active role of the spectator in the moment of performance and the relationship between spectator and actor in a live event.

Reception theory, as defined by Robert C. Holub, author of \textit{Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction} (1984), “refers to a general shift in concern from the author and the work to the text and the receiver (audience).”\textsuperscript{3}

Performance is a high human experience, but in life we are the centre of our own narrative, just as the spectator is the centre of their own. Yet we have within us a strong impulse, a wish and a necessity, to explain ourselves and our experiences in an artistic expression and we do it in front of the others. Also, performing arts have always been collaborative, within performances and self-enriching and inspiring from other forms of arts or expressions. It is important to fuse all the inspiring elements to make the audience feel the emotions the performance encompasses.

Performing arts melt into each other. The enriching and perpetual state of metamorphosis is true for all art forms. Art students are taught, through training, to merge one art form with another, thus having a broader perspective while performing. With each period and cultural movement, new voices have emerged, bringing new, inspired techniques from the other arts that can magnify the performance and have the audience delighted. A short retrospective would give us a wider perspective.

Stanislavski accused the romantic drama and actors of over-dramatization and exaggerated methods of speech and therefore introduced a system to train the actors that is still being used in the world nowadays, almost a century after it was developed. Let’s not forget that Stanislavski received

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\textsuperscript{3} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jksXXSZ_S8, 27 feb. 2019.
ballet training and it’s quite natural that he included physical exercises for the actors, inspired by careful studies of the body. He wanted to train the actors to be “more mobile, flexible, expressive and even more sensitive”\(^4\), envisaging the benefits that could be achieved by using these techniques from another art: ballet.

Similarly, new steps were made in ballet by requiring techniques that develop a more expressive use of the body in ballet (Diaghilev, Nijinsky, Fokine). Choreography was ready to pass from “ready-made and established dance-steps, to create in each case a new form corresponding to the subject.”\(^5\)

Then, when the quality of life increased due to the industrial and scientific development, in 1916 there was a rebellion against the so-called bourgeois theatre and the Romanian writer Tristan Tzara founded the Dada movement that influenced all art forms. Tzara wanted to return to simplicity and spontaneity, to the personal and subjective. Hence, both theatre and ballet developed the expression of personal feelings.

As a consequence, and against the realities of the war, Surrealism came into existence in the artistic world. Surrealism appealed to mysteries and utopias of the irrational, unconscious and non-logical mind in order to bring the audience to a poetic level of perceiving art. Basically, this was the start of collaboration among artists from numerous areas of expertise for the aim of a great performance.

The development of the natural sciences and psychology lead to the development of the modern dance. Improvisation experiences started in art domains within the expressionist movement. And if it was to draw inspiration from somewhere, then ballet was inspired by the ancient Greek dances (Isadora Duncan). The other means, except the performance of the artists, were reduced to simplicity on stage.

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Then, in the 1920s stage performance changed again, due to labor issues, to the socio-political climate after the world war, and new voices, such as those of Sigmund Freud, Strindberg or Picasso were heard in the art world. Ballet has been shaping and altering the emotively arabesque movement that we know today; an accomplishment of grace. But the scope of dance continued broadening.

Meanwhile in the theatre, postmodernism brought dry metaphor – as in the other manifestations of literature. However, theatre pushed the boundaries of performance and adopted more new techniques as it was competing over the audience with a proliferation of genres.

Bertold Brecht’s alienation technique aimed to distance the public from the play and instead, to engage them through the performance by stripping it of everything familiar, so that it forces the audience to become self-reflective of their circumstances.

In ballet, Merce Cunningham enjoyed experimenting with form rather than emotional expression and the result was highly demanding of the audience. He also tried to free choreography from depending on music and for this he asked for help from post-modern pianist John Cage, whose performance was based on improvisation, forcing the ballet dancers to improvise themselves. There’s always a solid background in classical and contemporary dance technique that could aid an individual in improvisation, strength, and ease on the stage.

The 1950s were a good period for experimenting in the arts, as economies were booming around the world. Arts would present as a melting pot of features, said Alvin Nikolais, and this was confirmed by others: “…became noted for a new kind of dance theatre which is almost completely abstract in terms of dramatic content but which represents a unique and imaginative fusing of sound, color, light, bizarre props, shapes, and movement to create a remarkably theatrical set of illusions on the stage.”

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6 Sandra Vitola, Determining Components of Dance Interpretation for Encouraging Dance Teacher Interpretation Skills, Article, May 2015 DOI: 10.17770 / sie 201 3 vol 1.589,
Bringing a lot of exploration of the perception created between performer and audience together, preferring to have small audiences, Jerzy Grotowski founded the Polish Laboratory Theatre in 1959. His performances brought avant-garde ideas, he created stunning works as a director, but he became better known for his way of training the actors to create meaningful theatre for both the performer and the spectator. Grotowski trained his actors to master incredible physical techniques that will help them tackle their emotions, develop their creativity and handle the script in more than one way. Until the end of the 20th century, new choreographers had blurred the usual physical distance between audience and performer. “Theatre makers, of both dramatic dance and drama, revisited the traditions of Commedia dell’Arte, ancient Greek theatre, and Oriental theatre to serve as forms of inspiration.”

Performing arts are important to communities and their economy. The history of performing arts began when the human beings started their ritual dances. They continued with the minstrels who were using music to tell theirs and others’ stories.

As it was then, now the audiences see transformation in front of them: events collide, attracting the public within the development of the live story, contributing to the whole atmosphere of challenge, thought provoking, taking sides, consequently the public stop their lives for a short time, to take part into the characters’. All performing artists know that they have to captivate people with the story and the way they express their show. The more skillful someone is to do that, the stronger the impact they will have on the audience and the more famous they will become. Alternatively, there’s a brief highlight of the main moments in performing arts during the last century in theatre and ballet.


7https://books.google.ro/books?id=odGVbqa6FR0C&pg=PT239&lpg=PT239&q=Barba+%26+Savarese+1991&source=bl&ots=vNb6Whm3wJ&sig=ACfU3U0ZkSV1bc3ZgpkhukJSSqJu8cXxLg&hl=ro&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjC48GFhN_gAhVLlyqQKHQ-vCJSQ6AEwCHOECAMQAQ#v=onepage&q=Barba%20%26%20Savarese%201991&f=false, pg. 165, 1 mart. 2019, 26 feb. 2019.
Dance, just like music and theatre, has appeared ritualistically because there’s an inner rhythm in each of us, regardless the musical ear, there’s a movement in the body of the human being, a rhythm that impacts our way of thinking, of working, of praying. Therefore, dance is so human, that it affects every emotion in the performer and the audience. “Ballet can be as intellectual as any other art-form, but if I want to go into a theatre and just be overwhelmed by feelings in a way that otherwise you would never be, then ballet is the art-form.”

It is internationally admitted that dance, as music and as some forms of theatre are international languages; they don’t need translation. The ballet dancers just add to the author’s intention to express feelings with their own contribution of feeling them through.

Maybe the main similarity in ballet and theatre is the flexibility of expressions. The more attention is given to theatre techniques in dance, the stronger the development of ballet in the cultural field and expression. Choreographers or ballet dancers become increasingly interested in embedding critical readings and interpretations of the body in the ways in which these are framed and represented within the practice by both theatre and ballet. Lately, dance dramaturgy has been similarly engaging the two fields. John Rockwell said: “All dance, even the most abstract, includes theatrical elements and all theatre involves physicality.”

Also, the human body is not a machine and it is definitely not neutral, so everything it has learnt will be reflected in the performance it gives. The human body will deconstruct, adapt and adjust and rearrange all indications of the ballet rules, according to what it has learnt, lived experienced or imagined. Art education comprises chapters of all art fields, thus the performance of a ballet dancer will be influenced by the multi-faceted, continually unfolding aspects of their knowledge and practice of theatre, music and even visual arts that will compete in insightfulness so that they will perform at their highest on

stage, in front of the audience. Lately, there are more and more choreographers who require the presence of an acting director during rehearsals.

From immemorial times, people told other people of their experience: a hunting story imitating animals and bragging about hunting skills, or expressing fear, or the strike of thunder: all these require an acting role on behalf of the storyteller, so that they share all possible emotions with the audience. Theatre has evolved out of the performance of Dionysian mysteries and the contemporary performance encompassing ballet and music and modern technology elements to enhance their effect. The notion of beauty in performing arts is defined by the viewer’s perspective, as it happens in real life. People like things to have proportion, equilibrium and essence in their structure. But in order to captivate the audience, the artist must change these things and then restate them. Theatre has been incorporating elements of nature, ritualistic and ethnic, elements of dance and music, of psychology, a social and cultural blend.

There’s no art without artists, but all the other elements (lights, scenery, script, choreography etc.) are also important. As all artists are curious, they let themselves influenced by everything they learn, especially everything they learn from the other arts: performing arts or visual arts. They do it consciously or unaware of that fact, but for the benefit of their performance.

The discipline of the artists’ work will contribute to the artists’ management of emotions and their release during the performance. From here we can see the benefit of arts education, that not only broadens the minds, but also strengthens the individual as part of the society. Creativity made the world as we know it. Creativity and arts contribute to youth imagining different realities and determine them to be open-minded and live a better life. Art provides the artist a living, but not isolated from the world. For instance, dance, theatre, opera are social skills.

Dance is intensifyingly turning into a multidisciplinary domain. Fluently, ballet has managed to assimilate many other dance forms, refining them, giving them structure and intrinsic beauty. The latest tendencies in choreography encompass a multitude of features, inspired from all aspects of
culture and society. However, all these are grafted on the classical methods if we speak about ballet dancing, as ballet started in the Italian and French Renaissance as court dances or court ballet. It was only in the 19th century that ballet dancing reached the high standards displayed until today. The new styles that followed, such as modern ballet dancing (first half of the 20th century), were a manifestation of new and modern against the formal methods that ruled all dance schools and performances.

Contemporary ballet dancing (considered to have begun in the 1950s) facilitates the development of new styles of approaching a piece of music throughout the versatility and fluidity of movements. It upholds the deconstruction of symmetry and rhythm within a performance. It is influenced by all the factors humanity has become aware of lately, in a freer perspective that preserves a high standard.

Gigi Căciuleanu - a famous contemporary Romanian choreographer for whom dance is an art which essentializes life itself – stated that to conceive a choreography is “to merge geometry and grammar, architecture and music, sculpture and game strategy…”\(^\text{10}\) For him, dance is the art of sculpting time with a body in motion. The dancer is a tool of beauty to express feelings that are ultimately a source of endless, ethereal inspiration. To do this, the dancer require high emotional intelligence. He/she has the ability to read the audience’s emotions and to guide them so the audience feels the way he/she aims them to feel.

In theatre, the artist is the messenger of the story, the one who conveys the story in such a way that it’s made true through the way he/she acts it. The actor tells the story of a conflict between the characters and the circumstances, as dance and opera tell too. That is why the line between the man performing on stage and the character becomes invisible. “There is an obligation and social responsibility to be an actor.”\(^\text{11}\)

\(^{11}\) Joanna Read, *Idem.*
Actors, dancers and opera singers create a bond with the audience through their performance, turning them into active participants. A piece of art is not completely what it is meant to be until the public is in the room. Performing arts break many barriers and make people more comfortable with each other, opening the doors of communication and perception.

Performing practices have conquered all cultural and social fields – education included – in order to optimize their outcomes. How could performing arts not be interlaced and melted into each other when performing arts represent interdisciplinary branches of the same cultural manifestation? Ballet, theatre and opera share not only the stage, or the subtlety of the metaphor of movement, but also practical indications that turn the expression through gesture and movement into performance. Those gestures and movements are intrinsic parts of a story the artist tells on stage for the audience. By understanding the artists’ language of movement and dance, the audience become part of the ephemeral show. The difference between ballet and the other performing arts, though, consists of the theoretical statement that sees human body follow through the speed and rhythm of a piece of music, in a classical, modern or contemporary approach. It is a sequence of steps relying on the harmony of sound and lyrics that communicate a story to the audience.

Physical theatre particularly builds acting through physical actions and relies on dance and eurhythmics. Therefore, only basic or primary artistic movements are used to express the plot, together with theatrical means (such as text). Physical theatre, the same as ballet, considers the body as its expressing medium. In this, the two arts reach a closeness where opera is not allowed.

Through time, people have been asking themselves: Is dancing able to express the complex emotions of the characters in a story? Is physical theatre capable of such sensitive fluidity that it could enter the category of ballet? Is music a *sine qua non* element for ballet, or a harmonious but steady factor in more complex creation on stage? And although the answers are *yes* with every performance of each type, the performance seems to be ephemeral at the same time, despite the collective effort, despite a panoply of great names: it is so
because performing arts are unrepeatable. And yes, performing arts are the highest manifestations of human body, mind and soul. Art doesn’t need explanations and the audience perceives it naturally, as a cathartic pleasure they receive throughout the performance.

While traditional visual artists display their works in a gallery, a museum or in a more or less conventional place - to be seen by the public for a long period of time -, performing artists let their work unfold in a unique moment in time, and it will never again be replicated exactly the same, regardless their devotion for arts.

I am making a clear distinction between the phenomenon of transgressing the borders between the stage genres, especially between theatre and choreography. “Choreography migrates towards theatre, and theatre infiltrates in choreography, although this emulation which wishes to be in the idea of a total theatre can give birth to some artistic experiments where the stress is placed upon the very visual interpretation, with an excessiveness of body movement and with an acute absence of Thalia’s simple and natural truths. The moderation and the balance of these changes is fertile to the spectacular aesthetic, burdening the sap of the artistic creation also through the revealing of the internal life of the characters beyond the lines themselves. Because either performing in Grotovski’ style, or Peter Brook’s, or in the Stanislavskian tradition, or personalising the game, the actor has to be armed with all the means of the plastic expression. The attention upon the way of assuming the body, of using it and of recognizing the strange infinity of its possibilities to transcend the barriers of communication.”

From a universal audience perspective, performing arts are the ones that have kept humanity sane and took it out of barbarism.

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