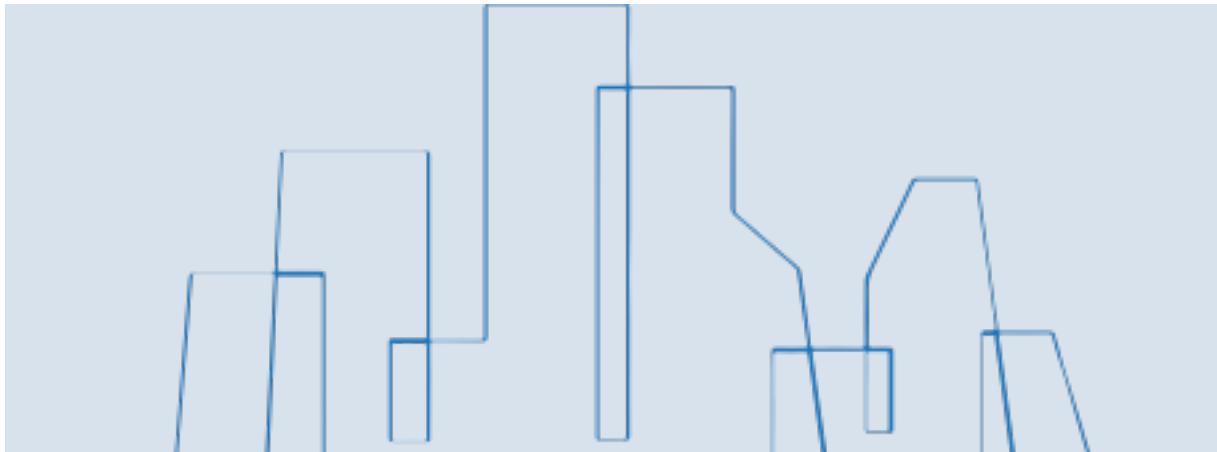




10

**THEATRE, CITY, AND PARTICIPATION: BETWEEN MEMORY
AND BECOMING** *Isabel Bezelga*



The present chapter is part of the research project Performance, Heritage, and Community, in the Theatre and Performance Studies Group of the Centre for History of Art and Artistic Research (CHAIA),³⁹ University of Évora. It has three central areas of analysis: City; Performative Art Practices; and Heritage.

This scientific and artistic research unit, which brings together researchers from multiple areas – from architecture to archaeology, from art history to heritage studies, passing through the various artistic areas – defines its main objectives in a transversal way, through the implementation of an approach projected on the transdisciplinary concept of critical heritage, which considers its re-signification in the present through contemporary artistic practices.

Resulting from this, the reflection presented here is concerned with the analysis of artistic actions that are developed in a heritage context in the city of Évora. It involves circular processes of research, creation, and teaching that promote the integration of researchers, students, and the community in the conception, co-creation, and realization of site-specific theatrical actions.

In addition, this research benefits from post-graduate research in Performing Arts, which aims to identify, promote, and systematize artistic creation methodologies, which enhance the production of performances in heritage spaces, in a dialogical relationship with the communities and the diverse groups present in the territory.

When investigating, analysing, and conceiving creation and production processes in non-theatrical spaces, questioning the conceptions, functions, and meanings that structure their development in specific places, questions crossed by perspectives

³⁹ Research funded by FCT (Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology), within the scope of the follow projects: Refa UIB/00112/2020

of identity and power immediately arise, contributing to the discussion about citizens' rights to the city and its heritage, as well as to the identification of forms of participation in decisions about their uses.

In the context of the contemporary public space, urgencies and transversal societal questionings have been acting as motifs for artistic creation. We highlight the issues related to the sustainable nature of the city, such as: climate change impact, the invisibility and unrepresentativeness of the cultural diversity existing in the territory, accessibility to the public space and gentrification, in which the commodification and touristification of the place acts upon the city's symbolic, imagination, memory, and daily experience dimensions.

The aim is to understand how the processes of conceptual reflection and the comprehension of a territory's particular traits are connected and reverberated with the development of artistic laboratories, in the production and amplification of meanings and the development of new knowledge.

The need for a performative artistic project that dialogues with the place

Évora was transformed in the 20th century from a traditional conservative town, still with traces of old feudal customs, to a land of promise, as a result of social and political changes after 25 April 1974. In recent decades Évora grew both as the university hub of a vast region and as a destination for cultural tourism.

Évora, like any other city, is experiencing a process of de-traditionalisation that is important to understand:

De-traditionalisation arises from the recognition that neither tradition nor innovation exist in an absolute

form. There are some potentially anti-traditionalist elements in tradition, as there are non-modernising components in innovation (Fortuna, 1997, p. 88)

Fortuna also underlines that “tradition, as well as innovation, are first of all ‘points of view’ or cultural messages” (*Ibid*, p.84). Given the status of Cultural Heritage of Humanity granted by UNESCO in 1996, Évora faces great challenges. Its historical centre is becoming a museum piece, in which the buildings are seen as pieces of art exhibited in an open-air gallery. Thus, Évora presents itself as unattainable and untouchable, because overregulation does not take into account adaptation to the current needs of the inhabitants.

However, the intramural city has been progressively losing inhabitants as more and more hotels open in the old streets. The growth of the peripheral neighbourhoods has led to a new configuration of the territory, in what can be seen as islands. The most recent generation is deprived of an experience of living in the city, imbued by the conviviality experience. Furthermore, this is reflected in their cultural practices. “Historic centres are spaces that refer to a romantic and picturesque picture expressed in an articulated set of meanings and symbols. Based on a kind of nostalgic feelings” (Aguar, 1995, p.24)

The stagnancy of the historical centre is advancing as the globalised tourism phenomenon increases. The hordes of hurried visitors are seeking to absorb the uniqueness of aesthetic visions, which soon become frozen in the cameras of mobile phones.

As a result, the effects of expanding tourism on the city life, on the daily practices of its inhabitants and, thus, on its heritage, are visible. However, the concept of heritage is not “(...) necessarily tied to a quest for ‘identity’ nor is it connected to a sense of ‘loss’. This fixation seems to be a singularity of the modern West and, more accurately, of its concept of ‘historical time’” (Gonçalves, 2015, p. 216). Relationships are, however, established with

processes highlighting identity reconfigurations, often nourished by the *vox populi*.

Heritage and identity are only compatible when we assume that heritage operates as a kind of magnifying mourning of the defunct which enables individuals to note and make tolerable the changes to which their identities are submitted. Granting heritage status corresponds to the acknowledgement that something has vanished or is not anymore part of everyday practices. Heritage consecration is an act of mourning (Peixoto, 2006, p.75).

In the context of the recent global experience, the usual bustle of visitors was substituted by a profound silence imposed by the confinement of the pandemic, submerging Évora into a spectral place. In that way, the response came quickly through the noisy break of such silence and loneliness that struck the world.

The performative actions of these last two years ended up revealing themselves as an urgency and a need to affirm that we are alive.

Architectonic heritage has a notable presence in the city, which is both aesthetic and oppressive, undermining traditional ways of doing and being. While keeping intact various layers of the past – from Neolithic to Roman remains, from the medieval borough and cosmopolitan renaissance to bourgeois and nationalist exaltation – Évora, nevertheless, has not exhausted its built heritage behind walls. This situation has come together to question and confront it through artistic creation, catalysing a need to dialogue *in situ* on a contemporary way, be it in the cromlech (6th century BC), the Roman forum, or in the invisible and forgotten places.

Places acquire diverse meanings, considering their intimate, social, aesthetic, and philosophical natures and for this a necessary dual analysis is required. One structured around remembrance, linked to the multiple histories that “inhabit” them, and the other exercising the contemporary condition that reinvents them in

their uses and in the resignification here and now. The discussion about the concept of critical heritage is particularly pertinent when the relationship between heritage and *in situ* performance is analysed. By considering the involvement of the body in the dialogue with heritage spaces, new possibilities are generated for these sites. In this framework the tensions between the agencied goals of heritage and the desires/needs of both individuals and communities inhabiting the contexts are recognised, as well as the different points of view towards diverse conceptions of heritage (Winter, 2013).

Site specific performance

Site specific theatre and performance practices are not recent and although they may have multiple configurations and derive from different meanings, they contain a common denominator that is configured in the relationship with a specific space, not originally conceived as theatre itself. The finding and occupation of other sites, often associated to a quest for creative freedom and that according to Carlson, (1989) became symbol of political freedom in the 1960s and 1970s, has a particularly strong meaning in the framework of the demand for the right to the city, especially by means of the performative occupation of the public space in the context of the debates on peripheries and centralities.

Even considering the accuracy of Pavis' (1998, p.127) reference regarding the 'site specific' concept, as "staging and performances conceived from and according to a location found in reality", this does not limit itself to the artistic creation process in the real use of the site, but rather expands itself in multiple relations and unfolds.

Facing the co-existence of a great variety of approaches, we took as a reference, amongst others, the studies developed by Wohl (2014). These perform a systematisation of such practices in distinct scales – environment, space, audience, dramaturgy, and has been relevant in the analysis of the actions developed.

From our perspective, by developing dialogues of intimacy and affection (Thompson, 2009), in the creative processes in specific sites of the city, we deal with complex relationships that are established between individual experiences: those of the group and those of the site. This kind of dialogue that takes place in a site simultaneously shared and occupied by the bodies of the performers and the spectators, who are fictionally integrated, often enables an intimate and intense immersive experience, blurring the perception between “being part of” and “watching” a performance (Pearson, 2010).

The Performance, Heritage, and Community Project

The Performance, Heritage, and Community Project is structured through the development of creative experiences which link teaching and research, and under the assumption of an early involvement of students in the ongoing research processes.

It is a platform which explores the dialogue between contemporary performance and popular culture performance practices, through the occupation of common heritage sites. It opens the door to the creation of new interfaces, having as main objectives the identification, description, and exploration of the various mutual contributions.

In this way, we intend to systematise the bases of the aesthetic, poetic, and dramaturgical specificities of site-specific theatricality understanding, modulated by the establishment of an ethical relationship – necessarily present in co-creative processes – based on a cross-disciplinary dialogue and to produce praxiologic reflection and documentation.

The process of listening to and immersing oneself in heritage spaces promotes a unique dialogue, in the body-space relationship, producing, step by step, unique poetics. In the same way, in the cases that directly involve the participation of the community

(Dicks, 2000), by mobilizing all sorts of intersubjectivities, also multiple feelings and affectations are summoned in the established relations with the space, contributing to co-creative experiences.

Methodological options of research

The methodology followed is inspired by the perspectives of practice as research. Various meanings are produced in the artistic field, so we can invoke the model that frames several investigations produced from artistic performances, presented by Nelson, (2013, p.6). The approach used is based on the development of sensitive cartographies, the walking and drifting experience, and the practice of collaborative creative processes as appropriate methods for the development of performative research projects *in situ*, that promote the perceptive, creative and reflexive openness required for high quality research.

Documentary research, combined with intense laboratory experimentation, therefore occupy a significant time/space in the co-creation of an intimate dialogue with the site.

The performances arising from these labs gain polyphonic identities, as a result of heterogeneous and multifaceted elements that coexist and allow the study of several aspects: the multi- artistic, social and spatial interferences/challenges involved in the development of these procedures; role negotiation; authoring and authority; and the kinds of relationship that are established between professionals and non-professionals.

1 Drifting and Walking to discover and feel

The need to “uncover the gaze” and the senses enables the discovery, in other forms, of familiar spaces crossed on a daily basis, full of meanings carried by a patrimonial view that is anchored in the glamour of the past, as well as that of fostering the encounters with the unfamiliar, through aimless “wanderings”. This practice led to the pursuit of the understanding of

(...) theories, such as the concept of *flâneur*, as advocated by Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, and Walter Benjamin, as well as the underlying principles of the Dadaist and Surrealist wanderings and the Situationist drift and the concept of transurbancy, as described and practised by the research group guided by Francesco Careri. (Duarte and André, 2017, p.8)

Why is it urgent to get lost? So that at least we can go through the sensitive experience of discovery and astonishment, seeking the path, listening, scenting the odours and smells, taking the stimulus that is given. Just walking. Feeling the rhythmical beat (the breath that flows in and out, the cadence in the warming muscles). Tracking where our footsteps lead us, refining our gaze to discover the yet-to-be-known. Being guided by overlapping sounds which reach our ears and urge us to go. To walk, to walk, to walk. The stride that takes everything behind. A body.

In this state of “loss” as a potency, perceptive channels are opened up which reveal signs, show other places, and allow unexpected encounters. Intuition and senses are mobilised in a state of wandering. They establish links that allow us to examine and more deeply understand the city space.

2 Cartography as a method for collaborative creative processes

This methodological approach is based “on the experimentation of thought – a method that is not to be applied, but experienced and taken as an attitudinal approach” (Passos, Kastrup and Escóssia, 2020, pp.10/11). The maps that result from the experience/ living of cartography are the records of the images/thoughts produced, of the meetings held, of the many conversations begun. A flow of ideas, acts, and experiences that encourage creative experimentations and collaborations are captured, leading to an infinitude of relationship possibilities. Constellations of transient signals, continuously reshaped, transformed.

In this context, the collaborative process of research-creation is a permanent way-building and rebuilding process, while the dramaturgical practice “as a way of structuring and meaning relations in the show” (Pais, 2004, p.18) is an unseen process – whose arrival point cannot be defined at all. It involves all sorts of intersubjectivities that establish new connections and intersections, and in which dramaturgical writing, authorship, and role performance are constantly being negotiated and are subjects/objects of consideration.

3 Archive and documentation

The development of performing arts archives is a matter of contemporary debate (Taylor, 2021), mainly because of their ephemeral nature, but also because of copyright issues and, moreover, because of the global virtual theatrical actions discussed during the pandemic season.

Care for the documentation of the research processes of artistic creation is a valuable part of the Performance, Patrimony, and Community project. It comprises a database of theoretical, conceptual and methodological data, audio-visual records, and reflective and academic output. Data concerning the processes of artistic creation – performances, shows, interviews with the artistic teams and audiences – is treated (audio-visual and text) in systematic ways, aiming at their analysis and the generation of knowledge in a strict and valid way. Even considering the risks of existing contamination between memory and historicisation, the accessibility of the audio-visual archive may be useful to the future participants of this project.

Research Artistic Practices

We discuss below three research processes that are at distinct stages of development and are paradigmatic of the diverse ways of accessing, interpreting, and inhabiting the heritage sites that the research group has developed.

Está aí alguém? (Is anybody there?)

From a challenge set by *Fundação Eugénio d'Almeida* (FEA), the performance process was carried out by a team of young researchers⁴⁰ to produce *Está aí alguém?*, which is a performative occupation of Páteo de S. Miguel, Évora's former palace, with its unique heritage and collections. It is simultaneously a project within the scope of artistic/theatrical research and a cultural and public mediation initiative.

In the process were discussed the aesthetic, ethical and dramaturgical specificities in a museological context (Jackson & Kidd, 2010). It was based on the perspectives of critical heritage (Winter, 2012) and on participative processes. This collaborative research (Cruz, Menezes & Bezelga, 2021) was based on "inhabiting the space" and also relied on available data from the FEA archives, related to the events and the transformations undergone in the place, whose protagonists were diverse characters who inhabited it in different times.

The development of *Está aí alguém?* was driven by the production of contemporary meanings and interpretations, through the recovery of narratives (which are also fictions, since they reflect what their promoters wished to hide or conceal from the archives) of historically located events, thereby questioning the glorification of status and power (Smith, 2006). Throughout the whole process the quest was for an artistic truth that would dialogue with these questions: How not to become hostage to a "historical truth"? What are the boundaries between documenting the real and the free to create a multiplicity of fictions? An illustration of this real / fiction shifting was reflected in a character who appears as metaphor of the erasure process, in the photo below.

40 Team: Chissangue Afonso, Nuno Zúniga, Paulo Roque, Rolando Galhardas, Rúben Jaulino, and Tiago Carrasco. Scientific coord. Isabel Bezelga and Ana Tamen



Figure 10. 1 – Garden of Paço de S. Miguel. Credits: André Batista, 2019, CHAIA

The site is real but the performance place is metaphoric, and can provide other fictions and other occupations (Turner, 2000). Beside the queries arising from the proper nature of artistic research (an option for the collective and participatory creation, in all of its parts: direction, costume design, script and dramaturgy), arose the constant need for dramaturgical validation, since the disruption between real/fiction led to incessant searches for writing and rewriting, for its own poetics, inquiring about how and in which way it comes about and feeds on itself.

In the process of the creative interpellation of spaces and archives, several ghosts (Turner, 2004) have approached and inhabit the artists' bodies who constitute the research/creative/production team: young professionals from the University of Évora theatre course, enabling the comprehension of the specificities that faced the performance, in a heritage/museum environment.

The scenic score elements, which were reconfigured in different stages, made it possible to organise and encode the materials in a dramaturgical scene writing.

Taking the displacement as a paradigmatic frequently used format for 'site specific' performance, the actors walked down and up corridors, went up and down stairs and were opening doors, with spectators, of inhabited places with singular histories (Pearson, 2010; Wohl, 2014). Due to this contingency, the audience participants tended to be very involved in the performance. The performance is overshadowed by a phantasmagorical time which is created *in situ* by the performers and the audience members become witnesses of it. In that way, it became possible to question the place radically, in a way that when you return to it, it will not be the same anymore.

More than conferring voice and presence to characters who circulate between different places and times (in a persisting exercise of balancing between documentary and fiction), actors' gestures, discourses, and actions are turned into real possibilities of dialogue, face to face, with single audience participants, in an on-site testimonial shape (Newman, 2012), imaging and reinterpreting city identities and sites of memory.

Évora, esta cidade que me espanta (Évora this city that amazes me)

The second case concerns a recent research/creation which began in January 2022 and which is still ongoing. It is the result of the lab experience of occupation and the discovery of *Pólo dos Leões* and of the pathways that led to it, by a multicultural group⁴¹, which through the experiences, feelings and affections that were exchanged, had a lively dialogue in the reshaping of the territory, disclosing the various underground layers. Classrooms followed

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the railway line, nowadays transformed into an eco-track and in winter nights, students' dreams of listening to the whistle at the railway station and the flag being waved by the railway crossing guard. The materialities lying there, eroded by the fungus of time... The old pasta factory of the Leões, where the centre of the School of Arts is located and which was subject to an adaptation project, not yet fully concluded, used to be on a railway branch line that linked Évora to Mora. It had a proper station, which still today serves as address to former staff (in the photo) and with direct access to the grain storage silos that remains in the School of Arts and which served the boarding and landing of the primary materials (Bernardo and Matos, 2021).

Figure 10. 2 –Leões Railway Station. Credits: I. Bezelga, 2022, CHAIA

This was a strategic point in this region, which has gradually become deserted due to the lack of employment opportunities. All that is available is poorly paid work in the tertiary sector of commerce and services, in which there is an evident use of seasonal employment in tourist lodgings.



Based on the increasing relation with nature and healthy lifestyles, many of the Portuguese cities and villages have set up cycling/pedestrian trails. Évora is no exception. However, it is not mentioned with the same strength that these paths are the old railway tracks!

The Évora line was opened in 1863. At the beginning of the millennium the branches which linked it to Estremoz/ Vila Viçosa, Mora and Reguengos (in Central Alentejo) were disappearing (Bernardo and Matos, 2021). The last train between Évora and Estremoz was in 2009. Centuries-old tracks and rails were removed from several lines that had formed a densely network between the villages in a region that had always been isolated and poor, because of the latifundium system that was in place.

Railways played an enormous role in the whole of Alentejo, contributing to the mobility and connectedness in a territory full of exclusion and loneliness, prior to the arrival of the asphalt empire. At a moment when the rail network was being electrified, the choice of investments was private transport, for the profit of the oil-based industry. This is how Évora witnessed the destruction of a vital rail network consisting of four stretches of track which connected the people of this territory.

This research/ creation arises from the experiments and initial thoughts that started on these tracks, listening to the silences of abandoned old stations and desolate platforms, in the eyes of the aged, clouded and dauntless eyes which follow our movements, constantly pushing us to more questions: Where have those who used to dwell out here gone? And what are the ones who stayed waiting for? Who and what are those who are excluded? The adopted methodology is based on the constitution of spaces of safe exchange and listening, in which diverse materialities have contributed to exploring the spaces, setting up playful experimentation and driving to immersive improvisations. By following a constant negotiation process in the group, in order to select, dismiss or to transform the ideas/forms found.

Bravas foram, Bravas serão! (Brave they were, Brave they will be!)

The final case is currently in the explorative phase and is a result of the research that began on the paths of the water in Évora, which began in 2018 with the Sete Águas performance, following the long aqueduct of Água de Prata, to reach the royal fountain in Largo do Chão das Covas. We proceed to encounter an innumerable number of public fountains which still exist throughout the city (nowadays, most of them are not used for what they were built for, as they are already disabled, and have no spouts to allow water flow to quench our thirst!) In the desire to follow this research path deeper, we came upon the lonely fountain beyond the walls, which once appeased the dryness of humans and nonhumans. “The picturesque Bravas fountain, located in Avenida Tulio Espanca, near S. Sebastião Church, documented since 1483 (...) does not appear to have suffered major structural interventions” (Guerreiro, 1999, p. 7).

After looking at the documentation, we have considered not only relations with the site, the role and uses of Bravas fountain, but also the symbolic meaning attributed to it, including narratives that recall the brave women who fearlessly stepped out of the city walls to metaphorically purge the day-to-day rudiments of their lords (by doing the laundry of the city’s noble houses). Nevertheless, the latter were not free from the exhibition of their virtues and faults in free and unrestrained popular language. The sanction of such public offences goes like this:

Mulheres Bravas or brave women was also the name that was given to women who had caused fights or quarrels with their neighbours and with other women. It was therefore stipulated that whoever injured someone else had to pay in accordance with how many times they had committed the crime: the first time they would pay 100 pounds; if it were the second time, they would have an iron whip put in their face, with a sharp pointed tongue, also in iron, which once inside the mouth would block the tongue

from being moved, otherwise it would be all cut off and would cause horrible pain. (Guerreiro, 1999, p.7)

At this stage, we have already begun to map the daily tasks that require the use of water, which in the context of the gender distribution of household work represents a significant number of working hours, particularly for women. Furthermore, we will also begin to collect oral expressions which, within the context of the region, express contemporary sayings and slang.

We intend to include in this creative process some of the women of this community, who wish to jointly explore the possibility of relationships with the site and its surrounding areas in the dialogues with sounds and visualities, arising from the experiences of womanhood.

Conclusion

This research has to fight, in the first instance, against all preconceived judgements and ideas that ground the relationships with heritage spaces on the reverence of the untouchable. The kinds of activities considered by sponsors and funders as ways of “promotion/visibility of the monumentality” contradict the challenge which aims at the body-space relationship, in a living dialogue with the place.

“Denaturalizing the look”, learning to “look”, and being willing to “listen” are the necessary steps to an effective performative dialogue which requires time and inner quietness and a disposition to read/see/listen to stories, which sometimes seem like unheard whispers (Schechner, 1994).

Remembrance, Experience, and Relationship are key factors in the creation of a singular and collective poetic. Permanent re- invention through a process of constructing and demounting is only made possible by the inter-subjectivities that arise from every single memory, which provide an infinity of different narratives (Halbwachs, 2004).

Therefore, artistic occupation, under the form of an aesthetic dialogue with the site, decidedly contributes to the resignification process of heritage spaces.

In Évora's context as a "heritage place" of reference, we must take into account the ways in which the audience, in their diversity, perceive and interpret public space and performance and link it with their own experiences. The link between the Academy and the territory where it belongs involves recognising the know-how of informal individuals and groups which promote the community experience and appreciation of the cultural and artistic performances in the region, as "living" bearers of a remarkable heritage. These many pillars warrant the research development, in the production of scientific knowledge, as well as a methodological basis that may provide sustainability to the several artistic and theatrical groups led by former students of theatre and young professionals.

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