

Performative theatre: a queer theatre?

MÉLISSA BERTRAND

ABSTRACT: Researcher Josette Féral has studied the reciprocity between performativity and theatricality in the field of theatrical studies. With the term “performative theatre”, she intends to build continuity between the notions against the traditional view which opposes theatre and performance. Taking her works as a starting point, I explore the dynamics of what I call the state of trans- (trance, transition, transformation, transidentity, transgression, transfer...) in performative theatre. The idea is therefore to go beyond the dualisms that oppose theatre and performance as well as femininity and masculinity, among others. How did the performative turn foster the emergence of a queer theatre? To what extent does this affect the way bodies exist on stage?

KEYWORDS: performance and theatre studies; performative theatre; body; queer; gender.

From the 1990s, when the documentary *Paris is burning* was presenting the subversive “ball culture” in 80’s in the United States, until today, since voguing¹ is making its come back and is even becoming fashionable, it seems that queer culture has gained visibility and has increasingly gentrified. Until forty years ago, queer culture was defined as a set of socio-political demands that combined the issues of sexuality, gender, race and class, revealing the precariousness of the people involved and the strategies they put in place to survive and express themselves. Today, the so-called queer practices have become almost elitist – at least in France, where queer culture seems very discreet in small and medium towns but is becoming more bourgeois in Paris where it is most often expressed in parties that use the queer label as a profitable cultural added value, targeting a rather white and wealthy population (BOURCIER 2017: 20).² Meanwhile, the few places

¹ Voguing is a dance, initially performed by trans and gay people in Harlem around the 1960’. This dance was inspired from the poses of the models in the magazine *Vogue*. Its aim was a crossing of gender roles and economical positions.

² The trans* and anarchic researcher Sam Bourcier also evokes a global movement of appropriation of LGBTQI’ identities in the labour market. These identities are used as an added value for capitalist companies (attract new customers, pretend to be inclusive, use clichés to make better sales: the butch at the hardware shop, the effeminate gay as a hairdresser...).

of resistance which remain accessible to precarious people survive as best they can and keep providing tools of self-defence, collective knowledge, self-empowerment and areas of expression.³

Institutional museums and theatres present ever more numerous shows featuring queer personalities. This was apparent the 2018 Avignon festival organized by stage director Olivier Py. According to some, such as the author, actress and stage director Carole Thibaut who symbolically refused a fake Molière award,⁴ the festival was missing its goal. Indeed, in 2018 the theme of the Avignon festival was “gender”, Carole Thibaut noted that in the theatre programme of the official selection, only 10% of the stage directors were women. The rate of trans or non-binary artists hasn’t been given, which contributes to make them invisible.

So, yes, queer themes attract and sell, but what is behind this allegedly subversive label? Are we facing the rise of new “technologies of gender”, to use Teresa de Lauretis’ terms⁵? It is too early to assess whether this institutionalisation and commercialisation of queer culture gradually infiltrates the dominant system to better destabilise it, or whether it is an appropriation of the queer subculture by a phallogentric and patriarchal culture.

The same doubt hangs over the question of artistic performance. The “performative turn” that accompanied the artistic and academic avant-gardes of the 1950s and 1960s has now become commonplace. First, Austin (1962) invited us to rethink the power of language. Then Goffman (1956) offered an analysis of the staging of daily life as a social performance. After him, Judith Butler (1990) made gender identity a palimpsest of quotations and rewritings. Thanks to all these researches, the term “performance” found itself at the heart of a renewal of the thinking of the individual after the Second World War. This transdisciplinary aspect (the term is used in linguistics, sociology and gender studies, among others) has become part

³ In Paris, the only feminist, queer, lesbian and bi bar, la Mutinerie, which often organizes free workshops, self-defence classes, shows, readings, meetings and parties, is threatened every year with closure (lack of money, neighbourhood’s complaints about the noise after several sound-insulation works although the bar is in the middle of a very lively district).

⁴ See her *Discours* on Youtube.

⁵ DE LAURETIS 1987. In this essay, Teresa de Lauretis, one of the first white female thinker of queer theory, transforms Foucault’s expression “technologies of sex” (*Histoire de la sexualité*) to analyse it in a feminist way. “Technologies of gender” are in every media (researches, movies, novels, shows...) and in every means of communication. They participate in the construction of gender in society by reproducing mechanism of domination (for example the male gaze) or destabilizing it.

of its essence. Several analyses of the history of what is called “artistic performance”, as opposed to social performance, also show the same reversal, a shift of an avant-garde practice, often in resistance to the dominant social, political or aesthetic context, but which has gradually returned to the museum or theatre (FÉRAL 2008; CARLSON 2004).

My field of analysis being that of the living arts, this infiltration of performance, and more recently of queer practices,⁶ into the dominant theatrical culture, nevertheless seems symptomatic. It seems to me that it is the transformation of the modality of existence of bodies on stage that is at stake. At the crossroads between the notions of an actor·tress carrying a character’s fictional identity through its own body, and that of a performer assuming their personal history and using it as a creative material, a new dynamic emerges, a more dialectical and complex positioning. In shows integrating queer themes, physical identity is located on a breach, on a border. This type of event includes what I would call “bodies in trans-” or a “theatre in trans-”.⁷ I purposely use this prefix because it allows in French, and to a lesser extent in English, to play with its variations through different terms, bringing together the same idea of movement: *trance* (*transe* in French), transition, transformation, transidentity, transgression, transfer...

Finally, it allows me to offer an update of the expression “performative theatre”, invented by Josette Féral, in order to look at it against gender-related questions. Josette Féral is a researcher in theatre studies, trained in semiology. She has studied the notions of performativity and theatricality in contemporary theatre. With the expression “performative theatre” (*théâtre performatif* in French) which she coined in an article dating from 2008, she intends to build these notions of theatricality and performativity in continuity. For her, shows of the beginning of the 2000s rely both on theatrical elements (characters, narrative structure, fiction, opposition between spectators and actors·tresses, theatrical illusion...) and performative elements (disrupted temporality, refusal of linearity, split references, variety of medias, risk-taking, deconstruction of the language...). Performative theatre is a theatre that swings between representation and “événementialité”, that is, when an event breaks the linearity of the plot. This is also a theatre where the performer is fully engaged: their personal identity

⁶ Queer practices can be identified as hybrid forms, blurred identity, use of quotations, rewriting and distortion...

⁷ Two key-concepts of my actual PhD research.

can be at stakes, their body can be put in danger, they question the limits of themselves and can link those limits to the ongoing show.

I do believe this hybridity can echo queer concerns or can even be renewed by the incursion of queer practices in performative theatre. In Josette Féral's legacy, I want to question the possibility of a queer theatre or, in my own and broader terms, of a trans-theatre.⁸ Speaking of trans-theatre, I therefore wish to go beyond the dualisms that oppose, among other things, theatricality and performativity, the fictional identity of the character and the physical identity of the performer, femininity and masculinity, heterosexual cis culture and queer culture... How did the performative turn foster the emergence of a queer theatre? To what extent does this affect the way bodies exist on stage? Can theatre produce new kinds of "technologies of gender"?

To answer these questions, I will focus on the analysis of performances that introduce either characters or performers with a queer identity. I will first see how gender identity is performed through transfer mechanisms between the performer and something that can represent both otherness and identity. To clarify, by transfer I mean the way the identity is projected onto something exterior to the body and expresses itself through it. It can be a material object, e.g. a puppet, or the global scenic environment that envelops and duplicates the performer. Although not every duplication on stage is queer, it is indeed this type of mechanism that is preferred to express queer identity today. This kind of transfer leads to a form of hybridity and expresses a creative power to redefine the self that can be considered as odd or queer (ANZALDÚA 1987: 40-41).⁹ Then, we will observe how gender expression through movements transcends the violence of the medical world that assigns an identity to a body.

⁸ In my PhD, the presence of queer practices or discourses is only one of the elements that question identities and bodies on contemporary stage.

⁹ "The queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual tribe's fear: being different, being other and therefore lesser, therefore sub-human, in-human, non-human. [...] Contrary to some psychiatric tenets, half and halves are not suffering from a confusion of sexual identity, or even from a confusion of gender. What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other".

1. TRANSFER MECHANISM AND PERFORMANCE OF TRANSGENDER IDENTITY

1.1. TRANSFER PERFORMER-CHARACTER-PUPPET

The first show I will focus on is *The Ventriloquists Convention* directed by Gisèle Vienne in 2015. Gisèle Vienne is a visual artist, stage director and choreographer who often integrates the use of puppets into her shows. In *The Ventriloquists Convention*, it is essentially the theme of gender that gives a performative dimension to the show and brings it out of a classic linear theatricality. Gender performance, in a more sociological sense, fully participates in the disorder, in the friction between reality and fiction, between citational repetition and rewriting of personal identity. And this performance is powered by the constant shift between the performer, the puppeteer character and the puppet.

As the title of the show suggests, Gisèle Vienne stages an international meeting of ventriloquism and fully plays on the different degrees of identity, otherness and duplication. The ventriloquist character Jessica Capdevielle, double of the “real” puppeteer Jonathan Capdevielle (who is well-known in the field of puppets), and her puppet introduce the theme of transidentity from the first words spoken on stage. The show starts with the late entry on stage of the master of ceremonies who wants to impress the audience by introducing the star... but misgenders her:

NILS: – Sorry, I’m late! How nice to see you again... Attention, attention! Ladies and gentlemen, this year is the first time that our competition has become INTERNATIONAL! Because we have Jonathan Capdevielle here...

JESSICA: – Je.. Jessica, please...

NILS: – Jessica, sorry, of course... Naturally... Jessica! Jessica! Jessica!”

We are thrown into confusion since each character bears the name of its interpreter in everyday life, except the character of Jessica Capdevielle who remains mentioned in the program by its male first name, Jonathan. This could be considered as the first blurring of borders, preparing the mechanism of transfer described below. The breach between the gender identity of the performer and the one of the puppeteer character questions the cis-centric habit to presume one’s gender from what is acknowledged and taken for granted.

This leads me to discuss the transfer of Jessica's character to her double puppets. It is through these media that her transgender identity is fully claimed, challenging the prejudices of the master of ceremonies, himself a stereotype of the heterosexual white cis man who occupies the space of speech and multiplies sexual jokes. Jessica's puppet is a praying mantis, named Mantis, which she genders as female, but which differs from the majority of the other puppets present who are mostly anthropomorphic. The "male-eating insect" identity that the praying mantis conveys is far from being insignificant to represent a trans woman who also fully assumes that she has not had surgery. She ironically challenges a cliché around the M-to-F transidentity.

The question of sex is clearly addressed in the alternation between Jessica's own speech and the speech of her puppet. The theme of motherhood and fatherhood helps to shed light on it since Jessica explodes the dualism of heterosexual cis thought. When the presenter compares her physical appearance to her son's, he uses the term "mother" to refer to Jessica. Her son immediately answers: "Yes [I look like her], but she's my father". The mixture of the paternal male figure and the female pronoun in the same sentence can be read as a queer use of language. As demonstrated by Monique Wittig (1981) the language can be a tool of self (re)definition, and irony can reveal the absurdity of straight and cis culture expressed through gender-related words.¹⁰ This intervention of Jessica's son confuses the master of ceremonies who apologises while Jessica amuses herself and uses her finger to improvise a creeping puppet representing her penis: "– It's still there, down, between my legs, right where you left it!". It is worth noticing that she uses one part of her own body to represent another one and doubles her identity by making of herself both the puppet and the puppeteer. This attitude defeats the possibility of a manipulated-manipulating relationship. She totally controls

¹⁰ « Ces discours [psychanalytiques] nous nient toute possibilité de créer nos propres catégories, ils nous empêchent de parler sinon dans leurs termes » (60) ["Those [psychoanalytic] speeches are denying the possibility for us to create our own categories, they are forbidding us to talk without using their words"].

« C'est pourquoi à l'époque où il s'opère une énorme poussée pour évacuer le sens des pratiques de langage il nous faut insister du côté du sens et par le sarcasme et l'ironie rendre manifeste ce qui tire à hue et à dia » (104) ["This is why, at the time when people try to make language practices meaningless, we need to value meaning and, using sarcasm and irony, reveal what is contradictory"].

her identity and what she wants to reveal about it. The body becomes a palimpsest of simultaneous quotations and rewritings of herself. The penis belongs to her past, when she was generally gendered as a man, but is also representative of her feminine and current identity.

Moreover, in a mirror scene, Jessica plays her role as a father-mother again thanks to Mantis who explains to her puppeteer that she does not feel well, that she has something inside her that wants to come out. Jessica auscultates Mantis, who confesses to her that she is pregnant with the master of ceremonies' puppet. Jessica then becomes the midwife of her double, Mantis, who gives birth on stage to a slimy and greenish form that she expels with a large spurt of water that reminds ejaculation. By transferring the identity of the performer to the character and the character to its puppet, it is a broad palette of bodily identities that emerges around the same figure that embodies the performativity of gender. What Jessica and Mantis are really giving birth to is a complex identity that does not want to fit in heterosexual and cis categories of man/woman and father/mother. The close relation between the puppets (Mantis / Jessica's own finger) and the puppeteer character contributes to blurring the lines.



GISÈLE Vienne, *The Ventriloquists Convention*, 2015. Credits: Falk Wenzel.

1.2. TRANSFER BETWEEN PERFORMER, STAGE ENVIRONMENT AND MATERIAL

The second example I would like to explore is that of *P.P.P.* directed and performed by Phia Ménard in 2008, a performance that allowed her to come out as a transgender woman. In a rather minimalist scenography, composed of a chair made of ice and various modular refrigerators, the performer juggles through the show with ice balls weakly suspended from the ceiling that fall randomly and are caught by the performer or explode on the floor. The fluidity of water that changes from solid to liquid during the performance becomes the ideal material to express the fluidity of gender identity. Ice is a threat when it falls from the ceiling, doubling the danger to the performer's body due to its extreme temperature and density, each ball weighing two kilograms. But when the ice melts, the stage becomes extremely slippery and produces another form of danger. Throughout the show, Phia Ménard literally juggles with representations of genders and integrates error, risk, glitch, vulnerability as the driving principles of self-construction. We see her dressed in a long purple velvet dress and a boa feather getting ready to shoot into a ball of ice, changing her mind and gently pushing it. She plays on the clichés of femininity by using an ice ball slipped under her dress which she then brings out between her legs to re-enact a scene of childbirth, metaphorically giving birth to her feminine identity. Phia Ménard also restores her femininity by reinvesting some beauty rituals associated with the female gender. Dressed in a bathrobe, she uses small balls of ice to rub her body and imitate beauty care actions before putting on lipstick, checking her body and observing her image in a large butcher's knife that she then turns against herself as if to stab her stomach. Sequences of pure juggling that always end up in failure – balls escape or explode – alternate with key images of representations of genders or symbolic expressions of an inner state.

The transfer of gender identity into the ever-changing material that is ice also happens in a scene that is similar to a more symbolic transformation ritual. She uses the accumulated ice to form a heap that she then disperses by drawing with a broom a spiral that gradually expands. The very jerky music, the songs that Phia Ménard begins to sing, the circularity of the movement and the use of the broom that she sometimes straddles, evoke the figure of the witch doing a sabbath. The witch, as a figure of feminist empowerment (FEDERICI 2014; CHOLLET 2018), is here associated with



PHIA Ménard, *P.P.P.*, 2008. Credits: Jean-Luc Beaujault.

the drawing of a circle, that helps Phia Ménard to accomplish her feminine identity in a kind of ritual. It creates an association between femininity and the shape of an orifice, the roundness.

It is during the broom scene that the performer brings the confrontation between water and ice, representative of gender-related injunctions, to its maximum. Before drawing a spiral in the melting ice, Phia Ménard plunges into a basin of hot water a dress that had previously remained on stage, frozen. As she goes around in circles, she goes out to retrieve the unfrozen dress and puts it on. This last dress, representative of her identity, turns against her when the performer breaks the circle, exhausted, to sit on a block of ice that clings to the dress. The ice trapping the dress forces Phia Ménard to wrestle with herself in an attempt to detach herself from the block. The struggle lasts until the performer gives up and has to take off her dress to be free. She finds herself exposed, in the slippery snow, out of breath. She then removes her bra and removes the silicone prostheses that were placed on her chest. This final scene of great emotional intensity transfers the performer's inner struggle for acceptance of her gender identity to an external struggle. The stage setting, with its hazards and

dangers, becomes an extension of the physical experience. Water, whose state changes as the show progresses, portrays the evolution of a gender identity caught in the grip of societal representations that tend to freeze, to paralyse. The power of matter in transformation, this intermediate state of change that is explored on stage, becomes representative of a body that emerges from dominant dualisms.

In those two examples, the transfers and displacements of identity in elements external to the body extend it and propose representations of bodily identity that cannot be contained behind a label. The idea of “performative theatre”, like that of “post-dramatic theatre”¹¹ quoted by Hans-Thies Lehmann (2002), is based on a de-hierarchisation of the elements on stage. In a representation, linear text is no longer the predominant element to which all other staging elements are subordinated. This “dis-hierarchy” underlies a breakdown of the character-performer, or body-text, relationship. The subject can then emerge within dynamics of flow, metamorphoses and reversals, and positions itself on the very border. In the case of Phia Ménard, the performance of the queer identity takes place in the tension between the performer’s body and her environment. The body and the identity it is carrying is the subject of the performance and what gives shape to it. In that way, it could be read as a type of stage composition (“écriture de plateau”), that renews the “post-dramatic theatre” or “performative theatre” to include the queer subject. This re-evaluation of the body on stage and of how it can express its diversity or its non-conformity, could be interpreted as a way to make queer theatre. In Gisèle Vienne’s work, identity is more apparent in the blurry areas, the sliding spaces, and in the phenomenon of superposition, repetition, and rewriting. The queer body on stage is no longer reduced to its physical aspect but expresses itself in its relationship to the context in which it appears. Language, irony and strategies of multiple duplications help to redefine it outside dualisms.

¹¹ The expression “post-dramatic theatre” draws the attention to the shift from a theatre where narrative is the basis of everything, to a theatre where all the elements present on stage (lights, scenography, colors, videos, costumes, sounds, bodies...) are of equal weight. The text no longer dominates the structure of the show. This concept has influenced Josette Féral in her idea of “performative theatre” but, according to her, this shift is not especially linked to the text: drama can cohabitate with a diversity of references that disrupt linearity.

2. BODY EXPRESSIONS TO TRANSCEND THE MEDICAL ASSIGNMENT OF GENDER IDENTITY

2.1. THE ACT OF SHOWING: TO OVERTHROW VOYEURISM

In a theatre that has evolved under the influence of performance, choreographed expression is more and more present. This assessment allows me to complete this article by the redefinition of the contours of the body through movement. Movement becomes the medium of a direct expression of identity used to respond to summonses or injunctions, particularly medical ones. The organicity and vitality of movement can become a sign of the possibility for the subject to redefine themselves, the symptom of resistance. The disordered and impulsive aspect of it transgresses the theatrical device and its oiled mechanics. The *MDLSX* show,¹² created by the Italian company Motus in 2015, is inspired by the performer's life and Jeffrey Eugenide's 2002 novel *Middlesex*, telling the story of an intersex person raised as a girl but who genders himself as male from adolescence onwards (I will therefore use masculine pronouns to refer to the character). The rather linear flow of the plot is regularly interrupted by disorganised, ultra-energetic, frenetic dance sequences that expose the androgynous body of the performer who also qualifies themselves as non-binary (I will thus use non-binary pronouns). These sequences break the narrative and tear down the dramatic fabric to allow danced epiphanies of a bodily identity outside dualistic thinking.

In this show, the scenography, largely based on the use of technological tools (repeated use of projections and video mapping on a barely empty stage, only occupied by a rectangular table), allows to take advantage of it to define the body. The performer mainly uses a camera to film their face or parts of their body in close-ups. Family film extracts, shot in the performer's youth, punctuate the story. This desire to contain the body in its image and to overanalyse it reflects the performative dynamics of coding and classifying an activity that takes place during each social interaction. According to Goffman (1956: 16), when confronted with the Other, one systematically begins to project a situation, each signal is interpreted according to the past experiences of the observer, who unintentionally creates a shortcut between types of action and their interpretations, often resulting

¹² Motus *MDLSX*. [Teaser](#) uploaded on the 26th of November 2015, by Motus, video realized by Enrico Parenti and Giacomo de Biase.

in stereotypes. On the other side, the individual who acts produces for their audience a more or less conscious image of themselves that defines their identity in relation to the social patterns already established.

But in this show, the will to fully understand identity, and more precisely gender identity, by the technological tool is pushed to the extreme by the scientific and medical device. In *MDLSX* show, the hospital institution acts as a normalising social element. The intersex body of the character is photographed, filmed, documented, analysed and defined by a jargon trying to grasp it. The process is reproduced on stage but interspersed with dance sequences that reverse the voyeuristic dimension and allow the character to reclaim his physical identity. Thus, the interpreter, plunged into darkness, uses a laser of green light and sprays lacquer to make this beam visible, to materialise the border it creates. This stream of light focuses the attention of the audience on this specific space. The interpreter then undresses, goes under the beam of green light and moves up their pelvis until their sex is exposed to full light without ever being really identifiable. The rectilinear light seems to violently penetrate or cut the performer's sex. The exhibitionist act increases the confusion of those in the audience who hope to see, and thus define, the identity of the character and of the performer. The definition of sex remains inaccessible since it is exposed but invisible. The audience is confronted with its own curiosity and voyeuristic drive. The "biological" identity,¹³ particularly because it is elusive and the performer's body is androgynous, remains outside cis norms. This reverses the logic of medical analysis that assigns and categorises. By exhibiting themselves and targeting their sex with light, the performer places the audience in the position of the doctors in the fiction and proves the absurdity and violence of the act of assignment. Fiction meets reality, the body of the performer meets that of the character, the position of the audience meets that of the institution that holds power over the bodies. I identify this reversal as an empowerment through movements and actions. This view is confirmed in the following scene, which reproduces the orders of the doctor who asks the character to expose himself in full light by spreading his legs and arms

¹³ The biologist and Gender Studies teacher, Anne Fausto-Sterling (2013), explains in her essays that even the definition of sex is a social construction and that we could recognize at least five sexes, if not even more. The historian Thomas Laqueur (1990) also explains how sex difference and the actual opposition between men and women have been created through history. According to him, the conception of sex evolved from a unisex model (the feminine was only a less perfect declination of the masculine) to a "bisexual model" built on dualisms and oppositions.

to better photograph him. The contrast between the two scenes and the repetition creates an ironic shift that reveals, on the one hand, the medical performance and, on the other hand, the empowerment of the subject who takes up the act of exposure on their own.

This reversal is reminiscent of Annie Sprinkle's *Post Porn Modernism* (1989) where the feminist American performer inserted a speculum (a gynaecological medical tool) in her cervix and invited the audience to look inside. Doing this, Annie Sprinkle appropriates the medical action and the voyeuristic gaze of pornography by choosing to make a show of her own body. The evident sarcasm of the title is a way to assert herself, to retake possession of her assigned female body. The dynamic that this action created in the room (people lining up to look into the speculum and other watching them doing it) made evident the power of the gaze in determining who is the subject and who is the object. About this performance, the researcher Rebecca Schneider explained (1997: 55), "Indeed the cervix itself was hardly any more of a show than the showing was a show, and this concatenation of display left no spot in the theater uninvolved – complicity was broadly based". This could also apply to the part of *MDLSX* described above. In both cases, it is the whole gaze system and the viewer-viewed relationship that construct representation of sex and that can also subvert it.



MOTUS, *MDLSX*, 2015. Credits: Simone Stanislai.

2.2. THE CHOREOGRAPHED MOVE TO TRANSCEND GENDER ROLES: FROM HYSTERIA TO DRAG KING AND TRANCE

According to another aesthetic, Phia Ménard's performance, *Saison Sèche*¹⁴, created in 2018, uses choreography to free bodies from gender roles and from the actions or attitudes associated with them. The show is divided into four main parts:

1/ [Browse pictures] First, a representation of female bodies oppressed by society. Seven women wearing nothing but a hospital gown curl up, tremble with fear and crawl when the ceiling of the room in which they are locked up comes down on them. In this first sequence, Phia Ménard expresses patriarchy through an architecture that acts on women's bodies and forces them to enter into the stereotypes of madness and hysteria.¹⁵

2/ [Browse pictures] The second movement is characterised by a relocation of the performers' bodies, which are freed through a dance that refers to how we picture trance and ritual. Women associate, scream, dance in a circle and paint their bodies and faces to make their female attributes disappear. All kinds of movements with high expressive potential are mixed in this exorcising dance: we see the military salute, rolled eyes, drawn tongues, a crucifixion, we imagine a Sabbath... Body languages¹⁶ from various cultures and historical periods are remixed in a dance that makes the shackles explode.

3/ [Browse pictures] The third and longest part of the show is a drag king¹⁷ march with a military dimension that lasts until the performers are

¹⁴ Phia Ménard, *Saison Sèche*, short video link uploaded on the 28th of August of 2018 by Cie Non Nova and Phia Ménard.

¹⁵ Hysteria is described by Michel Foucault (1976: 137) as a "sexual type" produced by mechanisms of power and knowledge to control sexuality: women are oversexualized and perceived as perverse.

Rae Beth Gordon (2015) has also proposed a brief history of how hysteria was brought to the theatre scene in Parisian café-concert and Music Halls. The epileptic convulsion is imitated on stage to satisfy the audience's medical curiosity and the desire to mark the Other (here women) as different. The author draws a link with the emergence of Blackface minstrels and cakewalk. Both are supposed representatives of wildness, and hysterical dancers are the first white women that also practice the cakewalk.

¹⁶ Body languages and behavior are culturally constructed. According to Eugenio Barba (2008: 13), stage director and writer interested in anthropology, body languages are a blend of the personality of the person doing it, sociocultural contexts and traditions, and trans-cultural body-techniques.

¹⁷ When an AFAB (Assigned Female At Birth) person, who usually identifies as female or non-binary, transforms her•their appearance to integrate assigned male attributes (mustache, beard, masculine clothes, codified movements...).

out of breath. The five dancers then reenact attitudes and actions associated with stereotypes of masculinity: urinating while standing, shaking hands, fighting, using a gun, doing push-ups, giving a speech, and notably military marching. The ridicule of the characters, which at first amuses the audience, ends up frightening them when faced with a seemingly endless scene. The repetition of the cadenced walk and the “bugs” that infiltrate it (when they start falling on the floor, out of exhaustion), end up turning the parody into a denunciation.

The distorted movement that made people smile because it was both “close to” yet “distant from” reality, eventually provokes something that could remind us what Freud calls the “uncanny”. To put it in a nutshell, the uncanny is the moment when something familiar suddenly appears to us as unknown, strange, distressing. To use the examples given by Freud (1919), himself inspired by Jentsch (1906), the feeling of uncanny manifests itself when a living thing seems dead or, when something inanimate seems animated. In the case of *Saison Sèche*, it is the movement that conveys this feeling. The length of the scene and the repetition of movements provide something mechanical that goes beyond the usual practice of drag king, which is usually limited in cabarets to sketches of a few minutes. And paradoxically, this mechanisation of the movement reveals something of our habits in everyday life. We move from the ironic action, to the mechanical one, to the unveiling of the performative aspect of this action. We understand, in Butler’s terms, that the copy offered by drag is only one copy among others and that it is not more true or false than the copy represented by gendered movements.

In this show, it is therefore the evolution of the choreographed movement in its repetition and rewriting that is performative. We transcend the marking of the body by society, and once again by the medical and scientific institution that was suggested in the first part. From the hysterical move provoked by patriarchal architecture, to the military drag king march and to a representation of the trance, we expose two patterns that lead to the development of movements, attitudes, and bodies produced as gendered. But it is really the drag king scene that allows the mechanisms to collapse, a collapse that was not possible to achieve through hysterical bodies locked in a device that does not leave room for body expression and rewriting.

4/ [[Browse pictures](#)] It is the drag king march that leads to the final sequence, the collapse of the scenography. The direction Phia Ménard

gave to her dancers was to “destroy the house of the patriarch” and this objective is only achieved by going through these successive stages, by putting into action oppressions linked to gender that end up penetrating the very way of moving. In the final scene, the performers, stripped naked, tear the walls of the scenography, which consequently begin to collapse on their own under the flow of a black liquid that infiltrates through the loopholes that represented, apart from the fourth wall, the only openings in the stage space.

MDLSX and *Saison Sèche* present two types of movements that allow performers and/or characters to redefine their gender identity, notably by using the processes of ironic repetition and rewriting. In Motus company’s performance, dance and acts, such as the one of exhibition, counterbalance a linear narrative that tells the life trajectory of an intersex person. It is indeed movements that make the discourse a performative one. The stage device reproduces the process of gender fabrication by fully integrating the audience in the performance, turning them from passive spectators to active voyeurs. In Phia Ménard’s work, it is less a question of a precise action, limited in time, than a long repetition of codified movements that highlight their alienating production in the context. In both examples, the medical and scientific structure re-enact a traumatic experience overcome by the individual, or a group of individuals, recovering their body by the choreographed move.

3. CONCLUSION

The four given examples are only representative of a small part of the contemporary theatrical scene; they reveal current trends. While performativity has added its dynamic power to a theatricality of the gender experienced as coded, queer themes have also found their way into the contemporary theatrical scene. They subvert the theatricality of identity forms previously experienced as dominant. What I would like to suggest here is that if performativity has not allowed an effective liberation of the queer subject in society, it now finds its place in a more fitting artistic form – again, if not already appropriated by the dominant culture. The identities I mentioned here are truly expressed in an “in-betweenness”, on the border delineated by the prefix “trans-”. They express themselves in performative situations, on the borderline between theatre

and performance. What I call bodies in trans- or a theatre in trans- finds its full place in performative theatre since it is a question of using performative mechanisms to express frontier identities. The performances mentioned are not completely unstructured or fluid, but there are paradigms of situations in which identities are expressed through bodies in movement, bodies in transfer, bodies that transgress or transform, which truly are moments of theatre in trans-. It seems to me that it is in those specific sequences that queer culture actively and effectively penetrates the current system of representation.

Organising a theatre festival around the theme of gender, as Olivier Py did, is not enough to miraculously accept the diversity of gender identities in a highly codified culture. But it is precisely in these short moments I analysed that aesthetics can become performative and open a new field of expression and thought. So, to answer the question in the title (can performative theatre be a queer theatre?), I would say that performative theatre clearly has created an environment in which a queer theatre (or queer sequences of theatre) can emerge. It has paved the way to a better acceptance of characters or performers who refuse to fit into the dualist categories of gender. It encouraged hybridity, distortion and irony – all tools to express queer identity on stage. Queer is not only a theme in a plot, it leads to new aesthetics, aesthetics where the performer can create an identity that goes beyond the character and that can express itself through the whole environment (ice in *P.P.P.*) or in the theatrical device (*MDLSX*). The distinction between the character and the performer is blurred and offers new ways of producing and perceiving the show: the body is given a major role, it can even be the starting point of the creation. For the audience, it also implies to question the way we position ourselves as viewers of the show. The power of the gaze must be redefined, and queer sequences of theatre can help rethink it. Establishing a link between Josette Féral's expression of "performative theatre" and the possibility of a "queer theatre" seemed interesting to me because of the use of the term "performative" (that is not the case in Lehmann "post-dramatic theatre"). The performative dimension, a key-concept of Gender Studies, seemed to constitute a bridge. In Féral's understanding, it explodes the linearity of the plot – and necessarily of the identity contained in it –, leading to a new type of temporality and to a strong involvement of the performer. All those elements seem to have amplified the queer potential

of some performances. So, yes, performative theatre has paved the way for a queer theatre and if not all performative forms are queer, queer is often – if not always – performative.

Mélissa Bertrand

melissabertrand06@gmail.com

Laboratoire International de Recherches en Arts (LIRA)

Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3

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