

Theatre Directing as a laboratory of emotional practice

Direção e Encenação de Teatro como laboratório de prática emocional

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Abstract

Drawing on recent research in emotion and affect theory—namely on notions developed by William James, Antonio Damasio, Silvan S. Tomkins, and Brian Massumi, among others—this article investigates how theatre directing may advance a laboratory of emotional practice. It thus examines two distinct theatre directorial processes, with corresponding methods of performing emotions onstage, arguing that theatre is an activity and art form that contributes towards the flourishing of life.

Keywords: emotion, feeling, affect, ethics, Antonio Damasio.

Resumo

Baseando-se na investigação recente sobre a teoria da emoção e dos afectos—nomeadamente nos conceitos desenvolvidos por William James, António Damásio, Silvan S. Tomkins, e Brian Massumi, entre outros—o artigo investiga a forma como a direção/encenação de teatro pode operar enquanto laboratório de prática emocional. Neste sentido, são abordados dois processos distintos de encenação e os métodos correspondentes de performance emocional, sugerindo que o teatro é uma atividade colectiva e forma de arte que contribui para o florescimento da vida.

Palabras chave: emoção, 'feeling', afecto, ética, Antonio Damasio.

Introduction

Some of the most influential developments of contemporary thought have ensued from an interdisciplinary collaboration of several fields of knowledge with cognitive neuroscience. In the field of theatre and performance studies alone, Elizabeth Hart, Bruce McConachie, John Lutterbie and Rhonda Blair (among other authors) have published several books and articles within this novel approach. Nonetheless, whereas there is relative agreement about what constitutes cognition, the same cannot be said about emotion, resulting in differing notions and explanations for the terms emotion, feeling and affect. As McConachie states, “the term ‘emotion’ has several definitions, depending on whose science you read” (2008, p.13). Further, although emotion and cognition have been viewed as largely separate throughout history—by both science and philosophy, in the past two decades a growing body of research increasingly points towards the interdependence between the two (PESSOA, 2009).²

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² Acknowledged interactions between emotion and cognition include i) perception and attention; ii) learning and memory; and iii) behavioral inhibition and working memory.

Among the arts, theatre is a highly collective creative activity and art form that works with different expressions and texts, namely written, bodily, vocal, musical, aural and visual. Moreover, theatre issues from and produces emotional thinking, an interface between emotion and cognition allowing thoughts to trigger emotions that are played out in the mind and body; and, in reverse, allowing body sensations to produce emotions and feelings that influence thoughts. Accordingly, this article assesses different methods of developing emotions onstage by probing two examples of rehearsal and production processes: *Miss Julie*, directed by Katie Mitchell in 2013, and *Sangue de Lorca*, directed by myself in 2019, with the aim of understanding how theatre directing may constitute a laboratory of emotional practice.

Emotion, affect and feeling

In *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), Charles Darwin proposed the presence of six basic emotions, not restricted to humans and which all had specific facial expressions and other observable bodily behaviors: Surprise, Sadness, Happiness, Fear, Disgust, and Anger. Some twelve years later, in the essay “What is an Emotion?” (1884), William James observed how in a life-threatening situation human beings first reacted physically and only afterward became conscious of the meaning of that reaction. James thus suggested that the experience of emotion is due to a person's proprioceptive perception, discerned from visceral and other bodily changes. His essay was considered groundbreaking at a time when “the scientific community widely believed that the reaction to a stimulus was cognitive, and that the bodily changes that resulted were primarily reactions to a thought” (COLEMAN & SNAREY, 2011, p.845). According to the James–Lange theory (proposed by James but also independently developed by Danish psychologist Carl Lange), therefore, emotions are automatic bodily reactions to stimuli, revealed by posture, gait, gesture, and face expression; their primary cause is physical and only afterwards do they evoke feelings in the conscious mind.

Emotion and feeling have played a central part in the work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, starting with *Descartes' Error* (1994), in which he addressed the role of both in decision-making, followed by *The Feeling of What Happens* (1999), where he outlined the role of emotion and feeling in the construction of the self, and later on by *Looking for Spinoza* (2003), which focused on how feelings are revelations of the state of life within an entire organism. Generally consonant with the James-Lange theory, Damasio proposes a distinction between emotion—which he describes as a “collection of responses” corresponding to external and measurable reactions, many of which are publicly observable—from feeling, which he reserves for the subjective mental experience of these emotional responses (DAMASIO, 1999, p.42). Most important, however, in his most recent book, *A*

Strange Order of Things (2018), Damasio claims that emotions and feelings not only conduct our decision-making, but also motivate all creations of human culture, by cooperating with *homeostasis*.³ Consequently, “What we call civilization is the education of our affects, of our emotional machinery, during our childhood and youth, at home, in school or in our cultural environments” (2018, p.162). Although this machinery is most certainly individualized, the greatest part of our emotions is social in nature. Our emotional machinery is governed and affected by a combination of biology, environment and culture.

Homeostasis typically refers “to any process that living things use to actively maintain fairly stable conditions necessary for survival” (RODOLFO, 2000). This conventional notion of homeostasis confines itself to the balanced regulation of life’s operations, conjuring up ideas of equilibrium and balance or the maintenance of a status-quo. Hence, Damasio (together with biologist John S. Torday), rejects this quasi-static assessment to propose an evolutionary view of homeostasis that not only guarantees survival and life regulation, but also tends towards the flourishing of life. Within Damasio’s new understanding, feelings are the mental expressions of homeostasis:

The alignment of pleasant and unpleasant feelings with, respectively, positive and negative ranges of homeostasis is a verified fact. (...) Mind and brain influence the body proper just as much as the body proper can influence the brain and the mind. They are merely two aspects of the very same being (2018, p.117).

Damasio bemoans the neglect of feelings in the natural history of cultures, because feelings are the subjective experiences of homeostasis—that is, of the state of life. A neglect of feelings in our culture thus corresponds to a disregard in relation to life itself (2018, p.25).

Adding to the above-mentioned emotion theories but often challenging them, affect theory—as found in the works of philosophers Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Brian Massumi—offers an environmental dimension to feelings. Within a schizoanalytic understanding of subjectivity as a *becoming-in-and-with-the-world*, proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, affects are prepersonal intensities within human and non-human bodies, in-between bodies, between bodies and world, that produce capacities of bodies within assemblages, in a continuous flux (DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 1987). According to Brian Massumi emotions are social, feelings are personal and biographical, but affects are prepersonal. Whereas an emotion is the display of a feeling that can be either genuine or contrived (sometimes an expression of our internal state, but other times engineered in order to fulfill social expectations), affect is a nonconscious and nonlinguistic experience of intensity. Affects are moments of unstructured potential, they correspond to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and imply an augmentation or a diminution in that body’s capacity to act:

³ Physiologist Walter Cannon coined the term homeostasis in 1926 as a tendency toward stability among interdependent elements. It derives from the Greek *homio* “like, similar, equal” and *stasis* “standing still”; and refers to any process that living things utilize to actively maintain fairly stable conditions necessary for survival.

When you affect something, you are at the same time opening yourself up to being affected in turn, and in a slightly different way than you might have been the moment before. You have made a transition, however slight. You have stepped over a threshold. Affect is this passing of a threshold, seen from the point of view of the change in capacity (...) every transition is accompanied by a feeling of the change in capacity (MASSUMI, 2003, p.212-213).

Thus the body never coincides with itself, but instead always carries an increasing or decreasing potential or “virtual” capacity for what will happen.

Affect theory is an approach across the humanities that focuses on the role of prelinguistic or nonlinguistic forces, and which can therefore be creatively explored in theatre and performance research. In effect, one of the background figures of affect theory, psychologist Silvan S. Tomkins, began his academic training as a playwright, thus gaining many conceptual insights from his experience working in the theatre. According to Tomkins, nine primary innate, or biologically based affects, combine to produce complex emotions: namely six negative affects (anger-rage, fear-terror, distress-anguish, disgust, “dissembl”⁴ and shame-humiliation), one neutral affect (surprise-startle) and two positive affects (interest-excitement and enjoyment-joy)⁵ (TOMKINS, 2008). Tomkins also held that we feel and function best when we maximize positive affect, minimize negative affect, and express all affect—which I suggest may explain why we feel and function so well in most instances of working creatively in the theatre.

Emotion in directorial theatre practice

Theatre directing may draw from the above mentioned emotion-affect theories in many ways. According to the examples I will next draw upon, there are at least four methods of developing emotions onstage: 1) by identifying their physical shape and hence recreating visible changes in the actors’ bodies from the outside; 2) by making actors individually recall, trigger and replicate feelings, from their psycho-emotional inside; 3) by stimulating emotional thinking, through an association of feelings to objects, “landscapes” and images; and 4) by acknowledging the transmission of affects to the bodies in the audience not only through actors’ facial expressions, respiration, tone of voice, and posture but also through spatial configurations, lighting, music, sounds, and other nonverbal mediated forms of communication.

Theatre director Katie Mitchell considers that she practices “fourth-wall realism,” and that she is mainly concerned about producing and conveying human behavior.⁶ Mitchell bases her directorial

⁴ A neologism coined by Tomkins.

⁵ Most affects are defined by pairs of words that represent the least and the most intense expression of a particular affect.

⁶ Katie Mitchell was associate director of the Royal Shakespeare Company and of London’s National Theater. Her theatre and opera productions have been presented in Dublin, Copenhagen, Milan, New York, among other cities; and at major international theatre festivals (Avignon, Salzburg, Aix-en-Provence, Almada, etc.).

work on some research into neuroscience, of the relationship between the biology of the brain and acting techniques. Her methods for acting emotions in the theatre mostly ensue from studying Russian theatre director Konstantin Stanislavski's later work on physical actions, developed in the 1890s, which in turn was greatly influenced by the James-Lange theory of emotions, claiming that humans first react physically and only afterward become conscious of the meaning of that physical reaction. In Mitchell's own words,

For theatre practitioners, whose business is the accurate embodiment and transmission of human emotions, [this] is potentially huge. Here is a way of looking at emotions that separates off the physical response from consciousness and the mental processes that follow this moment of consciousness. It points to a way of working on emotions through recreating their physical shape or circumstances (MITCHELL, 2009, p.231).

Because it is no longer essential for the actors to feel the emotions (as in Stanislavski's earlier method of "affective memory"), but rather to replicate them precisely with their bodies so as to make the viewers feel them, Mitchell's relationship to the audience radically changed. She realized that spectators can only read what is happening *inside* someone through what they actually see on the *outside* (MITCHELL, 2009, p.232).

Inspired by the work of contemporary Russian theatre directors Lev Dodin (Maly Theatre, St. Petersburg) and Anatoly Vasilyev (director of the Moscow Theatre School of Dramatic Arts), as well as by private training classes she took in the UK with actor-directors Tatiana Olear and Elen Bowman, Mitchell developed a series of emotional exercises for the actors where they can either replicate particular emotions

from the inside, by recalling the emotion (by remembering a time in their own lives when they experienced the same thing), or from the outside, by an almost clinical reconstruction of what the body does when a particular emotion hits it (MITCHELL, 2009, p.232).

Mitchell's reference point for both talking about and working on acting is not psychology but rather the physiology of emotions. In this, she draws not only on the James-Lange theory, but also on the writings of Antonio Damasio, who defines emotion as a change in the body (MITCHELL, 2009, p.156).

Whenever she prepares a new production, Mitchell starts off by selecting the script's dominant emotion and by asking her actors to re-enact an event in their lives where they experienced that emotion, for the rest of the group to watch. After studying how an emotion affects the body, and concentrating their observations on people's physicality, actors will then connect this physical information with particular moments in the play. By drawing attention to one emotion, the director sets the tone for the precision with which all the remaining emotions expressed in the play are to be investigated and reenacted in the production (MITCHELL, 2009, p.154-156).

Mitchell's theatre work distinguishes among three types of emotions: primary emotions such as happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise and disgust; social emotions or secondary emotions that are bodily changes "caused by the imagination," such as embarrassment or jealousy; and background emotions, "which are feelings operating at a low level, like when you say you're feeling 'a bit down' or 'under the weather'."⁷ In the words of David Lan, Mitchell wants to lead the spectators "to the ghastly depths of human behavior" and force them to understand it:

Her actors convey a sense of minutely observed, psychologically accurate naturalism. (...) If they are anxious or frightened, they stumble anxiously or fearfully over their words, to the detriment, sometimes, of audibility. That fear or anxiety, too, is strongly embodied: physical language does much of the work (HIGGINS, 2016).

Mitchell, however, also seeks to reveal "what it's like to be inside someone's consciousness" such as "the challenge of representing someone's dreams, of one dream that one person has, and constructing it in such a way that the audience will really feel they are watching a dream" (MITCHELL, 2005, p.5).

Within such an understanding, in her production of August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, presented at Portugal's 32nd Festival de Teatro de Almada in 2015,⁸ Mitchell decided to express the characters-actors' subjective memories and feelings through live cinema on stage. As the performance unfolded, five movie cameras accompanied the actors, either preceding or following them, registering step-by-step images of their activities that were directly edited by co-director Leo Warner. These images mainly focused on the actions and reactions of Strindberg's secondary character by the name of Kristin, a cook employed by Miss Julie's father, and fiancée of Jean, her boss's footman. We saw close-ups of her hands preparing kidneys for her fiancé Jean, or pressing flowers between the pages of her Bible; of a brush slowly smoothing her hair, and of her eyes spying through partitions on Miss Julie and Jean's sexual encounter. By placing Kristin's emotions at the center of the performance, Mitchell entered Strindberg's *Miss Julie* through the backdoor, turned the play's perspectives upside-down, and engendered pathos in the maid's plight.⁹

We're doing the play from the point of view of the least important character and, you know, it's very moving to watch the main action through the eyes of a person who is actually going to be really, profoundly affected by the action, but who the two protagonists don't really care about. It's like us in life, really. These grand dramas play out, but there's a lot of collateral damage (MITCHELL, 2010).

⁸ Mitchell's version of the play opened at the Schaubühne Theater in Berlin, in 2013. See trailer at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVCJ5jt7vM4>. Accessed 23 August 2019.

⁹ For reviews of the opening production, see Kate Kellaway, "Fräulein Julie – review", *The Guardian* 5 May 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/may/05/fraulein-miss-julie-strindberg>. Accessed 23 August 2019.

Hence, Mitchell relies upon an emotionally detailed psychological-realistic method of acting, conveyed through filmed and projected facial expressions that draw the spectator into the subjective world of each character.



Silvia Guerreiro as Yerma in *Sangue de Lorca*, dir. Graça P. Corrêa, 2019. Photo by José Teresa Marques.

When, in August 2018, I started composing *Sangue de Lorca (Blood of Lorca)*,¹⁰ I wanted to accomplish a work about love and revolution, about affectionate care and the power of changing the world: that was my main emotional drive from the start. With a cast of actors comprising seven women and three men, the performance resulted in a presentation of Lorca's celebrated trilogy of plays—*The House of Bernarda Alba* (1936), *Yerma* (1934), and *Blood Wedding* (1933)—, thus demanding deep dramaturgical choices in order to cut significant parts from the original scripts. Likewise, I was interested in portraying the personal, social, and political circumstances of the last days in the life of Federico Garcia Lorca, namely why he decided to stay in Spain even though he already had a visa to run away from political persecution to Mexico; his stance regarding the democratically elected Republican government, general Franco's right-wing military coup to overthrow it, and the Spanish civil war that ensued; his homosexual orientation and intense concern for the sexual and emotional oppression of women. Consequently, the performance was structured

¹⁰ Opened at *Espaço Hangar Inimpetus* in Lisbon, January 3-17, 2019; and presented at the Theatre Festival *Festival T* in Albufeira, 29 March 2019.

into three major sections corresponding to the plays, added by an introduction, two interludes, and a conclusion of monologues delivered by the “specter” of Federico Garcia Lorca on the subject of love, life and death, based on excerpts of his letters, poems and public speeches.

In examining Lorca’s trilogy of plays, I was struck by the fact that their chief emotions were fear and joy, two bodily-mental responses that fiercely oppose each other. In *Bernarda Alba*, a mother confines her five daughters within the walls of the family house, forbidding them any contacts with the outside world. Instead of being a site of care or a beneficial environment where relationships among living beings are reciprocal and affective, home becomes a prison, a hostile place of abuse where an unnatural mother/authoritarian ruler controls her daughters’ biological instincts and thus constrains their lives. Likewise in *Yerma*, home becomes a prison where a sexually aroused woman is kept to serve her stern, sterile, perhaps even impotent, husband. In *Blood Wedding*, a woman is about to marry a man she does not love, her destiny being to bear his children and dwell inside yet another prisonlike family house. Within Damasio’s understanding that feelings and homeostasis relate to each other closely and consistently, to such an extent that a deficient homeostasis is expressed largely by negative feelings, while positive feelings open organisms to advantageous prospects, the female protagonists of the three plays (Adela, Yerma and The Bride) are unable to thrive emotionally. They constantly live in a fear that prevents them from feeling joy; they are forced to repress their love drives; they suffer from anxiety due to repressed intimacy and lack of fulfillment: eventually, all of them culminate in suicide-like deaths.

Lorca’s plays demand a highly physical acting because of their emotional power and intensity in matters of bodily feeling. Indeed, several critics have noted how Lorca’s works have an extraordinary directness of emotional address, and how in most of them “love and passion are given a dramatic intensity that creates the thrilling effect of an equivalence between feelings and the processes of the external, natural world” (PERRIAM, 2007, p.150). Exploring this correspondence between feelings and natural landscapes, in *Sangue de Lorca* I stimulated the imagination¹¹ of each individual actor, through exercises and closed readings, so that they would create emotional-mental scripts based on their inner and outer sensory landscapes. We would strive to express, for example, to imagine-feel how it is like to be incarcerated inside an Andalusian house in the peak of the summer, wearing heavy black clothes during the day, and being unable to sleep at night because of the heat. How is such a claustrophobic feeling of an oppressive atmosphere similar to being unable to live and express oneself freely in the context of an authoritarian regime? As I have argued elsewhere (CORRÊA, 2011; 2016), the concept of landscape can be productively deployed in the analysis of playtexts, referring not only to the play’s theoretical perspective and aesthetic experience

¹¹ Aristotle’s Greek word *phantasma* is commonly translated as “[mental] image”; imagination is *phantasia*.

(landscape as a concept implies a point of view, as well as a sensory involvement), but also in directorial practice, through the exploration of concrete spatial-bodily and mental-emotional “scapes” with the actors.

Writing on cognition and emotion, Carl Plantinga argues that much of what leads a person to have an emotion occurs at the level of the “cognitive unconscious,” comprising “unconscious perception, unconscious affect, and unconscious conation (pleasure and desire)” (2009, p.49-50). Plantinga claims that emotions are not always automatically felt bodily states but rather can be “intentional states expressive of a relationship between a person and the environment; they therefore have objects, that is, they are directed at something or someone, whether real or imagined” (2009, p.79). This conforms to the mental phenomenon that Damasio calls “as-if-body-loop,” whereby the brain sculpts emotional body maps internally; in short, “the body-sensing areas constitute a sort of theater where not only the ‘actual’ body states can be ‘performed,’ but varied assortments of ‘false’ body states can be enacted as well” (DAMASIO, 2003, p.118). In this sense, in my directorial work in the theatre I often work with actors so as to make inner images, thoughts and landscapes trigger bodily emotions, as well as transforming what start out to be purely physical bodily postures and movements into feelings.

Differently from Mitchell’s directorial focus in replicating human emotional behavior, my practice as both dramaturg and director has mostly converged in the ethical-political-aesthetic affects of theatre performance. Consequently, the performance of *Sangue de Lorca* was emotionally prefocused in order to emphasize the patriarchal dimensions of authoritarianism, whereby sex becomes a tool for oppression and domination. Borrowing the expression from Noël Carroll, when he observes that films are “criterially prefocused” so as to engender “pro and con attitudes” in viewers about what is going on (CARROLL, 2006, p.223), I argue that theatre performances are emotionally “prefocused” whenever they have built into them a way of seeing events and characters, a specific order and duration to those events, and a built-in perspective that elicits a particular sort of emotional response (usually resulting from the combined work of playwrights, dramaturgs, directors, designers and actors).

In prefocusing *Sangue de Lorca*, for instance, I purposely enhanced through my blocking and choreography the audience’s visibility of actors’ faces throughout the performance, so that spectators were led to emotionally empathize with particular scenes and/or characters. According to Tomkins, the face is a “primary organ of affect” (123), a place where “sets of muscle and glandular responses” are located (133). Therefore, although affect in the theatre can be “activated and maintained endlessly by the magic of the word” (325), actors’ bodies, and above all their faces, are privileged means of expressing thoughts and feelings (824). In *Sangue de Lorca*, I also made use of the

affective import of music, namely through two popular Spanish songs sung by one of the actresses, and a recurring melodic theme taken from Joaquin Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* (1939). As noted by Eric Shouse, music is a form of expression that has an enormous potential of transmitting affect, because it "moves" people, producing actual physical effects without communicating specific meanings (SHOUSE, 2016).

Conclusion

Etymologically derived from the latin *movere*, and thus implying an action that triggers change, emotions are not only about activity and movement, but also about bonding and attachment. Although the term emotion started being used in France in the sixteenth century, denoting an instinctive and intuitive feeling distinct from a rational discursive process of thinking that produces concepts towards knowledge, recently many neuroscientists have found that emotional engagement is necessary to sustain the simplest cognitive tasks. Furthermore, emotions play a key role in providing various types of natural internal values upon which many complex behavioral choices in humans are based, and therefore are essential towards ethical thinking. In Damasio's words, "Ethical behavior is coextensive with emotion; it enables us to optimize our survival, our well-being. Because emotion is linked to ethical behavior, failed emotional behavior is the cause of failed ethical decisions and of potentially disastrous social consequences" (DAMASIO, 2002). In effect, as recent political world events have shown, "Attempting to understand human behavior as the outcome of rational cognition alone is not only incorrect—it leads to fundamental misunderstandings of the human condition" (MASSEY, 2002, p.2).

In his recent book, Donovan O. Schaefer explains that "As a method, affect theory asks what bodies do – what they want, where they go, what they think, how they decide – and especially how bodies are impelled by forces other than language and reason" (2019, p.1). Formerly, Schaefer had already observed how

effective actors will meticulously use every aspect of their bodies—their voice, hands, face, posture, stride, gaze, gait, and muscles—to build an affective symphony. Directors, too, use a nonverbal repertoire including timing, staging, and perspective to weave a thick knot of affects around their script (SCHAEFER, 2016).

Schaefer's emphasis on a plurality of affective forms ("knots of affects," "affective symphony") is especially applicable to the theatre, a multifaceted collaborative activity and art form. In this sense, an understanding of how emotions, feelings and affects work in the theatre—not only of how spectators grasp emotions from actors, but also of how theatre does produce ethical and political effects through faces, bodies, objects, sounds, spaces and landscapes— may significantly contribute to the development of the notion of well-being and thus help advance the flourishing of life.

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