

Dramaturgies of Spontaneity

By Filippo Romanello

Abstract

I would like the reader to consider a performance text simply as a text *for* performance, as the textual element of a potential live performance rather than its literary mastercopy. Okay, all dramatic (or postdramatic) texts are texts for performance - the reader might think... and it is true... and you are reading my remark... but let's allow ourselves a shift in emphasis. Let us indulge in an experiment, let our attention drift for a moment from product to process, from narrative to form, from representation to presence... Well, what happens? What are we actually experimenting with? And why? Let me just say in this little premise that I don't feel at ease with representations: I don't feel I represent, and I don't want to be represented. Yet even my text re-presents me. Hence the struggle. Hence my literary labour, a little unaware... building a texture amidst which to hide from overrunning dictation, from "citations or recitations and orders" (Derrida 302) for actors, or directors, always ready for a context... in other words an open yet cohesive dramaturgy, able to stimulate the actors' spontaneous reactions to the text, and induce shifts in their relationship with the audience. I have provided two exemplifying extracts (from separate pieces) that you are welcome to imagine performed as you read.

As a theatre-maker wishing to entertain *and* engage the audience both creatively and kinesthetically, I am suggesting a writing practice that focuses on developing textual material with

“immanent” theatrical qualities¹, useful for improvisations based on psychophysical impulses and personal associations². The intent is to let the dramaturgy of the performance *emerge* from the collective work of the performers in the studio, based on a phonetic score. Besides considering (quite conventionally) the spoken text as one of the triggering elements of a performance’s dramaturgy, this practice relies on limiting the weight of (predetermined) meaning it carries *in itself*.

The score should create an ambiguous yet coherent sequence of events and use a mix of theatrical devices (e.g. narration, monologue, audience-address, unallocated lines) and language experimentation, in order to inspire, infuse potentiality, escape literality and/or fool semantic meaning, eventually providing the actors with different performing choices, and requiring them and the audience to fill in the gaps. It is in these gaps, in the undecided *mise-en-scène*, in the unclear meaning, that life may manifest and representation recede. Similarly, thanks to the expanded range of acting and staging possibilities available in performance, this approach is meant to bring authenticity to the encounter with the audience, which is necessarily framed into

1 As in Małgorzata Sugiera’s use of this adjective, which is to characterise a shift in contemporary performance writing: “Nowadays, the basic structural principle of texts written for theatre increasingly often turns out to be their immanent theatricality, which is [...] a means of inducing the audience to watch themselves as subjects which perceive, acquire knowledge and partly create the objects of their cognition” (qtd. in Turner and Behrndt 194).

2 By improvisation, I mean a creative process through which the actor originates new non-textual material using the text as their score, in other words, as a detailed yet open enough framework from which to base their actions: “Next I want to advise you never in performance to seek for spontaneity without a score. In the exercises it is a different thing altogether. During a performance no real spontaneity is possible without a score. It would only be an imitation since you would destroy your spontaneity by chaos” (Grotowski 192).

the work³.

The first extract is from *Attempts on Friendship* (2014), a performance text developed for an ensemble of eight young actors from the Islington Community Theatre, both as an offer and personal response to meeting the group. Some of the devices I have embedded in the text are explained in the initial notations. In this case, “openness” is sought through the structure of the piece and the shifting subjectivity of the dramatis personae, yet it is still narrative that partly pre-threads meanings together.

Characters: A, B, C, D, E, F, PETE and LEA (with A, B, C and D representing various aspects of F and themselves).

The lines of the Prologue are not allocated to any particular character, therefore all actors may want to learn all unallocated lines. Other lines may include both internal and external speech, but this is not clearly demarcated. In places punctuation is reduced to a minimum. The intention of this notation is to leave the text open to the creative interpretation of the performers, their impulses and personal associations. Stage directions are in italic within brackets.

Prologue: They Will Listen To Us

(The whole company of actors. The following lines should be read in the order they are written, but they are not assigned to any performer in particular: each performer delivers them on impulse. Overlaps are welcome. Be aware of the rhythm, tempo and pitch. Please shout the last line of this section all together)

³ Audiences are framed in the moment they are acknowledged and they can take (or be given) a more or less specific role.

- I
- You
- He
- She
- It
- Us
-
- We
- You?
- You
- Them
- They
- We...
-
- I like us
- I like Ash
-
- She is white and British
- And green and Chinese
- And brown and English
- And black Caribbean

-
- And... Mixed-race
- And any other white background
- Any other...
- Any other white background

(Pause)

What?

- Any other *background*
- Other than...?
- So she is
- She is
- Everybody
- She is everybody
- That's it. She/
- He
- He?
- He or she
- Anybody
- Everybody
- And she believes
- You can bet she does

- He does
- He/she does
- Everybody does
- What?
- What
- What what?
- What does he/she believe?
- She believes in... God!
- That's right. God. Good.
- What god?
- One that is nice, one that is funny, one that likes jokes.
- There isn't any like that!
- Well she will invent one!
- He!
- So she or he believes she or he can invent a god that is nice, funny and likes jokes.
- *She* does so does *he*
- That's right. They believe.
- He and she?
- She and he
- It

- That's a bit too far.
- Shehe
- That's better
- Sounds weird though
- So do you.
- What do you mean?
- Are you a boy or a girl?
- Err... I'm a girl, why?
- Oh you sound like a boy that's why.
- Oh well I don't care
- And shehe either.
- That's right - shehe doesn't care how shehe sounds as long as *they* hear.
- As long as they...
- As long as they listen to her - him
- That's right as long as they listen. But shehe needs a name.
- And the name is
- Kofi!
- Samia!
- Sairus!
- Lea!

- Pete!
- Sile!
- Jevan!
- Patrisha!

(...until all say their names or others to agree upon, then a few of them together)

- Ashley!

(Pause, then everybody together the next line)

- *Ash*
- I've told you *Ash*/
- /Ash wants them to listen.
- What does Ash want to say?
- We don't know that yet.
- Ash don't know that yet.
- Ash don't need to know that yet.
- Not yet. But *we* will
- *Ash* will
- Ash will need to know. And will know. But now?
- Now Ash have whatever background, name and faith. And will make them listen.
- That's right!

- You bet!
- They will listen to Ash!

(Only the performers playing A, B, C, D and F remain onstage.)

- A Err I am tall and strong
- B I make people laugh – like I’m funny not ridiculously funny just good fun
- C Nice to hang around with
- D Despite my accent
- B Which is funny
- D But sounds ridiculous
- A People like me because-
- B Because I’m different
- C Because I’m cool, because people from where I come from are cool
- D Despite the stereotypes
- A What stereotypes?
- D Well like I don’t know like they nick anything from under your nose
- C That’s cool
- B So they like me because even if I steal from under my nose ehm I mean their nose which is cool so they don’t mind cause that’s cool?
- A I am cool because even if I could nick any-

thing from under your nose I don't, and that's what's cool and that's why people like me

D But people don't know me and they're scared.

C So I play it cool and look confident

D But that doesn't work and I end up all alone all the time

B That's sad man!

A So I...

C So I meet this other boy

A Yes, this other boy who comes from the same place and we're like buddying up

C And he has these cool friends

D These cool friends who have been around long time, and they take me around show me here and there so I'm not sad at all anymore I'm having fun, and I start thinking wow it's cool to be around these new people, this new place, the colours, rhythms, slangs, sounds, smells whatever and I am popular like big time and girls like me and I like her and and – and it's all gone

A, B, C What?

D It's all gone cause she's like she - he likes her and she likes me and I like her so we have a fight but I cannot fight really I can only steal – steal from right under his nose so I – now I just

have a black eye and no friends anymore

B Maaaaaan

C That's no cool at all

A But I but I but I really didn't mean I mean I
just I didn't even know she was who she was -
who is she?

B She's the boy's girlfriend

D Lea

C And she doesn't like him anymore cause I'm
around and she understands what's cool and
what's not

D But now I have a black eye and maybe she
won't like me anymore.

A Plus...

B Plus?

D Plus I cried...

C Ohhh man that is so uncool

A And she saw me. And she cried too. And I said
-

D Nothing

B I said nothing cause I was just sobbing and
couldn't open my mouth and everybody
laughed and she cried so I also cried oh no I
was already crying

- C That is so not funny man - that's embarrassing!
- A It's not embarrassing because... because
- D Because I didn't want to fight and everybody knew he was older and bigger and he was jealous and so people started to talk
- A Yeah they started to talk behind his back sayin, sayin things like she still fancies me - even with my black eye because I'm sweet
- C That's gay talk man
- B She still likes me cause I'm funny, cause with my black eye I look funny, just good fun you know, my black eye matching their black skin, and people make jokes about that and I feel better and I don't feel ridiculous anymore cause-
- C Cause people respect me, do you know what I mean?
- A Yes and people now come to me saying she wants to see me but she's afraid of-
- D Of Pete! He's Pete.
- C She's afraid of Pete cause she fears if he sees me and her together he will punch me down again
- A But Pete's my friend too
- B Pete saved my ass and what do I do?

- D Snatch his girlfriend. That's what I do. From under his nose.
- A Here's what I'll do I'll go say Pete look Pete I'm sorry
- C And that's so cool cause it's brave cause he might just knock me out again - on the other eye maybe
- B Which would make me even funnier but maybe-
- C Maybe he won't cause now he's the one people are making fun of
- D And he's sad cause he knows and also his girlfriend knows and he loved her but she's changed, something's changed
- A And that's no-one's fault. That's not my fault, that's what happens.
- B When people like each other
- C That's just what happens it's chemistry man
- D But - I'm not sure about that.

(Pause)

- A Not sure about...

(Pause)

- C About the chemistry about-
- B Chemistry? What chemistry man?

- D No the chemistry was there but I knew.
- A I knew she was his girlfriend
- B I knew she was his girlfriend all along cause I saw them
- C Getting hoooot
- B I saw them getting – I mean I saw them like that at the bus stop and I stopped and tried to hide but she saw that I saw and she laughed
- A She smiled actually
- D So I knew
- A And she knew
- C Only Pete didn't know
- B Poor Pete

(‘I Looked at You’ by The Doors may be played; all go off singing and dancing)

(PETE, E onstage)

PETE Look Pete I'm sorry. You go.

E Look Pete, I'm so sorry...

PETE I'm sorry. Just say I'm sorry.

E I'm sorry.

PETE Try with 'look Pete'.

E Look Pete, I'm sorry.

PETE Not convincing.

E Pete listen, I'm sorry. Really.

PETE Cry.

(E may try to cry in vain)

PETE You think I care?

E -

PETE Say yes.

E Yes.

PETE Well you're wrong. I don't. I don't care. I don't give a shit actually.

Say... say/

E Do you still like her?

PETE Who says that?

E I mean... he, she, no... well you?

PETE I wouldn't say that.

-

Shit. I probably would.

E Then I'd say: 'hey man it's all yours I mean you know I, I/

PETE That don't work. Say you're my best friend.

E What? You mean...

PETE Say it

E You *are* my best friend.

PETE Say my only friend. Say I'll do what you want. I give her back to you. She might not like me you know – in fact she doesn't she still likes you and I just want us to be friends. Best friends. You're my best friend. You're my only best friend.

E You are my only best friend.

PETE I'll have to think about that.

(Shift. Out PETE, in LEA)

LEA So I look at them and there's blood. No not too much. A little. But there's blood. They are shedding blood for me. I walk away - I have my new fur-boots on you know. No I mean, not like that. My mum you know. Can't have her noticing it. I know. That's me. But I mean, Pete, he's nice he really is, but he's you know what's the word - impulsive. It's too much. No it's not. I know. Well I don't know what happened. I don't know. I don't know I'm telling you! It's just, it's just chemistry man. Ok. Ok. See you.

E Really. Lot of blood? Ah right. What? That's posh talk man. Yeah right. I know. So always forward thinking and stuff. I can hear Pete sa- yin' how intelligent you are, and stuff. No it's not. So what happened? What you mean? What you mean you don't know tell me! Right. Well come and see me after class so we talk. I don't like that. But let's talk. K, see ya.

(Out LEA and E. In F first, then PETE)

F I can hear my heart beating in my chest like like I don't know like hard. And I get to school and I look around and I get in from the main entrance past the gate. The gate. Corridor in front of me. Empty. Squares of light through the windows. No one seems to be around. Strange. Everything's so still – and no it's not a bloody dream. There's tutorials, everybody should be around. So I breathe, maybe I'll have a cigarette. Yes a cigarette. I roll one and go back out. I'm looking for the lighter. Do you have a lighter? Shit it's him.

PETE I'm just bloody nervous like don't wanna see anybody just get this out of the way, could have stayed home, mum going what's wrong nothing mum just everything - doesn't matter. Gotta get this out of the way. I'm late actually who cares. Gate's open, it's always open what's the point - shit what's he doing here? Too late did he see me shit someone might... walking past him I don't care, just breathe just look cool just don't get into it look cool move along, fuck off.

F He doesn't stop. He hears me he doesn't stop. Pete!

PETE Shit what da fuck. I turn around.

F He stops.

(Beat)

Look Pete, I'm sorry.

PETE And he goes Look Pete I'm sorry. Looks sorry, looks miserable. And I don't know what to say and I feel rage and my face's all red I'm sure and my fists... my fists went on him already.

He starts. Put my hands in my pockets. His eye's still black. Cannot laugh.

F Mate. I say. Mate. What the fuck mate I've just fucked up man Man... what's he looking at me, he's looking angry at me.

PETE You are sorry. Shit not that... shit I've said it. Fuck. I'm late.

F Like...

PETE Yeah.

F I really... like - I'm really sorry man.

PETE Do you really like her? Shit. Shit. Shit.

F Who? - What da fuck who? That's Lea asshole now he's gonna punch me down again fuck... He's staring he's staring is he staring at me? Yes. Yes I do man. I do I'm sorry. Shit.

PETE I'm silent. I'm not looking I cannot look look in his eyes anymore.

F Look, I do what you want man I mean... I just - what? - you've been a buddy man you saved

my ass and I - it just happened man I don't know, what you want me to do. I'll do it.

PETE Say it just say it at least say it. For fuck sake.

F He doesn't answer he looks he looks what does he look like?

PETE I look stupid I feel confused I need to go he doesn't say he doesn't say I... man you just stabbed me man you just stabbed me here right here you see here? right here see? this hurts man you know you know more than more than... does it hurt? - Shit.

F I'll be alright.

(Pause)

PETE. I'm late.

F He's gone. My cigarette. I really need a cigarette. Shit the lighter.

PETE And I'm walking down the corridor. Shit. The corridor. Squares of light... paving me away. It's empty. It's just me. Shit. This is... shit, it's all shit. But he'll be alright. Yeah, he'll be alright. He'll be fucking alright.

(Looks at the audience)

Sorry mum

(Walks off)

The next extract is a monologue from a piece under development provisionally titled *Vice Device* (2015). Within the piece, the ambition is to go a bit further in testing the efficacy of a text stripped *almost* bare of (predetermined) narratives and meanings, to infuse into (or force onto) the speaking actor an authentic and creative reaction, one that allows also partners and audience to engage in the process as it unfolds.

This short monologue is an experiment within English language, a release of writing impulses struggling to transgress discourse, an attempt to write the equivalent of a spontaneous expressive gesture. Stage directions are in *Italic*.

MAN looks at the audience. WOMAN halts. Icons of sheets of paper, a folder, two Jpegs (of MAN and WOMAN) and a dustbin appear on the screen. The real sheets of paper, the folder and the dustbin are on the desk. A cursor drags the WOMAN's Jpeg off-screen, but it cannot actually go off-screen: WOMAN moves to one side of the stage where she stands motionless. As the other icons are dragged into the virtual recycle bin on screen, MAN throws their "double" into the real dustbin on-stage (including the desk? he tries: capitalist deskilling!).

MAN See I want to take this opportunity this is opportunity it is to be taken it is seriously to be taken I'm serious that is me and not me I mean to say that I don't know what is real what is real I know this is not real but at the same time it is. Time is same and space is same but maybe the thoughts come from somewhere where some ever been there. Or all have been there and here.

So there is a problem we say there is and carry on but if I say I say there is no going on until I say and then I do else I might just be written down forever. So I do what I do is this there is a problem a problem a technical problem I think is the brain because I think with the brain and I think of the brain. It is just between me and you and you are many and I am many too we all are many. It is just between all of us that we might think through this problem of truth. Imagine that imagine that machine a machine is a brain and I am the brain and the machine and I act like a machine. Like a machine why I act like a machine why is not why is when not why when it is when we forget and I have forgotten I have I mean I haven't but if I have to tell you I have to pretend and I don't want to pretend but what is theatre then.

The difference it is between it is and not forget or remember or knowing is was or is was to know. And will what will to know is will. Will you have will you have I hope soon so soon so soon so I can become and not forget but realise I have become. This is the story of my becoming and my forgetting where I am becoming from.

I believe that the strength of open performance texts will ultimately reside – among other things – in the capacity to trigger personal associations and unexpected potentialities. To this end, when writing, we could wish to provide the creative actor⁴ (and

⁴ Or “actor-dramaturg” as suggested by Patrice Pavis (74-80). Performance texts don't often go beyond rehearsal rooms anyway.

the willing reader) with something to work on that is *workable*. Dramaturgies of spontaneity aim at creating the conditions for a supplementing spontaneous action, or creative engagement, on the part of the audience as well; not only in response to each performance's *presumed* themes, but as that insight reflected in its mirrors, or seeping through the creases of its formation⁵; in other words the immanently human nature of creativity.

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⁵ Or *formaction* to literally adapt (i.e. adopt through literal translation) the Italian term for formation, which is 'formazione' (forma + azione = form + action).