HOW COULD ARTISTIC RESEARCH CONTRIBUTE TO ACTING THEORIES?

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Abstract

Drawing upon her insights as an active participant in artistic research processes, the author delves into artistic research practices and seeks to reveal the peculiarities of this research paradigm. By studying examples from artistic doctoral projects, the author explores how artistic research methodologies serve as the lens for unravelling the intricacies of acting, while also acknowledging their limitations. The study argues that neither artists nor art scholars working in isolation can develop a comprehensive theory of acting that fully captures the essence of the phenomenon. Instead, it is through the integration of artistic, scholarly, and scientific paradigms, facilitating the exchange between inside and outside positions, that the complexity of contemporary acting can be illuminated. This synthesis potentially offers new insights into performing arts and paves the way for advancements in both academic research and artistic practice.

Keywords: *acting, artistic research, art research, theory, performance*

Upon closer inspection of recent literature on acting, we would see that many of the books were written by theatre practitioners holding a PhD in the arts or humanities. The papers by Rhonda Blair (2007), Rick Kemp (2012), Phillipp B. Zarrilli (2019), Kris Salata (2021), Royce Sparks (2022), and Giuliano Campo (2022), among others, serve as examples. Some of them have or had

a connection to academia, but institutional affiliation is not a prerequisite for carrying out artistic research. It can take place outside the academic realm if it creates new knowledge in and through artistic practice. What kind of knowledge does artistic research produce? This type of knowledge differs from explicit knowledge that is transparently expressed and readily conveyed through language. Artistic research generates implicit knowledge that is tacit, embodied and situated. Typically, this knowledge is non-verbal, context-specific and based on personal experience, intuition, or practical skills.

This paper seeks to reveal the potential of artistic research in shaping acting theories. The author, a theatre scholar and a supervisor of artistic doctoral students, explores the opportunities and limitations of artistic and scholarly approaches to acting and searches for the most relevant model for research on acting.

On methodology of artistic research

In his book, *The Creative Qualitative Researcher. Writing That Makes Readers Want to Read*, Ronald J. Pelias does not refer specifically to artistic research, but introduces the phenomenon that is very close to it: that is the concept of creative scholarship and creative researchers who pay special attention to the emotional and intellectual complexity of their subjects and who utilize their vulnerable, relational, and reflexive selves to reveal and transform problematic cultural practices, as well as those who involve their embodied ideological and ethical sensitivities in their research endeavours [Pelias 2019]. In contemporary academia, this trend is symptomatic of blurring boundaries between academic and artistic research. However, there are some differences that sometimes can become the strengths and sometimes – the limitations.

Typically, artistic research aims to create something new rather than to explain what already exists. Artistic research stems from artistic practice, but not every practice is research. The distinctive feature of research is the presence of a question that must be answered by implementing artistic practices (often experimental). Its novelty, however, is ensured by the originality of the research method, which is never prepared in advance. The method is being born along with the practice. *The Routledge International Handbook of Practice-Based Research*, and specifically its chapters addressing methodological questions, discusses the distinction across methods and proposes the Common Ground model for practice-based research design. The contributors suggest that in a specific research context, concrete research actions, such as the selection of procedures, tools, and techniques, intertwine with the overall research strategy [Vear 2021: 12].

Juha Varto, the author of the study on artistic research, claims that only research itself can ground concrete selected methods [Varto 2022: 34] and that

artistic research requires a researcher to devise their own method, suitable only for that particular research [Ibid., 37]. According to Mika Hannula et al., the basic scheme of artistic research method can be formulated as follows: "artistic research = artistic process (acts inside the practice) + arguing for a point of view (contextual, interpretative, conceptual, narrative work)" [Hannula et al. 2014: 15].

In devising artistic research methodologies, artist-researchers often borrow methods from other disciplines. One of the most prevalent methods is autoethnography, since personal experience is at the very core of artistic research. Autoethnography provides researchers with an exceptional opportunity to combine their personal experiences, cultural context and artistic practice in an introspective and self-reflective manner. A researcher uses their own experience and a personal life story to contextualise certain cultural phenomena. Hence, autoethnography, being a qualitative research method, can expand sociological understanding [Sparkes 2000: 21]. In artistic research, autoethnography enables actors to explore their personal experiences within the context of acting. It may be relevant when addressing certain topics because this method may yield insights into how one's own life and identity intersect with their experiences as performers. Moreover, autoethnography may encourage actors to examine their own assumptions, biases, and beliefs critically. This can help the performer to better understand their motivations, goals, and artistic development. Likewise, autoethnography may help actors situate their experiences within broader cultural and societal contexts as well as theatre traditions. Ultimately, by reflecting on their own experiences as actors, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of various creative processes, such as the embodiment of characters, the impact of selected creative models and rehearsal methods, struggles when adopting certain techniques, and others. Given my experience as a supervisor, actor-researchers do not adhere to autoethnography's methodological approach with precision and consistency, but rather develop their own hybrid method.

Even if we acknowledge the unique nature of knowledge produced by artistic research, the question of how subjective experience can become knowledge remains. The phenomenological position, which equates experience and knowledge, seems not to be sufficient here, because knowledge must be applicable in one or another way. Outcomes of some projects suggest that artistic research produces new meanings rather than new knowledge. Ian Watson proposes the term *applications*: "Unlike scientific research, which is grounded in the discovery of universals, performance research is rooted in the personal, in the findings of individual actors and/or researchers in particular circumstances which are, in turn, applied in future situations" [Watson 2009: 85]. The applicability of new knowledge is more evident when the artist's research concerns the elements of her profession (techniques,

methods, strategies, etc). In this case, this is knowledge "how to do things"[1]. However, it is not so easily defined when the artist investigates other phenomena (it can be any concept from any field). Many artist-researchers are interested in "the epistemic potential of performing": they believe that they "can acquire cultural and social knowledge and learn about humankind through a systematic creative and researching artistic process" [Lüneburg 2021: 186].

Two doctoral artistic projects implemented at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre demonstrate how performers integrate autoethnographic elements to develop experimental models suggesting transformational practices for contemporary performers.

The first example is drawn from the work of transdisciplinary performer Brigita Bublytė, who has defended her doctoral artistic project *Transformations of the Vocal Timbre: The Influence of Ethnic Traditions' Practice on the Contemporary Performer* [Bublytė 2018]. She aimed to reveal how engagement with various ethnic traditions benefits contemporary performers. She practised singing techniques from different ethnic groups (Spanish flamenco, Mongolian throat singing, and Lithuanian sutartinės) and documented the footprint this practice left in her body and its impact on her vocal expression. Having implemented the research project, Bublytė concluded that the practice of ethnic singing affords a performer greater breadth of vocal expression in a number of ways and proposed a set of exercises to aid performers in the process of vocal timbre transformation.

The second example is the project by playwright, director and performer Milda Al-Slamah. In her doctoral artistic project *Overcoming the Constraints of an Independent Theatre Maker: Towards the Theatre of Consciousness* [Al-Slamah 2024], the researcher reflected on her attempts to break free from the constraints that encourage insincere, self-censored, and innovation-lacking expression, and aimed to formulate new creative principles. She documented the changes in her professional and personal mindset while describing her individual journey through testing various creative practices. Al-Slamah ended up in the new territory of the *Theatre of Consciousness* that she proposed as a tool for conscious and live creation with transformative potential.

In both cases, researchers constructed their own method, which was not strictly defined in advance. The research process followed a cyclical pattern: the phase of practical experimentation was followed by a withdrawal from

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[1] Alva Noë was among the first philosophers to defend *knowing how* as an independend and specific kind of knowledge. According to him, our practical abilities, that play a significant role in the process of achieving this kind of knowledge, are *embodied* (they depend on our bodily natures, moreover, learning new tasks changes our bodies) and *situated* (they have conditions for their exercise that are external to the agent). See: Balevičiūtė, 2018.

the practice and a critical reflection, which involved reading various sources, analysing works of other artists etc. Afterwards, the artists would return to their studios and begin working practically again, attempting to incorporate the newly acquired knowledge. The periods of *doing* and *reflecting* may differ in duration and intensity; however, the general cyclical pattern, offering the shift in perspective on the researched problem, stimulates the researcher's creativity[2]. Within this particular methodological framework, researchers improvise, adapting to new information, exploring different possibilities, and allowing themselves to indulge in the unknown. Since predictability is not the goal in artistic research, artists often employ improvisatory modes of investigation that allow approaching a problem with a flexible and spontaneous mindset and being open to unexpected outcomes. According to Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, "Improvisatory modes of inquiry allow (...) to explore open spaces where the unplanned and unexpected are central to the research process" [Bartleet 2002: 138]. The improvisatory method is particularly relevant to artistic research because it is "both intuitive and based on shared understandings of artistic language, contexts, and relationships" [Ibid].

Bublytė and Al-Slamah relied on their personal experience and on the individual responses to the performed actions in their bodies as well as the mindset assuming that those changes may also occur in the professional life of other performers. Obviously, it is only an assumption and by no means can be considered as a theory. Although the research conducted both by Bublytė and Al-Slamah had the key elements of theory formation, i.e. it involved observation, data collection, analysis, and interpretation, it was based purely on the subjective experience and did not go through testing and refinement in other contexts.

Artistic vs scholarly theories of acting

When speaking about theories of acting, we usually refer to such prominent theatre directors as Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Brecht, Grotowski, Barba, Lecoq, Brook, Lupa, Fabre, etc. All of them wrote about their methodologies and described the principles of acting. However, basically they were interested in only one particular type of theatre and they sought to train the actor who would be able to embody their theatrical vision. Of course, they considered the latest findings of the sciences of their time (some of them did this more consistently, while others relied more on metaphors and intuition); however, their goal was not to formulate the general principles of acting. In this respect, their theories can be called artistic. Gőze Saner calls such theories *practitioners' theories* and observes that "Theories in the shape of

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[2] The change of perspectice can be seen as an important factor for artists' creativity. See more: Balevičiūtė, Jurgaitytė-Avižinienė, 2002.

methods, sets of principles, rules and value schemes often emerge out of laboratory processes and help formulate and formalize the practice of the specific practitioner/laboratory for posterity" [Saner 2018: 191].

The is noteworthy that all the authors of those acting theories are directors, not actors (although some of them had certain experience in acting practice), and some of the more recent theories are formulated by famous actors' trainers such as Phillip B. Zarrilli or Rick Kemp. This observation supports my central argument, that theory, specifically acting theory, emerges from the integration of experience (position of an insider) and reflection and conceptualisation (position of an outsider/observer). In the field of performing arts, the centrality of the body is evident. Considering the fundamental premise that "the body is a site of knowledge" [Bartleet 2002: 139], it is necessary to involve bodily experiences of the performers in the analysis of acting. Thus, the directors are very close to the bodily experiences of the actors, but at the same time they keep the critical distance. According to Juha Varto, theory is the detachment from experience, hence it is instrumental in the comprehension of the phenomenon that is being researched [Varto 2022: 88]. This model, combining the alternation of *inside* and *outside* positions, reflects the structure of the artistic research process. Thus, all artistic theories of acting can be seen as the outcomes of artistic research. Although the texts written by artists may look abstract or too poetic sometimes, they are of great value. My practical observation suggests that when artists start working with the phenomena described by artist-researchers in their books, they realise what the author of those hazy ideas wanted to express. This possibly can be explained by the tacitness of knowledge: the knowledge stays silent or incomprehensible until it becomes embodied and situated.

The main difference between artistic and academic research, along with the type of knowledge they produce, is the researcher's relationship with the object of research. For a long time, the dominant tradition in art research was the investigation of art results (artworks) or the creative process. In both cases, research is conducted outside artistic practice, and the researcher applies various scientific research methods that emphasise objectivity. This means that those methods establish a research object and seek a neutral relationship with it. The researcher observes, analyses, and synthesises phenomena, thereby creating new knowledge. There is a certain difference between scientific (accumulative) and scholarly (diversifying) knowledge, but both kinds of knowledge seek to understand and analyse laws and principles of a concrete phenomenon. In the centre of artistic research, there is the artist themselves – their practice and experiences. Hence, the research object is within artistic practice, and the relationship between a researcher and a research object is subjective and even intimate. The knowledge produced by artistic research is often treated as emergent

knowledge, referring to new, evolving, or cutting-edge information and insights emerging across various fields.

John Lutterbie, the author of the book *Toward a General Theory of Acting. Cognitive Science and Performance*, gives an excellent insight into the differences between artistic and scholarly approaches to art. All scholarly theories must be falsifiable: "The greater the number of experiments that successfully support a truth claim, the more confident scientists are that it can be used as a basis for further explorations. It is humbling to think how much confidence theatre practitioners have in their approaches to creating a performance and how little evidence, other than personal experience, supports that confidence" [Lutterbie 2011: 74].

For artists, Grounded Theory (GT) can offer a relevant scholarly methodological approach. Grounded Theory is a qualitative research methodology developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the 1960s [Glaser, Strauss 1967]. Scholars from diverse fields (primarily the social sciences) use this tool to systematically develop new theories from data without fitting the data into preconceived frameworks. According to psychologist Agnė Jurgaitytė-Avižinienė, Grounded Theory is particularly suitable in the fields that have been poorly investigated before, for researching processes or phenomena in the given environment and analysing data collected through interviews, focus groups, observation, diaries, activity notes, and documents, and presented in various forms [Jurgaitytė-Avižinienė 2012: 105]. Jurgaitytė-Avižinienė emphasises Glaser's and Strauss's claim that the researcher does not have to be an outstanding scholar or a genius to create a new theory – it is enough to follow strictly the procedures of GT, trying not to get lost in the labyrinths of data [Ibid. 108].

In the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, GT was used by actress Vesta Rasa Grabštaitė in her doctoral research project *Acting Phenomenon: Persuasiveness of the Other's Verisimilitude* [Grabštaitė 2024]. She aimed to research the complex nature of acting by applying GT to artistic practice. The research was centred on the experience of professional Lithuanian actors to determine the structure, composition, and characteristics of the components of acting and their interactions when seeking to create an impression and impact on spectators. Besides, she created the performance with highly experienced Lithuanian actress Eglė Mikulionytė, where they tested various assumptions about acting. The main research finding is that acting, being an emergent, impact-generating system, requiring anticipatory, adaptive and dynamic properties, obeys three fundamental laws: the law of the other (acting is conditioned by the transformation of the person), the law of the verisimilitude (acting is based on credibility), and the law of the persuasiveness (acting aims at a specifically defined, predetermined, purposely planned, and domain-specific effect). Although Grabštaitė provided many valuable insights into the ontological

nature of acting, at times, she treated the procedures of GT too loosely, beginning to interpret the data at too early a stage. At some points in her research, she mixed GT with performative writing and poetic inquiry that is at the very core of her artistic nature. As a result, her theory of acting cannot be considered a scholarly theory and ought to be allocated to the domain of artistic theories.

The presented cases lead to the conclusion that, in the field of art, the combination of different approaches may serve more than one specific method in seeking to reveal such a complex phenomenon as acting. Of course, many artist-researchers passionately defend their right to autonomy in the research realm. For example, Bartleet states that non-linear, improvisatory, and embodied approaches enable one "to work within research paradigms that respond to the dynamics of the artistic process and the ebb and flow of creative life, rather than pre-ordained, linear prescriptions modelled on social-scientific research approaches" [Bartleet, 2002: 139]. Moreover, many researchers underline "the price of reductionism and generalization" [Hansen 2018: 37] while carrying out scientific or scholarly research in the field of performing arts, because often it fails to reveal the full complexity of an artistic phenomenon. Lutterbie also writes about the limits of science: "While the theatre seeks to expand our understanding of the vicissitudes of human experience, scientists seek to remove all variables that could cast doubt on the conclusions they draw from experiments. For them, being reductive is a virtue. For artists, it is synonymous with being overly simplistic, verging on the boring. (...) The arts tend to expand, the sciences to limit the field of investigation" [Lutterbie 2011: 73–74].

This kind of opposition can hardly be productive. In his research, Lutterbie himself tries to maintain some variables, paying special attention to the insights and testimonies of theatre artists (from Stanislavski to Lecoq). Applying Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) and recent findings in the cognitive sciences, he proposes the *General Theory of Acting*. He suggests looking at acting as a Dynamic System: "Acting is the activity of an embodied, dynamic system"[3] [Lutterbie 2011: 25]. However, at the end of his study, he self-ironically recognises the limitation of his approach:

"Is dynamic systems theory the answer to understanding acting? Ha! Wouldn't that be wonderful! I have no such illusions. Tomorrow or the next day, experiments may be undertaken that falsify all the claims in support of this model. Such is the nature of science and of theories in general. But for all its frailties, DST does have the virtue of allowing us to rethink the art of acting in a way that, despite the use of science, does not destroy its mystery. It opens up the complexities of

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[3] ..."dynamic system" is one that exists in a constant state of disequilibrium, responding to perturbations (disturbances) that further destabilize the whole [Lutterbie 2011: 25].

the art form in a way that is comprehensible, accessible, and productive for theatre artists." [Lutterbie 2011: 231]

In conclusion, the exploration of artistic versus scholarly theories of acting highlights significant differences in their approaches. The artistic theories rooted in practical experience contrast with scholarly theories that emphasise objectivity and systematic analysis, sometimes at the expense of the complexities inherent in artistic practice. The example of Vesta Rasa Grabštaitė's use of Grounded Theory demonstrates how artistic research can inform structured theoretical frameworks, while also revealing the challenges of balancing creativity with academic rigour. This tension suggests that both artistic and scholarly methodologies are necessary to fully capture the multifaceted nature of acting.

Conclusions

It becomes evident that neither theatre scholars nor artists alone hold exclusive authority over the development of comprehensive theories of acting, as each approach has inherent restrictions and limitations. Artists often ground their insights merely in practical experience, providing embodied understanding, while scholars tend to prioritise objectivity and theoretical frameworks that seek to distil complex phenomena into generalised principles. This study reveals that artistic research can significantly contribute to the formation of acting theories by leveraging unique insights derived from its distinctive methodology, often employing improvisatory modes. Artistic research fosters a synergistic approach by facilitating an interchange between subjective, lived experiences and analytical, reflective insights. Such integration allows for a more nuanced understanding of how contextual factors, personal experiences, and embodied practices shape the performance process.

The examples of Brigita Bublytė and Milda Al-Slamah illustrate specific ways in which artistic research may contribute to acting theories. Their methodologies, rooted in personal and artistic experiences, inform theoretical discussions by demonstrating how individual practices can give rise to new concepts in acting. Furthermore, the cyclical nature of their research processes, characterised by experimentation, reflection, and integration, highlights how artistic research not only generates new knowledge but also refines and expands existing theoretical frameworks. This iterative approach underscores that acting theories can evolve through the synthesis of insights from artistic inquiry, effectively bridging the gap between practice and theory.

Ultimately, fostering a dialogue between artistic and scholarly approaches can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of acting. By valuing insights from both realms, we can enhance the development of theories that genuinely reflect the richness and complexity of human expression in theatre.

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