

**OPPONENT'S RECOMMENDATION FOR THE MASTER'S THESIS:**

Attachment to the state magister's examination report.

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**Branch of study: MA DOT**

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Eva Burgerhoudt in her Master's thesis *Experiencing Ourselves Behaving* pose relevant questions for current theater and performance art practice. She presents elements which are the starting point of her research and uses theoretical sources to clarify principles that are substantial for the construction of her research. Later she gives a thoughtful recount of the creative process of "Go away - See if I'm there" and of the experience she gained by performing this piece, including useful audience's insights. In the last sections, Eva reflects on the findings she acquired throughout this process and articulates questions and points of attention that need to be clarified to bring further her research. The thesis accounts for a clear understanding of key elements that are essential for continuing her particular way of theater making.

The thesis reads well and ideas are expressed clearly, the structure is consistent with the process of framing a question, describing the research period and reflecting on conclusions. Sections 8-12 have the potential to become one section dedicated to establishing definitions pertaining to her particular practice. With the use of a precise "wording", she can formulate and specify the elements of her research. One mistake to correct is in section 6.2 where Schechner is credited for the ideas of Lehmann.

The theoretical references to frame the practice offer starting points but are not clearly articulated with the process and result. The question of the relevance and role of empathy during the performance is not fully discussed. On the other hand, the interpretation of Sapolsky's text, regarding the impossibility to give a coherent overview on the topic of behavior, prevented the whole concept to mature and narrow down as the practice took place. Thus there is a lack of precision on what is the focal range of behavior that can be explored with this performance, more thoughts about this topic will be provided further. I recommend revising the concept of Rasa aesthetics since it could contribute to go deeper into thinking the process that attendees undertake during the performance if taking into account the classification of the nine rasas are states of mind that can be also analyzed from a behavioral perspective. Further theoretical research can continue in a sociological field that observes networks of relations, for instance, the notions of Bruno Latour that take into account how humans and nonhumans affect each other. The observation of how the disposition of space and which kind of objects are used, in this case for sitting, affect the behavior of the attendees, is already pointing towards Latour's idea of delegation and subscription in which humans delegate into objects certain tasks, in this case, the performers effort to make people feel at ease is delegated into an inviting and comfortable object. The thought of human behavior being stimulated by something other than human beings is worth revising since the theater is a hybrid of human and technical activity. Concerning the research itself, I consider that Eva is questioning in depth the relationship between audience and performer and has started the process of looking for a version that responds to her vision and needs, distancing herself from already established forms of

participation. In my opinion, she found several interesting points that deserve to be researched further and for those, I am contributing with some thoughts and suggestions. It has been established that "the experience needs to be seen through an artistic lense" and that a black box theater has been selected to present the performance. Consequently, if the piece needs to be framed by the theater to become what it is, and not to be confused with what is not, a social experiment, then is worth to pay attention to this fact and understand as much as possible what is the contribution of the construction of the theater to the piece. Theater understood as the physical space, the social event with its behavioral givens, the infrastructure that organizes and makes available the experience to the audience. But especially the behavior that is given in the situation of attending and experiencing a performance in a theater, to reflect on what are the relationships that operate and not take them for granted. A way to address it is to investigate how theater curates behavior. What is its contribution to the piece that makes it a requirement? Regarding the aim of the project as to "create spaces where behavior can be experienced" or "create a situation in which behavior can occur", it presents the problem of a very general and imprecise aim. Is there a situation or a space in which behavior does not occur? It needs to be clarified what is what the performance is creating within the flow of continuous behavior, what is the difference between behaviors in other places and the behavior that occurs in the performance, what is the set of behavioral elements present in the precise place and time of the work. For that is also necessary to narrow down what is understood by behavior in the context of this performance, what is addressed with this word? Choices, reactions, dispositions regarding listening to someone's story, wanting to express, distributing one's body in the space in relation to others, the level of engagement, the quality of a relationship established with a performer, the sense of collectiveness in a group, the explicit act of demonstrating separateness... What are the concrete manifestations of behavior that can be addressed in this work?

Manipulation and participation are analyzed as behavioral nodes in which performer and attendee meet, but there are implications in the attendee-performer relationship that are not being observed and questioned. For example the dimension of theater as a collective activity, the shared understanding that in this place the symbolic charge of objects, words, and gestures are intensified, the agreement of a gathering that operates with different logic than the everyday interactions, the nuances in the position of the attendee, sometimes operating as an individual and sometimes as part of a group, to mention some angles. If attendees are essential for the construction of the performance, then it is also necessary to give more time and research to how they are positioned in the work. There is a level of observation of behavior that is not mentioned and I find crucial: becoming aware of how others become aware of oneself. The feeling of being observed, exposed, separated from the anonymous collective when signaled by the approach of a performer is a given, even if the approach is not experienced as threatening or uncomfortable. At that moment the attendee will be visible and acquire a role in the situation. So how does it feel to develop a relationship with a performer having witnesses, be it, strangers or friends, how it affects the behavior of an attendee. One can assume that it would be very different to develop this relationship without witnesses, is it so? and if yes, then how to acknowledge that the collective is strongly shaping the behavior of the attendee.

Eva's research covered a thorough study of the presence of the performer in relation to the attendees. Another given to explore is the relationship among attendees themselves. How they affect each other, and position themselves within the network of presences, can a contagious behavior come into question? Can this be used as a material of composition? For instance, the performer weaving subtle connections between attendees, or reacting to the subtle connections that are already happening.

Manipulation is another topic that I recommend to revise further, it is a fact that all theater making can be taken as manipulation, but it can also be fruitful to understand the nature of the manipulation or to even rename it to precise the intention of it. If the performance is meant to be configured in collaboration with the attendees, then a way to frame the situation is that the attendees can make use of the elements provided in the performance to do something with them. This can be an analogy to a machine that one is presented with for the first time and do not know how it works. The instructions that explain how to operate it can be understood as manipulation? The performer who is orienting the attendees on how the performance works, and that will later give space for attendees to take over in some way is any different? Another reversal that could contribute to this topic is to think of how does the attendee manipulates the encounter and the performer. It is a frame to revise the concrete ways of manipulation that the audience has in all levels of the performance, from deciding to assist and until the very end of the performance and leaving.

It is an interesting proposal to train the attention of performers to be aware of the attendees as guides for their improvisation. I think this training should include different contexts, even when it might feel like a social experiment, this can be part of the process of developing a further understanding of this kind of training. I find it limiting to test and rehearse within a frame of a theater community.

The research has pointed out the effect that distance between bodies and body positions has on attendees. This could be pushed further and be articulated as a body vocabulary to establish relationships designed for this specific performance. It would be interesting to explore how this tool can also affect the degrees of engagement of the attendees, how the body of the performer (its closeness, for example) situates the body of the attendee in relation to the rest of the group, and also how the bodies of the attendees shift the space during the performance.

The gained understanding of how the performer needs to be present in the moment could also expand to an awareness of a timeline, acknowledging connections between stories and materials (reactions) that emerge, and that can be related to things that were already mentioned or experienced during the performance. The performer can follow up the emergent dramaturgy and remember elements that can be connected to the new stories that are revealed, in that way creating connections between stories, but also between attendees that own those stories. This implies an awareness of a network of stories and connections between people, instead of a linear journey. I am suggesting the training of memory as a dramaturgical tool.

I also would like to bring attention to the ratio of the performer-attendee contribution to the performance. Would it be coherent with the research to give more space to attendees' stories and presence, not only by being chosen by the performer and having a relationship with him/her, but also realizing that they have relevant connections with other attendees? In the example described in which an attendee asked not to be touched, would it be a way to incorporate this reaction by asking who else doesn't like to be touched? could this be a way to release the personal charge of that comment into a fact of observing behavior that can belong to others as well? and then, can the attendees feel connected to each other, or in relation to each other by answering that question? I am posing the question of decentralizing the performer as the point where all stories and attention meet and are lead during the performance.

In my opinion, behavior in this research is not the content but the mechanism in operation during the performance. The tool that is devised and shaped. The content, therefore, could be different things, but again is useful to see what is already implied in this form and in the research itself. The topics that were explored: heroes, people that shape you, expectation,

disappointment with its consequent pain, trust, are also present in this performative form. The performer is a hero, a person one supposes have the answers, knows what he/she is doing, leads the journey and hopefully takes care of us as attendees. The performer that “crosses the line” can be a failed hero, the person that gained our trust and guaranteed a certain order, was not able to see clearly or judge clearly. It seems to me that if the performers acknowledge this as part of their dramaturgy then there will be no separation between the content and form, the story and what is being experienced. The attendees can be “shaped” by these models who fail and regain their trust, in a sort of collective effort for surviving instability, the kind of instability implied in every human relationship. The thesis addresses the question of narrowing down the concept of behavior in future work. I would recommend a revision of the materials that have been already collected because it seems to me that that precision in behavior is already operating in the topics of trust and disappointment. If anything, they would need to be taken intentionally and consciously into account in the dramaturgy. Can the performers intentionally betray the trust of the attendee, can they regain it? is it possible to do this carefully? would it help if it is open and clear for the attendee that some interactions will be about that, the risk of trusting? This relates to the topic of risk, “Should we aim to stay on the safer side, or is it worth it to risk crossing boundaries?” If the theoretical questions and the practice were to be coherent, then there shouldn’t be a direct intention in determining a behavioral range, imposing risk or comfort through the design of the performance. I believe the question in this research is to observe behavior, and in this case, the design should be focused on stimuli, this proposition accepts that there will be no control of what reactions will be triggered and should have the elements to operate like that. On one hand, disappointment and trust happen in micro doses all the time. What intensity is necessary to achieve the goal of the performance? In my opinion, it is not necessary to go too far to create the tension that will lead to awareness of behavior. Nevertheless is possible that what appears to be mild, turns out to be offensive for an attendee. Within the mechanics of this performance, the problem is not to *not cross the line* but, to know how the performers will behave when this or that response occurs, how they can balance it to be able to continue in a fruitful territory of improvisation. If a performer placed an attendee in a position where this particular person felt a line was crossed, what will be her/his next reaction of to level up the chain of future reactions and move from distrust to trust? What is the behavior that would do this in everyday life, an apology, a promise, a compensation? How can the natural reaction of the performer be integrated into the moments that are, either too comfortable or too uncomfortable? Can these become a dramaturgical tool? I see here a potential to create a pool of concrete actions that can be used as levelers between risk and comfort. Information is an important element, the ratio of information between attendee and performers can be a strategy to rebuild trust and draw things back after a situation in which too much risk or discomfort was experienced. Often not understanding what is the sense of the risk makes it a negative experience. It is possible that the explicit information to orient the person in the overall context could be enough. I had the opportunity to be an attendee in “Go Away” in Studio Alta and I think Eva did a very good job in keeping an objective eye in the theoretical analysis of her practice. Now the challenge is to see how the theoretical understanding can inform the next steps of her practical research. From my point of view, the development of her proposition has the potential to make an interesting and substantial contribution to the current postdramatic theater scene. For all the afore mentioned **I recommend the thesis for the defense.**

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