

OPPONENT'S RECOMMENDATION FOR THE MASTER THESIS

Attachment to the state magister's examination report

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Branch of study: MA DOT

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I

Arnis Alneikovas claims in his abstract that his thesis *I am just cooking: performative healing in the times of Covid-19 catastrophe* will consider how performance can have a meaning in "the age of catastrophe", thereby referring to the Covid pandemic. In relation to this ambition, Arnis is "contemplating performativity in terms of healing". A key concept in the thesis is "inner dramaturgies", and Arnis claims that this concept will function as a "main methodology" for creating a dramaturgy in his work.

The four main chapters are about *healing*, three performances created by Arnis, *inner dramaturgies*, different kinds of performances, and the strategies and ethics that have occupied Arnis during his creative process.

In the last chapter Arnis summarizes his experiences: he concludes that he has presented both rehearsed theatre performances and performances that are unrehearsed and presented as streamed, real-time events. In addition, his final Master work combines both the above-mentioned approaches. Arnis stresses the importance of the "individual's inner state" (p. 76) and the aspect of *healing*, and finally he proposes to the audience to "tune in with your body-mind set instead of only intellectualizing it" (p. 78). There is an overall strong belief in the body as a source of knowledge and artistic material, and as a tool to heal and transform. (As a reader I draw parallels to how French philosopher Jean Baudrillard already in the 1970s claimed "that the body has today become an object of salvation. It has literally taken over that moral and ideological function from the soul.")

Arnis describes his struggle with the Covid isolation and how his performances can establish a fruitful way – through using the bodily aspect – for communicating. Three performances, *Pulse*, *Room in 286/75* and *Apartment* are described as "experimental, healing and inner dialogues-based performances" (p. 1) and they are mainly presented in chapter 4. The two latter performances were live-streamed, while *Pulse* became a DISK theatre production. The Zoom-performance *Fragmented realities* is described in chapter 5.

The thesis argues that performance has another impact on both audience and performer, compared to presenting fictional events: "I am thinking about the real (meaning embodied and not a character based) experience the performer has and if it's a real experience – it also has different energy and impact to the audience. This makes the one watching it relate to the piece more personally and live it with their bodies" (p. 36). Arnis describes his insecurity and doubts in relation to the audience's reaction, or rather lack of reactions, during his live-streamed performances of *Room in 286/75*, and he asks himself if people are interested in what is happening in the apartment. A recurring phenomenon is how Arnis is wrestling with the possibility of being oneself, or being authentic, while live-streaming.

In his thesis Arnis mainly refers to literature in the field of neurology, psychology and bodily techniques, as Body-Mind centering and Ecstatic dance. Arnis also contextualizes his reasoning in relation to the performance tradition, but more seldom to theatre.

II

Some key terms recur in the thesis, namely *healing*, *inner dramaturgies*, and the antithetical use of *inner/outer*.

Arnis' thesis aims at understanding how his performances can *heal* both the performers and the spectator, and it is important to understand his specific use of this term.

In one of Arnis' references, the term *healing* is defined as "associated with themes of wholeness, narrative, and spirituality" (footnote 8). Arnis, in the same spirit, defines his own use of the term on a level "which is higher and often more abstract than those levels at which a subject, etc., is normally understood or treated" (p. 10).

Two performances, *Pulse* and *Rest*, are related to healing, and Arnis asks himself how these performances can affect the audience during and after the performance. In chapter 3 he gives several examples, from e. g. massage and different bodily techniques, and healing seems to be a psychological and spiritual phenomenon. It shouldn't be confused with the term *curing*, and I understand Arnis' project as having a therapeutic goal. Healing is, despite the thesis' general quest for communication, often connected to self-expression, inwardness and about scanning your inner for "transformation". Arnis describes how a director "should take care of the performers (meaning, to do a psychologist's work and try to get to know them as people better, navigate their state)" (p. 73), in this advocating his own role as a therapist.

Inner dramaturgies appears as a less clear concept. As it is not really an established term, it should need some clarification. As I understand it, *Inner dramaturgies* is mostly used for describing the material collected in the workshops, and sometimes seen as a method: "I was mainly collecting the personal thoughts and feelings in the very real time. This material became a main dramaturgy in the streaming sessions. That method later I used in the online streaming performance called 'Fragmented Realities'." Some quotes might illustrate my confusion: "the movement sequence for performance PULSE has started developing from the confessions that are linked to inner dramaturgies" (p. 49), "I let the dramaturgy to appear and to build itself" (p. 30), and "This is why the performances that are being created based on healing qualities (such as somatic movement or inner dramaturgies)" (p. 76).

In the thesis, the terms *inner* and *outer* are used antithetically, just as body and mind seem to be strongly separated entities. Arnis is consistent in his approach to focus on inwardness: "It is enough to find yourself in a present moment and scan your inner system for transformation" (p. 7) and "Not to take the dramaturgy from somewhere else, somewhere outside an individual's physical realm, but to shift the focus to a person's (or people) inner self" (p. 7). Later in the process, it is claimed, these inner materials could be used as a base for bodily work.

Connected to the focus on inwardness is, somewhat paradoxically, the focus on the body as a source of knowledge. In the work described in the thesis, instructions are about reaching an inner self, but also to "change the focus from the inner body to outer space" (p. 50). The participants could be advised to "listen to their bodies" (p. 20) and to "be in the body more than in a head" (p. 50). Arnis' use of the terms *inner* and *outer* and *mind* and *body*, as well as the relation between these entities, is sometimes confusing for the reader and could have been clarified, especially as these terms are recurring and play an important role in Arnis' argument. I consider this a general dilemma in a discussion about the mind/body relation: often, sometimes with the support of phenomenology, it is stated that mind and body form

a unit, but yet they are in practice treated as a dichotomy. And if Arnis' rhetoric about the mind/body relation often appears as unclear, he is not alone.

III

The thesis shows Arnis' strong devotion to the use of performance as a tool that should be beneficial for healing and bodily engagement, and to the use of personal – or inner – material in times of a catastrophe. Therefore, the thesis is an important document as it shows how the pandemic affected an individual artist, and how it raised questions about how performance art can be used as a tool, both for artists and for the individual spectator. The doubts and experiments described in the thesis are relevant, related to the frustrating situation Arnis finds himself in as a guest student in a foreign country. In his reflective process he aims at re-thinking performativity, because when times change, performativity must also change. Arnis' discussion is anchored in and contextualized through a broad field of artistic and scientific references.

It is sometimes complicated to navigate between the descriptions of the different performances and to get a view of what is preparatory work, rehearsals or live or streamed performances. Very generalizing statements are sometimes made, which seem to be based in Arnis' own experience, e.g about breathing (p. 53), dancers (p. 16), therapy (p. 44 f.) or how a specific practice "was bringing calmness, acceptance and love in the room" (p. 57).

In addition to the above-mentioned remarks, some questions appear when reading Arnis' thesis:

- When participants or spectators are quoted about their experiences from the performances, what method is used for the selection of quotes?
- How does the pervading focus on inwardness affect the communication between participants and spectators?
- As healing was the focus of the process, what does the reader learn about the outcome?
- What are the ethical stakes for Arnis' exploration and experiment; were Arnis or any spectator in some way healed, or did also trauma appear? And to what degree have the participants agreed to being involved in a healing process?

IV

Some formal remarks:

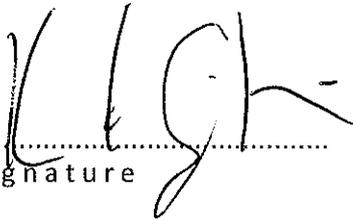
- The use of *italics* is very unclear and inconsistent: always for titles in the footnotes, but seldom in the text. Titles in the footnotes are both in italics and in quotation marks (both single and double); in the text most of the time in capital letters, with or without quotation marks, and sometimes in lower case letters.
- Quotation marks for quotations: both double and single are used.
- Hyphen (-) and dash (–) shouldn't be confused; they have totally different functions in a text and are often used wrongly. (This might be understandable, as the guide offered to international students – *Guide for Citations and Bibliographic References* – is not consistent and sometimes differs from international standards.)
- Footnotes: sometimes the footnotes are ended with a full stop, sometimes not. Sometimes the authors surname is first, sometimes the given names. When referring to pages, numbers are sometimes in brackets, and sometimes not. When referring to a journal or a book, the reader is seldom informed about at what pages the quote was found.

- Bibliography: family names don't appear in alphabetical order; the references of more than 15 footnotes and most of the electronical sources aren't mentioned in the Bibliography.
- The thesis should need a careful proof reading.

I recommend – ~~don't~~ recommend the thesis for the defense.

Date: 9th of June, 2022

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signature

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'K. G. H.', written over a horizontal dotted line. The signature is stylized with a large 'K' and a long horizontal stroke.