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## **Performing Deviance: A Photo Essay on “Manuscript Performance”**

**By Isabel Pinto**

### **Abstract**

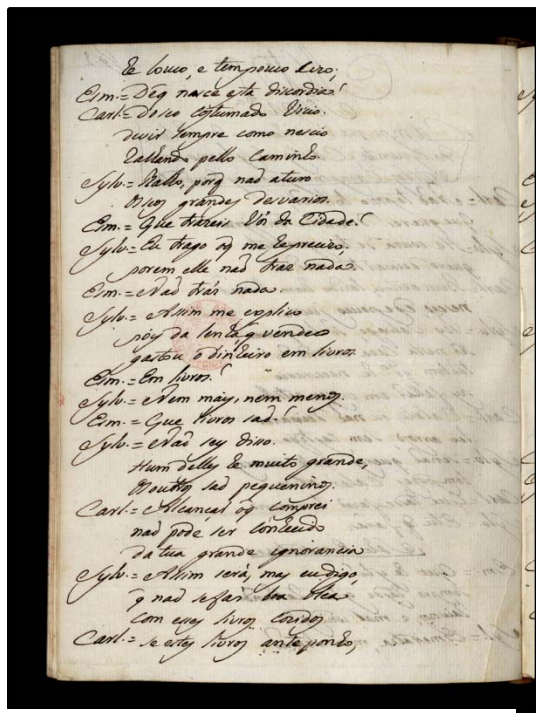
This photo essay documents a creative pathway initiated by a feeling of unsettlement within my research on eighteenth-century manuscript plays, which ended in a live performance framed by the broader question: How does one live surrounded by manuscripts or, in other words, how to do things with manuscripts. Personal narrative was a strategy to link my everyday archive research to a one night performance during which I tried to disclose plainly the awkwardness of communicating through manuscripts. My communication efforts were shaped by physical responses to an environment that was characterised by many boundaries, mainly those resulting from my own manuscript immersion. I wanted to communicate but manuscripts were all I had.

# Performing Deviance: A Photo Essay on “Manuscript Performance”

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## 1. Performance Materials

Thirty-four ‘in oitavo’ volumes of plays are kept at the National Library of



**Figure 1 - a collection of eighteenth-century manuscript plays kept at the National Library of Portugal.**

Portugal (Figure 1). They were copied between 1780 and 1797 by António José de Oliveira, someone who usually signs his copies, and about whom very little is known, apart from the fact that he was somehow related to the printing process of these works, as some official documents from the Royal Censorship Council [Real Mesa Censória] attest. Each volume contains five or six texts, mixing genres (comedy, tragedy, drama, farce, etc.) and without reflecting any set of pre-established criteria.

The majority is in Portuguese (some are bilingual, i.e., also in Italian), and some of the authors represented are Carlo Goldoni, Diderot, Edward Young, Pedro Calderón de la Barca, Salomon Gessner and Voltaire.

I have been studying this collection since 2009, with a research grant from the Foundation for Science and Technology. In concrete, this means that I have been gathering further information on the plays, authors, theatrical events, actors, publishers, and booksellers, trying to complete the puzzle of the Portuguese theatrical mainstream of the second half of the eighteenth-century. For some years now, I have been working in archives and libraries, and I have also been reading many plays, mostly on my own. Based on the collected information, I write and present papers here and there. All this is my daily routine, my everyday research work and environment (Figure 2).



**Figure 2: my daily routine, a space inhabited by eighteenth-century manuscripts**

Nevertheless, I came to a point where I could not stop myself from thinking how I could involve other people in my work, in particular what should I do if they were to make a sense of their own of my daily

manuscript plays. At the same time, and beyond the personal drive, I wanted the dissemination of my research on eighteenth-century theatre to take part in the ongoing dialogue between performance and the archive, following the work of Schneider, Kobialka, Jackson and Kidd, and Borggreen and Gade, namely by bringing into question the dynamics between cultural memory, embodiment, identity and the reinterpretation of the archive (Derrida 55).

So, I turned to performance, or something that we could call, with some sense of humour, “manuscript performance.” In this context, manuscripts, as archive representatives, accounted for the present accessibility of the historical experience. With this, I was both trying to fulfill the promise of future that the archive should embrace (Derrida 127) and to give a satisfactory response to the challenge posed by Clarke:

Why not re-perform art history, as well as rewriting it through art history? What about an embodied approach to historiography, experiential ways of understanding and remembering performance? How can we understand, intervene and get mixed up in art history by doing it physically, as well as researching and writing about it? (370).

## **2. A Narrative Structure**

As I wanted to string together personal experience and sense-making, I adopted Bruner’s conceptualisation of narrative accounts:

Narrative accounts must have at least two characteristics. They should center upon people and their intentional states: their

desires, beliefs, and so on; and they should focus on how these intentional states led to certain kinds of activities. Such an account should also be or appear to be order preserving, in the sense of preserving or appearing to preserve sequence—the sequential properties of which life itself consists or is supposed to consist. (70)

This perspective helped me to find a sequence of actions drawing on the body as its main constitutive element. As I tested the limits of my capacity to act within the manuscripts' realm, I tried to transform my own way of looking at those research artifacts.

In this case, narrative is to be understood as a strategy to go from dealing with raw material, i.e. manuscripts, to performing with and through it. Thus this phase encompassed a personal narrative construction around possibilities of relationship with manuscripts, one that expresses the conflict between experience and identity (Langellier 125). Without using speech, I wanted to tell the story of someone who chose to be surrounded by manuscripts on a daily basis, reading and studying them, and who, at a certain point, felt compelled to communicate the meaning(s) of that kind of life to other people.

Of course, I was also relying on the concept of cultural heritage for this. These manuscripts are part of the Portuguese drama heritage, and consequently could be presented as relevant to the audience. In other words, to build up a narrative that could structure my performance, I mainly took up my knowledge of the manuscripts and their own condition as cultural icons of a common past. Insofar as I believed in the use of the visual impact of manuscripts as unmistakable references to the past, my

narrative and subsequent performance also implied the assumption of “culture confirming” (Bruner 71).

Therefore, a story based on my desire to communicate through manuscripts mediated my bodily interaction with them during the performance, and also my relationship with the other performer. My motivation was to tell a narrative of solitude among historical manuscripts. The closeness to manuscripts, and the resulting solitude, was to be conveyed through “the taking place” (Kobialka 7) of the event of the performance, also inscribed in the dramatic nature of the manuscripts. In this case, the archive was not displayed as national legacy, but as a set of personal artifacts and a central element in terms of individual everyday life. The alleged orthodoxy of the archive was converted into a first person communicative imperative. I was not committed to conveying the meaning and sense of manuscripts as heritage instead my effort was to justify the personal meaning they are prone to acquire under certain circumstances.

The performance explored the tension between the stability and orthodoxy of the archive, understood as collective memory, and the gestures, movements and actions that derive from a subjective conviviality. During the performance, I was not reading manuscripts, talking about them, or accounting for their historical relevance, but really living with them. So, I was not receiving, or interpreting heritage, but doing it (Smith 69). I was moving around them, and with them. In fact, I carried them around with me, using them to communicate my daily life to the other performer, who would react according to her own interpretation of the live events that were always meant to include her. However, the initial stimulus was on me to the extent that, by moving towards

manuscripts, I provoked a response from the Other. In this context, narrative/ story-making was a necessary strategy to pass from isolated gestures and movements to a progressive composition of manuscript interactions with a climax and an end that, at the same time, aimed to trigger communicative encounters, both with the other performer and the audience.

### 3. Manuscript Performance

On December 20, 2013, I premiered “Manuscript Play” at Galeria da Boavista, in Lisbon. It was an event organized by DEMIMONDE, a group of performance practitioners from different backgrounds. The setting was rather unpretentious, with a table, a few chairs and a pillar ‘supporting’ manuscripts (Figure 3). Mostly, I wanted the audience to become interested in my research work, and, in particular, I wanted them to be willing to “try out” the manuscripts I have embraced for some years now.



Figure 3: the setting for a “manuscript performance”, Galeria da Boavista, courtesy of Freya Group.

I started the performance with a short presentation of myself and my research work (Figure 4), underlying the circumstance that we, I and the audience, shared a social order of production and consumption where my work was expected to consist in the reading of eighteenth-century drama manuscripts. This was the general background intended to contextualise what followed.



**Figure 4: a first moment of engagement with the audience, presenting myself, Galeria da Boavista, courtesy of Freya Group.**

In order to achieve that, I decided to interact with the manuscripts through physical actions: I carried them around, laid my upper body on them, sheltered behind them escaping from exposing too much of myself (Figure 5), pushed them through... all my movements were driven by and towards them.





**Figure 5: looking for a shelter or maybe a gentle disguise, Galeria da Boavista, courtesy of Freya Group.**

On the one hand, I wanted to experience the collection in a renewed fashion that did not entail reading, analysing, studying, but rather expressed closeness and a sense of belonging. On the other hand, my goal was to defy manuscript conceptualisation as a steady and solemn object of knowledge, an icon of the immutable past, and rather present it as “performance remains” (Schneider 100) in its own right.

I also made the manuscripts move as much as I could so as to transform them into a symbol of mobility and rapid change (Figure 6). Nevertheless, they were always close to me as if complementing my body on the move. In this way, they no longer pertained to the silent, distant and ambiguous past, or either merely to my personal world, but were by then a part of the globalised world in which we all live. By this time, the boundaries between past, present, and future, and the borders separating

identities were flattened by means of both a redefinition of space and place, and a relocation of heritage. Framed by a subjective perspective, manuscripts were used to reach the Other, a complete stranger, with whom I shared a space for engagement and a place of encounter. Heritage was the bound, the missing link.



**Figure 6: carrying the manuscript load around, across imaginary borders, Galeria da Boavista, courtesy of Freya Group.**

I imagined a narrative, where the manuscripts were the threshold to another level of reality, one in which my personal history would become a matter of common ground, taking in consideration that “The canonical and the possible are forever in dialectal tension with each other” (Bruner 13-14). I was then able to interact with the manuscripts in such a way as to call the attention of the Other.

I needed someone to notice what I was doing, and how special and unique that could be. I succeeded insofar as the Other was trying to follow me, to get where I was heading, to give the right response to what I was demanding. At a certain point, we were even able to engage together in a kind of sculpture using manuscripts and chairs, rediscovering uses and figures, in an attempt to challenge the audience's perception (Figure 7). At this moment, my interaction with the Other had an object counterpart, as if resulting in a consequent edification, another possible remain of our encounter.

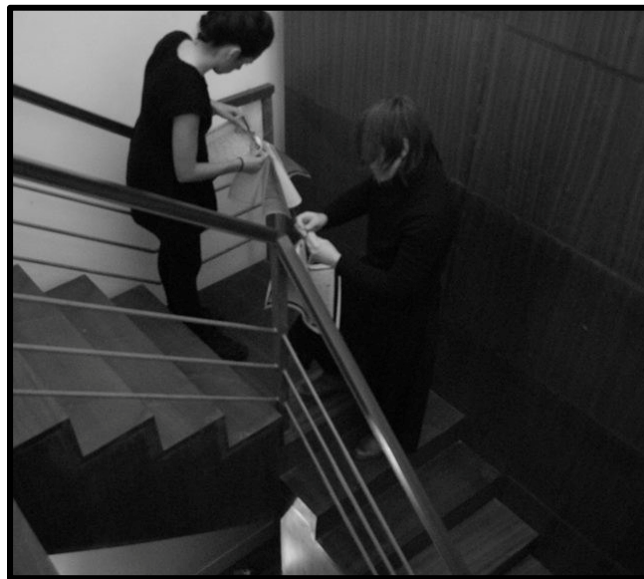


**Figure 7: tying manuscripts to chairs as if tying manuscripts to people, Galeria da Boavista, courtesy of Freya Group.**

However, as the performance goes on disclosing the centrality of manuscripts to interpersonal communication, the audience cannot avoid noticing the hesitation and awkwardness on the part of the other performer, as if moving into a world where almost everything was out of place. Nevertheless, I was able to create a new landscape, full of physical

engagement with something that has a long tradition of being steady, unshakable and immutable. For better or worse, the Other never gave up, always trying to keep track of what was going on, and hopefully also finding a way of making sense of all that historical reading material right on the move.

In the end, I was again on my own, apart from the rest of the world, with a manuscript border separating me from everything else (Figures 8 and 9). I was again at rest and alone, returned from an encounter mediated by manuscripts. In fact, they had given way to a journey that took me and the Other to further destinations, places where everything, the archive in particular, was to be rethought and reinvented. In that no-named land, there was no routine, and so the old me had vanished into a black hole of no turning back. Accordingly, performance had craved a new level of identity.



**Figure 8: the manuscripts settle the final border, Galeria da Boavista, courtesy of Freya Group.**



**Figure 9: “manuscript isolation”, again on my own, Galeria da Boavista, courtesy of Freya Group.**

Indeed that was quite a busy day for me, full of preparations and settlements, and for once I felt my manuscripts with my body. Furthermore, it felt good being able to use them in a different fashion to communicate. For once, I was not disseminating research ideas, achievements or projects. Instead I was expressing my inner feelings towards how my days became shorter, those same days that inspired me to seek improved approaches to what life has also turned out to be.

I do not always want to seat and be seated, reading or foregrounding some daring research proposal, sometimes I just need to do the opposite, as if stretching myself enough to reach the other side of the opaque mirror. I was an historian moving through and with the archive (Kobialka 9), displacing the boundaries between past, present and future: “Literally performing the archive here attests not only to a will to push the

boundaries, but to a more fundamental understanding of the archive as a medium and an organism rather than a stable repository” (Borggreen and Gade 22).

#### **4. Final Remarks**

From here, I would like to take the discussion about the relationship between historical remains and performance art further, namely how can historical groundbreaking information be effectively disseminated by performance, making way on its own terms for a new approach to it, and thereby connecting the past to the present, and the present to the future. The potential of this mutual influence has also led me into digital experiences (online editions, video-performance, etc.) that aim to bring a new insight into historical scholarship, pinning down a set of new media processes and objects (Fickers 26).

As a response to Clarke, and also endorsing the debate about the contrast between the ephemeral nature of performance and the constancy of the archive, I argue that theatre history needs the challenge of today’s performance art, in order to come out of academia and foster broader audiences’ expectations and interests. It is the complementary endeavour that can be found in the dynamics between performance and the archive that manages to recreate both at one time: as much as performance can play a role in communal forms of assessing heritage and legacy, the archive can gain the insight of everyday life achievements. In sum, there is a brand new visual world of opportunities for archive display, and I wish to be a part of it by imagining elaborated narrative, so I can take me further ahead of myself: “To what degree is one impelled, once one

launches on a genre account of oneself, to stay with it forevermore?" (Bruner 68)

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