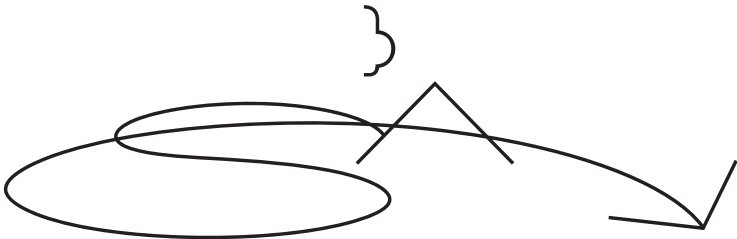


{ Marijn de Langen



TURNING, TURNING: THEORY IS
MOVEMENT

'I have always been fascinated by that borderland where theory and practice meet,' wrote theatre critic and dramaturge Marianne van Kerkhoven in 1999, 'because I have an abiding sense that the two are organically bound up with one another. But at a certain point in the history of human enterprise their connection was lost, and it is a central imperative of this moment that we rediscover the unity of theory and practice.'

1 Contemporary theatre theory is increasingly being devoted to the study of the union of theory and practice, and it is now commonly accepted that theatre is perfused with what has come to be known as 'embodied knowledge', a term drawn from the phenomenology of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he expounds on the 'knowledge in the hands', using the act of typing to illustrate his proposition. His focus here is on a specific form of knowledge that is never made explicit or consciously articulated. Its seat is the body. The body knows how to act.

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Embodied knowledge likewise plays a crucial role in the practice of those who make and perform theatre. Performance scholar and art practitioner Ben Spatz's 2015 book *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research* is exemplary of recent efforts to place the embodied knowledge of the performer at centre stage in theatre theory. Spatz advocates the concept of technique as being an 'epistemic activity, an activity that engages with, or produces knowledge'. The published work of performance scholar and practitioner Philip Zarilli also offers a thorough examination of the embodied knowledge of the performer. Zarilli has created an abundant body of practice-based theory through his explorations of subjects such as respiration and energy in the context of various performance codes. Spatz and Zarilli can be viewed in the context of growing interdisciplinary interest in embodied practice, encapsulated as the 'practice turn' in contemporary theory. Despite this burgeoning and broadening awareness of the unity of theory and practice, it has encountered multiple obstacles to its assimilation into Dutch theatre teaching and theory, and it is regrettable that theory development rarely draws on knowledge generated through contemporary theatre practice. Fortunately, a number of excellent recent projects – primarily taking place in the area of dance – have persuasively resisted this tendency. They

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include *Inside Movement Knowledge* by Emio Greco|PC and *A Choreographer's Score* by Anna Teresa de Keersmaeker and Bojana Cvejic. There is still much terrain to be won, however. Why is it that Dutch theatre makers and performers so rarely reflect on their own embodied knowledge? Where is their body of theory to be found? And, most importantly of all, why are theatre educational programmes not striving to play a role in collating this knowledge?

The absence of theory development emanating from (and pertaining to) theatre practice in the Netherlands is bound up with the place occupied by theory in the established structures of theatre education. Bachelor's programmes in particular continue to propagate the notion of a theory-practice dualism, ensuring that theory is 'other' to practice rather than integral to it, and that although this 'other' has a part to play, it should not be taken overly seriously. It seems, then, that the old hierarchy – in which theory is considered subordinate to practice – still prevails. Although Descartes's notion of a mind-body dichotomy is now broadly viewed as outdated, it is apparently still haunting daily practice in theatre educational programmes. One of the ways in which this is expressed is in the fundamental structures through which theatre education is conducted in the Netherlands. Here, a strict division is maintained between theory and practice: practical subjects are main subjects and theory is a subsidiary subject. Practical subjects are taught out on the performance floor; theoretical subjects, around a table. Practical subjects are taught by a practitioner; theoretical subjects by an academic. To clarify: I am not campaigning for some kind of 'justice' for theory, or the academisation of educational programmes in the arts. I am not urging theatre academies to replicate universities where students learn to engage at a high level with philosophy and other humanities subjects. I, too, believe that creation and performance are indeed the lifeblood of any theatre-making programme. I do take the position, however, that at the heart of creation and performance lies a great deal of theory, and also that creating and performing generates a large quantity of theory. Theory is inseparably bound up with practice.

How can we take Van Kerkhoven's question seriously? How can we 'rediscover the unity of theory and practice',

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and how can that unity be introduced into the consideration of theatre education? My contribution to this discussion is an attempt to formulate a number of proposals by drawing on my own fifteen-year teaching practice in higher theatre and arts education in the Netherlands. In particular, I recommend that two subjects be given the attention I believe they deserve: theory inherent to creation processes and theory inherent to performance practice.

ZOOM IN THEN ZOOM OUT

Dutch theatre theory classes are, almost by definition, the places where students zoom out from their everyday creation processes. The space in which they find themselves is different, and the format is different; they are 'doing something different' for a while. What I am suggesting is that theatre theory can also incorporate the act of zooming in. Theatre director Boukje Schweigman's staging for *Spiegels* (Mirrors) comprises a huge wooden box containing a diorama. The audience sits on benches around the box, with narrow openings affording each spectator a view into its interior. Skilful lighting means no walls can be seen; the dark space is apparently infinite. Weightless bodies loom up out of the darkness like something from a dream. Then, suddenly, they are gone. Were you watching a real body, or was it in fact a reflection? You cannot be sure what you are seeing. Then suddenly all becomes clear; and then, with a mild sense of shock, you realise that you are again uncertain. This is what I mean by zooming in: look, look more closely, look again; revise your expectations; overturn your presumptions. I believe that theatre theory could constitute a form of zooming in on creation and performance practices and the forms of embodied knowledge that play their part within these practices.

Theatre *is* knowledge: knowledge about performing, about crafting, about breath, about the audience, about the physical self in the space around it, about being present, about not-acting, about articulation, about opposing forces, about making space visible, about the visual, about composition, about anarchy, about being on-site, about moving, about looking at, about being looked at, about the invitation to be looked at, about human behaviour – the list goes on and on. Why is it that theory classes so rarely

engage with this kind of knowledge? Why is theatre theory (again, primarily at the bachelor level) so often contextualised as theatre history, one which generally recapitulates a white, Western and male historical narrative? (A proposal for teachers of theatre theory: could we, as an experiment, devote theatre history classes for a single year exclusively to the subject of women? What would happen?) And why is theory generally viewed as the exclusive domain of theory teachers? All teachers of theatre are continually developing theory through embodied knowledge. Let us share that knowledge. With what knowledge and experience are we working? What key concepts are justified in having a place in the curriculum, and with which narrative should the students be confronted? What forms of research should be placed in that narrative? With which questions should we, as a programme, engage? Theory is not solely the responsibility of the individual theory teacher; it is the responsibility of the programme as a whole. Theatre teaching programmes would surely be enriched if they had the courage to make the knowledge they work with explicit, and to also question and further develop that knowledge.

Theory classes could be opportunities within teaching practice for reflecting on approaches to performance and creation, and for looking into the ways this 'internal' knowledge has a bearing on histories, current affairs, politics and society. What am I doing on stage? What do we want to make, and what knowledge will we be tapping in the process? How does that relate to what others are doing? With what histories and ways of thinking does it resonate? Start from the practice itself and from the students themselves: from their observations, their inspirations and their drives. Zoom in, then zoom out.

Without losing the positive power of what is good about them, perhaps the very concept of separate theory classes should be replaced by something else – a think tank, perhaps, a research lab, a place for research within one's own department where ideally not only students but also teachers could conduct research? What form might such a replacement take? It should in any case not be a room containing just tables, chairs and a video projector.

LOOKING FOR WORDS

13 In an effort to raise for discussion some aspects of embodied knowledge in theatre practices in the Dutch context, in 2014 and 2015 I organised a series of meetings titled 'There is a Discussion', for which I asked a variety of theatre creators and performers working in the Netherlands to write a self-portrait focusing on transferable knowledge and experience. Just what was it that constituted their expertise – their know-how and their 'know-what'? Many of those involved found it valuable to re-examine their own work, method, and creative and thought processes, and to draw some preliminary conclusions about them. One of the contributors, Floor van Leeuwen, wrote the following:

It's all about how I would like the contact between myself and my audience to be. I want that exchange to take place in an open and honest way. The doors close and the time that people have paid money to be able to keep their mouths shut is valuable. It's a deal that sparks fear in me, but also empowers me if I manage to control the eyes. ... I've noticed that I have the power to manipulate them. Like, for example, if I have a stick in my hands and I can feel that they'll laugh if I drop it, I hold on tight to the stick.

14 Van Leeuwen's quote is a fine illustration of the attempt to describe something in words – an essential force in developing theory. Can you create – within an institute of arts education – the time and space that is needed to look for words, or for other, non-linguistic means through which knowledge can be shared? One must create the time and the space to dwell on certain matters. The meetings demonstrated that it is precisely through this process of searching, formulating and reformulating that insights are created. I endeavour to let my students experience the fact that it is those moments when one is least certain that are often the motor for something new. A thought is a thought is a thought; is it possible to zoom in any further? If you do so, where do you find yourself?

CREATING THEORY

It is hugely important to instil in student theatre makers the awareness that they are, in a certain sense, the owners, the *creators*, of theory. This is precisely the area where current teaching and development of theory in Dutch theatre education can sometimes fall short, because it does not take creation as its departure point. The assumption is that theory is something that must be taught. I, on the other hand, believe that theatre training should involve the seeking out, the study and the creation of theory. How can we best develop our practice? Which creative research is at the core of our practice? Which questions and desires are dominant in it, and how are they embedded in contemporary society? I believe that we should approach theory as something we can and must create within the realm of arts education. Art students respond very differently if we appeal to their artistic being rather than handing them a collection of articles and treating them like youthful academics. It makes them more creative and more free.

Van Kerkhoven describes theory as a process of 'awakening', vividly detailing how this heightening of understanding is an ongoing component of the theatre maker's creative processes: the awareness gives rise to new practices, which in turn question the awareness, and so on. This is a thoroughly sound appraisal of the process. It leads to the perception of theory as a link in a process rather than a distinct and delimited activity. I interpret this as meaning that theory is in no sense about taking distance. On the contrary: it is all about getting up closer. What is happening here, precisely? What is becoming manifest? What new thoughts does this evoke?

Viewed in this way, we might perhaps come to conceive of theory as a movement, an aspect of doing in which it is essential to refine, introduce nuance, take distance and zoom in. Like a cabinet maker or sculptor, one must be able to look at the work and know what changes must be made to hone it. Here, thinking is integral to making – and vice versa. Perhaps it is in this practice of making that we shall find a new basis for thinking about theory in theatre education programmes. What is the practice, how does the practice think, what sort of thoughts does the practice make possible and how can you deploy that thinking as an

injection into the practice itself?

15 Might this not encourage ways of thinking that are hermetically sealed off from the outside world, that are mere navel gazing? No, because, as Marianne van Kerkhoven so cogently puts it, 'The theatre is to be found in the city, and the city is to be found in the world, and the walls are of skin.' Theatre stems from our life, the way we live, the questions we have about it, from what is going on around us. Knowledge about theatre is intrinsically connected with innumerable other realms of knowledge, and the trails they leave behind them must be followed. Just as the dichotomy of theory and practice is a false one, so is the dichotomy of the internal and the external. Theatre is about the world.

THE PLAY: A DYNAMIC FRAMEWORK

16 In addition to giving a central place to embodied knowledge, we might also incorporate consideration of the embodied knowledge of the play or performance itself. Theory is often seen as being *about* a particular phenomenon. Art theory, for example, is about art. But the artwork itself could also be viewed as a dynamic form of theory, as a means of understanding something. Cynthia Freeland put it this way in 2003: 'A theory is more than a definition; it is a framework that supplies an orderly explanation of observed phenomena. A theory should help things make sense.' Theatrical performances can have an extremely confusing, alienating and undermining effect. Often, they appear to give nothing like an 'orderly explanation of observed phenomena'. They can seem cryptic and obscure. Nevertheless, staged works provide us with insights into our selves and our lives. They make us experience and they make us feel; they spark questions and thoughts; they give us goose bumps. In a certain sense, then, the live performance of a play does indeed serve as a 'framework' – a dynamic framework – within which we can attempt to understand our lives.

The practice of performing a theatrical work spawns loads of implicit theory on matters of thinking, emotions and suggestions about how best to understand or to question. How does a performance function as theory, as a phenomenon that alerts our thoughts? And is this something that can be talked about with students? Might it be possible to embed

the teaching of theory in theatrical works and their potential as sources of theory? This would entail shifting our context from a canon of theoretical texts to a canon of theatrical works – of plays that incite thought, make a statement and convey knowledge. In theatre, these processes are emphatically bound up with a physical experience.

Take, for example, *Blaas* by Boukje Schweigman, in which the audience spends an hour watching a large bag of air moving in wondrous ways through the space. What ways of thinking does this piece make possible; what thoughts does it give rise to in us? First of all, there is the astonishment at the fact that no matter how abstract the form, we will always identify human characteristics in it. The bag of air smiles, dances, protects a smaller bag of air. We see humanity, through the medium of a bag. For anyone receptive to it, a theatrical work such as this sparks questions about anthropocentrism. Proposal: for an entire year let us take theatrical works as the basis for our theory classes. Let us explore the ways in which each work articulates itself, and find out the discourse in which it is participating. What new thoughts does it evoke, or enable? Is this something that can be put into words?

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TURNING, TURNING

The final matter I wish to raise for consideration concerns the oft-uttered line that 'bridges must be built between theory and practice'. Given that theory and practice are not each other's polar opposites, I am not – or am no longer – endeavouring to build bridges between them. Any attempt to build bridges between practice and theory in fact serves only to perpetuate the dualism. The bridge is a connection, but is also creates a permanent state of distance. From one side to the other. Across the bridge. You can always use the bridge to run back to your own, safe territory.

The image of the bridge builder is related to another that I have grown to distrust. I often hear theatre students saying something like, 'I am looking for a way to translate this idea to the stage.' This is another bridging concept generated by the theory-practice dichotomy. It implies that a form of instrumentalism is at work – as if the thought, the theory, is something that must be fashioned, processed and

transformed, as if the ability to accomplish this constitutes the art of theatre making. Translate to the stage. In my opinion, students should not be taught to translate. Making theatre is not about translating, it is about creating. It is about using everything available: the body, language, music, materials, thoughts, philosophy and so on. To impose a hierarchy upon them would be presumptuous.

18 Theory and practice are not opposites. Rather, they are both fully integrated and organic components in the revolving artistic process of creation. Sarah Vanhee's remarkable 2011 piece *Turning, Turning: A Choreography of Thoughts* has something of a scientific investigation about it. The audience sees each of the three cast members attempting to reveal to the spectator (within the limited amount of time allotted to them) the workings of their own mind by giving immediate and uncensored verbal expression to each and every thought that comes to them. And the thoughts do indeed tumble out of them, jostling for attention. It is a courageous and intriguing initiative, one that sprang out of Vanhee's own research into the ability to 'speak ahead of one's thoughts'. Can you speak before you think, and, if you can, what does that allow to happen? Vanhee has explicitly interpreted thought and the process of thinking as a movement.

19 A major inspiration for Vanhee in this process was the philosopher Maurice Blanchot, particularly his book *The Infinite Conversation*, in which he writes:

I remember that the verb 'to find' [*trouver*] does not first of all mean 'to find', in the sense of a practical or scientific result. To find is to turn, to take a turn about, to go around. To come up with a song is to turn a melodic movement, to make it turn. No idea here of a goal, still less of a stopping. To find is almost exactly the same word as 'to seek' [*chercher*], which means to 'take a turn around'. – To find, to search for, to turn, to go around: yes, these are words indicating movement, but always circular. It is as though the sense of searching or research lay in its necessary inflection in turning.

This is a fecund image that Blanchot has brought to life here, one that triggers another way of thinking about the

'QUESTIONS ARE POSED AND INVESTIGATED THROUGH THE MOVING BODY' → 100

organic interconnectedness of theory and practice. What is an artistic creative process? Turning, turning: it begins at some point, perhaps with an observation or a thought, something you write down, being onstage, a technique, a knowledge, zoom out for a moment, zoom in, play, watch. It would be redundant hair-splitting to introduce a distinction here between the theoretical and the practical component of this process. They are not opposites. It is all about continual exchange, continual motion of turning, thinking and making; turning, turning. The theatre maker chisels and scrapes away in a circular motion, always returning to a particular point, but progressing ever deeper into the material.

Let arts education place practice – and theory along with it – at the centre stage. Let us offer space to embodied knowledge and the knowledge born of creating; let us identify that knowledge, and allow ourselves to be led by it, because theory is inextricably bound up with practice – with life.

{ Marijn de Langen

↪ Performance researcher and lecturer in the Theory and Research Honours Programme, ArtEZ University of the Arts (Arnhem, Enschede, Zwolle), Academy of Theatre and Dance (Amsterdam University of the Arts), Theatre Studies Department at Utrecht University. }

(1) Marianne Van Kerkhoven, 'Van de kleine en de grote dramaturgie', in: *Van het kijken en van het schrijven: teksten over theater*, Leuven: Van Halewyck, 2002, pp. 197-203.

(2) This quote from the 1962 English translation of the French work first published in 1945.

(3) Ben Spatz, *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research*, London: Routledge, 2015.

(4) Philip Zarilli, *When the Body Becomes All Eyes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998; *Acting Reconsidered*, London: Routledge, 2002; *Psychophysical Acting: An Intercultural Approach After Stanislavski*, London: Routledge, 2008.

(5) Theodore Schatzki et al. *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, London: Routledge, 2001.

(6) See www.insidemovement-knowledge.net.

(7) See www.rosas.be.

(8) This publication is primarily concerned with the teaching of theory in Fine Art and Performing Arts

master's programmes. Particularly on matters impacting on the approach to theory, it is essential that we turn our attention to bachelor's programmes, which form the very foundation for master's programmes. There is room for improvement in the coupling of these theatre educational programmes in the Dutch context. To a substantial extent, the discrepancy lies in their approaches to theory.

(9) 'My mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely and truly distinct from my body, and may exist without it.' Descartes, 'Sixth Meditation' (1647).

(10) I have been teaching at the Theaterschool, Amsterdam University of the Arts, since 2001, and at the Honours Programme for Theory and Research at ArtEZ University of the Arts since 2012. I have been a guest lecturer at the Theatre Studies Department of Utrecht University since 2009.

(11) See www.schweigman.org.

(12) A related question: how can we claim to be striving for a varied

multicultural and feminist theatre if we are not putting this intention into practice in our consideration of the narrative we use to educate?

(13) The title is taken from a conceptual artwork by Ian Wilson. In 1968, Wilson hung a note in a museum that read: 'There was a discussion in New York City, in 1968, on the idea of Time'. See also my publication *Het is, It is: negen gesprekken met theatermakers*, www.ahk.nl/theater-school/lectoraat/publicaties/het-is-it-is/.

(14) Ritsaert ten Cate, a key figure in the twentieth-century history of Dutch theatre, collected a number of

his texts in a volume with the title *Man Looking for Words*. The power of that gesture will always remain with me.

(15) Marianne van Kerkhoven, 'State of the Union: Theaterfestival 1994 (het jaar van de genocide in Rwanda)', in: *Van het kijken en van het schrijven: teksten over theater*, Antwerp: Van Halewyck, 2002, p. 137.

(16) Cynthia Freeland, *Art Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

(17) See www.schweigman.org.

(18) See www.sarahvanhee.com.

(19) Maurice Blanchot, 'Speaking is not seeing', in the 1992 English translation of *L'Entretien infini*, 1969.

THEORY ↔ ARTS ↔ PRACTICES