

# TOWARDS A PRACTICE-AS-RESEARCH MODEL OF *PERFORMISE*: TAKING SCENOGRAPHY FOR *ANTIGONE THE UNBRAVE* (2019) AS A CASE STUDY

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## **Introduction**

This article conducts a practice-based investigation, termed Practice as Research (PaR) (Nelson, 2013) to explore the concept of '*performise*' as developed by Pavis (2012, 2013, p.47). Pavis (2012, 2013) defines *performise* as a convergence of performance art and *mise en scène*, which refers to directors' audio-visual representations of texts, to point out multidisciplinary, potential ways of creating performance in contemporary theatre. The concept highlights the phenomenon of performative shift and echoes various investigations (e.g. Fischer-Lichte, 2004, 2008; Lehmann, 1995, 2006; Pitches & Popat, 2011) over the past two decades that enquire how performances are produced, rather than what performances mean. That is to say, conventional understanding of stage as static décor relevant to semiology is being replaced in contemporary theatre by a new phenomenological approach in which performers and spectators dynamically interact.

Nelson's (2013, p.40) PaR methodology foregrounds the entangled process of 'doing-thinking'. In my opinion, PaR can be added as an additional layer onto *performise*. Pavis (2010, p.331) similarly suggests an 'energetic criticism of semiology' that imagines theatre as a circuit of flowing energetics through which

space no longer functions as collections of the signified in a stable state, namely, representing the text into certain pre-defined signifiers to fill up the stage. Rather, space can be conceived 'as an energetic vector connected to its users, to their spatiotemporal coordinates, presence, energy, movements, and route through it' (ibid.). This is why I began employing PaR methodology during collaborative scenography and writing articles about the process. While the embodiment of *performise* can be seen as a kind of group-devised performance, the use of PaR enables the transformation of theatrical performances into a form of academic writing that does not exist within group-devised performance.

This article argues that for a scenographer to embody *performise*, it is necessary to employ PaR by combining scenographic practices with theatre and performance studies, particularly new dramaturgy. According to Trenscényi and Cochrane (2014), new dramaturgy is an evolving process of interweaving multidisciplinary performances and cultures to achieve unique aesthetics, unlike traditional dramaturgy which analyses and organises texts. Thus, new dramaturgy possesses an increasingly close relationship with scenography because the latter plays an important role in generating 'discursive space' (Collins & Nisbet, 2010, p.1) in the production of contemporary theatre. The association of the two fields transforms and broadens theatre-making into an organic network that intermeshes various areas of knowledge.

This article will first review the development of *mise en scène* and then explicate how *performise* improves upon notion of *mise en scène* and visual-spatial dramaturgy. The article will then introduce PaR methodology in the arts. Through the lens of PaR, I will discuss how *performise* differs from site-specificity and performance design to clarify the term *performise* in this article. I then present a case study based on scenography for *Antigone The Unbrave* (2019) in order to characterize conditions by which *performise* can be embodied. In conclusion, I summarize an approach towards a PaR model of *Performise* by re-verifying several factors uncovered in my scenographic works.

### **Definition of *Performise***

Before defining *performise*, it is necessary to trace the development of *mise en scène*. Pavis (2012, 2013, p.303) notes the term *mise en scène* originally stressed the first word *mise*, which refers to “putting” or “setting”. Historically, Western scenography featured backdrops, flats, and wings painted with indoor or outdoor scenes. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, physical props such as books, desks, carpets, and flowers were used onstage in accordance with the Naturalism movement which strove to create an illusion of reality using a variety of dramatic and theatrical strategies (Zhèng, 2016). Moreover, by the end of the 1960s, the emergence of semiology regarded *mise en scène* as the accumulation of signs and readable meanings (Pavis, 2012, 2013). Scenography served to reinforce stable structures of texts for directors in accordance with *mise en scène*. To this point, stage space was integrated into textual space. However, as Pavis (2012, 2013) suggests, after the appearance of performance art and poststructuralism since the 1970s, performance and *mise en scène* have become increasingly incompatible. This critical perspective by Pavis, in my opinion, is an opportunity to release the autonomy of scenography and split stage space from textual space.

Scenography is no longer thought of as a tool exclusive to directors to order *mise en scène*. *Performise* offers an alternative to relink text and stage so that ‘the text itself is also a performance’ (Pavis, 2012, 2013, p.305) in a form of performative negotiation between the text and the stage that changes theatre productions today. To clarify this understanding, Pavis (2012, 2013) combined the word *mise* with the French word *perf*, which means “to perform”, to create the new term *performise* that stresses the importance of performative action. I suggest that the flexible lexicon of *performise* can be conceived as building association to spectators’ reactions, not only to texts. This *performise* hybrid concept implies innovative ways of making theatre that improves upon the original notion of *mise en scène*.

Here, I must clarify the relation between the terms *performise* and visual-spatial dramaturgy. Holger Klein (2017) employs the term spatial dramaturgy

as an analytic method that compares architecture to dramaturgy in order to systematically examine the mutual relationship between users and built spaces. Similarly, Cathy Turner (2015) applies architecture as an approach to investigate dramaturgy in theatre practices to explore how built spaces can generate potential for theatre production. Aligned with these concepts is Dorita Hannah's work (2011) that uses the term event-space to expand the spatiotemporal possibilities of built space into an active role that performs its intrinsic nature.

The above-mentioned researches are pertinent to visual-spatial dramaturgy because they all reveal ways of converging space with action into the performance, whether banal or theatrical, that is produced. Such a visual-spatial dramaturgy can be regarded as seeking visual signs of architectural elements that already exist in empty space and wait to be organizationally composed as dynamic events. In contrast, *performise* does not begin with previously-established space for theatrical performance. Rather, space is gradually constituted as doing-thinking opportunities unfold during creation.

### **Practice as Research in the Arts**

This paper adopts a Practice as Research (PaR) approach (Nelson, 2013, pp.17-18) as a research project in which diverse modes of practice are a fundamental method of inquiry and are offered as evidence of research exploration. Instead of exclusively drawing on a theoretical investigation of arts, PaR holds that knowledge can be learnt by engaging in practices. Research into scenography can be enriched by adopting the processual approach of PaR which engages practice with theory. *PaR researchers 'do not merely "think" their way through or out of a problem, but rather they "practice" to a resolution'* (Nelson, 2013, p.19). Unlike other methodologies that focus on either theories or technics, PaR relies on practice to draw out potentialities and derive knowledge.

Furthermore, because the process constantly shifts between practice and theory, between thinking and doing, knowledge generated from PaR research is a form of *'fluid "knowing"'* (Nelson, 2013, p.37). The cyclic shift between thinking

and doing serves as a form of ‘resonance’, a term introduced by Nelson (2013), and makes PaR suitable for the study of scenography: on the one hand, it urges designers to be researchers in order to deepen the design concepts by absorbing multidisciplinary knowledge and writing papers; on the other hand, it impels designers to re-examine their understandings of academic theories during the creation of scenographic works.

In order to emphasize scenographic practice and research for performance along with PaR methodology, I deliberately use the term *performise* rather than “performance design” or “site-specificity” to describe my development of scenographic works. According to Sodja Zupanc Lotker (2015), performance design often occurs with site-specific performance with two major characteristics: staging diverse atypical spaces for theatrical performance; and shifting from organizing props to relations in the spaces. That is, designers are increasingly attentive to dynamic encounters between spectators and the sites in which they are located and less focused on serving texts to create an illusionistic world. Site-specific performance, as defined by Nick Kaye (2010), conceives locations as an essential part of performance events. Changing locations means creating different events.

Although the three terms all transcend the ordinary understanding of *mise en scène* in traditional theatre, unlike site-specificity, which selects particular locations that possess specific sociocultural contexts related to performances, *performise*, as realized through PaR, interrogates conventional theatres or sites that have no inherent, obvious characteristics related to the context. Thus, a PaR process is requisite to reveal the spatial and performative resonance between stage and text. The scenographers situate themselves *within* locations to shift between morphogenetic space for theatrical performance and various levels of reception.

### **Case Study: *Antigone The Unbrave* (2019)**

*Antigone The Unbrave* (2019) was adapted from the famous Greek tragedy

*Antigone*. The story recounts the death of Antigone, daughter of Oedipus, the exiled King of Thebes, who kills herself after the new King Creon forbids the burial of Antigone's brother Polynices who was killed in battle. Other deaths follow including Creon's son Haemon who is in love with Antigone and Haemon's mother. Although Creon learns of the gods' disapproval of his decree, news arrives too late to save the lives of his family.

The director of *Antigone The Unbrave* (2019) and I agreed the piece alluded to the crisis of democracy caused by neoliberalism and emerging right-wing nationalism in Taiwan. The increasing pressure was especially pertinent to the fifteenth Taiwan presidential election an event which crystallized attention across Taiwan on issues of nationality and independence. Given these concerns, the director and I decided to layer these latent sociocultural issues within *Antigone*. To achieve this, I apply Trenscényi's (2015, 2016) concept of new dramaturgy to highlight the potentials of reality shared by performers and spectators. The character Antigone denotes the people of Taiwan who lack power but believe in the value of liberty and are forced to fight for it. Thebes is represented by a giant corporation, the CEO of whom is Creon and the Thebian salariat class is the chorus.

To develop scenographic works that investigate the embodiment of *performise*, I have borrowed the creative process from the Creative Articulations Process (CAP), a PaR model established by Bacon and Midgelow (2014). CAP includes six facets. 'Opening' concentrates on one's body-mind to allow the emergence of the unknown and observe how it leads to the creation of a work. The second facet, 'Situating', emphasizes increasing awareness of one's situation and response. The third facet, 'Delving', involves reflection on the breadth of research issues. The fourth facet, 'Raising', attempts to explore other fields while enhancing mind-body awareness. The fifth facet, 'Anatomizing', undertakes experimental practice to examine feelings and imagination. In the final facet, 'Outwarding', as one becomes more engaged in the process and realizes new findings, it becomes possible to complete a creative work and share it with others. Each facet can be



Figure 1. Opening scene of *Antigone The Unbrave* (2019). The scenography moved wings to expose industrial materials of the theatre's interior such as wood and steel trusses, walls, marley, concrete floors, lights, and opened backdoor to bring in outdoor scenery. Scenography and photo attributed to the author

repeated during a PaR project to clarify and strengthen the linkages between practice and theory. Although the CAP model is based on PaR researchers' body awareness, I found that the six facets of CAP were clear guidelines for developing scenography for prior works including *Enactor* (2017), *I am a Normal Person* (2018), and my current work *Antigone The Unbrave* (2019).

The first facet 'Opening' involved reflecting on my own perceptions while the second facet 'Situating' led me to contemplate my position within the social structure of contemporary Taiwan. By engaging in this exercise, I found that a sense of floating permeates the main concept of the piece. By "floating", I mean that Antigone's long exile and return back to Thebes was an alterity comparable to the circumstances of people who experience a disconnect to their own society rooted in the oppressive financial inequity of the global wealth pyramid. Thus, the director and I decided to use the urban park as a constantly-relocating realm where people move between their jobs and daily life and struggle between

freedom and oppression.

My exploration then engaged the third and fourth facets of CAP, ‘Delving’ and ‘Raising’ respectively, in which I adopted Pavis’s (2013) concept of *performise* to further develop the piece’s dramaturgy. The director and I used children’s playground equipment such as seesaws and swings as metaphors that denote contentions of political and economic power. Guided by *performise*, I was focused on performance-led scenography, which transforms deployment of venue and props into performance, rather than trying to logically visualize the depicted scenes onstage.

Our collaboration continued with the processual facet of ‘Anatomizing’ discussed earlier in this article. The performance venue was chosen not for site-specific qualities that would help the performance, but because it was the only suitable venue that fit our production and performance schedule. Constrained by the lack of other choices, a *performise* approach allowed us to examine the specificities of the venue, its advantages and disadvantages, and merge them with the scenography. This process bolstered my position that *performise* is distinct from site-specificity. The venue was originally built during the Japanese colonial period as a warehouse B9 at Pier 2 for storing sugar (Newsletter of Taiwan Sugar Corporation, 2013). In 2002, the Taiwanese government rejuvenated the abandoned warehouse area as The Pier-2 Art Center in which warehouse B9 was partially refurbished as an experimental theatre. The Pier-2 Art Center has become a famous tourist spot that helps drive economic development in Kaohsiung City. The rebuilding of warehouse B9 embodies the tourism-based Art Centre’s contradictory relationship with its neighbourhood. Visible black steel trusses, which represent the new economic power of the creative art industry, vertically and horizontally strengthen the building’s original wood structure, which refers to the building’s original neighbourhood and concomitant poverty. The warehouse manifests a sense of provisional juxtaposition in space and time. The director agreed with my suggestion that the contradiction could be expressed by exposing the theatre’s black internal walls and steel trusses and removing





Figure 2. Opening scene of *Antigone The Unbrave* (2019). The scenography moved wings to expose industrial materials of the theatre's interior such as wood and steel trusses, walls, marley, concrete floors, lights, and opened backdoor to bring in outdoor scenery. Scenography and photo attributed to the author

stage wings to transform these industrial materials into the modern crowded cityscape of Kaohsiung at night. To further the visual metaphor, I used the same type of trusses to build a horizontal rectangular frame on the ground that connected with the theatre's black trusses beside the walls to create an extending yet contrary sense from/between the past to/and the present. Furthermore, the rectangular truss frame was uncovered to allow the reflection of colourful lights hidden behind the trusses to shine through. On top of the truss frame, flat wooden boards were attached to serve as passages or platforms for performers. This rectangular shape clarified the director's idea to have a circular running route for performers both inside and outside the theatre. The performers' running upon the flat wooden boards made loud rhythmic sounds which shook borders between the theatrical and the ordinary. Considering the on-stage and off-stage as a whole, I intentionally destroyed the backdrop, which was cut into long rectangular pieces, to expose tourists passing by outside the theatre and to

transform the backdrop into part of a live performance. The backdrop no longer functioned as a normal stage curtain but rather as the fragmented sky, doors, and tunnels that indicate performative space.

The director and I wanted to further emphasize the performative interface between invisibility and visibility in the piece but were at a loss as to how to achieve this. After some contemplation on the sixth CAP facet of ‘Outwarding’, I realized that the choice of colour was key to completing the scenographic work. I noticed that the backstage concrete floor was light grey and could visually connect to the wooden boards and the backdrop if they were in a similar colour. Moreover, the light grey was also the original colour of the trusses. The grey colour tones would link the various material pieces as a unity. Following the same logic, in order to make the entire floor inside and beneath the rectangular truss frame resemble the black auditorium platform, I covered the floor with black marley to extend the stage into the auditorium. In addition, I used navy blue to colour a pool on upstage right that was designed for Antigone’s death and afterward, related the water in the pool to tears of Antigone’s ancestresses which were accumulating there.

With the three colours – black, grey, and navy blue, the materiality of the walls, floors, trusses, and backdrop raised a question: Did the darkness of the walls, trusses, auditorium, and backstage help “perform”? In this respect, scenographic practice and research embody *performise* in the venue and contribute to the creation of liminal spaces in which old and new, performing and spectating, and inside and outside, converge together. During the after-performance talk, several spectators commented they felt that the stage transformed into a playground, and they found themselves encompassed and stimulated by the scenography to contemplate the relationships among theatre, props, and performance. In addition, spectator feedback also noted that the specifically designed backdrop and truss frames helped extend the performance space to the outside world and engendered a sense of floating in diverse space-time structures.



Figure 3. Scene 4 of *Antigone The Unbrave* (2019). The scene design, where Antigone walked forwards on a narrow bridge from the backstage to the pool, was synthesized through study of Greek mythology, contemporary architecture, and lighting. Scenography and photo attributed to the author

### **Summary: Towards a Practice-as-Research Model of *Performise***

In development for almost three years now, my Practice-as-Research model of *Performise* can be summarized as a doing-thinking process that involves group-devised creation. It offers theatrical performances more possibilities and theories to transform the restrictions of conventional theatres into the spatiotemporal dramaturgy of the spectators' mixed realities. This is something that performance design does not provide.

In *Antigone* (2019), I have identified four factors to embody *performise*. Firstly, opening the stage to the auditorium generated proximity and involvement and was realized through the connection of the rectangular truss frame with the auditorium platform. Secondly, concepts such as decenterization, blurred borders, and overlapped yet recognizable realms between performers and spectators were achieved through multi-layered frames: the rectangular truss frame merged with the backstage while overlapping the stage floor with the auditorium, the opened

backdoor of the theatre transformed spectators and tourists into performers, the sliced backdrop hanging alongside the theatre's original trusses on upper stage transformed the partially exposed backstage into a shifting space, and the pool interwove personal and national histories. Thirdly, focusing on efficacy of performance elements encouraged spectators to actively provide responses and was embodied through augmenting the steel trusses, slicing the backdrop, and bringing in the outdoor scenery. Finally, the performance of architectural structure was emphasized by analysing the context of the partially refurbished venue. Employing these factors, we arrive at a model of *performise* that involves ever-increasing resolution through the use of networked traces and events, that functions as theoretical research, and simultaneously as scenographic practice. According to Pavis (2014, 2016, p.36), *mise en scène* today 'help(s) us to grasp how the work, either choreographic or theatrical, has been conceived, how it is built up and composed of different materials'. However, *mise en scène* has become quite different from its original meaning. The lack of clarity of the term necessitates considering the use of *performise* as new alternative concept to offset the lack of meaning provide by *mise en scène*.

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