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## Elements for an Ontology of Theatre\*

**ABSTRACT:** *In this study I will seek to characterise, first, the being of theatrical beings in the process of their creation (theatrical poiesis), affirmation, presence, and perception, distinguishing between different types of theatrical beings with different ontological densities, such as what can be termed a “poetic-theatrical body” in its ecstatic emergence, its energy, and its quasi-thing status within a relational ontology; the case of theatrical objects understood as “transitional beings”; and the case of theatrical atmospheres, which are also characterised by the absence of a substantial ontological status. An analysis of the chronotopical inscription of all these types of beings allows me to address scenic space as potential space, as well as the complex webs of theatrical time that cause theatrical action to be ephemeral, unrepeatable, and irreproducible, enhancing the ontological leap between the beings of everyday life and theatrical beings, and dissociating them from the traditional concept of a finished work that endures over time.*

**KEYWORDS:** *theatrical being, theatre poiesis, theatrical atmospheres, scenic space, theatrical time.*

### 1. Introductory Notes

An articulation between Philosophy and Theatre may refer us to different domains within philosophical thinking itself: Aesthetics is naturally one of the first, most evident domains, with the need to rethink the nature of perception and the way in which it happens; Anthropology is also mobilised, namely in the context of an Anthropology of the theatrical subject and the actor’s body; Epistemology, in the sense that thinking about theatre also means thinking about its truth and the way it is produced; and Ethics, because, given the community nature of the theatrical act, both in its creation and production and in its reception or reassumption in the performance dynamics, the values inherent in the practice of theatre are not only aesthetic or epistemic but also ethical. Less addressed, though not less relevant or productive, is the ontological dimension of theatre, which places it at the heart

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of Philosophy itself and of the deepest radicality of its thought. Therefore, in this article I would like to outline some elements and contributions to an Ontology of Theatre, attempting to answer a question which, as we shall see, can unfold into a diversity of other questions: what is the ontological status of the reality that confronts us in the act of theatre? In other words, what is the being of a theatrical being or of theatrical beings? How can their world be characterised ontologically and how does a special type of being which intercepts with the being of human beings reveal itself in such a world? In the following pages I will be offering some thoughts on the ontological meaning of these questions.

However, before moving on, and in order to address such questions with some precision, some concept clarifications are needed.

The first clarification has to do with the difference between dramatic text, or drama, and theatre. These two concepts often get confused, especially in studies from areas that are relatively peripheral to the core area of Theatrical Aesthetics. Let us start by clearly establishing that drama is one thing and theatre is another, very different thing. In more concrete terms, a dramatic text is literature while theatre is an artistic event characterised by a convivial dimension, an inescapable materiality, and a dimension of presence which drama is far from possessing. Drama is a source of material for theatrical action, but it does not constitute its core, and therefore, to reduce the History of Theatre to the History of Drama would be as big a mistake as confusing Literature with Performance. If medieval Mystery Plays and the *Commedia dell'arte* were not enough to question this idea, the whole of the History of Theatre since the late 19th century, with the emergence and the notion of Art Theatre, which has named and characterised so many theatrical adventures from Stanislavski to Craig, to Reinhardt or to Strehler, demonstrates exactly that (Dusigne 1997; Banu 2000), as does the progressive replacement of the primacy of the text by the primacy of the body and presence with Artaud (Artaud 1964) as the main protagonist, and later culminating in the work of such great stage directors of the second half of the 20th century as Grotowski, Brook, Barba (Perrelli 2014). Starting from this distinction, our tentative ontological approach to theatre is not so much about ontological issues that may pertain to drama as about theatrical performance as a singular event, with a number of characteristics from which we may proceed to examine its ontological dimensions.

The second clarification that needs to be made concerns the very concept of Ontology. Although the term itself was coined as late as the 17th century<sup>1</sup>, the truth is that the corresponding philosophical analysis is as old as Parmenides and includes Plato and Aristotle, who gives Prime Philosophy all its scope as well as the precise terminology that will cross the Middle Ages to arrive at Modernity, showing the key importance of a reflection that seeks to answer the question “what is being?” in its most general sense, including, in its ramifications, the being of any being so as to reach the concrete being of beings through their *esse commune*

1 Published in 1647, J. Clauberg's *Elementa philosophiae seu ontosophiae* includes the term ontology: De Finance, 1966, 9, n. 1, which refers to Gilson 1948, 168, n. 1, on this subject.

(De Finance 1966, 12). The characterisation of the being of beings at this level of abstraction is the task of a general ontology, which, in my opinion, does not exclude the possibility of regional ontologies dedicated to the being of certain specific ontic regions. This is the context in which we can attain a deeper level of concreteness and investigate the nature, traits, form of constitution and emergence of the being of theatrical beings, i.e., the beings whose presence occurs in the specific framework of a reality with different characteristics from other spheres of reality. We can thus speak of an ontology of theatre, which would be parallel to an ontology of cinema, an ontology of literature, or an ontology of architecture, for example, following different paths from those of an ontology of the religious or an ontology of physical realities, because it investigates being in different spatiotemporal articulations and in different experiences of its perception and of the perception of the beings in which being is realised.

Having made these conceptual clarifications, let us now first seek to characterise the being of theatrical beings in their process of creation, affirmation, presence, and perception, while making a distinction between different types of theatrical beings with different ontological densities, as is the case of what I call core theatrical beings, accessory or circumstantial theatrical beings, and embracing theatrical beings. I shall then proceed to characterise the space and time coordinates from which theatrical beings emerge and become present, addressing their specificity in the real world and in the world of theatre.

## 2. The being of the poetic-theatrical body generated by theatrical *poŕesis*

When we ask ourselves about the type of reality, action and behaviour which we are confronted with in a theatrical performance, we immediately think of a fundamental distinction which underpins its peculiarity: the distinction between behaviour in the everyday world and behaviour in the expressive situation of performance. These are the terms in which Eugenio Barba, for example, characterises the specificity of Theatre Anthropology when he very relevantly establishes that “Theatre Anthropology is (...) the study of human beings’ socio-cultural and physiological behaviour in a performance situation” (Barba and Savarese 2005, 6; Eng. transl.: Barba 1991, 8). Underlying this statement is the idea that there is a very relevant difference between a performance situation and a situation in ordinary life. In order to clarify this difference and make it explicit, Barba uses the Indian distinction between *lokadharmi* and *natyadharmi*, where *lokadharmi* indicates behaviour (*dharmi*) in daily life (*loka*) and *natyadharmi* indicates behaviour (*dharmi*) in dance (*natya*), with dance here representing both the actor’s activity and the dancer’s activity (Barba and Savarese 2005, 7-8; Eng. transl.: Barba 1991, 9). The distinctive characteristic of *natyadharmi* involves the dilation that occurs in the actor’s body (although this is always a body-mind dilation), which is responsible for the power of its presence and turns it into a “hot” body whose “particles that make up daily behaviour have been excited and produce more energy, they have undergone an increment of motion, they move further apart, attract and oppose each other with

more force, in a restricted or expanded space.” (Barba and Savarese 2005, 33; Eng. transl.: Barba 1991, 54). In order to do this, performers and dancers use extra-daily techniques, which do not follow the usual principles of human movement, require more energy to be spent, and inform the body, endowing it with a form, in a near-Aristotelian sense, which it did not have before. It is exactly these techniques that produce a theatrical being or make it emerge in its specificity within the complex structure of a theatrical event.

Jorge Dubatti, the Argentine theatrologist who has made important contributions to the establishment of a Philosophy of Theatre, distinguishes three layers in the structure of the theatrical event, which comprises a *convivial event*, corresponding to the departure point of initial immersion into daily life where those involved in the theatrical act (artists, technicians, and spectators) exist; a *poetic event*, which corresponds to the activity of ‘poietic’ creation of the new, theatrical beings; and the *spectatorial event*, which corresponds to the return to a convivial space with the audience, where the multisensorial perception of a theatrical being in its “presence on *skené*” happens (Dubatti 2007, 35-36). Although theatrical beings appear in their visibility and constitute a specific ontological reality in the third moment, where their perception occurs, their genesis occurs and they are fundamentally produced in the second moment, which is the moment of theatrical creation, that is, the act of creating new objects and bringing them into the world of being with their own, specific characteristics.

To name the process by which these new beings are endowed with the conditions of appearing as existing, Dubatti uses the term *poiesis*, in its sense of creating, making something new out of previously existing materials, producing, which applies to both poetic creations and other productions that result from human *tékhnē*. Although the body is not the only theatrical being, we can start by analysing the genesis and the emergence of the poetic theatrical body, since it reveals the process whereby other theatrical beings also come to existence. In the case of theatre, this process can be called theatrical *poiesis* and it corresponds to the transformation of a set of previous materials or beings that exist in everyday life into specific poetic-theatrical beings: first and foremost, the body of the performer, whose physical body becomes a theatrical body, Hamlet’s or Othello’s. With it, also other beings, like props, texts, images, sounds, wardrobe, are part of the world that constitutes theatre action (Dubatti 2012, 70), insofar as, as Henri Gouhier claims, “to believe that Hamlet exists is to believe that his mother, Ophelia, and all the characters in his drama also exist; it is to grant existence to the castle walls that I see onstage and those I cannot see, as well as to everything that surrounds the castle(...)” (Gouhier 1997, 28)<sup>2</sup>, just as “believing in the existence of Antigone onstage is, by the same token, to believe in the existence of the spiritual world where she is Antigone, where her life and her death are tragic” (Gouhier 1998, 30)<sup>3</sup>. According to Dubatti’s fine analysis, this process of moving from everyday

<sup>2</sup> Translated from the French original as referenced above.

<sup>3</sup> Translated from the French original as referenced above.

reality to the new reality mobilises and generates three different fields with different levels of ontological thickness: “i) the field of everyday reality beings; ii) the field of everyday reality beings affected by a regimen of difference; iii) the manifestation of the new form and, through it, of the new poetic being” (Dubatti 2012, 69)<sup>4</sup>. This entails an ontological alterity between the reality of everyday life, on the one hand, the reality of affectation or of the poetic state (which, as far as the body is concerned, also entails the reality of the dilation process, to use Barba’s terminology), on the other hand, and also the reality of the field of the poetic being as such, which results in theatrical *poiesis* defining a time that is different from the time of everyday life while it simultaneously defines an-other space which is different from the space of everyday life. The poetic-theatrical being that gains existence in this new field is a being, because, as Dubatti very aptly explains, “it has a matter/form unity” (Dubatti 2012, 72)<sup>5</sup> which, in the case of an actor, constitutes what one may call a poetic-theatrical body. This poetic-theatrical body differentiates itself from the performer’s natural-social body that is his/her biological body, which involves a process of “de-naturalisation”, “de-individuation” and “de-socialisation” of the source body and its “re-naturalisation”, “re-individuation” and “re-socialisation”, going through the intermediate state of an affected body, in a poetic state or undergoing a dilation process. There is an ontological leap between the natural-social body and the poetic-theatrical body that corresponds to generating a reality with a new ontological status. The poetic-theatrical body is thus the prototypical example of the new theatrical being, which Dubatti defines as “the concerted mass of volumes, movements, sounds, rhythms, colours, speeds, odours, intensities, generated by bodily actions (active or passive, metaphorical, non-natural) made cohesive by an internal morpho-thematic relationship which is simultaneously material and abstract, formal and content-based, within a structure of inter-relationships that gives it unity in *poiesis*” (Dubatti 2007, 101-102)<sup>6</sup>. Thus, by way of this ontological leap, certain beings are ontologically reconfigured and gain a new status or, as one might also say, a new being that is significantly different from their original being. Such changes occur through a number of physical-corporeal actions that happen in the body, the voice, the gestures, and in all that accompanies this actors’ material and characterises that other world which they configure or from which they are configured; this world is somehow parallel to the world from which they originally come, including also the meanings with which they are reinvested in a single act, which is the performing act, when the outcome of the poetic event emerges in the spectatorial event and is perceived by the audience. Within this dimension, according to Dubatti, “*poiesis* thus includes both the *sphere of the work* that generates *poiesis* and the materials (matter-form) upon which this work is produced, the *resulting object* (new being or poetic being), and the implicit programmes and guidelines to which one has resorted in order

4 Translated from the Spanish original as referenced above.

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to organise the work and produce the event of the new form, of the new being” (Dubatti 2012, 73-74)<sup>7</sup>.

### 3. *Ékstasis*, presence, and perception

All this poetic work aims at producing presence (Gumbrecht, 2003) in the last stratum of the structure of the theatrical event, the spectatorial moment, which is inseparable from the relationship with the audience, who, in their own way, perform a *poíesis* themselves (Dubatti 2012, 131 ss) in the act of perceiving the theatrical being, and equally take an ontological leap that allows them to move from the everyday reality in which they are immersed to the poetic-theatrical reality to which they adhere through the pact that constitutes the theatrical relationship. Ontologically, the most specific element in this act is the “entrance”, the “appearance” onstage or the “spectatorial” of the new beings who are then “staged”, “put inside the scene”. Special emphasis must be given here to the Greek word *skené*, whose first meaning is house and then becomes temple and also stage (Böhme 2010, 175-177). It corresponds to the space of playing, which, like any play, includes the establishment of its own specific space and time, different from the space and time of everyday life (Huizinga 2016; André 2016, 11-74). The stage defines the different time and space and, by doing it, endows the beings that emerge and move inside it with their own specific reality, which implies and accentuates the above-mentioned ontological leap. This requires a distinction between the effectual reality and the physical reality of what appears. The body of the actor who plays Hamlet belongs to the realm of physical reality, but Hamlet’s body, which the audience sees through him, belongs to effectual reality (Böhme 2010, 175-177), that is, it belongs to the reality that is created by the effects which the scene includes for the spectators who perceive it<sup>8</sup>. More than mere imitation, *mimesis* is the act by which somebody or something that may not even exist is made to appear<sup>9</sup>. The stage is, therefore, the space where theatrical beings appear, with their characteristics in their effectual, emerging reality (as early as the 18th century, Diderot claimed that more than being experienced as existent by the performers themselves, characters’ emotions and personalities are characterised by being shown and externalised in their appearance which is perceptible to the audience – Diderot 1967, 132-133).

The perception of such a presence happens through a very unique process that emphasises other ontological characteristics of theatrical beings. Using the notion developed by Gernot Böhme, this process is ecstasy, from the Greek *ékstasis*, which means the act of standing or being outside oneself, that is, exteriorising oneself (Böhme 2010, 193). I am interested in going back to this concept because

7 Translated from the Spanish original as referenced above.

8 Even if the character being played corresponds to the performer who plays it, its ontological density in the performance is different from his/her ontological density in everyday life.

9 For the different meanings of *mimesis* based on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, see Naugrette 2000, 45-86.

it allows us to think about the specific way in which the characteristics of theatrical beings are presented. We usually mention the characteristics of something as if they were its properties, as that which things have or possess, even if only in the realm of thought. However, if theatrical beings appear before us in their ecstasy onstage, what we capture from them are expressions of their presence, their ecstatic dimension<sup>10</sup>, whose meaning escapes our rational, interpretive thinking; instead, they are inscribed in the experience we make of them with the body that we are, mobilising multiple senses, in all the polysemic acceptations of the word<sup>11</sup>, more than just its respective meanings. The reason is that, while properties are objective, the expressions of the presence of something in its ecstasy are a result of the intersection between what it emits and the percipient's sensitivity in the full involvement of his/her own-body, which make it necessary, following Merleau-Ponty, "to attach to the notion of 'significance' a value which intellectualism withholds from it" (Merleau-Ponty 2008, 257; Eng. transl.: Merleau-Ponty 2005, 246). In the experience of ecstasy as in the experience of feeling described by the French phenomenologist, there is no exteriority between the one who feels and that which is felt, no dichotomy between activity and passivity, although there is an experience of something that happens in a double projection towards the world, and a deep inscription in it of the two poles of perception, which thus defines its field as multi-sensorially constituted and inhabited by the senses of sight, hearing, feeling, smell, and taste, which requires a kinaesthetic reconfiguration of the perception of the presence of something (Merleau-Ponty 2008, 271 ff; Eng. transl.: Merleau-Ponty 2005, 273 ff; Böhme 2010, 137-153; Griffero 2017, 114-120). However, besides its kinaesthetic dimension, ecstasy, like sensation, also mobilises the memory of one's own-body, and it is within that complex framework that the phenomenon of expression happens and is constantly actualised, so much so that it can be said of the ecstatic perception of theatrical beings that it happens in the body and that "My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my 'comprehension'" (Merleau-Ponty 2008, 282; Eng. transl.: Merleau-Ponty 2005, 236). Therefore, the senses of sensitivity and the meanings of understanding emanate from one's own-body, because it knows the world in a way that is unknown to the "conscious self". Applying this to theatre, it knows the stage and the world of its beings in a way that reason does not.

In this discussion we must consider presence as one of the specific, most distinctive marks of theatrical beings. Their existence is marked by presence and essentially consists in it. Their materiality is the materiality of that presence, and their expressiveness, or their emergence as beings in the act of theatre, happens through it. This emergence first occurs through corporeality, which starts in the performer's corporeality (although it does not consist only of it). From

10 On the way how the I that appears in "ecstasy" cannot be mistaken for the properties of something, cf. Böhme 2010, 194 and ss.

11 The word "sense" can mean "meaning" but it can also refer to sensory organs and correspond to what is sensitively perceived.

this perspective, it is important to distinguish between the physical body and the semiotic body. By physical body we understand physical presence in all its materiality, which is able to penetrate the spectators' sensitivity on the basis of its primary and secondary qualities, with the involvement provided by all the other elements in the performance: the physical body is the body that is felt and thought by the body itself, which impacts and resounds in the body of the spectator. The semiotic body is the body that emits sense and meanings through a whole set of signs that can be appropriated and interpreted. It is important to understand those two elements as two dimensions of the same body rather than two separate bodies, and the dimension of meaning should not be separated from that of physicality as if we were dealing with two different perceptive acts<sup>12</sup>. Thus, a performance includes the simultaneous presence of the body, of its stimuli, its vibrations, and its senses. To say that theatrical beings are ontically marked by the intensity of presence is to accept that "performance is experienced as the completion, presentation, and passage of the present." (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 94). Presence can be weaker or less intense, or it can be stronger or more intense<sup>13</sup>, depending on whether the performer has the ability to develop a pre-expressiveness which then supports his/her expressive behaviour. Here the work of Eugenio Barba on Theatre Anthropology is extremely relevant, notably his focus on pre-expressive techniques, which he considers to be "the level that deals with how to render the actor's energy scenically alive, that is, how the actor can become a presence which immediately attracts the spectator's attention" (Barba and Savarese 2005, 194; Eng. transl.: Barba 1991, 188). Such techniques are distinct from the usual behaviour techniques of daily life and thus require an acculturation effort, translated into the ability to distance oneself from the socialised use of the body within its respective cultures. Therefore, it should be noted that "[t]he performer's pre-expressive state can correspond to a particular state of the spectator's way of seeing which, like a kind of immediate reaction, precedes all cultural interpretation. This state could be defined as *pre-interpretation*" (Barba and Savarese 2005, 210; Eng. transl.: Barba 1991, 203). Also associated with presence, as a characteristic aspect of theatrical beings and, among them, of the body itself onstage, is their ephemerality, which

12 I am somewhat critical of E. Fischer-Lichte's distinction between phenomenic body and semiotic body as if the phenomenic body were the actor's body and the semiotic body were the body of the character being played, because what theatrical *poiesis* does is to transform the performer's body into the character's body, in order to avoid a perceptive dualism on the part of the audience (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, 77-93). I am equally critical of the conception of interpretation of the semiotic body as if it were only an interpretation of meanings mentally or verbally translatable, based on a signifier/signified dichotomy (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, 138-147), which, although it can be abstractly elaborated in the theatre, is rarely found in reality. Such a conception is, to some extent, heir to an anthropological dualism that characterises Western thinking, but which has now been deeply questioned and resolved: we do not receive stimuli with our body and meanings with our mind, we perceive a theatrical act in the body that we are and which forms an indissociable unit with our mind and consciousness, the understanding and interpretation of a theatrical performance being both a mental and a bodily action.

13 I accept this distinction by Fischer-Lichte 2008, 94-97, although I do not agree with all of its assumptions.

will be mentioned when we discuss the space-time in which these beings emerge and manifest themselves as existing.

#### 4. The energy, the flow, and the quasi-thing status of theatrical beings in an ontology of relation

The issue of presence and its intensity leads us to another extremely relevant element for the ontological clarification of what is involved in theatrical performance. Although so far I have been focusing especially on the poetic-theatrical body as a core being in the theatrical event, we must now turn our attention to what lies behind the intensity of the presence of the body, its gestures and its movements: energy. In the book by Barba that I have been quoting, this is what the author writes apropos of it: “By means of techniques passed on to performers by tradition, or through the building of a character, they acquire an extra-daily form of behaviour. They dilate their presence and consequently dilate also the spectator’s perception. [...] To this end, they imagine that their body is the centre of a network of physical tensions and resistances, unreal but effective. They use an extra-daily body and mind technique. [...] On the visible level, it seems that they are expressing themselves, working on their body and voice. In fact, they are working on something invisible: energy” (Barba and Savarese 2005, 57; Eng. transl.: Barba 1991, 79-81). This is not about denying the performers’ work on the body or their work on the words and the voice that expresses them. It is rather a question of recognising that, in theatre, all the work done on the body and on the words is ultimately and in fact work on energy. One may therefore say that the theatrical subject, that which becomes visible in theatre, is essentially energy; in other words, in theatre it is energy that is permanently in motion. And, given the Greek words that form its composition, the etymological meaning of energy, which we usually take to mean power, is “at work”. Energy is the quality of something which is “at work” (in *poiesis*, as I started by saying), in the process of happening. The performers’ work, be it with their body or with their mind, is always work on energy. And talking about energy is not exactly the same as talking about strength or force (in the sense of impetuous or violent virile force) because just as there are vigorous energy modulations there are also soft modulations, warm and cold, and tender and harsh modulations. This reference to energy and its modulations introduces a profound dynamism into the heart of theatrical beings: rather than things, such beings are flows and flow modulations that can be perceived through their effects, although they are not necessarily visible in their concrete, physical reality.

As energy contractions and expressions, theatrical beings can hardly be considered things; that is why the concept of quasi-things used by Böhme to characterise what he calls “the atmospheric” (Böhme 2010, 101-104) and which he borrows from Hermann Schmitz (Schmitz 1978, §245), who characterises quasi-things by distinguishing them from things, on the one hand, and from qualities, on the other, can be quite useful in clarifying the ontological status of theatrical

beings. Theatrical beings cannot be properly and rigorously considered things either, because they lack substantiality and therefore, they lack permanence in time; however, they are not really qualities, properties or accidents inherent in other things, although in themselves they may present characteristics similar to qualities or properties. This does not mean that they do not have some degree of individuality or of singularity. The characters Romeo and Juliet, in being performed, that is, made present by the physical reality of whoever embodies them, have their own singularity, as does the Yorick skull, dug out by the grave digger when preparing the grave for Ophelia's funeral, and which may be represented by a skull, a stone, or a simple wood volume; it does have its own individuality, but, in neither case is such an individuality extant or substantial but simply "ecstatic", since it lasts only as long as its appearance. This might lead one to think that, as quasi-things, theatrical beings only have actual existence and are denied potential existence. However, although that is one of the characteristics which Böhme stresses when he conceives of the atmospheric as quasi-things (Böhme 2010, 103), it is my opinion that, in applying this concept to theatrical beings (and others), although their affirmation, existence and actual presence are more evident, this does not mean that the actuality of their presence cannot simultaneously include a potential dimension, the same way as an action, in one's perception of it, includes the past that leads to it and the future that it opens up to and which is somehow pre-contained in it, although not immediately visible. Also in regard to the perception of theatrical beings, one may say, in line with Merleau-Ponty's statement on the perception of one's own-body, that "each present permanently underpins a point of time which calls for recognition from all the others", and therefore, "the object is seen at all times as it is seen from all directions", and if that happens with the past, "the same is true of the imminent future which will also have its horizon of imminence" (Merleau-Ponty 2008, 97; Eng. transl.: Merleau-Ponty 2005, 79-80). The ecstatic existence of theatrical beings is, to some extent, also a modulation of existence in the play of their presentation and, for that reason, it can be said of the body, even in the theatrical act, that it "is to be compared, not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art" (Merleau-Ponty 2008, 187; Eng. transl.: Merleau-Ponty 2005, 174). This is sublimely expressed by Appia, who calls the theatre body "a work of living art", making the body the core centre of the art of theatre as an intersection of different arts of space and time: "The living, moving body of the actor is the representative of movement in space. Its role is, therefore, capital. [...] The living body is therefore the creator of this art, and it holds the secret of the hierarchical relationships that unite its different factors, because it is their head. We should start from the plastic, living body to arrive at each one of our arts and determine its place in the art of drama" (Appia 1988, 362)<sup>14</sup>.

Despite its physical dimension, the theatrical body, as a specimen of theatrical beings, transforms itself by virtue of theatrical *poiesis*, which moulds and reshapes it, in a kind of relationship of relationships, energies, and tensions that constitute

14 Translated from the French original as referenced above.

it, and this renders the application of the category of substance to theatrical beings very problematic, requiring from the category of relation a density and an ontological dignity which neither Aristotle nor philosophical tradition have ascribed to this philosophical category<sup>15</sup>. In the two passages where Aristotle specifically deals with relation, in *Categories* (Aristotle *Catégories* 7, 6 b 15 – 8 b 25: Aristotle 2014, 42-45) he analyses the subject mainly from the perspective of logic and grammar, with rules of discourse concerning relatives; and in *Metaphysics* (Aristotle *Métaphysique* D 15, 1020 b 26- 1021 b 11: Aristotle 2014, 1817-1818) he distinguishes three types of relations (those of number, those founded upon action and passion, and those which have to do with the measurable-measure, knowable-knowledge, and perceptive-perception relations), always supposing a relation to a term or a subject to which it is inherent, and also distinguishing real relations from simply thought relations. However, relation lacks the ontological dignity that characterises substance, which effectively provides ontological support to any relation. Aristotle's metaphysics can therefore be seen as fundamentally shaping an ontology of substance, and thence, as Böhme writes, “[his] difficulty in thinking about relation as such”, which “is expressed in the fact that he is able to speak of relations always only as determinations relative to the relata, as *prosti*” (Böhme 2010, 93)<sup>16</sup>. However, only in an ontology that acknowledges relation in its ontological density<sup>17</sup> (which simultaneously presupposes the ontological acknowledgement of difference) will it be possible to consider the intermediate thickness of the being of theatrical beings without devaluing them for not being exactly things or substances.

## 5. Scenic objects as transitional objects

In seeking to clarify the ontological status of theatrical beings, I have so far been focusing on the poetic-theatrical body. However, the materiality and physicality of theatre is not limited to the body, it involves other kinds of beings, perhaps of a more accessory nature, which I would broadly call scenic objects and to whose ontological dimension we should also address our attention. I specifically mean such elements as stage props, objects manipulated by the characters, scenic devices, or costumes, which contribute to shape the action performed as a theatrical action. In order to clarify their ontological status, I believe that the concept of

<sup>15</sup> Curiously, the valorisation of relation stems from the philosophical reflection on the concept of person, from the term *persona*, which initially meant the mask worn in the theatre and which, from the classical definition of person as substance, came to express person, associating to it the concept of relationship because its definition as substance seemed to be insufficient (Pereira 2015, 314-331).

<sup>16</sup> Translated from the Italian original as referenced above.

<sup>17</sup> The ontology of modern science was also viewed as an ontology of relation, but this relation is mostly understood as a function, as Cassirer himself interpreted it in *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* (Cassirer 1910, *zweiter Teil*).

transitional objects, put forward by Donald Winnicott, the paedopsychiatrist, can be interesting and useful.

In his book *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott develops the concept of play in parallel with his theory of transitional objects and transitional phenomena, understood as being key components of the realm of illusion that founds the initiation of experience. They imply an intermediate area of experiencing that constitutes most of the child's lived experience, corresponding to the circulation of and contact with objects that cannot be considered as truly belonging to the child's inner world but which are not experienced as being part of his/her external world either. In order to accept this intermediate area, the author believes in the need to reformulate human nature by incorporating a third element: "the third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated." (Winnicott 2005, 3). This intermediate area is filled with such objects as a handkerchief, a pillow-case, the corner of a sheet, or a teddy-bear in a relationship where they are seen as neither an entirely internal nor an entirely external reality and which opens to and prepares the child for a future confrontation with a reality that is indeed external. Here, transitional objects and phenomena are part of the realm of illusion that founds the initiation of experience (Winnicott 2005, 19). And it is exactly in this intermediate area and through these transitional objects and phenomena that what, in its prototypical dimension, can be called play or the child's ludic activity does happen. This implies the existence of a space that is different from both the child's inner space and the space of external reality and which Winnicott calls potential space (Winnicott 2005, 55-56).

We must note that the concept of play in Winnicott is not limited to its genesis at a specific stage in the child's life – it also extends to human life in general. That is the reason why the author dedicates a whole chapter to the space of play as a potential space where cultural experience is located (Winnicott 2005, 128-139). Therefore, I would say that playing is also playing art: music, painting, sculpture, photography, cinema, theatre, dance, and other performative arts are materialisations of the play instinct<sup>18</sup>, as Schiller called it (Schiller 1992, Brief; Eng. transl.: Schiller 1967, Letter XV). Play, both for the artist and for his/her interlocutor, the audience or the spectator, is where their world happens; it is a world that forms a totality of meaning in the space and the time that it summons and in which it is configured.

Applying these notions to theatre (and we must not forget that in some European languages a theatrical performance is called by the same word as play, like the German 'spielen' or the French 'jouer'), I would say that what makes that ludic-artistic space possible is what could be given, also in theatre, the ontological

18 Note that the expression has been variously translated into English as play instinct, play impulse, and play drive.

status of transitional objects. And so, if we accept that in the theatrical play there occurs the creation of a space different from the everyday space but which simultaneously and insidiously slides into the space of everyday life, that is, the creation of a double space which belongs to the actual physicality of the stage space, while also belonging to the virtuality of the symbolic in the world of theatre and its characters (the same way as the child's potential space is and is not the real space and is and is not the space of illusion), we will find out that such a space is enabled, in potency and in action, by scenic objects as transitional objects. And if moving poetic-theatrical bodies, those living hieroglyphs, as Artaud called them (1964, 83, 93), could be the first to be included among such transitional objects, other objects could certainly also be included, like the potion that Juliet drinks, or the one poured into the ear of Hamlet's father or its substitute in the comedy that the actors perform before his uncle, or the poisoned sword that kills Hamlet, his uncle, and Laertes, to name but a few cases in this play by the greatest of playwrights. And thirdly, we have to consider the wardrobe, or costumes, which, in their materiality, also operate transitions and openings between spaces. And I would go even further, wondering whether words, in their physical, material, sound dimension, which Artaud also considered in his theatre of cruelty (Artaud 1964, 140), can also be transitional objects, since they are power and energy, even if only in their contracted and permanently expanding evanescence, circulating in the duplicity of theatre, between actor and character, real space and virtual space. Words also allow for the opening up of worlds within the world, the building of new worlds and the transition between real, symbolic, and imaginary worlds in their spaces and in their times, void and full, contracted and open, dazzlingly torn in the ephemerality of the theatrical play. And could they also be a being of theatrical beings which, not being things in the strict sense of the word, are also "quasi-things" in their dimension of presence and representativeness and for which, I believe, the ontological appellation of "transitional beings" would certainly not seem far-fetched.

## 6. Atmospheres

However, if the above-mentioned elements do have a certain degree of concretion, although their symbolic, effectual character lasts only as long as its appearing or its *ékstasis* lasts, theatrical action also entails other elements of a much more evanescent nature but which are determining for its realisation. Such elements can be called embracing theatrical beings. An example is atmospheres, which are spaces filled with presences that inhabit them, that flow within them and that irradiate from them and their elements, thus contributing to the ontological reconfiguration of their respective beings. E. Fischer-Lichte is therefore right when she considers that the theatrical, performative space always creates an atmospheric space (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 114), to which he dedicates a section in his discussion of performative spatiality. In it, she uses a concept developed by G. Böhme in his essays on a new aesthetics and which he defines as "[s]paces insofar as they are 'tinctured' through

the presence of things, of persons or environmental constellations, that is, through their ecstasies”, adding that such ecstasies “are themselves spheres of the presence of something, their reality in Space” (Böhme 1995, 33; Eng. transl.: Böhme 1993, 11). Therefore, *ékstasis*, which I have mentioned above, constitutes the reality where atmospheres emerge and make themselves felt, which endows them with a materiality that may be considered somewhat evanescent. Atmospheres provide the space of theatrical beings with tonality, temperature, rhythm, affectivity, form, density, and they are, as it were, emitted both by primary qualities and by secondary qualities, while being also related to the affections and the emotions of the perceiving subject. Although in a later work the author distinguishes atmospheres from the atmospheric, identifying in the former something from which the I cannot separate itself and in the latter a greater separation from the I, (Böhme 2010, 82), it is impossible in both cases to consider these elements on the basis of a subject-object opposition, because their reality is situated between them, it is an “in-between” reality (according to other authors, performers themselves can be defined as an “in-between” – Louppe 2004, 132). Ontologically, this is after all what relationship itself is (Böhme 2010, 92). For that reason, Fischer-Lichte stresses the fact that in Böhme’s conception, atmospheres are, on the one hand, “spheres of presence” and, on the other, they are situated neither in things nor inside the subject, “but in between and in both of them at the same time” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 116). In his book *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces* (Griffero 2017, 120-127; Eng. transl.: Griffero 2014, 119-128) Tonino Griffero presents the main characteristics of an atmospheric ontology, among which I would highlight 1) their intermittency (atmospheres appear and disappear); 2) more than causes or effects of inflows, they are themselves inflows; 3) they have a fundamentally phenomenic, non-reified character (they are quasi-things); 4) they are a kind of “in-between” of the subject-object copresence, somewhat similar to the Japanese phenomena of *ma* and *engawa*; 5) they are perceptible and, to a certain extent, accessible to knowledge, albeit a *sensus communis* knowledge, and they are susceptible of displaying a certain identity that makes them recognisable; 6) they have a being that is founded on their actuality; 7) they can be confined, or have boundaries; and 8) they require a more Heraclitean than Parmenidean multidimensional ontology.

In trying to identify what it is that creates atmospheres in the theatrical word and in the theatrical space (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 114-130), I must necessarily mention lights and sounds, with the latter including the actors’ voices, the music or the soundtrack of the play, the musicality of the scenes (assuming that there is a difference between music and musicality), colours of both sets and costumes, smells, which some directors seek to stimulate very markedly, and also rhythm, because the sequence of gestures, actions, or scores necessarily impregnates the atmosphere of a scene or a succession of scenes with a specific tonality. I would therefore say that theatrical atmospheres are simultaneously spheres of energy that move, flowing in the scenic spaces from bodies to objects, and from bodies and objects to the audience; in a more performative staging, they can also flow from the audience to the performers themselves, affecting the poetic body that their theatrical *poiesis* not only produces but also permanently reconfigures.

Most of the ontological characteristics which I have ascribed to theatrical beings, both as poetic bodies and as scenic objects, like most of the characteristics which Böhme and Griffero ascribe to atmospheres, can also apply to theatrical atmospheres. I would just highlight the quasi-thing dimension that characterises them so markedly, their character as flow, and the need to consider them within the framework of an ontology of relation rather than an ontology of substance. I believe that the affirmation of the primacy of their actual (as in act) being, although partly inherent in their phenomenic being, should be relatively mitigated, since, according to the theory of perception, inspired by Merleau-Ponty, and which I have resorted to above, the actual being of what is perceived is, in the act of perception, a contraction of both past and future; therefore, looking at atmospheres merely in their existence as act would be to approach them in too atomistic a manner, which would prevent a consideration of the permanent state of openness towards the future that also occurs in each atmosphere that is experienced, and also in too static a manner, not entirely compatible with the characteristics of the theatrical space, which will be discussed next.

## 7. The space and time of theatrical beings

I would like to conclude this ontological approach to theatre by focusing on the two coordinates that are key to understanding the status and nature of theatrical beings. By this I mean their chronotopical inscription, that is, the space and time coordinates where theatrical beings emerge and through which they manifest themselves.

I shall begin with the space of theatre, or, in more comprehensive terms, the scenic space, for spatiality is an essential dimension to the atmospheres that I have just mentioned, and which I had mentioned when discussing scenic objects from Winnicott's perspective. I must start by highlighting the fact that, more than the mere space where bodies or other objects are, the scenic space is a much more dynamic phenomenon (André 2014) in the sense that Michel de Certeau ascribes to the very concept of space: "A *space* exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is, in a sense, actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs, as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities" (De Certeau 1990, 173; Eng. transl.: De Certeau 1988: 117).

This profoundly dynamic view of space is completely in line with Winnicott's potential space hypothesis, which he describes as follows: "I contrast this potential space a) with the inner world (which is related to the psychosomatic partnership) and b) with actual, or external, reality (which has its own dimensions, and which can be studied objectively, and which, however much it may seem to vary according to the state of the individual who is observing it does in fact remain constant)." (Winnicott 2005, 55-56). As we saw, Winnicott places transitional objects in the

potential space and I would like to propose the possibility of interpreting the concept of scenic space based on the dynamism that some authors identify in this particular type of space, through the mediation of Adolphe Appia's notion of latent space and Peter Brook's notion of empty space. After considering the body's movement onstage as one of the key elements of the theatrical art and after claiming that "a stage is an empty and more or less illuminated space of arbitrary dimensions" (before Brook, Appia had already described this space as "empty"), and contrasting the audience space, which is fixed and immobile, with scenic space, Appia defines in very clear terms how that void should be conceived of: Appia, 1988, 362: "Isolated, the scenic space permanently awaits a re-ordering and it must therefore be arranged for continual changes. It is more or less illuminated; the objects that are placed in it will wait for a light to render them visible". And he very significantly adds: "This space, therefore, is not in any way except potentially (as latent) as concerns both space and light. — These are two primordial elements in our synthesis, space and light, which a stage contains potentially and by definition" (Appia 1988, 362)<sup>19</sup>. Similarly, and as paradoxical as it may seem, also Peter Brook's empty space is a scenic space only if, despite being an empty space, it is not an entirely empty space. Only thus can one understand both the author's claim that "[t]he empty stage is no ivory tower" (Brook 1996, 44) and his argument, apropos of the sacred theatre as "The Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible", that "the stage is a place where the invisible can appear" (Brook 1996, 49). From this perspective, the concept of empty space becomes productive and theatrically effective when it is conceived of as a potential space open to the dynamics that design, shape, and recreate it developed by all those who play and perform within it. Emptiness is, therefore, the inscription of plenitude or its appeal in its absence, its lack and its distance, which makes the empty space the whole power of space through all that makes it possible and reinforces it. This is the space where theatrical beings emerge, move, and relate to each other, receiving from it the energy and the momentum that activates them in the theatrical *poiesis* and the spectatorial event.

This space emerges with its beings in a specific, though rather complex time configuration (André 2016, 211-251). Theatrical time is not time in the singular, but rather *times* in the plural, forming a complex web of overlapping times which determine theatrical beings themselves. First, there are different layers of objective, chronological time, among which I emphasise the duration of the spectatorial theatrical event (as perceived by the performers, on the one hand, and by the audience, on the other) and the narrative time, also called diegetic or argumental, of the action that unfolds in it (from which the "unity of time" rule was established in classical tragedy), with its different levels of thickness analysed in depth by Paul Ricoeur when discussing the process that goes from "a prefigured time that becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time" (Ricoeur 1983, 87; Eng. transl.: Ricoeur 1990, 54), corresponding to the different

19 Translated from the French original as referenced above.

types of *mimesis* which he also identifies. This time is manipulated, compressed, or expanded in different ways, both by the playwrights and stage directors and by the performers themselves, being experienced differently by the characters onstage, the actors, and the spectators. However, there is another, intensive, inner time, experienced by the penetrating power of presence (which, as we saw, is one of the ontological characteristics of theatrical beings). Paradoxically, it is a kind of time without time, or, in its kairological dimension, a time of all times: in the theatre, this time inhabits us in the form of the ‘now’ that makes the instant a kind of eternity and eternity the light of the instant (André 2016, 242), and which is unrepeatable and unreproducible since it is extinguished with the cessation of its happening, its being depending on the performer-spectator interaction. It is experienced by the author, the stage director, or the scenic designer in their moments of creation, or by the actors during the spectatorial event. Because of its intensity, Patrice Pavis describes it as corresponding to moments where time seems to stop (Pavis 2005, 147). For the performers and the audience, it is the unrepeatable moment of the theatrical performative act (Gouhier 1997, 107-121), and this is what makes theatre an event, where the paradox of performance manifests itself, rather than a work: “it is ephemeral and transitory, but that which emerges and takes shape while it happens manifests itself as *hic et nunc* and is experienced as present in a particularly intense manner” (Fischer-Lichte 2005, 74)<sup>20</sup>. This is where, in A. Badiou’s felicitous expression, “the elucidation of the instant” happens “by an encounter with the eternal” in the text (Badiou 2014, 112; Eng. transl.: Badiou 2008, 230). It is in this eternity of the instant that theatrical beings are actually experienced and this eternity is what provides their temporality with an extreme complexity, which highlights their actuality while luminously contracting and concentrating past and future temporalities.

The time of theatre is a web made up of all these times, where the eternity and grace of its instant-long duration are enkindled. And this gives a very specific ontological dimension to theatrical beings, impregnating all their other dimensions mentioned in this text (and which have an impact on their natures as poetic-theatrical bodies, energies, relationships, transitional scenic objects and atmospheres, and in their forms of presence and ecstasy). This is why theatre, both in its *poiesis* and in its spectatorial event, is a sublime art of making love to time, and the ultimate result of this act of love is the being of its beings.

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20 Translated from the published Portuguese version.

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