

Performing Ensemble. Practices, Theatre, and Social Change

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Practice constitutes a dimension of social life that, in some respects, pertains to how people and things are intertwined – or, better, *entangled* (Barad 2007). In the performing arts, there exist creative groups that engage in practices conducive to this entanglement, thereby enhancing collective creativity and fostering artistic innovation. Dealing with one of such groups, *Performing Ensemble* goes deeply into this matter and aims at elaborating the idea of the ensemble through the history of the Independent Theatre Association for Research (*Associazione Teatrale Indipendente per la Ricerca* – ATIR), an Italian theatre company founded in 1996. Carmen Pellegrinelli, an experienced theatre practitioner and a social scientist, offers readers a vivid account of how ATIR formed as a theatrical ensemble, providing an in-depth understanding of theatrical practice through this case study.

In the Introduction, while outlining the book's argument, the author puts emphasis on the notion of practice as a key feature of theatrical activity. In particular, Pellegrinelli states that her book is an attempt to fill a gap in the literature on the ensemble – this literature being focused either on the ensemble as a transient “epiphenomenon”, or on those traits that qualify the ensemble as a long-term, stable entity, namely “the group ensemble” (as is the case with the more standard interpretation of the notion of theatre company). In doing so, Pellegrinelli approaches the ensemble through the lens of the “posthumanist theory of practice” (Cozza and Gherardi 2023), articulating “an argument from a theoretical paradigm that places ensemble practices at the centre of the analysis” (p. 5), also aiming to overcome “the tendency toward dualistic and descriptive positivist human-centric narratives” (p. 10).

The book's argument also relies on the notion of *agencement* derived from Deleuze and Guattari (1987), along with the *assemblage theory* developed by Manuel DeLanda (2016), who is himself indebted to Deleuze and Guattari's original formulation of *agencement* – though his appropriation of the latter was subject to criticism (Buchanan 2015; 2021). While I shall return on this point later, it is worth noting here that Pellegrinelli uses the concept of *assemblage* to explore “ensemble-making practices” and to account for the different sets of relationships forming the ensemble and connecting it to other entities. Through the case study of ATIR, the ensemble itself is understood as “a complex processual phenomenon of connection between heterogeneous human and nonhuman elements” (p. 6). In fact,

these latter include “the school, rehearsal room, the Ringhiera theatre [the venue in which the company resided for a given period], and the city” (p. 15).

In addition, Pellegrinelli follows Latour’s (2005) “recommendation to trace the associations between phenomena and entities” as a methodological guide to analyse the traces that constitute the foundation and development of ATIR (p. 13). To this aim, the author scrutinises aesthetic practices relating to actors’ bodies, gestures, and collective energy, drawing upon empirical materials comprising interviews, ethnographic notes, and documents.

Pellegrinelli followed the traces of ATIR’s artistic path through three phases: first, the nomadic period lasting from 1997 to 2007; second, the resident period, during which the company ran a theatre venue designated as the group’s home (2007–2017); third, the “homeless” period lasting from 2017 to the present. The book’s chapters are thus devoted to describing and analysing these phases.

Pellegrinelli began this research with the accomplishment of her master’s thesis in 2003 at the University of Bologna. In this initial endeavour, the author considered the span between 1992 – when ATIR’s members first met in Milan’s *Civica Scuola di Teatro Paolo Grassi* (“the Paolo Grassi” henceforth), one of the leading drama schools in Italy – and 2002. This first study was based on interviews with both the company’s members and the teachers of the Paolo Grassi, the voices of whom punctuate the author’s elaboration on how ATIR’s assemblage evolved since the training of its members at that school.

Indeed, in Chapter 1, entitled “The School”, the author takes readers on a journey into the milieu that gave rise to ATIR. The Paolo Grassi is understood as “a community of practice” and a locus of effervescent creative effort: “The school’s activities were part of a dynamic movement of renewal in theatre training and education which was spreading in Italy and Europe” (p. 19). Under the direction of Renato Palazzi between 1986 and 1995, the school welcomed this movement of reform, “privileging the experimental workshop over the traditional dimensions of ‘instructing’ acting techniques and pre-established models linked to the prose theatre tradition” (*ibid.*). To readers familiar with theatrical practice, the idea of the workshop may easily sound evocative of a particular creative style and atmosphere. In a workshop environment, the aesthetic power of human and nonhuman entities participating in a performance can be expressed at the highest level. The degree of openness is maximised, and this turns out to be highly beneficial to bringing about novelty in terms of creative outcomes. This is the way the Paolo Grassi set most of its education and training philosophy, with an experimental vocation that was conducive to building some of the key principles informing ATIR’s foundation and activity.

This appears most vividly in Chapter 2, “The Rehearsals Room”, where the emergence of ATIR’s performances is described in detail. The notion of assemblage matters here, in so far as the author’s dissection of the creative process focuses on the practice of shaping the play and the scenery, as well as the collective development of acting intensity (e.g., through choral exercises). Adopting Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) conceptual architecture, Pellegrinelli recalls that “an assemblage operates on two axes”, of which the first, horizontal one, consists of two segments related, respectively, to content and expression (p. 46). Content is meant to be a “combination of various heterogeneous materials”, including actors’ bodies, performance venues, costumes, or scene sets. Expression refers to “semiotic forces like words, statements, discourses, declarations, texts, scripts, manifestos, and tacit or explicit norms” (p. 47). As for the second, vertical axis, it is dealt with in Chapter 3, discussed later.

The second chapter thus explores the ways in which the creative process revolves around these elements. For instance, as for the semiotic forces implicated in the assemblage, working on Greek classics leads the group to experiment “the polis”, and “allows each company member to be equally enhanced by their scenic role” (p. 58). The staging of classical texts actualises the choral orchestration of voices and bodies in the performance – the chorus being a chief expression of the ensemble and a central element of ATIR’s training at the Paolo Grassi, particularly under the guidance of Gabriele Vacis. Notably, the entanglement among scenes, texts and bodies seems to overcome the potential dualism that the distinction between content and expression might entail (although such dualism is not highlighted in the book).

Chapter 3, “The Theatre”, focuses on the temporary stabilisation of ATIR’s assemblage, when the company became resident in the Teatro Ringhiera, a theatre located in a Milan’s semi-suburban area. In this way, the group found its stability in the 2007-2017 decade and, consequently, started to build intense relationships with the local territory, which resulted in the active involvement of the local community in various activities, including the organisation of annual theatre seasons. Indeed, this is the path that many nomadic theatre companies undertake when they succeed in finding a home and thus have the opportunity – and often the necessity – to extend the range of their activities from theatre production to educationally and socially oriented projects. As for ATIR, some of these projects were addressed to “vulnerable people and non-conforming subjectivities” (p. 75). At the same time, the group evolved organisationally (another typical route for theatre companies becoming resident).

Central to this elaboration is the notion of *territorialisation/de-territorialisation* borrowed again from Deleuze and Guattari (1987), namely the second, vertical axis on which an assemblage operates. Territorialisation, as Pellegrinelli put it, “is the process by which an assemblage can express its potential by expanding its action into the environment and making it familiar” (p. 71). Therefore, the *Teatro Ringhiera*, “as a nonhuman object, entered the ATIR assemblage and modified, reinforced and made it capable of profoundly impacting (territorialising) the neighbourhood and the city” (p. 72).

Chapter 4, “The Community”, is then devoted to the process of de-territorialisation experienced by ATIR when the group lost its home due to the closure of the *Teatro Ringhiera*. In that case, forced to de-territorialise itself from the Ringhiera theatre, “ATIR realized their home [...] needed to be found in the community gathered around its activities” (p. 98). In this manner, ATIR’s assemblage demonstrated its strength and resilience – that is, its *resistance* – by leveraging the group’s connections to the local community, fostered through “participatory theatre projects put in place to forestall the dispersal of its extensive community” (p. 95).

In Chapter 5, “Conclusion”, Pellegrinelli summarises the main aspects of ATIR’s ensemble-making and provides the reader with a commentary on the posthumanist approach adopted to understand the performing ensemble. These concluding remarks are concerned with the emergence of the performative ensemble, the influence of the context on the ensemble, the stabilisation of ensemble practices, and the nexus between the aesthetic and political-ethical areas pertaining to ensemble-making. In this posthumanist reading of the ensemble, a noteworthy aspect is, for example, the “significance of nonhuman agency”, as is the case with texts and scenography (p. 118).

Indeed, it is vital for theatre-making that the material elements of the scene participate actively in the creation of the performance. For Pellegrinelli, this constitutes a chief trait of

ATIR, the working style of which is taken as an instance of the intimate relationship between human and nonhuman agency in shaping theatrical performances. The interplay – or entanglement – among the diverse human and nonhuman elements of the show is far clearer if one considers how, in the words of ATIR's scenographer Maria Spazzi, the scene setting composes a "sounding board" for the choral performances of the group (p. 54). This approach confronts the reader with an idea of scenography – which is one of the largest nonhuman elements of the performance – that differs from the one usually related to the "background" of acting.

Readers of this book could well be satisfied with how ATIR's practice-based work is investigated. Less satisfaction would probably derive, instead, from the use of the theoretical framework of *agencement/assemblage* informing this inquiry. First, although Pellegrinelli states that "this work is not a historical investigation" (p. 14), the book can be regarded as a dense and insightful exposition of the history of ATIR, with the four chapters all featuring mentions of assemblage in the beginning, though not systematically engaging with the empirical material through that framework. (On the contrary, the posthumanist approach seems to involve a more substantial dialogue between theory and empirical material.)

Secondly, the terminology of *agencement/assemblage* would have required a more thorough explanation. As Ian Buchanan (2015) observes, *assemblage* is the English translation of the French term *agencement*, which was proposed by Brian Massumi and adopted by DeLanda, as Pellegrinelli recalls (p. 46). This translation might be problematic, as it risks losing the sense of contingency inherent in *agencement* (Buchanan 2015, p. 383). Yet, throughout the book – if I am not mistaken – the use of the term *assemblage* is prevailing over that of *agencement*, though more often referring to Deleuze and Guattari (1987) than to DeLanda (2016), a choice that is not explained.

Thirdly, it seems that the concept of *assemblage* – including all elements of content and expression (with reference to Deleuze and Guattari), mentioned about the "nascent ATIR" (p. 47) – might also work well with many other theatrical ensembles. Nonhuman entities are often meant to be organisations, spaces or territorial domains interacting with or traversed by the ATIR ensemble, and yet it is hard not to think of them as part and parcel of the existence of many, if not all, theatrical groups.

Nonetheless, the originality of *Performing Ensemble* lies in the analytical lens through which the aesthetic matter of the theatrical ensemble is investigated, one which goes beyond the domain of theatre studies and the sociological perspectives on culture and the arts. Notwithstanding the absence of relevant studies in the sociology of theatre and performance (e.g., Shevtsova 2009) within the theoretical framework informing the book, one merit of *Performing Ensemble* is to suggest a connection between the theatrical tradition of experimental directors and pedagogues (such as Jerzy Grotowski) – via the apprenticeship that ATIR's members had at the Paolo Grassi – and the concepts of assemblage, sociomateriality, symmetry, the de-centring of the human, and so forth. Therefore, the book also appeals to the social studies of science and technology, nurturing the extant common ground between this field and the sociology of the arts (e.g., Hennion 2015), as well as organisation studies, due to its focus on group dynamics and group creativity. Notably, *Performing Ensemble* offers valuable insights into the study of human-nonhuman interactions in theatre-making, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the fundamental grammar of practice in both the performing arts and the social world.

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