

LEONOR SERRANO RIVAS

*"I would call this a scene, the 'scene of the subjectile,' if there were not already a force at work prepared to diminish the scenic elements: the visibility, the element of representation, the presence of a subject, even an object."*

Jacques Derrida, *To Unsense the Subjectile*, in Jacques Derrida and Paule Thévenin, *The Secret Art of Antonin Artaud*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998.

One way to approach the recent body of work of Leonor Serrano Rivas is to understand it as a deconstruction of sorts of what would make a theatrical event. Enamoured of theories exploring classic Greek drama—but approaching them from a purely intuitive perspective, rather than the academic precision of a scholar—Serrano Rivas arrived at Oliver Taplin's *Comic Angels* (1993). In it, the British academic and classicist tells of how, when preparing his comedy *The Birds* (414 BC), Greek playwright Aristophanes began the play not by writing the script, as if would seem most usual, but by designing the costumes of the chorus, the so-called birds of the title.

This was trigger that sparked the idea for Serrano Rivas' performance *An Ornamental Way of Moving*, which premiered in 2016 at Chisenhale Dance, London. This piece originated her two most recent projects: *Decorative Elements* staged both at Seville's Centro de Arte Andaluz Contemporáneo (CAAC) and *Recurrent Patterns* at Sala de Exposiciones Santa Inés, Seville. In them, the Spanish artist has presented three key elements of a theatre play—the stage, the costumes and the backdrop—across the two venues, joining them across space via three scripts. But, who's acting in this play? And more importantly, who wrote the script?

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PRODUCER: [...] (*Then addressing the CHARACTERS*): Who are you? What do you want?

FATHER (*he steps forward, followed by the others, and comes to the foot of one of the flights of steps [leading to the stage]*): We are here in search of an author.

PRODUCER (*caught between anger and utter astonishment*): In search of an author? Which author?

FATHER: Any author, sir.

PRODUCER: But there's no author here... We're rehearsing a new play.

STEPDAUGHTER (*vivaciously, as she rushes up the steps*): So much the better! Then so much the better, sir! We can be your play.

Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921).

In 1921, when Pirandello premiered this play at the Teatro Valle in Rome, some outraged members of the audience greeted the performance shouting "Madhouse!, Madhouse!"

This reception somehow brings to mind the debut of *Rite of Spring*, the ballet piece choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky to music by Igor Stravinsky—as part of the famous Ballets Russes company of Sergei Diaghilev—which famously debuted at Paris's Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1913 to a rowdy brouhaha.

Like Pirandello's existential meta-theatrical play, the *Rite of Spring* sits at the top of Modernism's greatest achievements, two works whose influence in the arts and culture of the 20th century can't be underestimated. They are pieces so ground-breaking and confrontational, so radically new, that when they were first presented they were met with ridicule and rejection, as audiences are prone to do with that they do not yet comprehend.

In the case of the ballet, the strong rejection was sparked by a combination of elements: the strident, staccato soundtrack and the stomping choreography, danced, moreover, by a slew of histrionic dancers dressed as pagan Russians and contorting their faces covered in bizarre make-up. It was, it seems, easy to dismiss because it wasn't a conventionally "pleasant" experience.

In the case of Pirandello, the rejection came from the fact that defied the basic rules of a playwright, who should present a play with a fixed narrative and set of characters. In his controversial play, a group of stray characters barge in the middle of a rehearsal of a play by Pirandello, called *The Game as He Played It*, demanding to be allowed join the professional actors in the rehearsal of the play.

The interpretations are myriad, are we the authorless actors, going about life searching for an author, meaning, god, purpose? Is he, on the contrary, saying that fact and fiction are interchangeable? That we go about our lives performing most of our everyday acts, with the world serving as the greatest stage there is?

At both Serrano Rivas' concurrent exhibitions in Seville, it's you, the viewer, who barges into the space, much like Pirandello's lost characters entering the scene. These forms of making—or doing—were explored already in *An Ornamental Way of Moving*, a durational performance where live bodies merged with still life compositions. In all these three pieces, the viewer enters into a flickering backstage that changes position following an internal logic, while responding also to the movements of others bodies in the space.

Serrano Rivas' pieces take two components of classical theatre: the chorus and stage design. For her, scenography is understood as a type of ornament within a stage setting, with the function of setting the mood or atmosphere of the scene. On the other hand, the chorus functions as an accumulation of individuals designated to be interdependent to each other, working as an unique organism whose role is to stand behind the protagonist, amplifying his or her discourse.

In *Decorative Elements*, the artist uses the architecture of the CAAC create a set that encloses an imaginary chorus. The imposing chimneys of the southern gallery corridor form pillars that frame the scene. In the space, viewers traverse a succession of “curtains,” which make us accomplices of a predetermined plot. In the same way that the attire of the characters was thought to represent their identity in the origins of theatre, the shapes of these elements dramatize the members of a choir.

*Recurrent Patterns* is the second act of this peculiar theatre, where chorus and scenography comes together again presenting a video installation projected into a huge piece of stage machinery suspended in the space.

In both *Decorative Elements* and *Recurrent Patterns* bodies are brought to life by the script, a series of descriptions developed by external agents chosen by Serrano Rivas. In the three works, the artist uses the spaces as a stage on which to dramatize the work and constantly rearrange it to introduce us into a theatrical plot that thickens with time. Serrano Rivas wants her works to be perceived through the integration of each performer’s rhythm in the scene.

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*I can take any empty stage and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.*

[...]

*I am calling it the Holy Theatre for short, but it could be called the Theatre of Invisible-Made-Visible: the notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear has a deep hold on our thoughts. We are all aware that most of life escapes our senses: a most powerful explanation of various arts is that they talk of patterns which we can only begin to recognize when they manifest themselves as rhythms or shapes. We observe that the behaviour of people, of crowds, of history, obeys such patterns.*

[...]

*The curtain used to be the great symbol of a whole school of theatre-the red curtains, the footlights, the idea that we were all children again, the nostalgia and magic were all of a piece. [...] But the day came when the same red curtain no longer hid surprises, when we no longer wanted-or needed- to be children again, when the rough magic yielded to a harsher common-sense; then the curtain was pulled down and footlights removed.*

*Peter Brook, The Empty Stage (1972)*

In 1972, the director Peter Brook published *The Empty Stage*, a compilation of lectures exploring his thoughts about the millennial art form, after decades working in theatre, and questioning the issues that faced the discipline at the time.

Of the four lectures gathered in the book, the one titled *The Immediate Theatre* is perhaps the one that reminds me more of the work of Serrano Rivas. In it, Brooks answers the question of the ongoing relevance of theatre in modern times. In a globalised world, he says, the community formed by a play stays the same size. Crucially, in that community, although removed enough from real life, we can see at work the same social patterns that govern our lives: the shared goals, the individual desires. That, and the fact that it always asserts itself in the present, Brooks claims, is perhaps what makes theatre such a powerful tool, and such a usual target of governments' censorship.

Brooks also mentions the primordial relationship in the theatre process, that between director, subject, designer. Let's not forget that Serrano Rivas, prior to developing her artistic career, studied and worked as an architect. The question of spatiality is still a key concern for her, found across her body of artistic work, as it is for playwrights and theatre directors.

The stage is a space, where diverse elements—actors, costumes, props—are carefully placed, or choreographed. Performance—the most theatrical media of the visual arts—has been acquiring more and more visibility across Serrano Rivas' work. Through it, she can amalgamate sculpture, sound, installation, and video, activated by live performers.

Performance, in Serrano Rivas' world, becomes a *gesamtkunstwerk* (or total work of art) which she conceptualises, designs, and implements like a theatre director, letting it then be played by either professional performers or unsuspecting characters. Which one are you?