

It's time to act

Empowering ageing, sisterhood identity, and legacy transmission through intergenerational community performance methods

Ana Moya Pellitero^a, Isabel Bezelga^b & Daniela Salazar^c

CHAIA, University of Évora, Portugal

^aamoya@uevora.pt

^bimgb@uevora.pt

^cdavfs@uevora.pt

ABSTRACT

“Old woman? Who said that? We are still here!” is an intergenerational spectacle that premiered in October 2024 in Évora (Alentejo, Portugal), and counts with the participation of sixteen women on stage from 22 to 80 years old. Behind the scenes, there is a multidisciplinary team made up of 15 members, all teachers, researchers and students at the University of Évora. CHAIA is coordinator of this artistic participative based- research, embedded in the project *Age Against the Machine: European Solidarity Network for Older Citizens Rights (2024-26)*, co-financed by the European Union under the programme CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values).

We engaged with an intergenerational group of thirty participants into a dialogue valuing individual singularities and collective identifications through sensitive listening, using participative theatre methodologies, and participative artistic actions which helped us to build a collaborative dramaturgy. There has been a political, ethical, social, and cultural dimension in our work, reflected in a performance that reveals poetically and transversally themes such as ageing, feminist care ethics, gender rights, embodied and performing heritage, the re-signification and connection with the land and Alentejo landscape and the deep relationship with the cycles of nature. This testimonial work of embodied knowledge of past and present memories holds the pride of a process of legacy transmission. The group was empowered through togetherness, team solidarity, inclusion, and active participation, as well as through a process of fearless curiosity, intimacy and sisterhood, with a sustainable long-term effect on their lives and their close communities.

KEYWORDS

Ageing, intergenerational performance, embodied heritage, gender rights, collaborative dramaturgy

Introduction

Age Against the Machine: European Solidarity Network for Older Citizens Rights (CERV, n. 101138625), is a co-financed European project that uses innovative methods, such as theatre and performing arts to address prejudices related to aging and social inclusion. It comprises a collaborative network of six European partners: Novi Sad Foundation: European Capital of Culture (Serbia, as coordinator of the project), Red Cross Serbia and Theatre Company Trupa Drž ne daj (Serbia), Teatr Brama (Poland), Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium Odin Teatret (Denmark), Compagnia Il Melrancio (Italy), and the Centre of Art History and Artistic Research (CHAIA, University of Évora, Portugal). The project started in March 2024 and for two years, all partners will be involved in participative and intergenerational applied theatre methodologies for the goal of raising awareness about the existence of age prejudices and challenging discriminatory practices towards older citizens in Europe. In the first year, all partners have developed theatre co-creative laboratories with intergenerational groups to foster a dialogue among old and young people. It resulted in a public premiere of a performative presentation in October 2024 in all partner cities, with the active interaction and dialogue with the public and our local communities. From November 2024 to October 2025, we will hold five International Community Theatre Festivals in each partner city, where all the partners' performances will be presented.

Each partner researches and addresses the most critical and relevant issues at their national and regional level regarding ageism such as retirement issues and working rights, the aging body acceptance, love and sex, stereotyping and anti-ageing discourses in culture and media, among others. For our local rural region of Alentejo (Portugal), with more than 23% of its population over 65 years old (Eurostat 2020 – Aging Europe 2020), we decided to tackle issues related to the rural contextual background of many of our older citizens in the city of Évora, giving space to legacy transmission of heritage experiences, critical sustainable living and historical cultural conditions, traditions and discriminations in those rural areas. We also observed that many of our older participants – the majority of them women- suffered gender abuse in the past and at present involuntary isolation due to widowhood. Therefore, we decided that our local debate on mental health policies should be enriched with the reinforcement of a sisterhood identity tackling gender stereotypes, gender-based violence or the burden of gender family care. There is also the need to give visibility to the revindication of empowering ageing, especially community gender empowerment and sisterhood (independently of age differences), extending it to older citizens active social participation, active ageing, and well-being.

During six months, from April to October 2024, we delved into co-creative processes and a collaborative dramaturgy. We counted on the

collaboration of the Depart. Performing Arts, the Depart. of Visual Arts and Design, Arteria Lab (transdisciplinary research), and Évora City Council (Department of Youth and Sports). The Department of Youth and Sports became a community mediator and expert in health practices and it has a relevant role in the team. We started our activities weekly. We gathered 30 participants (among students and older people, between ages 22 to 80), from both genres. Three of the students have prior expertise as artists in scenic arts. Due to the required long-term commitment, the group dropped to 16 members, only women. Our multidisciplinary research team, behind the scenes, is made up of 15 members in charge of the creative participative research processes, artistic direction and dramaturgy, light, sound and audio-visual design, costumes and scenography, community mediation, communication, production and research coordination. It included teachers, researchers and assistants.

In our creative laboratory we have been producing reflections on participatory artistic actions of a performative nature in which the design of listening, sharing and collaboration runs along all process stages.

Participatory theatre: the poetic and the testimonial

The aesthetic, ethical and dramaturgical specificities of this artistic project is based on the processes of co-creation and participation of/with/for the community (Nogueira, 2017; Bezelga, 2016; Cruz, 2021). The implemented approaches in our creative laboratory stem from the principles and methodologies of Community Theatre and participatory arts, through methods that are inspired by situated listening, the experience of being and being part of a locus in which the presence of bodies are mediums of thought in action, in an intense socio-cultural experience, of re-reading and desire, in constant questioning of the world, reconnecting the experiences of trauma and care. These encounters are characterised by key topics such as critical heritage, transdisciplinary dialogues, identity/alterity, experience, memory, choir, poetic image, multisensorialities, humour, affectation and collaborative dramaturgies. There are no interdicts. Sensitive listening to the paths travelled always allows us to question who we are, who we are in our encounters with each other, what is whispered and what is revealed to us. They also occur in unhurried encounters, in sharing memories and feelings, and in the coincidences that arise. Discovering the nest in our own experiences, in the relationships we establish with what we have learnt and want to know. The reverberations that echo in us and *affect* us present themselves as possibilities for research and creation. What arose spontaneously in the context of creating a trusting, safe and respectful relationship through body action, play, small group exercises, and improvisation, gave access to memories, experiences and personal information that

made it possible to incorporate them into a fine exercise between singularities and collective experience. Memory as a central element in the construction, reconstruction and invention of a common path/project, even if imagined, was possible because of the intersubjectivities that arise from each individual memory, offering us an infinity of possible narratives (Hallbwachs, 2004; Bauman, 2003).

What emerged as a potential topic for collective identification, through sensitive listening and notation, remained in a state of latency, which allowed us to bring to life those collective identification topics as images for scenic creation. By valuing the singularities of each participant, and their individual poetic cultural experience, it is possible to reflect on the processes of alterity. According to Derrida "there is no difference without alterity, there is no alterity without singularity, there is no singularity without here-and-now" (Derrida, 1994, p. 51). In this sense, establishing a state of playfulness, all collaborations are seen as valuable. Working together is free of hierarchies and rich in negotiation and horizontal discussion, and the identity of each element is sought to be coined in the work.

We follow a process of constant negotiation within the group, retaining, discarding or transforming the ideas/forms found. What is retained/reconfigured in the various stages will later be organised and codified for the stage. The aim is a polyphonic identity that results from the simultaneous existence of heterogeneous elements that do not yearn for unity and harmony but rather the confluence and juxtaposition of distinct and multifaceted elements, voices, perspectives, discourses, memories, and cultures, where it was possible to find the lyrical, the poetic, the testimonial. Assuming ourselves as a collective body, accepting the dissensus along the negotiation, we explored the limits of the roles traditionally present in the theatrical performance, taking power away from the director's demiurgic role, moving on to the vision of creators/actors, with total responsibility for the whole process, reflecting a new status of co-creation.

Sisterhood identification: ageing pride, feminist care ethics, and gender rights

Throughout the creative laboratory, we observed that the core of participants that remained in the group were all retired women, the majority migrated during their young years to Évora city, from the hardships of Estado Novo rural villages. All married, half of them were now widows or separated. Therefore, we were confronted with a double violence: Woman/Old woman. On the one hand, and in their youth, they belonged to a vulnerable collective due to the change in its status as a domestic and professional productive force, always ruled by a strict patriarchy that restricted their freewill to lead their lives. On the other hand, at present, there is a tension between greater and lesser

vulnerability that goes from being an object of desire in their young years to being almost invisible. Socially, the old woman's body, being perceived as asexualized, without desire, also allows them to be exposed in a condition of less vulnerability.

There is also a reflective dimension produced through the theatrical metaphor. Through personal enjoyment, fulfilment, and the pleasure of playing, participants discover the ability to express themselves freely. Dropping reservations, we reduced the internalization of prejudices and the target of taboos. In the session “happy memory of their youth” we understood key-life individual moments that were defining their singularities and group convergences regarding youth hardships. At the performance, the scene “the works and the days”, presents this collective sweet-bitter weight of the old times at the rural villages, with the marks and the fight against the destiny reserved for only women that is expressed in the prohibitions repeated a thousand times since a girl was born: “Show respect”, “Don't talk back to your father, your brother, your husband”. These are visions of bodies restrained, frozen, in a submissive black headscarf, with and lowered eyes, which insisted on lasting.

There is a poetics in which ethics and aesthetics are intertwined in the construction of a collective body, which is sought in the memories and embodied experiences of the participants. From the perspective of Care Aesthetics (Thompson, 2022), socially engaged participatory arts transform the qualities of these shared experiences into aesthetic qualities, valuing and supporting these individual and collective life experiences, because “We have us! And we feel all reflected!” Care is also an aesthetic of sisterhood and feminist care ethics (Gilligan, 2008), based on the intimate sharing of the “blood/life” cycle, which accompanies all women and is transmitted between the various generations, strengthening us. The scene “sisterhood caring” talks about women that give time, advice, comfort, and share experiences with other women. Women hold the ancestral know-how of natural remedies, and ancestral and magical blessings. Blood also unites us in the secret of the first menstruation, birth and abortion. With a restorative tea, these women approach and offer to the public the blessings of unconditional care. However, a message is clear regarding the burden of gender informal care: “we don't let people take care of us!”; “Sometimes we don't let them and we don't ask!”; “What about those who want to take care by force? Taking decisions about our lives in their own hands? “To take care of others, we have to take care of ourselves first!”. These strong statements expressed on scene emerged through guided conversations and improvisation work, which led to spontaneous performative interactions about the concept of caring and its impact on their lives with poems, jokes, stories and secrets (Figure 1).

The final performance script is structured around the concept of the Journey as a metaphor for life. Taking as a motto the participants'

curiosity, thirst for freedom and desire to know and experience, with the full awareness that life is not over yet, even though many are currently experiencing being alone for the first time. The performance begins with the departure on a journey, still staggering and disoriented, continuing with fear of what will happen next. At the end we leave with the enthusiasm of the discoveries that will emerge and with the confidence of the battles won, the experience that has been accumulated and the certainty of those who will no longer let ourselves be told what to do. This is symbolized by the removal of layers of clothing along the performance, until everyone is left with their swimsuits and their group choreographic water dance, liberated from any complexes about their bodies exposed in public: "Now we are strong. Let's go, together!" It's time to live and time to act. We have Hope!

Embodied knowledge and legacy transmission

In this community project through performing arts, it has been relevant the intergenerational transmission of intangible embodied heritage. Our co-creative processes offered the possibility to share different layers of transdisciplinary embodied memories and knowledge. The presence of the participants' bodies were mediums of "thought in action". We experienced the presence of bodies in relationship with each other, with their physical differences, temporalities, and embodied roles played over time. Younger generations were sometimes not keeping up with older generations' memories and vital experiences.

In dance, we observe how participants move differently according to generational differences. All the older ladies were dancing with the same type or rhythmic movement. At the end, when we commented on the wishes they were holding in their hearts while dancing, the older women spoke about 25th April in Portugal, and the importance of freedom and peace in society.

(Process Diary, 24.04.24, p. 4)¹

However, we could verify common life-features independently of their age gaps, such as the fact that all of them travelled extensively across Portugal's geography, or the remarkable memories in their youth connected to the countryside, nature, family celebrations and gatherings, or the strong relationship with the family ties of parents, grandparents and siblings. Also the relationships of women care (mothers-grandmothers-daughters), and their right to claim an active voice in love relationships, brought closer both generations. The challenge of bringing their personal

¹ Cf. https://www.ageagainstmachine.uevora.pt/assets_research/Process%20Diary_S3_24.04.pdf)



Figure 1 – May Workshop, Session 7 - A Family Day (Sara Romão, 2024).



Figure 2 – April Workshop, Session 3 - Individual Body in the Collective (Isabel Guedes, 2024).

memories, experiences and future wishes to the performative exercises, allowed them to relate to each aspect of their own lives in a more tangible way and produced a collective body that was, progressively, freeing itself in movement, and voice. It moved from individual experiences to collective identification. It was an evolution from bodies that were afraid of expressing themselves to a feeling of collective freedom and ease (Figure 2).

Participants felt the need to pass on this embodied knowledge and narratives of which they were witnesses and protagonists. They gave visibility, through the practice of theatre games, of a precious social and cultural archive: labour bodies (harvesting scenes), subversive bodies (in the management of family relationships), gender bodies (pregnancy, birth and resistance). This process is also connected to the concept of culture as performance (Fisher-Lichte, 2004, p. 145) in the sense that our

cultural expressions are always based on a performed ritual or relation. In our case, theatre served as a means of representing it. Performance frees and concretizes the body as the material, par excellence, of performative artistic creation. This body as an archive of memories, experiences, legacies and knowledge is described by Andre Lepecki as a source of knowledge and practice that can be transmitted from body to body, especially in the process of documentation and *archiving*.

(...) the body as archive re-places and diverts notions of archive away from a documental deposit or a bureaucratic agency dedicated to the (mis)management of the «past». (...) Like the body, like subjectivity, the archive is dispersion, expelling, spilling, differentiation; a foaming and a forming and a transforming of statements into events, of things into words and of virtuals into actuals (and vice versa).

(Lepecki, 2010, p. 15)

In the case of their labour bodies, we recreated bodily actions in the rural context and the rural work in the fields through movement mimesis. We observed the transformation of a learning process of mechanical and choreographed movements that awaken old traumas or painful memories, into a dance. The ladies taught the mowing movements to the younger actresses/students, who had no physical memory of this practice. Simultaneously, this patrimonial bodily knowledge transmitted from body to body, while these gestures were imitated, was also about passing on a legacy that was both historical, cultural, and generational.

We had several types of harvest: olives, rice, blackberries and flowers. (...) By imitating movements, the younger participants learn traditions from the past that no longer are present today (...).

(Process Diary, 29.05.24, pp. 3-4)²

This gesture of transmission thus opens space for the process of delegated performance (Jones, 2011) and re-enactment of traditional practices. From the moment that this process of transmitting labour practices associated with harvesting itself becomes a dramaturgical image, it is assumed that there is a process of delegation of these gestures to the bodies of the performers as well as a re-enactment of these same practices on stage.

The harvest was one of the scenes that produced a choreographic image in two intersecting lines. This image had much power, as did the grapes harvesting and the power of the sound of the stamping of the feet. Another powerful image is the olives

2 Cf. https://www.ageagainstmachine.uevora.pt/assets_research/Process%20Diary_S7_29.05.pdf

harvesting, when they are placed in a triangle and the image of offering the baby to the moon.

(Process Diary, 05.06.24, p. 5)³

This urgency of transmission reflects a fear of forgetting and losing not only their ability to transmit but the amount of time and opportunity they had for this to happen. We observed the old ladies' pride in passing on and caring for preserving a memory and a legacy. A memory that was talking about a rural community united by manual work, the soil and the countryside. The fields needed the collective, their music, songs and food.

They were proud to pass on this ancient knowledge to new generations. Cacilda - one of the participants, at the end of the session said "I'm happy that this knowledge doesn't die with us". Therefore, they felt an urgency to communicate both bodily and oral knowledge, thus, as knowledge transmitted from woman to woman (knowledge enclosed within the feminine world).

(Process Diary, 05.06.24, p. 3)³

This factor leads us to Diana Taylor's concepts of "archive and repertoire", but above all to this corroboration of performance as a form of transmission because cultural memory is, among other things, a practice, an act of imagination and interconnection (Taylor, 2003, p. 82). Taylor also refers that the issue of transmission becomes one of the main points in the permanence of this memory. In this act of transmission of these rituals and gestures, by repeating their repertoire, they are giving visibility to an archive in their own bodies.

A collaborative dramaturgy

Throughout the creative laboratory, topics emerged, arising from discussions with the participants at the sessions about the project's objectives, sometimes arising from inducing materials, such as songs, poems, drawings, sharing of memories and personal stories, or revealed secrets, which provided starting points for improvisations.

The building of a collaborative dramaturgy started with three main scenes: the "thief-fear scene", which came from a traditional Alentejo song shared during the laboratory, symbolically referring to the vulnerability of older adults and their fears; the "tea scene", based on the concept of forgiveness and unconditional care; and the "headscarves and gowns scene", discussing the lack of freedom and the headscarf's symbolism as a carrier of prejudice regarding women in tradition. We continued with the construction of the scene related to "sisterhood caring" as a

3 Cf. https://www.ageagainstmachine.uevora.pt/assets_research/Process%20Diary_S8_05.06.pdf

gear of group bodies in a harmony of movements, actions, gestures, words and sounds. Other scenes arrived during the process: “between a husband and a wife do not interfere” dealt with domestic violence and group protection. In “the works and the days” through ancestral traditions and the connection to the Earth, the deep relationship with the cycles of Nature are vivified. There is wisdom in the gestures that come from the hard work in the fields. Therefore, the local environment and the relationship with the land is always present during the performance (Figure 3).

As a particular ecosystem. This is why, in the scenography, a central hanging tapestry becomes the central element around all the scenes. A tapestry screen weaved by the participants representing the colours of Alentejan countryside. Sustainability was also explored by and we brought to the stage the relationship these women have with the land, the labours of the long days, which echo the tradition of “Cante Alentejano”, as well as the vernacular knowledge and skills about health remedies, ancestral forms of care and living, as legacies for future generations from an ecological perspective.

During the creative sessions since July until October 2024 we worked in greater depth on the dramaturgical sense and the sequence of scenes, the cutting out of spoken text, the option for the presence of chorality, the transitions between scenes, the rhythm changes, the body occupation of the scenic space, the props experimentation and with the different layers of costumes, from trench coats to swimsuits (Figure 4). In a collaborative way we chose and distributed the lines in each scene, assuring that all the participants are represented. Attention was also given to the creation of atmospheres using simple scenic devices, the definition of the various moments of interaction with the audience and appealing to their participation (e.g. taking a position on what is happening in the scene; sharing a cup of tea with the actresses, getting out of the chair to dance). The last details of the performance were related to the final presentation of the close script to all participants and choosing with them the songs that appear throughout the performance, the costumes and stage accessories. Moving on to the more technical elements, we had to count with the integration of voice-off and soundtrack and in the adaptation to the light design. Finally, close to the end, the whole group met to propose different ideas for the title of the performance.

Discussion and conclusions

Part of our research process is based on the disclosure of each session according to sensitive listening of the topics developed in the prior one, and how each session was unfolding in relation to each other. All the sessions were registered and collectively documented in a Process Diary,



Figure 3 – Play Premiere, School of Arts (UÉvora), October 2024 (Isabel Afonso, 2024).



Figure 4 – Play representation at Educative Cities' Week (Évora), November 2024 (CMÉvora, 2024).

emphasizing the main topics, the participants' responses and evolution, team impressions and observations, or the dialogue and transversality of themes and creative and human relationships developed. In this sense, a Process Diary is relevant for a methodological evaluation for all the project partners. The participatory creative processes brought more questions to the fore and different possibilities to the research practice and simultaneously, the research questions also fed the creative and artistic decisions. Therefore, we detected how our research approach and the participatory and community processes were nourishing each other. Regarding the process of knowledge and legacy transmission, we observe how this project is a case-study in which we witness a body of archived memories in its corporeal and physical dimension, where the "body" appears as the place of this process of archiving memories, not

only of those that are recovered, but also those that are transmitted, and the new ones that are created. In this context, the “body” appears as a resource and essential tool in the transmission process, specifically in a knowledge transmission from body to body and not so much through the technological registering of these memories.

One of the most significant impacts of this project is the sense of sisterhood among participants and research members. We had the opportunity to get to know more about each other, to connect and learn about our stories and wishes, and how transformative these type of artistic projects are in the participant's personal emotional transformation, with an impact in their close families, friends and local communities. This resulted in an empowering process of these older ladies based on a sense of protection and togetherness, intergenerational solidarity, social inclusion and active participation, as a process of intimacy, individual respect, and collective identity.

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