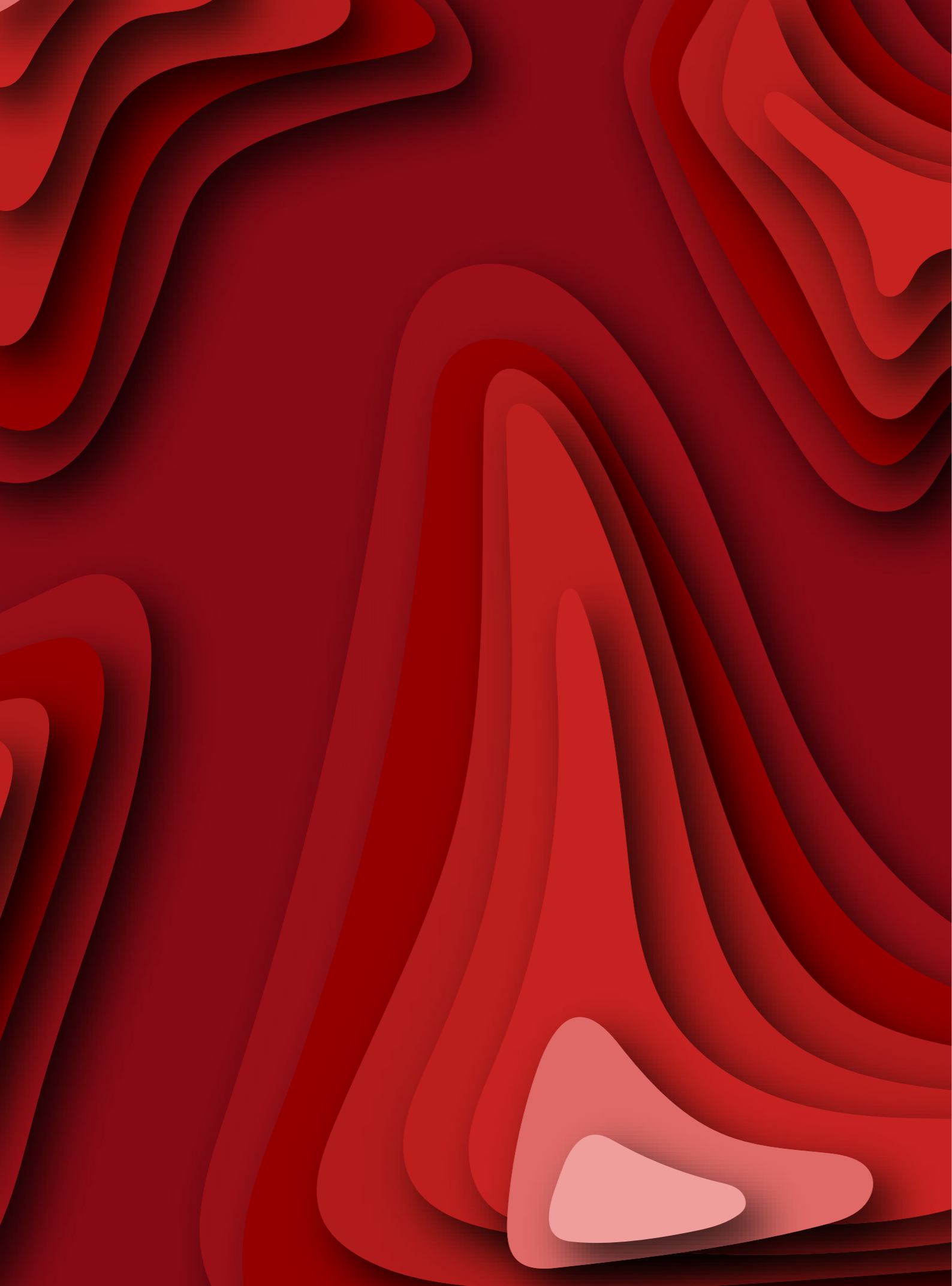


FLUIDITY MATTERS

EDITORIAL
INTRODUCTION

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As the Australian academic Elizabeth Stephens argues in her article ‘The Matter of Fluidity’, the concept of fluidity has been of central importance to critical theory these last few years but, at the same time, ‘remains strangely uninterrogated’ (2014: 186). Our goal in this sixth issue of the *European Journal of Theatre and Performance* is not only to examine how the concept of fluidity provides useful tools to rethink and to analyse theatre and performance in both historical and contemporary times but also to question the very concept of fluidity, through the performances discussed in this Essays section.

Through the six essays we selected for this issue, we propose to bring the different meanings and values ordinarily attached to the concept of fluidity into a new light. Fluidity has a long bow of connotations, ranging from grace, mobility, and change to lack of grip, instability, danger, and disaster. Theatre productions, performances, and lecture-performances appear to be ideal places in which to continue to contemplate fluidity as both material and conceptual and to experience the ways in which these two dimensions intertwine.

Fluidity (specifically water as the main fluid ‘matter’) has been central to the diverse mutations that have affected and continue to transform theatre stages in Europe and elsewhere. Fluids have often been used as a spectacular element in the history of theatre, from the Greek *nau-machias* to the British nautical drama of the nineteenth century, for instance. Water remains a recurring element on contemporary stages, not only as a scenographic ingredient but also — and increasingly so — as a fluid that carries both threat and salvation, in a world continually on the verge of imploding through either the acute shortage of water or its disastrous abundance. More generally, as various essays in this section make clear, contemporary stages seem to be characterised by this state of *becoming*, in a constant flux, without a distinction between past and future (Deleuze [1969] 2012: 9) that goes beyond the flows of liquids and instead appears as the phenomenological expression of a more general abolition of boundaries. In this sense, fluids are associated with trans or ageing bodies as well as with prospective and futuristic bodies that refuse all hierarchies. Here, we witness how the boundaries between inside and outside, between top and bottom, and — more generally — between matter, form, and mind are deliberately abolished.

As the art historian Georges Didi-Huberman has observed, theoreticians of the various arts have generally privileged form over matter in their analyses (2000: 209). When fluids enter the stage, however, one is compelled to break with this way of thinking and to rebel against the supremacy of form. Nowadays, many dramaturgies and performances are built around fluids in the broad sense of the term: that is, as formless matter associated with non-being, disorder, or even chaos. Not without coincidence, the Essays section offers various reflections on instability, constant change, or plasticity — all characteristics that underpin what Didi-Huberman calls the ‘potency of the material’ (ibid.: 219; our translation).

Jochen Lamb opens the Essays section with a contribution that reveals the potency of water in nineteenth-century stage technology. After the disastrous 1881 fire in the Viennese *Ringtheater*, which caused the death of nearly four hundred people, several German theatres invested in new hydraulic technologies. The unique situation of German theatres, which already then were receiving large subsidies, enabled them to develop the most modern stage technology at a time when theatre was slowly turning into a mass medium. The aim was to ensure the comfort and safety of the audience but also to meet new artistic demands. Lamb shows how a very precise and ingenious use of water made it possible to meet these challenges: ‘In the form of steam, it heated buildings during winter; as cold well water, it cooled incoming air during summer; mixed with oil and pressurised, it transferred energy for all kinds of movements on stage. Furthermore, it had to be available at all times as extinguishing water in each corner of a building’. As Lamb shows, the counterpart of this increased fluidity and flexibility in terms of energy transmission runs parallel to an increase in control over the workers who handle these new technologies. This leads to the remarkable paradox that the fluidity gained in terms of technique enables a more rigid control of the workforce.

A contemporary counterpart to Lamb’s historical focus can be found in Isabel Stuart’s contribution. In her article, Stuart shows how water-filled pipes are an integral part of the set design in *Overflow* (2019), a performance set in a public toilet and created by the British theatre maker, writer, and performance artist Travis Alabanza. Exploring the different forms of fluidity that inform Alabanza’s work, Stuart argues how this interest in fluidity also undergirds the political efficacy of the piece. In Alabanza’s *Overflow*, water appears as a fluid full of potentialities, notably that of disrupting binary thinking. Stuart interestingly connects this fluidity to the feeling of indifference that some audience members experienced towards the piece. Rather than disparaging indifference ‘as a purely

negative affect', Stuart argues that it can be considered a fluid affect, as it 'acts as a way of sustaining multiple states of being and feeling'. By engaging with fluidity as a material, as an affect, and as a political tool, Stuart demonstrates how its constant mutability constitutes its very strength.

The political and transformative power of water is also at the heart of Annalisa Sacchi's essay, which discusses the lecture-performance *Spillovers* (2022) by Rita Natálio, a non-binary choreographer, researcher, and activist. For this piece, Natálio took their cue from Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig's book project *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* (1976), which was republished in English as *Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary*. In the course of their lecture-performance, Natálio invents their own genealogies, meanings, and glossaries around water as an active force by summoning queer epistemologies, cultural studies, postcolonial theories, biopolitics, and environmental activism. As Sacchi discusses, water is a primary resource that in Natálio's piece appears in all its ambiguity, as 'a place of political imagination, of militant practices and also as a means through which gender and race discriminations, toxic contaminations, and neocolonial violence are transmitted'. In the course of the performance, however, the contamination by water shifts into a question of power, as water becomes the conductor of energies gradually transmitting themselves to the body. The performer begins to vibrate, then to twerk, turning their own body upside down, addressing the audience from their anus surrounded by glitter while upsetting any hierarchy of orifices, materials, and means of expression. Fluidity here becomes the expression of a rejection of the often taken-for-granted duality between theoretical research and choreographic practice.

Bodies in transition are also the focus of Heunjung Lee and Xavia A. Publius's dialogue around the theatrical dance piece *Gardenia* (2010) and its restaging with the original cast, *Gardenia: 10 Years Later* (2021).

These works were created by the Belgian choreographer Alain Platel with his dance company les Ballets C de la B, which recently formed a new production structure, laGeste. In describing the performance, the authors note how *Gardenia* 'blends and contrasts bodies of different ages and genders by staging older trans, queer, and gender non-conforming drag performers alongside younger professional dancers'. Lee and Publius conceived their essay as a conversation about how fluidity is enacted on stage through and thanks to these non-conforming bodies. As the authors recall, the concept of fluidity has long been instrumental in trans studies, which criticise the idea of gender as 'static, essential, and perpetual'. What is interesting in both versions of *Gardenia* is how the expression of continually shifting genders encounters the performance of ageing: as the performers express different gender identities and multiple ages without any kind of chronological order, *Gardenia* offers a non-linear take on both gender and age. In this way, the performers highlight a double fluidity that, even though it concerns us all, is mostly ignored: how we relate to our gender yet also perform our age is never stable nor definite yet always subject to change, even from day to day. Thus, as the production moves forwards and backwards and sideways, traversing different temporalities and subjectivities, it puts us back in touch with the fluidity of our own identities.

In his essay on the performance *La Plaza* by the Spanish collective El Conde de Torrefiel, Massimo Milella similarly questions the many metamorphoses the human body can undergo. Following the structure of the production, Milella's analysis takes us along three key moments of the piece: the absent body, the intangible body, and the contagious body. At the start of the show, the spectator faces a stage devoid of human presence, a plastic installation that Milella sees as reminiscent of religious altars, whose patterns recall the presence of Christ in his very absence. The intangible body refers to the performers, who are entirely covered in flesh-coloured fabric throughout the piece; these bodies,

not yet embodied, thus become a projection surface for the audience. Finally, the contagious body is the dead, decaying body which finds itself at the core of *La Plaza*; it is the only one whose skin we will actually see. Through these different metamorphoses, the body gradually becomes incarnate, reminding us of our condition of constant transformation, from birth to death. As the author writes, ‘the fluid metamorphosis of *La Plaza*’s human body seems to become increasingly identified with the inaccessible nature of its mystery, the mystery of an unknowable body, which requires the ultimate act of conversion: incarnation’. The spectators themselves are caught up in this mechanism since they are both those to whom the absence is addressed and those who allow, by their very physical presence, that the incarnation is accomplished.

Finally, spectators are also at the centre of Elvira Crois and Free De Backer’s essay ‘A Fluid Aesthetics of Audience Participation’. Their contribution focuses on participatory performances, which implement and shape group dynamics and are in that sense different from immersive performance practices that are instead geared towards individual sensory experiences. The authors argue that there is still little analysis of what happens between participants and performers, for lack of a proper vocabulary and appropriate theoretical knowledge. Through an analysis of the work of the Belgian artist Katrien Oosterlinck, and in particular of her performances *Imagine Moving Rocks* (2017) and *Tactile Talk* (2021), they elaborate on the audience-performer interplay, which is key to a proper understanding of what they call ‘a fluid aesthetics’. To better understand the specific dynamics of participatory performance and how it could work as an artistic medium in itself, they develop a terminological framework distinguishing between aesthetic zones of attunement, misattunement, and disattunement. By showing that audience participation oscillates between these different zones, the authors claim that ‘the aesthetics of participatory performance typically fluctuates, rather than establishing a definitive aesthetics a priori’.

From the ingenious sprinkler systems installed in nineteenth-century German theatre buildings to the delicate tuning-in and tuning-out during participatory performances, this *EJTP* issue intends to bring together some new elements to rethink fluidity in theatre and performance. The six essays collected here all aim to understand how fluidity affects the heart of some performances, trying to catch the fluid energies in words or in images. Fluidity is inherently difficult to grasp. However, by reflecting on artistic practices that expand the several streams in which fluidity flows and overflows, the articles we have selected for this issue create a kind of delta that gives a view on the many possibilities of what fluids can do on stage. From this perspective, the diversity of approaches presented throughout the essays shows how fluid the scope of fluidity is in itself. As such, they testify to the idea that, as Elizabeth Stephens reminds us, fluidity remains a ‘potentiality whose outcome, by its very nature, can never be determined in advance’ (2014: 199). •

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