



Collapse tactics in performing arts: on the urgency of surviving and standing up

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ABSTRACT – Collapse tactics in performing arts: on the urgency of surviving and standing up – This article evokes The Tower tarot card as an allegory to discuss collapse tactics within a specific performing arts project: the research staging process of the play *The Vagabond*, a One-Woman Music-Hall Show, developed during the Covid-19 global pandemic and produced by the Xama Teatro group (Maranhão state, Brazil). It reveals possible alternatives for a combined writing process of both script and staging, based on experiences of vulnerability and drawing on collapse as a tactic to provoke a process that constantly feeds back into itself. The procedures that stand out in the process are: improvising in an atelier environment; choosing references and mapping thematic fields; exploring problems; and experimenting with performative programs as a means to insist on surviving the Covid 19 global pandemic.

Keywords: **Artivism. Atelier. Creation process. Performative programs. Staging.**

RÉSUMÉ – Tactiques d'effondrement au théâtre: sur l'urgence de survivre et de se relever – Cet article se réfère à l'arcane *Tour* comme allégorie pour parler des tactiques d'effondrement dans le montage expérimental de la pièce *La Vagabonde, Revue d'une Femme Seule*, développée par le groupe Xama Teatro (Brésil- MA) en ces temps pandémiques. Révèle des alternatives possibles pour une écriture conjuguant texte et scène basée sur des expériences de vulnérabilité, accueillant l'effondrement comme tactique pour générer un processus qui se rétro nourrit à tout instant. Comme procédures se démarquent: la pratique de l'improvisation en atelier, le choix de références et la cartographie de thématiques; l'exploration de problèmes et expérimentation de programmes performatifs comme moyens d'insister et survivre à la pandémie de la Covid 19.

Mots-clés: **Artivisme. Atelier. Processus de création. Programme performatif. Mise en scène.**

RESUMO – Táticas de desmoronamento em teatro: sobre a urgência de sobreviver e levantar-se¹ – O artigo evoca o arcano *A Torre* como alegoria para discorrer sobre táticas de desmoronamento na pesquisa-montagem de *A Vagabunda, Revista de uma mulher só*, desenvolvida em tempos pandêmicos com produção do grupo Xama Teatro (Brasil - MA). O texto revela possíveis alternativas para uma escrita conjugada do texto e da cena, baseada em experiências de vulnerabilidade, acolhendo o desmoronamento como tática para gerar um processo que se retroalimenta a todo instante. Como procedimentos, se destacam: a prática de improvisação em ateliê; a escolha de referências e mapeamento de temáticas; a exploração de problemas e experimentação de programas como modos de insistir e de sobreviver à pandemia de covid-19.

Palavras-chave: **Artivismo. Ateliê. Processo de criação. Programa performativo. Encenação.**

Commère: But what is it about these women
That the world to want to restrain?
Jumping from the tower and bleeding
or accepting and dying?
The one-woman music-hall show
Is a difficult gathering to convene
They are all saints if the desire is mute
But vagabonds when they can realize it
Yamal, Victoria, Margarida, Virgínia, Mara and Araci
Norma, Josephine, Elvira, Rogéria, Olga, Dercy,
Luz del Fuego, Ivaná, Carmem, Colette, Rita, Marie
Pablo, Renata, Valeska, Ludmila, Anita... what do they want, anyway?
How many of you would return for a hundred years to face whatever
comes?
Well, note that before the fire, she was different, she was a woman.
(*The Vagabond*, 2020)

The desire to produce a play, the intuition that leads to a potential subject, the assembly of the creative team, the belief in dreams as a guide for the journey, the discovery of references, all these are pulsating energies in creating a theatrical performance. But the journey not always turns out as planned. Started before the Covid-19 pandemic, the research staging of *The Vagabond – a One-Woman Music-Hall Show* took successive new directions due to the global health crisis, revealing and grouping timely procedures of creative cooperation.

This article aims to organize the procedures taken by the authors in a pandemic situation as a means of creative persistence in unstable contexts, mapping a path of dramaturgical research for writing both script and staging, founded on experiences of vulnerability. These multiple actions, addressed here as “collapse tactics,” emerge as a strategy in response to the impositions of current times so as to provide the strength required to build our creations in the face of chaos.

The investigation process that we propose to share is guided by the acknowledgement of what is configured as the raising of a practice—the organization of the possible actions, means and people. Among the frictions of this process, concepts are problematized and formulated from the inside out, based on the practice with the references and the experimentation with theatrical creation, in this specific case, the play *The Vagabond*. We open

the narration of the process by addressing how we heeded the calls for creation and thematic revelation, when images are converted into ideas, followed by the emergence of the first dramaturgical triggers that help compose the theatrical production; we continue by describing the circumstances of our encounter with the image of collapse, which inspired us, through The Tower tarot card, to take a path of disruption and reconstruction in both the dramaturgical flow of the play and the group's production methods; based on new agreements, we evoked, in a atelier, procedures that problematized the issues in question and associated them with the subject to fertilize new problems and references. Finally, while dealing with the possibilities of time, we groped among different concepts and proposed notions that result from the technovivial and convivial practices that we experienced over this journey, showing that both the research staging of *The Vagabond* and all the built materialities only emerge as we describe them thanks to the experience of vulnerability.

The Tower Has Fallen, Nothing Will Ever Be the Same

Where does a play begin? How do we know that what affects us can no longer be contained in our everyday relationships and requires an audience? Certainly, attention to such marks may not be essential issues for creation. However, being open to heeding such calls – of dreams, of the verisimilar, of passion – certainly affects those who will inebriate themselves on the performing arts as a way of life: women theater makers. When The Tower card turns up in a tarot game as guidance and misguidance, in the midst of what was already the new staging journey of the Xama Teatro group,² an image of collapse is intuited that will not be ignored throughout the entire process.

Started in August 2019, production of *The Vagabond*³ progressed amidst rubble. While struggling to survive the biggest pandemic of the century, we welcomed the indications of a path of rupture/reconstruction, challenge/detachment that required reconciling comfortable notions, planning and repertoire practices with the urgencies of the moment, which would incite openness to new experiences. Accepting that they might even put on hold the creation methods, ties and references with which the group was familiar, we abandoned some of the “[...] historical stones” (Braga,

2014, p. 64), understanding, under the guidance of Renata Figueiredo (verbal information),⁴ that “[...] building new structures requires tearing down old ones, taking a deep dive into humility.”

The Tower is an excellent card to open a process of creative and academic research, as it bears an important interpretation: the challenge of learning to unlearn in order to create new things, so that from such a challenge may emerge new structures. This necessary opening led us to an intense creative practice that required from us, women theater makers, exposure, about-turn, authorial writing of body and performance, non-moralizing of the expressive possibilities of visuality and sound, and the understanding that our ethics is the ethics of *lifestart*.

Xama Teatro is a theater company mainly composed of and coordinated by women. Based in the metropolitan area of the large island of São Luís,⁵ in the Brazilian state of Maranhão, its research focuses are the art of narration and the figure of the storytelling actress and of the witch actress. One of the group’s traits is inviting people to jointly create dramaturgy. In executing their projects, the actresses are alert to the messages and images that surround them: “When we are open to listening, a number of inspirations, dreams, messages and resonances lead us to creative paths, lead us towards the images we inhabit and the great challenge of transforming those images into dramaturgy and that dramaturgy into staging” (Vasconcelos, 2016, p. 98).

The subject of *The Vagabond* was (unexpectedly) inspired by the interpretation of dreams, by I Ching consultations, by tarot cards and by the reading of an eponymous novel. For Xama, dreaming is the driving force, it is concreteness. “Recognizing dreaming not so much as a daily experience of sleeping but rather as a disciplined exercise of seeking in dreams the guidelines for our everyday choices,” as Krenak argues (2019, p. 25), is the path we follow in our quests for chants, inspirations, cures and practical resolutions.

What should be heeded, then, in the dream that woke up the Xama witch actress, Renata Figueiredo, in the middle of the night?

I woke up from a vivid dream, I dreamed that Gisele was wearing an outfit from the 1920s, doing musical numbers, it seemed at times like a silent movie and that something was being spray-painted on the wall, sort of, writ-

ten mon..go. I woke up not knowing what the graffiti was, but in the dream I knew exactly. And her husband would also appear, Abdomacir would appear offering flowers. It was a dream like that, with an aesthetic, it was a very beautiful dream (*One-Woman Music Hall Show*, 2020).

It might all have been no more than a pleasant vision; however, images become ideas when we relate them to a fact at the time: the unpretentious reading of the book *The Vagabond*, by the French writer, journalist and music-hall actress Gabrielle Colette. A holiday read chosen by Gisele Vasconcelos, a member of the Xama Teatro group, becomes the first link and palpable reference of the actress's intuition from the very first page: "This is play material!"

Colette's autobiographical novel tells the story of the brilliant anonymous artist who writes books that are signed by her husband, until she divorces him and starts earning her living as a music-hall dancer. The search for affective and economic independence and the meeting of new lovers, as well as having to choose between tour and love make up the plot of this literary work that sparks the creation of the play *The Vagabond, a One-Woman Music-Hall Show*, based on a curtain opening for the stars of Brazilian vaudeville. The book and the dream attract each other and announce, as our path of investigation for the play, the subject of early 20th-century women artists and their struggles in life and art.

The I Ching consultations, in turn, guided the assembly of the team for this research staging. Through them we contacted Nicolle Machado, a member of the Poli Companhia group,⁶ for the roles of stage director and playwright. These mixtures of spirituality and materiality, this confluence of dream, literature, oracle and tarot arcana were the early dramaturgical triggers and contributed to the theatrical production, also linking to the experiences of each one within the creation process.

The Tower arcane card was then promptly evoked as an allegory of the subject that revealed itself from the link between references, from the problem linked to destruction that renews, a thing that must end, a tower to be torn down, starting out from Renata Figueiredo's tarot readings of the process (2020). Perceiving how that image affected us at the time, we organized the aesthetic proposition of the research staging of *The Vagabond*: "the tower has fallen, all is on the ground, we must rebuild or die." It is in the at-

tempt to make this intensity palpable in the atelier⁷ that we gradually connect new issues and arrive at the materialities of the play. We understand theatrical production as research that feeds on problems, which takes the opposite direction of reproduction art towards problematization/creation art: “Theater feeds on problems, and if there is no problem, discomfort, that forehead-wrinkling strain, then there is no research” (Machado, 2020, p. 103).

Through “problematization/creation art” (Stubs et al, 2018) we propose a fertile approach to the event, mistrusting commonplace terms while establishing procedures to map problems, references, themes, so that the dramaturgy is circumscribed to the creation process, manifesting itself in theatrical experimentation and blurring some conventions of performance. We will call collapse tactics these experiences of vulnerability and exposition, in the sense of exposed subject proposed by Jean-Luc Nancy (2006, p. 16, our translation): “[...] the condition of uncovering the structure of the subject: its sub-jectivity, its being-under-itself, its being-within-itself, and therefore, outside, behind or in front. That is, its exposure.”⁸ This tactic, which consists in preparation and readiness in the face of the collapse of what is given, leads us to a movement between falling and getting up, always considering a position in a state of risk, of turnaround, which requires us to make some connections with the body and with the real to sustain our desire to insist.

Executioner disguised as love 1: –Artist? Now you’re an “artist,” are you? Do you think you’ll get any art out of this trash? “Artist”... tell me, what show have you ever done? Your life is not worth a stanza, let alone a play! So grab a broom and a mop and go make your one-woman music-hall show at home! It’s high time you gave up! Forget it!

Gigi: Fear comes with everything. Fear of living the unknown, of not having a ground under me. But even with the big head that says “no!” I don’t know why, I’m not afraid. As incentive to leave, a magic card alerted me: women who were forced to throw themselves from the tower. I knelt in prayer before my saint and leaped into this one-woman music-hall show (The Vagabond, 2020).

By situating these experiences of vulnerability as a tactic, we intend to say that it depends on the circumstances, the space, the references, the possible associations to prove effective. Thus, from among a range of proce-

dures that we have experienced throughout our artistic lives, we chose some to respond, in a certain order, to that demand for creation. Thus, problematization, improvisation, programs, scene sketches and devices for remote cooperation are jointly configured as the tactic to be followed in the ateliers to react to the metaphorical collapse and to the material of the creation process of *The Vagabond*.

If, on the one hand, it must be said that this tactic was organized for this different time, the pandemic time, on the other, that does not mean to say that it will only serve for this production. Insofar as the tactic functions as a means to address problems – to what emerges during the process – it will undoubtedly result in different intensities in the encounter with other problems, subjectivities and territories. Above all, what stems from this tactic is an ethic of creation that reacts in the present time, which deals as best it can in the time it has to stay alive. In *The Vagabond* this is reflected in a flow of acting that is exposed in the contrasts, which, between the situations of containment and demolition, finds poetry, time dilation, maximum volume of action, musicality, physical exhaustion, the impossibility of movement. . . And we will be alert to react to other urgencies and new processes to sustain our art.

In *The Vagabond*, what indicates the need for a tactic of collapse is not Colette's book but rather The Tower card as an image of a chaotic time. In this sense, the book and all the other references and links that arise in the investigation are as important as the attitude of the women theater makers, insofar as they are part of the tactic: they are the arsenal, the materials that will be manipulated in the atelier.

However, in the despondency of a pandemic, what is imperative for our art, the performing arts, when it is impossible to do it following previous production methods? What and how to do, when isolation requires not taking risks, not putting others at risk, not hugging, not crowding, not seeing each other, not touching the other and not feeling or breathing so close? Faced with so many challenges imposed to minimize the risks of contagion in the reality of Covid-19, in 2020, the pandemic and quarantine were also able to “[...] reveal that alternatives are possible, that societies can adapt to new ways of living, producing, consuming and interacting in these early years of the 21st century,” as Santos well argued (2020, p. 29).

We theater makers had planned our year of 2020 in late 2019 with a view to fulfilling a promising agenda of projects related to theatrical research, production, performance and circulation, but nothing went as planned. We had to play by the established rules and, more than that, urgently find a breach, or as Badiou (2017, p. 12) points out in his study on the lost real, “[...] a previously invisible opening through which one is able to escape this constraint without, however, denying the fact that both reality and constraint do indeed exist.”

Thus, *The Tower*, as an allegory, guides our thinking about the nature of collapse tactics within processes of theatrical creation, insofar as, inside its walls, as cozy it may be, it is not possible to absorb the outside world, which drives us to the awareness of vulnerability as a means of action. Therefore, “Jumping off the tower and bleeding or accepting and dying?” (*The Vagabond*, 2020), becomes an initial problem of our theatrical research for the production of *The Vagabond*. The leap, taken here as the need for a “scandal,” is precisely the action that comes to “haunt the semblance”, which comes to “reveal the ruin of a semblance,” due to the “[...] indirect need of the real to manifest itself in the ruin of the semblance” (Badiou, 2017).

What imposing discourses do we have in the allegory of the tower as a cloister, as a prison? And in the tower that crumbles, that falls? Jumping if needed and rebuilding as often as necessary. To evade the discourse of the impossibility of making theater in times of pandemic, we experimented with new ways of creating for the impossible one-woman music-hall show. We therefore started out by considering the staging of the play *The Vagabond* an impossibility. We were faced with a challenge: the idea of a single actress putting on a music-hall performance: “A single actress to handle a structure that became popular by presenting a range of numbers and sketches with a large cast. That was the first problem, a good problem – as I like to say – of the kind that needs to create links with the right references in order to sustain itself” (Machado, 2020, p. 121).

In addition to challenging a genre that is mostly scripted and produced from the male perspective, the main subject of the show would be to “revisit” the struggle of several women through the experience of a woman who is always alone, as a person and as a character, but who, for being af-

flicted with the same iniquities that have sabotaged several women for centuries, will never be the voice of a single woman.

All the encounters highlighted here as triggers—dreams, tarot, I-Ching, Covid-19 constraints, the reading of the book *The Vagabond*—gradually coupled with the desires of the theater makers and germinated problems stemming from violence against women to, in the encounter with the investigated references, converge on the subject of marginalized women in the field of arts in the early 20th century. Hence, given the pressing need for approaches to theatrical production whose urgency prompts changes in usual production methods, we call attention to the development of a tactic as a means to survive the chaos. In *The Vagabond*, additional procedures were required that would allow us to withstand the collapse of our plans and not be pushed apart, as the times mandated.

Therefore, like the women in our research who, in daring to be artists in the early 20th century, saw their right to exist repeatedly demolished by the walls of patriarchy and even so “disrupted their times,” we used that same energy of rising from the rubble to develop a form of cooperative work, with procedures that feed back into the remote production and continue building not only the play *The Vagabond*, but also the various possible variants of sharing the creation experience with the audience in a state of social distancing.

In this experienced tactic there is no separation between form and content, but rather a dialectical relationship among all elements of the process, from the first intuition to the performance. This is so inasmuch as the sketches emerge from the procedures, summoning new references that, in turn, recreate the procedures so as to find both the images that interest us and the path we will take between them. And that, reciprocally, is already the flow of our performance. Furthermore, there are many problems on which we wish to ponder, but the way we find to do so is no different in importance, often presenting itself as the turning point of the issue. What is inferred from a tactic, in this context, is knowing how to direct the right procedures and try them out with references – a careful arsenal. The point is not to try out this tactic with any subject, but rather, when faced with a given subject, to know how to develop a tactic. The collapse that we showed here was a specific path for this tactic that “dances in the rubble,”



based on the resonances produced by The Tower card and the despondency of the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, what we can leave as cartography to other processes of artistic creation is what can be found among the choice of references, discovery of subject, problematizations, improvisation practice, experience with programs and devices of cooperative intersection that evoke other procedures; a path we will discuss next.

An Arsenal of References

Our first deliberate action for the research staging was to study the ensemble of documentary, imagery, sound, film and literary references, before engaging in the related atelier, since it was a work of a very strong historical bent. Based on the subject, we gathered references that might spark experiments and related them to our urgencies at that time. The proposal was to materialize the subject in the atelier, whether in texts, objects, film, music or any other format, without prior judgment, but rather accepting what had been intuited during the improvisation practice. Anything can be a spark. One must pay attention, read, watch, take notes, feed on the senses, yet without missing the opportunity to react. Often, for believing that we should only start the body atelier after the references have been formalized into meanings, we lose the construction of marginal meanings that could stem from the encounter of their raw state with the inconsequence of our desires.

niously; on the contrary, she was conceived after long hours of meetings, strange practical work programs and many online drives crammed with improvisation videos. “Every journey offers countless opportunities for new insights and also exposes us to the risk of disorientation,” tells us Sallie Nichols (2007, p. 147). In our relationship with the other and with the world, we can both learn about ourselves and lose ourselves in the experience. Experimental processes enjoy a prominent position in various aesthetics, but for the production to be consistent with the pace required by the staging, they need to be organized and recorded.

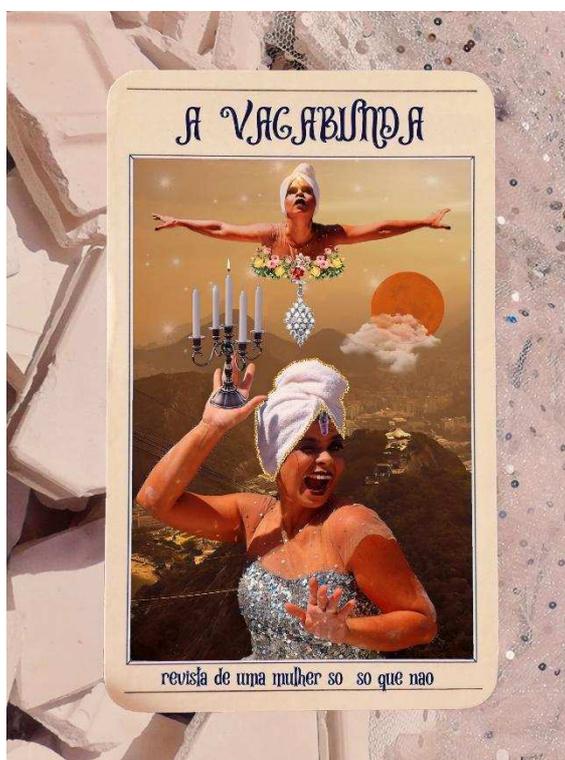


Figure 2: Gigi. Graphic Design of *The Vagabond*. Photo collage by Silvana Mendes.

Source: Authors' collection

The analogy of a crumbling tower lends strength to the creation of both dramaturgy and staging, and is the starting point that leads us to dig up the seeds of the play *The Vagabond*, guided by an extensive historiographical approach to women's struggles. The dramaturgy, then, writes the history of this “vagabond,” who flees the characteristic anonymity imposed on women artists of past centuries and plunges into the fight against a system that tries to brand her as inferior, threatening her rights with the support of a sexist culture of oppression and exploitation. The Music Hall that

operates in Gigi's life affronts her to resist while she perceives herself as structural, such as the exercise proposed by Bell Hooks (2018, p. 13):

[...] all of us, female and male, have been socialized from birth on to accept sexist thought and action. As a consequence, females can be just as sexist as men. And while that does not excuse or justify male domination, it does mean that it would be naive and wrongminded for feminist thinkers to see the movement as simplistically being for women against men. To end patriarchy (another way of naming institutionalized sexism) we need to be clear that we are all participants in perpetuating sexism until we change our minds and hearts, until we let go of sexist thought and action and replace it with feminist thought and action.

To the antagonist of our vagabond in the play, whose interests of domination are openly hostile or naturalized, we gave the name of Executioner disguised as love:

(Forbidden to leave. Gigi is beaten)

Executioner disguised as love 2: Toe the line! Go back home! I know how to break you. . . and next time I receive Mrs. "someone or other," be sure not to make that face or you'll see what happens to you. Toe the line. Toe in line!

Another figure Gigi comes across in her journey of attempted freedom and patriarchal interference is Commère. A supporting character in Brazilian vaudeville, the eternal companion/pair of Compère, in *The Vagabond* she is our hostess. Her appearance represents a split in time-space for reasons of narration. Besides commenting on what happened and announcing what is to come, her proximity to the audience and her rhymed cynicism that "speaks in front, recites the verse and turns admittedly inside out" is an invitation to criticize what unfolds on stage:

Commère: -There are closets of all kinds
From those that conceal skeletons
To those good for muffling screams
If she disgraces the family, the padlock is a blessing
Goes mad, wild, she's asking for it.
In prison all is dark, no one can see the marks
So long being beaten and only now she collapses?
Don't complain, lucky one, be happy with your lot
Behind the bars of the cage, you can sing to your heart's content
(*The Vagabond*, 2020).

In positioning ourselves as creative women playwrights, we are also supporting feminism as a social, cultural, political and linguistic practice that “[...] creates specific ways of existence that are more integrated and humanized, rejecting the binary oppositions that hierarchize reason and emotion, public and private, male and female, heterosexuality and homosexuality,” as argued by Margareth Rago (2013, p. 27).

Tactics of Edification

In the research staging of *The Vagabond* we create multiple devices for the theatrical production, weaving networks of knowledge-power relationships with other new possible ways of re-existing, of approaching relationships with subjectivities, with bodies, with practices, with feminist artivisms. For Roberta Stubs (2018, p. 16), activism “[...] is becoming that produce fissures, cracks that trace the maps of universal knowledge to give vent to knowledge that is sensorialized and non-cognizable.”

In viewing activism as a means of knowledge production and demand (Stubs et al, 2018), penetrating the field of art to reflect on its relationships with politics, we aim to locate, in the process of theatrical creation herein analyzed, a feminist activism and its possible provocations: deconstruction/construction of bodies with practices and subjectivization, activism from the viewpoint of a feminist aesthetic and of the new technologies at the service of cultural production and creation where women occupy spaces of visibility, displacement and rupture of current rules.

In March 2020, we pursued the sparks of the initial references we had for the theatrical research. We started a face-to-face process in a creative atelier format at the Xama premises in São José de Ribamar, Maranhão, attended by the actress Gisele Vasconcelos and the director Nicolle Machado. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this process had to be interrupted and lasted less than two weeks: face-to-face activities in the atelier had to be promptly suspended to comply with the social distancing measures imposed to counter the rapid advance of the virus in Brazil. At that time, we asked ourselves: what are we doing, what do we intend to do and what are we not going to do? We were then forced to invent new ways of viewing and designing our creation. It was vital to understand what kinds of knowledge

were at stake in that imminent collapse, whose debris would also help us deal with everyday life in a symbolic and collective way.

If, on the one hand, dealing with a new organization of everyday life – the state of quarantine – pushed us apart, on the other it enabled more people to enter the process. Given the suspension of our face-to-face meetings in the atelier during the lockdown period of April 2020 in our state, Maranhão, the only possibility we saw of proceeding with the staging process was to open it up to other people—so far we had only invited the director and the actress. Aiming to receive contributions to our dramaturgy, we created an experimental chat room online with the interaction of five artists: Gisele Vasconcelos, Nicolle Machado, Nádia Ethel, Igor Nascimento and Júlia Martins.⁹ In this collapse tactic, we cultivated “[...] the art of encounter” (Bondía, 2002, p. 24) and built a different representation of space, another place, for access to and creation of variants of theatrical research: writing, recording and exhibition of videos of the practices in the atelier, improvisation, execution of programs, production and recording of virtual dialogues, transcription of meetings, dramaturgy exercises and inventories of experiments.

An essential aspect in sustaining our wish to produce even in the face of distancing rules and new forms of relationship was that we quickly identified and, above all, accepted that in that reality, with those new people, even if the actual subject was the same, we were forging together the path to a new show, now permeated by affects to which we would also be linked. We reinvented, giving “[...] new meanings to physical, geographic, political, affective or subjective spaces,” pursuing the heterotopias, in the Foucauldian sense, as described by Margareth Rago (2015, p. 14): “Unlike utopias, which lead to some distant time in the future, heterotopias concern the here and now and the possibility of transforming the outer and inner world, individually and collectively.”

All the means and constructions of the research staging thus generated a number of artistic products and services. We are still waiting for the play’s on-site premiere; meanwhile, we survive on technovivial experiences (Dubatti, 2020). The variables generated from the means and construction of this research staging address the absence of conviviality (Dubatti, 2020, p. 14), since the danger of contagion by the virus through physical presence

is considered. Thus, we experimented with convivial and technovivial practices based on our quarantine experience, such as dramaturgical investigation in an online writer's room, on the Google Meet platform; recording and streaming theatrical improvisations, programs and experiments to the creative team via Google Drive; recording what we call "vagabond attempts" as an experimental initiative about angle dramaturgy;¹⁰ face-to-face performance of the first act of the play in a single session, for the team members and guests only, complying with health measures, at a time of relaxation of distancing rules that included the reopening of local theaters for a short period, from November 2020 to January 2021; launch of the play's soundtrack, available on major digital platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music and Deezer;¹¹ and reading of the script on the Reading Series: Women Playwrights¹² (Midrash, 2021), streamed live. Also, we came up against the need to build our own theater, pulling down structures that no longer supported themselves—the old terrace at the group's headquarters—to build a possible space for the theatrical meeting. To this end we created a physical/structural design: Teatro Xama, for a reduced audience.



Figure 3: Demolition to build Teatro Xama. April 2021. Photo: Nicolle Machado.

Source: Authors' collection

To detail some procedures as feasible actions in the context of the pandemic, experimented with during the creation of the play *The Vaga-*

bond, among so many practices and as a sample to understand our tactic in this article, we highlight below the dramaturgical investigation in the atelier format with convivial and technovivial practices. In this format we created text images and scene images, tracing a dramaturgical path, building a sequence of ideas, hoping to reach a playable dramaturgy, as guided by Igor Nascimento:

First of all, I proposed developing the profile of figure character, finding this constellation and seeing what orbits them, these constellation characters. That required creating profiles and inserting in the script what they considered relevant to the subject. The proposal was to work like a writers' room. To draft an outline, which is this structure, and then each one adds to it, creating dialogues, scenes 1, 2, 3... I really believe in this method (*One-Woman Music Hall Show*, 2020).

By finding the profile of characters, figure and the flow of tensions it was possible to try out a more objective form of investigation, with indications of actions, exploring problems in the format of Performative Programs (Fabião, 2013). Developed by the director and explored by the actress in an isolated atelier practice, the programs were recorded by two video cameras in the workroom, which had been transformed by necessity into a recording studio. All the experimentation done from April through August 2020 was made available to the dramaturgy and production team in the form of texts and videos on the Google Drive file storage and synchronization service. Over this period, we held over 60 hours of virtual meetings and recorded more than 319 gigabytes of video experiments.



Figure 4: Experiment with plaster. Photo: Nicolle Machado.

Source: Authors' collection

The Programs, which resulted in more than 15 video experiments, fed the dramaturgical structure of *The Vagabond*, but were constantly turned over and collapsed into other exercises if we felt that fixing on something was preventing us from moving on, as happened with Colette's book at one point. The collapse tactic only makes sense as a movement of letting go in order to get up. In the ateliers, we prioritized bodily and intuitive relationships through affect, seeking prudence in emergencies by asking the questions: "[...] What can a body do? What affects are you capable of? Experiment, but it takes a lot of prudence to experiment" (Deleuze; Parnet, 1998, p. 75). Then, the procedures—knowing how to fall, get up, survive—rise like a rope to cross the chaos while the performance is transcribed as a dramaturgy of experience.

It must be said that the fact that Gisele is a living atelier, creating in a living urgency that accumulates languages, is a determining factor for the progress of the work. When I sent her a program, I didn't specify rules for setting or props, but she always followed them by experimenting with relationships with costumes and objects. Without so much forethought, she made use of everything that came her way, such as material left over from a neighbor's building work (plaster) or her daughter's 15th birthday dress that became

her character's dream of success. Gisele is so open that she becomes violent; she doesn't judge what she can do and that's why she accumulates so many languages, her poetic is of attraction, getting denser and denser: a gravitational artist (Machado, 2020, p. 106).

In investing in this figure of a gravitational actress proposed herein, we considered the body as a tactic in a comprehensive sense— affective, intuitive, spiritual, physical, biological and chronological—as an attractive force that interacts with anything or nothing. A body that communes and builds with everything it comes into contact with, and that, being memory, is able to select what most affects it. In our process, we exposed memorable occasions, sayings and actions that we came across at some point in our lives, as materials for experimentation. It was thus that we added to the dramaturgy, with different contexts, the pandemic narratives that hit us in the midst of creation:

Gigi: The smell of things doesn't even seem to stick to the air anymore. The coffee was so ready it poured out of the pot and I couldn't feel anything... I can't smell or even taste this crap anymore. Nothing but annoyance... Everything was ready, just as I had planned, it was "Gigi and great cast." The great cast has gone. Only Gigi is left. Who wants to see a one-woman music-hall show? Who's going to line up at the door? I don't even know if my life is worth a play. But then, it's this habit of mine of preparing too soon (*The Vagabond*, 2020).

In all the ateliers for the staging of *The Vagabond* we followed the investigation, tracing relationships between the desires for the creation, the experience that gains expression in the actions, and the images that emerge from this creative process as an encounter. The artist in contact with her sensitive material for creation, as an expansion of her desire, has the potential to dissolve previous material references, weaving strains that emerge during the process and that, through a suspension in the flows of meaning, defy the templates of theatrical representation, acting and inscribing themselves in the body as a dramaturgy of experience, fragmenting the initial references of the research:

The theory-practice relationship develops like a rhizome, as both are nourished in the process. Knowledge grows by branching out and develops, theory leads to the study of practice, and practice returns the need for new theoretical references that question other parallel themes that do not emerge in the first working hypotheses (Pons, 2013, p. 13, our translation)¹³.

Thus, the work revolving around the subject inspired writing as a guide for the process; however, the dramaturgy of the play was not restricted to textual production. According to Sanchez (2019):

Dramaturgy is not necessarily related to writing. Furthermore, when the dramaturgy is fixed in a text, in a way it is betraying the medium it serves. Dramaturgy can be something invisible and can be done by writers, directors, choreographers, actresses, architects and teachers. Dramaturgy can be something like drawing in time or drawing in the air. One draws in time or in the air with the intent of seeing that drawing materialize in living bodies. But it must be a drawing which does not halt those bodies, which makes them walk (Sanchez, 2019, p. 01).

For us, text is the materiality of such movement, emerging from the need to give words to strains. It may just be a sequence of actions or may not even exist. In the case of *The Vagabond*, in order to map the dramaturgy that continually rose and collapsed, four main text formats stood out, among others: notes; collage text; program schedule; outline; flow text; theatrical play¹⁴.

These spark texts are developed to be explored in a pathway of artistic investigation based on experience, risk and encounter and not to be “applied” on stage; not to be enjoyed as such given the premature formalization of one of the most complex elements of creation: the word. No. But they are sketches of what we are capable of being. “Having a text at the beginning of the atelier is having a reference like any other materiality and that, therefore, must be problematized” (Machado, 2020, p. 93).

Atelier Prompts

An example of how references are fragmented in this process can be observed when the first problem faced in *The Vagabond*—jumping and bleeding or staying and dying—led to the use of plaster as an object, to the action of being buried to later dig oneself out and dance in the rubble, which was, there, an image of the tower, of the tarot, destroyed¹⁵.



Figure 5: Mummy Fire Survivor. Photo: Carolina Libério.

Source: Authors' collection

It is plausible to unravel the problem by either experimenting with only one of its words, jumping, for example, or creating consequent images. This is how we discovered that some of our early references—Colette's sarcophagus number, *Rêve d'Égypte*, at the Moulin Rouge, in 1907; women survivors of the Bazar de la Charité fire in 1897; magazine and newspaper articles about Luz del Fuego at the 1948 carnival season; Dilma's impeachment in 2016; Marielle's murder in 2018—were recreated in our play as a mummy who survives a fire and wakes up in the middle of carnival: she had the opportunity to die and survived, now she wants everything, she is a different woman¹⁶.

The prompts for the atelier, forwarded by the director and received by the actress via WhatsApp messages, were sometimes called Program or otherwise simply described with evasive actions and few words conveyed in text messages:

The triggers came in a variety of ways, such as simple, everyday actions ("put on makeup and wear something really fancy"); movement in space (walk over the rubble); exploration of the sounds of objects (develop the sound of this rubble); of costumes (try to put on the dress from underneath, with it hanging, transition from that to the straitjacket); or as sequences of actions (lie down on the rubble, sink into it, move but leave the shape of the body). Many times the program contained a sequence of actions and I interpreted those instructions, prepared the set, props, lighting, costumes,

camera, makeup and executed the program by exploring intuitive, bodily-vocal powers, using as references experiences previously recorded in my body and others that I come across at that moment. I feel that the position of being inside, building together with the dramaturgy, with different kinds of research sources: bibliographies, movies, photographs, conversations, memories and personal memories, prepares me in terms of content and practice to explore the proposed programs (Vasconcelos apud Machado, 2020, p. 122).

The quality of surprise, of the unknown, of not knowing what will be done tomorrow, of never repeating a program, the words arranged in text messages, links or Word files, ordered and disordered, metaphorical or descriptive, impossible or easily possible to be experienced, became triggers for actions, images, texts and sounds as tactics to provoke the actress's gravitational force. The unstable body is expected to react to the unusual and that is why we do not moralize the atelier. In the improvisation we find the images, in the programs we understand how we will walk among them, but always meeting goals rather than marks. Our play is the meeting of this with the actress's gravity.

In the research staging process of *The Vagabond*, the programs are viewed as initiatives in the sense proposed by Fabião (2013, p. 4), “[...] that which enables, guides and drives experimentation.” WhatsApp messages served as drivers of experimentation, capable of activating body-vocal movement and stimulating psychophysical and affective aspects in the gravitational actress.

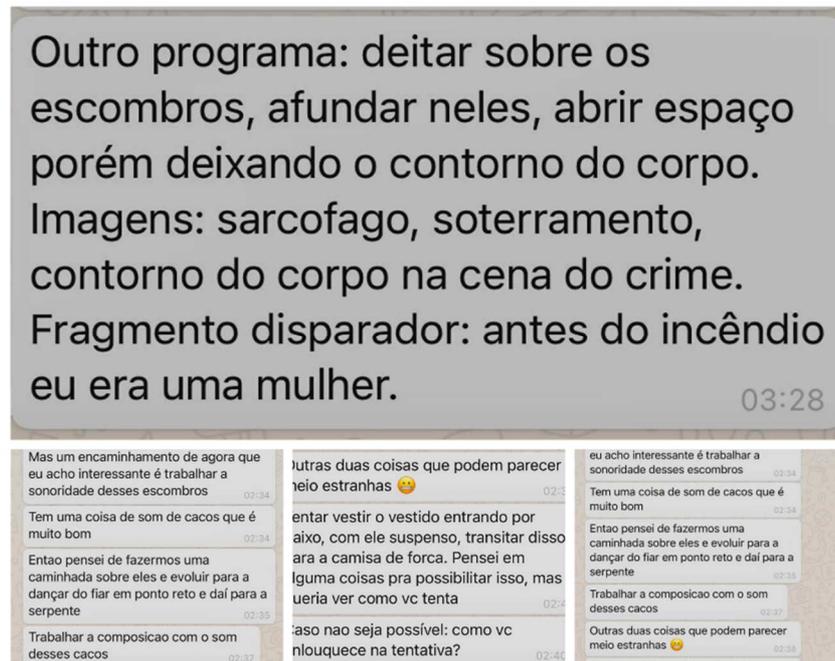


Figure 6: WhatsApp messages from the director to the actress.

Source: Authors' material.

The *Whitewashed Walls* Performative Program was the first with a face-to-face meeting between the director and the actress, after eight programs developed in isolation, streamed online from the ateliers to the team of five artists. This specific program included preparatory actions, description for actual experimentation and trigger texts extracted from some of our references: excerpts from the book *The Vagabond* (1971) and statements by Mexican stars from the documentary *Belas da Noite* (2016):

- PRE-PROGRAM

- 1 – Spray the space with a scent that brings you closer to the star;
- 2 – Play the playlist we have (I'll send additional options);
- 3 – Set up the lighting: black light and small spotlight (entrance lighting);
- 4 – Put on makeup and wear something very chic;
- 5 – Leave on a general light for the video.

- PROGRAM

- 3 – Write with coconut soap on the walls the name of all the women revisited, survivors and the most alive, after death, you can recall.
- 4 – Collect everything in the space and put it in the suitcase – including the makeup, the clothes you are wearing and the rubble.
- 5 – Get on the suitcase stage, prepare for the show, get ready.

6 – Wait for the lights and start singing to the music.

7 – When the light changes, stop, drop everything on the floor and leave.

TRIGGER TEXTS:

Hey, you there! There alone, in this cage with whitewashed walls! On these whitewashed walls, scarlet fingernails like yours wrote the unconscious appeal of the abandoned. Behind you a female hand engraved like a fiery rubric something that rises like a scream. . . why are you there so alone? Why not somewhere else, Gisele? (...)

(ACCUSING TONE) I'm a person who has to fight every day to survive, damn it! Give me an opportunity to work, to earn money, I want to do things. I ask the producers: what's wrong with that? And with this? When I'm a professional that gives 100% on stage (...) (Performative Program, June 26, 2020).

In the experimentation of the *Whitewashed Walls* Program, we witnessed a scene performed in the constraint of extremes, in such a violent way that it pierced the absurd with the real. An exaggeration that, in trying to persist as much as possible, is unable to handle the situation and crumbles in the exposure of the actress as she is: “So twisted it exposes the flesh. It was, no doubt, the Program that had most affected me and I was sure that several aspects of it could hold their own on a stage” (Machado, 2020, p. 116).

In the solo *The Vagabond*, everything in the staging is built to problematize “what else can happen?”—which engenders true traps on stage—where the actress's biggest challenge is to avoid masking such strain. We write while preparing the body for acting, it is a writing path that only bears fruit if we continue with the investigation to find the play. So, we record it in writing, improvise again, change the staging and change the script. . . it is a process that feeds back into itself the whole time because it is in this in-between that the sketches are drafted: what costume is this? What action completes and undoes it? What are my desires when faced with this, what reaction do I produce from this encounter?

The goal of problematizing for improvisation is not to solve something, but to compose forces that open up to a new experience of the present. Sales (2014), in viewing rehearsal as a machinery of becoming, draws on Foucault to show the fruition of the problematizing attitude. We chose to substitute the word atelier for rehearsal, believing that the current ran-

dom use of the term in theater does not do justice to the procedural statement: “It is not about making theory or building systems, but rather intensifying existence through the problematization of present events, in view of a possible use of freedom. Therefore, problematization challenges what one is and the world in which one lives” (Sales, 2014, p. 58).

In adopting a problematic attitude in the atelier process of *The Vagabond*—whose references largely relate to unequal historical contexts normalized at the time—our aim is not to unravel the gears of the ideas of a past, but to contrast those positions with the present, with the ways of life of which we can exude attitude, produce thought and, thus, break down the authority of what is gone: to expose the bare fact to dismember it in encounters with the possible of the present. To invoke the presence of women, artists, mothers, aunts, stars, goddesses, saints, friends, who were so often called vagabonds, is akin to listening to posthumous voices that remain active and resistant. And this was and continues to be our “political theater of desire” (Vasconcelos; Aires, 2020).

That is why we embraced collapse as a tactic, to tear down disguised prisons and, in getting up, generate a process that feeds back into the experiences of its creators, so that we may always have reasons to insist. Even if there is a structure of narration, of acting, more important than having such a structure is to sow it: how do I relate to the imminence of collapse? For even if we have idealized it, none of us can premeditate the layout of the plaster rubble or whether the candle wax droplets will fall on the actress’s face or arms.

The experience of vulnerability

Situations of vulnerability remind us, as David Jubb (2011, p. 202) says, “[...] that great art and the transformation it can catalyze are founded on being vulnerable: both on the part of people who create and partake (artists and audience) and the things and objects involved (hinges and buildings).” A good tactic to collapse with prudence is to consider that people and things, subjectivity and concreteness are responsible for constant danger, for error. That having them with us is as much the risk of falling as the strength of getting up. The atelier is a practice in which not everything

is under control and which will not always unfold as planned. But, after all, is there any way to control what will come from the encounter?

The experience of vulnerability breaks with “the straitjacket of the planned.” In *The Vagabond*, risk and ex-position introduced creative conditions for staging and acting founded on the principles of vulnerability (Jubb, 2011). In the process of staging the play, we created a permanent environment of instability with plaster debris that unbalances the actress, in a destroyed space that becomes knowable as the performer breaks down – while the character tries to rebuild the space, the inhospitable of the rubble competes for the deterioration of the figure – in an eternal movement of falling and getting up, of building and collapsing. In our practice, we considered that the actress’s greatest difficulty, even among so many constraints on mobility, was dealing with the risk of exposing herself, of having her layers investigated.

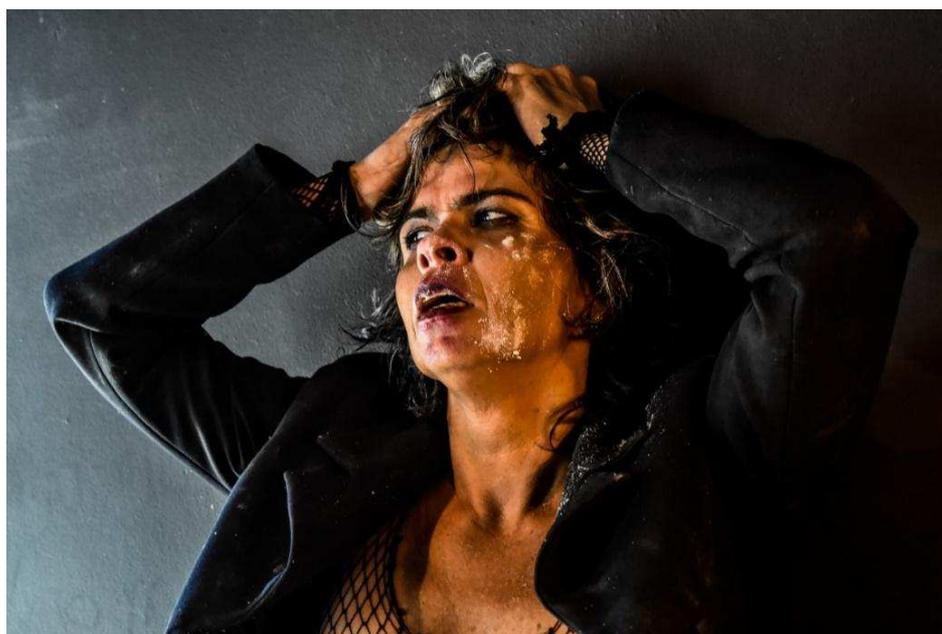


Figure 7: The Star’s Decadence scene. Photo: Nicolle Machado.

Source: Authors’ collection

Other principles also support us to affirm to what extent we delved into the Tower allegory, tracing a path of rupture and reconstruction in the research staging of the play: we invested in a non-linear process, founded on the art of encounter, with dialogue between creators; we gathered a team unlike that of any other Xama production, with new people and new dis-

coveries; we created a process based on learning from experimentation that fed back into itself, which required going back or rebuilding as many times as necessary; we explored a process centered on female activism, on humanity and on appreciating instincts, uncertainties, doubts, insecurities, fears, intimacies, pleasures, strengths; and we constantly challenged working methods, opening up to new structures, supported by a culture of attempts, of vagabond attempts.

And for everything we narrated here and the urge that we collapse alive, we conclude this article aware that the end is a movement and that the clash with the vulnerable being is a trauma that will be repeated as long as we keep our desire alive. Therefore, we certify that dealing with instability has long been a way of life of ours, of female theater makers. And so it will be, if that is the way to prevent our creativity from being buried. We left herein our traces and raised the urgent need of constellating forces, regardless of their matter. If time imposes on us collapse, undermines and lays waste to what we thought we knew or had—exposes our vulnerability—the alchemy that drives every artist keeps on whispering. It is what advises us to go back to the rubble and pick up what makes sense to build something new, what communicates our urgencies with the community, as something playable, inalienable, like the art we have left. We address here the importance of knowing how to deal with all material available, the exercise of constant listening that enables us to recognize possible procedures, to act with problematizing force and to organize what is achieved, so that forms emerge from artistic creation. This in itself is a daily practice that guides us in developing the tactics we need. Thus, alert—and not forgetting that a beautiful scandal is needed—we insist on tactics that prevent vulnerability from paralyzing us. We take a step back to remember that theater is a combination of subjectivity and concreteness, so this is the manifesto: to unite, when they want to bury us.

[...] When one of us loses strength
and says life is no longer worth it,
it's up to all of us to rally
for the enchantment.
Dig up the quasi-actress,
astronaut, pianist.
In danger: dress up the madwoman!

Follow the law of commotion.
They want to kill them woman?
then give them the madwoman! (*The Vagabond*, 2020)

Notes

- ¹ Este artigo contou com o recurso parcial para a tradução em inglês, proveniente do PROAP/ CAPES (Finance code 001).
- ² Theater group from the Northeast region of Brazil, with more than 13 years of experience. It has been awarded in circulation projects and public notices that enabled the performance of one of its shows, *A Carroça é Nossa*, throughout all Brazilian states. It is a research and repertoire theater group, with authorial shows.
- ³ Postdoctoral research at UNIRIO by the Xama Teatro actress and UFMA professor Gisele Vasconcelos, which gradually took on greater theatrical dimensions. Today, it is a solo play produced by the group in partnership with Poli company, with the participation of more than 30 artists (70% women). Conception and Actress: Gisele Vasconcelos; Director: Nicolle Machado; Dramaturgy: Nicolle Machado, Gisele Vasconcelos, Nádia Ethel; Playwright: Igor Nascimento; Production: Nádia Ethel, Júlia Martins, Nicolle Machado and Gisele Vasconcelos; Costumes: Cláudio Vasconcelos and Maria Zeferina (*Demodê*); Lighting Design: Arlynda Hunter and Renato Guterres; Original Songs: Didá; Musical production and arrangements: Rui Mário; Banda Vagabunda: Gisele Vasconcelos (voice); Aline Oliveira (guitar); Nize Cavalcanti (percussion); Karolline Figueiredo (trombone); Sarah (sax and flute); Thaynara Oliveira (violin); Melanie Carolina (bass); Rui Mário (accordion and piano); Photo-Collage: Silvana Mendes.
- ⁴ Line spoken by the Xama Teatro witch actress, prof. Renata Figueiredo, at the *Do Louco ao Mundo* workshop, Xama Teatro, August, 2019.
- ⁵ The São Luís metropolitan area comprises the cities of São José de Ribamar, Raposa, Paço do Lumiar, Alcântara, Bacabeira, Rosário, Santa Rita, Icatu and São Luís. Xama Teatro is based in São José de Ribamar. The Xama facilities include office, dressing room, storage for props and costumes, kitchen, terrace and performance and rehearsal room.

- ⁶ Theater group based in Paço do Lumiar, Maranhão, formed by Luciano Ferrar, Marcelo Morais, Nicolle Machado and Renato Guterres, interested in researching experimental procedures for theater.
- ⁷ We chose the term atelier to designate these spaces of creation that aim to “incite in the actors the process of investigation of available materialities with the goal of tracing the dramaturgy of this adventure of exploration and its possible experiences.” (Machado, 2020, p. 18)
- ⁸ Original text in Spanish: “a condición de poner al descubierto la estructura del sujeto: sub-jetividad, su ser-bajo-sí, su ser-dentro de sí, por consiguiente afuera, atrás o adelante. O sea, su exposición.” (Nancy, 2006, p. 16)
- ⁹ The actress and director were joined by: Nádia Ethel, an Argentinian artist and student of Gisele Vasconcelos in her master’s degree in Performing Arts at UFMA, who cooperated in dramaturgy and production as part of her research; Igor Nascimento, a collaborating partner at Xama, as playwright; and Júlia Martins, a theater student at UFMA, supervised by Gisele at PIBIC, as researcher and producer.
- ¹⁰ We created a concept called Angle Dramaturgy based on the intersection between theater and audiovisual. Angle dramaturgy challenges theater to use audiovisual in order to achieve the impossible gaze of detail. On the other hand, the challenge for audiovisual is to work with one-shot scenes without repetition and to be able to capture something of the performance experience of “live” recording.
- ¹¹ Available at <https://ps.onerpm.com/4158793654>
- ¹² Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipp81JZEv0c>
- ¹³ Original text in Spanish: La relación teoría-práctica se desenvuelve a modo de rizoma, ya que ambos se nutren en proceso. El conocimiento se ramifica y desenvuelve; la teoría lleva al estudio de la práctica, y la práctica devuelve la necesidad de nuevas referencias teóricas que cuestionen otros temas paralelos que no aparecen en las primeras hipótesis de trabajo. (Pons, 2013, p. 13)
- ¹⁴ Respectively: text similar to notes on the book *The Vagabond* by Gabrielle Colette, organized for a monologue; text in collage format, with 47 pages, with all the references that we able to signify in words, interconnected with original verse/couplets; sequential structure, showing the connection between scenes and sets; sequence of actions for experimentation in the atelier; composition of

dramaturgy as a flow of tension, a draft script written for practical investigation; rewritten text after the improvisations.

- ¹⁵ Full experiment available at:
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1256OhbTArDhZwBXKkBB46GpbYR2YmH3j/view?usp=sharing>
- ¹⁶ See face-to-face performance on Nov. 2020 at Teatro do Sesc - Ma, as part of a gradual return to on-site theater performances. Available at
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GFu7V1gFcExRJtmz_JbhE7O63nLeEqZn/view?usp=sharing

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