

# **Tilting at windmills: a case study investigating embodiment, performativity, and dramaturgy**

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To what extent can a state of embodiment in performance challenge and shift the limits of its performative status? To what extent can a performer engage non-performance behaviour in performance? In marking an aporetic instance of a transcendence (of performativity) that remains always already performative, this question served as a strategic platform from where some of the liminal areas of performer process could be explored in a practice-based investigation held by the research ensemble Icarus Performance Project.

This article examines the notion of a dramaturgically informed state of embodiment from the viewpoint of aesthetics. To this effect, the technical and dramaturgical processes of Icarus Project's *La Reina* performance structure are adopted as a case study. Phillip Zarrilli's phenomenological model of the actor's embodied modes of experience frame the discussion on the resultant performative condition. Furthermore, the symbiotic relationship between actor embodiment and structure dramaturgy are proposed as a higher-level instance of what Zarrilli calls the bodymind. In drawing on Jean-François Lyotard's account of the sublime sentiment, the article will also highlight the application of critical theory as an informing device for practitioners and as a methodological tool to better understand aspects of performer practice. Finally, the frame applied in this article is presented both as a model for University practice-based research and as an instrument for the analysis of contemporary performance realities, particularly those which rely on extensive vocal processes.

## Parameters

Set up in Malta in 2001 by the author of this article, Icarus Performance Project is an ongoing research endeavour that investigates performer process within a laboratory context. Though its theatre practice is inspired by the work of Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, and Ingemar Lindh, the philosophy that informs its vision draws on the writings of Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and, especially, Jean-François Lyotard. The Project's first major investigation was a four-year process (2001–2005) that explored embodiment in training and performer by means of five solo-performances (each with its own individual process and dramaturgy), which were then integrated into a choral structure with a shared dramaturgy under the name of *Lamentations of Cain* (Camilleri 2006a: 16–33; Icarus Project 2010). Icarus Project's work is closely associated with practice-as-research activity at the University of Malta and, since 2008, the University of Kent. Principal interests of this collaboration include the exploration of practice-based links between theatre practice and contemporary critical theory.

*La Reina: A Vocal Structure* marked the initial stage of Icarus Project's research on the interface between dramaturgical process and performer embodiment.<sup>1</sup> Taking its cue from the preceding performance's point of arrival (i.e. *Lamentations of Cain*), the Project devised a vocal structure as its point of departure for the new work. A 'vocal structure' is defined as the arrangement of vocal textures and dynamics that govern a sequence of texts, songs, and other forms of vocalization, which is then worked upon to generate physical scores and spatial configurations in a performance structure.

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<sup>1</sup> The presentation of *La Reina* (The Queen) at the Summer University of Performing Arts (Malta) 2006 marked the stage Icarus Project had reached after twelve months of investigation. Directed by Frank Camilleri, *La Reina* was performed by Nicole Bugeja, Karl Cassar, and Frank Camilleri. The research imperatives of *La Reina* were further developed and subsequently presented in 2007 in the performance *RISK: El Riesgo de la Reina* (The Risk of the Queen). More information on *La Reina* and *RISK* can be found on [www.icarusproject.info](http://www.icarusproject.info). The present article focuses on the work that went into the fundamental research of this project.

The composition of *La Reina* was conditioned by two currents that informed each other. One current entailed the technical aspect of constructing a vocal line of songs and texts, whilst the other concerned the subject matter. It is tempting to reduce the distinction between these aspects as the one that pertains to form and content, but it is misleading to see the process in such dualistic terms. The symbiosis that pervaded every level at every stage of the creative process militated against a dualistic approach. In fact, the choice of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* as a dramaturgical point of departure necessarily conditioned the selection and composition of the text (the 'content') as much as the sequence and texture (the 'form') of *La Reina*. The symbiotic relationship between these two currents was an effect of the main research endeavour to explore the implications of intersecting performer and dramaturgical considerations.

The question that emerged during the process is indicative of the Project's objective to problematize the roles of actor performativity and dramaturgical exigencies: *Can a dramaturgical structure lead to a state of embodiment that goes beyond its performative context?* To use an analogy from the text that informed *La Reina*, the problematic condition announced here is reminiscent of the seamlessness that pertains to Don Quixote's belief in knight errantry and his performance as a knight errant. In Cervantes, Don Quixote's belief that the windmills were giants gave rise to and contextualized his actions as he assaulted them – the dramaturgy of his imagination is not shattered even after he crashes into the non-dramaturgical reality of the windmills. The question posed here, therefore, addresses the possibility of creating, dramaturgically, a performance structure that gives rise to and contextualizes actions to an extent that repositions their performative status.

The various problematic issues that accompany this question need to be qualified by the strategic intentions that frame it. Viewed in the light of the Stanislavskian and Grotowskian traditions of the performer's work upon oneself, the question is strategic in

supplying a platform from where performer processes can be explored theoretically. Issues such as (i) the generation of action by way of memory (cultural and personal), intention, and impulse; (ii) the status of action with its Stanislavskian overtones of ‘truth’ (Stanslavski 2008: 152–194) and its Grotowskian echoes of *doing* (Grotowski 1995: 121–131); and (iii) ‘presence’ as a form of organized energy, are all aspects that take on a different shine when viewed from the perspective of a dramaturgy that is conducive to a state of embodiment that draws attention to – by asking questions about – its performative status. Similarly, the hypothesis of a state of embodiment that challenges its performance-behaviour status whilst remaining always already performative, places the concept of performativity in a new dimension. The concept of a mode that shifts its own performative status provides critical theory with an intriguing angle on the concept of palimpsest in problematizing the distinction between ‘erasure’ and ‘transcendence’.

The main strategic intention that this article espouses, however, concerns Jean-François Lyotard’s formulation of the sublime sentiment, specifically the nature of allusion to what he called the ‘unpresentable’ (Lyotard 1984 and Lyotard 1991). In Lyotard’s reading of Immanuel Kant’s aesthetics of the sublime, the unpresentable marks the infinitely large or small, a powerful feeling or a state of being: the universe, humanity, the end of history, the instant, space, the good (Lyotard 1991: 126). These are Ideas, Lyotard writes, of which no presentation is possible (Lyotard 1984: 78). The unpresentable, therefore, defies presentation in resting beyond the capabilities of representational techniques. Lyotard says that in works that belong to an aesthetic of the sublime, there occurs a kind of ‘negative presentation’ where an unpresentable is *alluded to* in the strategic use of representational techniques (Lyotard 1991: 98). This management of representational devices inevitably involves the drawing of attention to their manner of representation which is found to be inadequate, and it is paradoxically in that strategic failure to represent, that allusion to the unpresentable occurs.

The aporetic and problematic constitution of the question posed in the opening sentence of this article is meant to be strategic in a mechanism which is not unlike that of Lyotard's 'negative presentation'. In drawing attention to issues of embodiment and performativity, the question is aimed at facilitating an engagement with an area that concerns practitioners and theoreticians alike. One problem that the question implies is the distinction between 'performative dramaturgy' and 'dramaturgical performativity'. The distinction is tautological and theoretically rarefied only if it is divorced from the practical context that gave it birth; hence the necessity to describe Icarus Project's work on a vocal structure and a shared dramaturgy. Another problematic issue that the question underlines concerns the concept of a dramaturgical mode of embodiment. The seemingly contradictory mind/body status of such a condition will be addressed by a theoretical position that links Lyotard's aesthetics of the sublime with Zarrilli's phenomenological model of the actor's embodied modes of experience. It is by means of the strategic problematization of such issues that the current article strives to explore some of the liminal areas between dramaturgy and performer processes.

In the following two sections, an account of the technical and dramaturgical processes of Icarus Project's *La Reina* performance will describe the aesthetic that made possible the investigation of a dramaturgically informed state of embodiment. Later sections will focus on the nature of this performative condition, provisionally locating it within a phenomenological model of experiential modes.

### **The technical process: constructing a vocal structure**

One of the two currents that were involved in the composition of *La Reina* entailed the technical aspect of constructing a line of songs, text, and other forms of vocalization. This formalistic side of designing a vocal structure was conditioned by one of the Project's main

research objectives: the ongoing endeavour to make use of traditional Maltese sources and, if necessary, to extend the limited Maltese material available. The main strategy employed to extend indigenous material in *La Reina* was a more sophisticated version of the one applied in *Lamentations of Cain* (Camilleri 2006a: 8–15), i.e. that of grafting material from neighbouring cultures onto Maltese components or vice-versa. Malta's geographical position at the heart of the Mediterranean (right between Sicily and North Africa) and its history of foreign occupation (including the Arabs 870–1090, the Knights of St John 1530–1798, and the British 1800–1964), make of it a rich intercultural index that lends itself to such grafting processes.

Traditional Maltese vocal and musical material that was adapted for *La Reina* include the 'Maltija' (Maltese) melody, the 'Bum Bum il-Bieb' (Knock, Knock the Door) song, and the 'Ara Gejja l-Mewt Ghalik' (Death is Coming to Get You) chant. *La Reina* also developed the work on the vocality of the Maltese language as a major research strategy to offset the lack of an indigenous tradition of song. The Maltese language can indeed be considered as that vocal source which unquestionably constitutes the principal repository of the history and memory of the inhabitants of Malta. Though written in Roman script and containing Latin- and English-derived vocabulary, Maltese belongs to the Semitic language family and is basically Arabic in structure, word formation, and vocabulary.

The Project's cultivation of vocality focused on the Semitic quality of the Maltese language. On a primary level, this entailed research on the vocabulary, syntax, and grammar of the language. On a practical level, the work revolved around the pronunciation, intonation, rhythm, cadences, and accents of words and sentence structures. The laboratory research focused extensively on the articulation of vowel and consonant sounds and on the syllabication of words and sentences (i.e. the breaking up of words and sentences into syllables) in order to facilitate work on Semitic-derived phonetics. The engagement of

specific facial muscles and body stances to generate certain vocal textures and dynamics was intended to serve as a bridge linking the work on the Maltese language with a freer, more liberated habitation of performance scores. The psychophysical implications of this vocal work will be addressed later on in the article.

A cross-sectional view of a segment of the vocal structure will illustrate the nature of the grafting procedures employed in *La Reina*. Moreover, the particular segment to be described below also exemplifies the symbiotic relationship between the ‘form’ and ‘content’ of *La Reina* as informed by the Project’s work on *Don Quixote*: the dramaturgical need to refer to the countryside aspect in *Don Quixote* converged with the Project’s commitment to explore indigenous vocal sources by means of a grafting procedure that involved Maltese, Italian, and Arabic vocal and linguistic material.

The countryside context of *Don Quixote*’s peregrinations inspired the elaboration of a vocal pattern based on a traditional countryside song by the Italian folk group *Nuova Compagnia di Canto Popolare*.<sup>2</sup> Apart from the cultural heritage shared by Malta and Italy, *Nuova Compagnia*’s work on traditional rural songs was identified as possible graft material specifically due to the strong resemblance between certain vocal textures in the traditional folk singing of both cultures, no doubt as mediated by Semitic influences. The particular song that was selected led to the formulation of the vocal pattern under review. This vocal pattern was then slightly modified when a text, with Maltese words of Semitic derivation and with references to *Don Quixote*, was written especially for it. The vocal pattern underwent further modification when specific vocal textures were applied to the melody and to the words – this is most evident where an Arabic modality of breaking the voice and elongating the final

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<sup>2</sup> *Nuova Compagnia di Canto Popolare* was set up in 1970 with the intention of making Italian rural traditions accessible to a wider public. The name of their 1992 album, *Medina*, announces the effort to link the diverse cultures that share the Mediterranean as a common factor: ‘Medina’ is the name of an old Neapolitan gate as well as of the Holy City of Islam and of various cities in Spain. It is also the name of Malta’s old capital city.

syllable is employed. The result of this elaboration process was an intricate intercultural weave of an Italian folk melody, Maltese words, and a Semitic vocal texture.

This multi-graft strategy, which grew out of the need to counter the lack of an available repertoire of native Maltese songs, is indicative of the kind of procedures researched by Icarus Project to create vocal patterns that are aimed at exploring modes of embodiment. The process of elaborating a vocal pattern consists of an ongoing reworking modality that continues during the various montage phases until it is combined with other texts and songs within a structure of physical scores and spatial configurations. It is this process of constant reworking and revisiting that is viewed as a form of ‘training’ that cultivates the conditions of possibility of a shift in a state of embodiment that challenges its status as performance behaviour.

In tapping into Maltese and Mediterranean sources by means of a reiterative model of elaboration, the vocality of the *La Reina* structure aimed at enabling performers to investigate modes of embodiment by way of a more engaging habitation of the performance structure. The desire of the Project to work on a native tradition of songs was related to the search for means of verticalizing the performative act by way of minimizing psychophysical blocks in order to obtain as clean a medium as possible for the flow of (bodymind) energy to occur. The Grotowskian undertones of ‘verticalizing the performative act’ (cf. Grotowski 1995: 125) will be tackled later on in the article when the status of physical action in the context of a dramaturgically informed mode of embodiment is discussed.

### **The dramaturgical process (i): contexts and conditions of possibility**

The other main current that conditioned the composition of *La Reina* concerned the subject matter. Following *Lamentations of Cain*, a project which drew from a rich repository of tragic texts (mainly the Old Testament, Greek drama, and Shakespeare), the need was strongly felt



to explore subject material that engaged other areas of human experience. The variety of texts employed in *Lamentations of Cain*, though indicative of a red line, was symptomatic of the multiple origins of the process which had five performers working on five different lines (Camilleri 2006a: 16–33). With *La Reina*, the point of departure was dramaturgically clear and defined to performers and director alike: *Don Quixote* of Cervantes. It was the archaeological immersion into tragedy that paradoxically prepared the Project to tackle the ‘comic’ as a vehicle for a bolder exploration of dramaturgy as an active agent in embodiment processes.

In this article, terms that refer to the formalistic (i.e. representational) aspect of an aesthetic process, such as ‘genre’ and ‘style’, even ‘subject matter’, ‘theme’, and ‘content’, are employed as strategies that make it possible to embark on the Lyotardian project of allusion. The use of terms such as ‘tragedy’ and ‘comedy’, therefore, should be seen as a mechanism that facilitates the endeavour to approach the unrepresentable in different modalities. To avoid the conventional diachronic implications of elements such as ‘plot’ and ‘character development’ that come with denominations like ‘comedy’ and ‘tragedy’, I adopt and adapt Lyotard’s term ‘narrative and stylistic operators’ to indicate the Project’s strategic engagement of certain aspects of performance.<sup>3</sup> A way of circumventing the limitations of form is precisely to inhabit the available structures in a strategic way that draws attention to the fissures in their fabric, in the process activating what Lyotard, in his reading of Kant, called ‘negative presentation’, i.e. the inadequacy of representational devices which gives rise to allusion to that which resists formulation.

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<sup>3</sup> Lyotard’s use of these terms is neutral compared to the strategic weight they are made to bear in this article. See for instance: ‘Joyce allows the unrepresentable to become perceptible in his writing itself, in the signifier. The whole range of available narrative and even stylistic operators is put into play without concern for the unity of the whole, and new operators are tried. The grammar and vocabulary of literary language are no longer accepted as given; rather, they appear as academic form, as rituals originating in piety (as Nietzsche said) which prevent the unrepresentable from being put forward’ (Lyotard 1984: 80–81).

The Project's identification of source material for a shared dramaturgy had to withstand the objective of facilitating an aesthetic of allusion. *Don Quixote* fulfilled (or rather 'informed retrospectively') three main conditions for its adoption. First of all, the desire to explore other areas than the strictly tragic was the aspect that initially drew attention to *Don Quixote*. The well-crafted aesthetic of *Don Quixote* made possible the problematization of the presentable via the border territories of the comic/serious modality and the appearance/reality thematic dynamic in Cervantes's text.

Secondly, the narrative and stylistic operators at play in *Don Quixote* provided material that could be employed in the strategic application of representational devices. As a novel, *Don Quixote* is problematic by twenty-first-century standards because it predates the conventions of the genre as developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The lack of a narrative line that unites the exigencies of plot and character development; the tendency of the narrative to go off at a tangent with the quasi-arbitrary insertion of other narratives; and the irony and parody of the burlesque; all come to function as textual strategies that draw attention to themselves in failing to represent a single, diachronic experience that is concerned with the unity of the whole.

The third aspect is connected with the Project's endeavour to work with indigenous material as a way of grounding and investigating embodiment in performance. The Mediterranean factor and the link between Don Quixote's obsession with chivalry and one of Malta's richest historical periods, the sojourn of the Knights of St John in Malta (1530–1798), made possible an attempt at 'dramaturgical grafting', i.e. the technique of adopting material from a neighbouring culture in order to research and extend the repertoire of a place whose traditions have been lost. It is not a coincidence that one of the traditional songs used in *La Reina* is directly linked with the heritage of the Knights in Malta. It is also not coincidental that the Knights of Malta are mentioned in *Don Quixote* or that in Part II

Cervantes uses the fictitious narrative ploy of having the history of the protagonist survive as a text written by a Moor (i.e. that the story was originally recorded in a Semitic language).

In the following section, an overview of a segment in *La Reina* will illustrate an attempt to disrupt a linear representational aesthetic by the insertion of genre and stylistic operators within a divergent context. This overview will pave the way for a discussion on the impact that such a strategically and collaboratively composed dramaturgy had on the habitation of performance scores. The discussion will conclude with the location of the concept of a dramaturgically informed performative condition in an etymological re-inscription of the term ‘abandonment’.

### **The dramaturgical process (ii): towards a performative condition**

A major dramaturgical strategy that was employed in *La Reina* involved the incorporation of unmodified tragic genre operators within the predominantly comic framework derived from *Don Quixote*. This was made not merely for the sake of aesthetic contrast but mainly to puncture the seamlessness of representation with the purpose of generating conditions for allusion to the unrepresentable to occur. In practice, this mechanism also led to the stimulation of modes of embodiment that drew attention to their manner of occurrence in marking what appeared to be non-performance behaviour in a performance context.

The implementation of the divergent genre strategy in *La Reina* was associated mainly with the work of performer Nicole Bugeja on two poems by Pablo Neruda (‘Lost in the Forest’ and ‘The Weary One’). The non-comic status and the non-Cervantes derivation of these texts were already indicative of a rupture in the dramaturgical weave of the structure. Due to this intervention, unfiltered by devices such as irony or the burlesque, the distress of the damsel in the *La Reina* dramaturgy was neither illusory nor insignificant. Indeed, the

status of the Lady's distress in *La Reina* (see Figure 1) is comparable to Don Quixote's belief – in Cervantes – that he was surrounded by belligerent giants when he attacked the windmills.



*Figure 1: Nicole Bugeja in La Reina (photo by Sandro Spina).*

The juxtaposition of discordant genre operators in *La Reina* echoed the compositional and stylistic differences between Bugeja's work and that of the other two performers (Frank Camilleri and Karl Cassar): whilst Bugeja's score was developed on her own and as a solo piece, those of the male performers were developed in a choral manner according to the technical and dramaturgical demands of the vocal structure. The constitution of the scores of the two male performers in *La Reina*, and also of Bugeja when joining the choral segments of the performance, announced the condition which in *Dramaturgy of a Performance Process I* mark by the phrase 'abandoning physical action':

The 'precision' of the [...] physical structure was not intended in the [...] sense that an action had to be technically precise first and foremost. [The] precision of an action was no longer the *cause* but the *effect* of

the intention to do an action. This realization [which is the result of a long term process of cultivation] is more complex in practice than it sounds in theory [...] The informing principles of the process that led to the new physical lines of actions were thus based on the bare essentials: intentions, impulses, specific physical actions with the benches and other objects [in the scenic space], and reacting to colleagues' actions. If there was no call to do anything, then 'nothing' *was done*. If, on the other hand, this context suggested an intention or a physical reaction, even by way of an evoked memory [or image], then the performer followed it whilst still maintaining the performance's structure and its tempo-rhythm.

(Camilleri 2006: 48; emphasis in the original)

Rather than a rejection, the etymological re-inscription of 'abandonment' as an aporetic form of control achieved by surrender, marks a refined understanding of the practice of physical actions in the tradition of Stanislavski and Grotowski. The current predominant meaning of *abandon* is 'to give in to the control of, surrender to something or someone', but the original meaning of *abandon* was to 'bring under control', from the Latin *a-* ('to' or 'at') and *bandon* ('control', related to 'ban').



Figure 2: Frank Camilleri in *La Reina* (photo by Jeremy de Maria).

## **‘Abandonment’ as a mode of physical action**

The concept of ‘abandonment’ as a mode of physical action is integral to this article’s concern with a manifestation of actor embodiment that is related to an aesthetic of allusion. In *La Reina*, (i) the constitution of a vocal structure, (ii) the ongoing reworking modality of elaboration processes, and (iii) the dramaturgical status of the Lady’s distress and of Quixote’s mindset, all served to situate a mode of physical action that sustained moments of what in this article has been identified as an aporetic state of abandonment. These moments, which shift the process of signification away from representational linearity on to a *performative* and *experiential* mode, function as epiphanies intended to make space for Lyotard’s negative presentation.<sup>4</sup> It is by such means that something which resists presentation becomes, *performatively (during embodiment)*, perceptible in the liminal areas of technique and dramaturgy.

The performer process described here is directly linked to the question posed in the introductory paragraph of this article: *To what extent can a state of embodiment in performance challenge and shift the limits of its performative status?* The ‘transcendence’ (of the performative) implied in such a shift remains always already *performative*, irrespective of how much that status is questioned. The abandonment mode of physical action similarly marks a shift that remains always already *action*. The work on physical actions and performance embodiment that obtained in *Lamentations of Cain* and *La Reina* might convey the impression of being too understated and liberated to the extent that ‘transcendence’ can be

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<sup>4</sup> Lyotard’s formulation of the sublime is related to the concept of eventhood. Though ‘event’ and ‘occurrence’ are problematic terms in Lyotard, they often mark the presence of difference and otherness in the resistance to received conventions; hence the emphasis on the *now* (i.e. the non-preconceived status) of occurrence. In this sense, ‘occurrence’ and ‘event’ partake of the epiphanic in marking the manifestation of an unrepresentable. In ‘Answering the Question’, occurrence is set up as a textual characteristic: ‘The [postmodern] artist and writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*. Hence the fact that work and text have the characters of an *event*’ (Lyotard 1984: 81; emphasis in the original).

mistaken for an ‘erasure’ of action into a phenomenon that resembles choreography or everyday behaviour. This seeming ‘erasure’, which marks one pole of abandonment, is not a neutralization but a *deferment* that is always already active and subject to the demands of the vocal/physical structure. The other pole of abandonment is more perceptible as a mode of embodiment since it coincides with an *ecstatic* form of engagement that draws attention to itself as scenic behaviour in being more explicitly manifested in terms of energy, speed, and size. Then there are, of course, the various shades of gray in between the two poles.

External manifestations of abandonment include, whether in the deferred or the ecstatic mode, the constant engagement of the voice as an active bodymind agent and the untensed-yet-alert quality of the eyes. Both these manifestations are symptomatic of a technique of muscle- and breath-management that in its own turn reflects an aptitude to oversee or control even when not consciously applying that control. Such an ability is reminiscent of the etymological re-reading of ‘abandonment’ which announces a control-by-surrender state that, if viewed out of context, might lead to the misreading of its deferred mode as an ‘erasure’ of action in appearing too daily to qualify as ‘performance embodiment’. This ability, detectable also in the tempo-rhythm sensitivity that characterized the choral actions in *La Reina* (see Figure 3), invested the physical scores with a status that was other than choreographed movement – an otherness that in proving to be elusive partook of the dynamics of allusion and which, in *La Reina*, was enlisted as another device towards an aesthetic of the sublime.



Figure 3: Karl Cassar, Nicole Bugeja, and Frank Camilleri in a choral action in *La Reina* (photo by Jeremy de Maria).

### **Locating a phenomenology of abandonment**

The challenge of addressing a form of embodiment that is conditioned by an aesthetic of allusion can be strategically engaged by a theorized investigation of the performer's experiential mode. Phillip Zarrilli's identification of a post-Merleau-Ponty phenomenology as a methodological tool to better understand the embodied work of the actor (Zarrilli 2009: 50) could go a considerable way in theorizing states of what I have identified as 'abandonment'.

The state of embodiment investigated in *La Reina* could be initially situated in what Zarrilli calls the 'fourth body' or the 'aesthetic outer body', i.e. 'the body constituted by actions/tasks in performance' (2009: 52) where the actor's body is 'dually present for the objective gaze and/or experience of an audience, and as a site of experience for the actor' (2009: 58). However, it would be more accurate to locate this state of performance embodiment somewhere in between the fourth body and, to keep using Zarrilli's model, the



third body ('the aesthetic inner bodymind'). Though inclusive of 'acting/performing per se', the aesthetic inner bodymind is more immediately related to yoga, martial arts and 'similar forms of embodied practice which engage the physical body and attention (mind) in cultivating and attuning both to subtle levels of experience and awareness' (Zarrilli 2009: 55).<sup>5</sup>

Zarrilli's 'chiasmic model of experience and embodiment', which modulates 'betwixt and between one's bodymind and its modes of engaging its own deployment in the score (physical and textual) during training and performance' (2009:60), is indeed a useful tool to locate the phenomenon researched during *La Reina*, but it needs some further refinement to cater also for a performer-embodiment that is dramaturgically informed and conditioned. Attention has already been drawn to the aporetic and problematic status of the question that opens this article, but it was precisely this question that first instigated and then informed Icarus Project's long term research process in *La Reina*. The implication is that however theoretically problematic the question might be, it did lead to a practical research process and outcome. In so doing, it also highlights an instance of a collaborative practice-as-research model that allows practitioners to operate within an academic context.

Zarrilli's model does take dramaturgy into account. He refers to 'performance environment[s] shaped by each specific dramaturgy' and to 'possibilities based on the aesthetic logic of a particular dramaturgy' (2009: 49). But at no point is the possibility of a chiasmic model between creative (dramaturgical) and performer (embodiment) processes envisaged. These two are always kept separate in terms of (i) skills and (ii) application; for instance, 'the potential affordance available within the forms of training per se' (e.g. the

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<sup>5</sup> Icarus Project's research on embodied states of abandonment is complemented by the *Tekhne Sessions* practice which aims at cultivating a bodymind sensitivity that is more immediate to performance exigencies by engaging the space between technical and performance structures. For an account of *Tekhne Sessions*, see my contribution in *The Changing Body Symposium* (Camilleri 2006b) and Icarus Project (2010: [Tekhne Sessions link](#)).

‘generation of a particular kind of awareness or the raising of one’s energy’) and ‘a second set of affordances – those for application, i.e. how one might apply one’s energy/awareness to various performance structures or dramaturgies’ (2009: 49). The aporetic question that guided the *La Reina* process compelled Icarus Project to reconsider these two affordances as one, that is, to see if it was possible to achieve a form of awareness that accrues from an application (e.g., a dramaturgy) that is always already a skill (e.g., a training).

The model or theory of acting that Icarus Project’s investigation implicitly enacts, to use yet another of Zarrilli’s terms (2002: 1–3; 2009:40), can be located somewhere between Grotowski’s work on *doing* and subtle energy in *Art as Vehicle* (Grotowski 1995: 121–133) and Lindh’s practice of collective improvisation as performance (Camilleri 2008a). However, the concept of a dramaturgy that is conducive to a particular state of embodiment is distinct from both Grotowski’s work (which was concerned with the ‘objectivity of ritual’ rather than with theatrical considerations; Grotowski 1995: 122) and Lindh (whose investigation of performance structures was guided by improvisatory considerations). And yet, it is also related to both practitioners through the central position that the voice occupies in their practices. Indeed, another aspect that the *La Reina* case study highlights is that a more extensive account of Zarrilli’s model would necessarily need to consider the role played by the voice in the engagement of a bodymind mechanism within a performance context.

The advantages of considering vocalicity as a key in an account of the bodymind in performance are crucial. Alongside a physical training regime, a cultivated vocal practice extends a practitioner’s aesthetic bodymind awareness to an extent not obtainable solely by a practice of vocal silence. The difficulty of describing vocal action is in part due to its hidden nature that makes of it a partaker of Zarrilli’s second, ‘recessive’, body.<sup>6</sup> The other side of

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<sup>6</sup> In Zarrilli’s model, the ‘recessive’ body is described as ‘the deep, inner, visceral body of corporeal depths which in physical terms includes the mass of internal organs and processes enveloped by the body surface’

this condition is the amenability of vocality to an aesthetic of the sublime: the abstract quality that makes it resistant to figurative cover (and hence to representation) engages an idiom that is always already accessible to allusion. In this sense, a cultivated vocality becomes pivotal for the manifestation of bodymind agency in performance. If it is ‘through the breath [‘the most susceptible of our visceral processes to intentional control’] that the aesthetic inner body reaches and touches both the surface body of exteroception, and also the depth (‘blood’) body of our inner recesses’ (Zarrilli 2009: 56), then it is by means of a cultivated vocality as a higher application of breath that the aesthetic inner body is manifested in performance. Such a manifestation in structures that embrace an aesthetic of the sublime becomes the locus of signification and, in the terms of this article, the locus of allusion to an unrepresentable which partakes also of Zarrilli’s ‘hidden’, ‘subtle’, ‘inner’ bodymind.

The ‘vocal structure’ appellation of *La Reina* and *Lamentations of Cain* is indicative of the centrality of the voice in Icarus Project’s exploration of a form of abandonment/embodiment that could be located in a more far-reaching account of Zarrilli’s aesthetic outer body. The case study of *La Reina* presented in this article can be adopted as a model for the analysis of practices that follow an aesthetic of allusion and which place vocality (text or song) at the core of their work, such as the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards, and Gardzienice Centre of Theatre Practices. Furthermore, Phillip Zarrilli’s model of embodiment and awareness could be extended to cover this article’s discussion on a performative state of abandonment. The overlapping roles played by dramaturgy and the abandonment form of action in *La Reina*’s aesthetic of allusion can also be viewed as a higher-level instance of bodymind process.

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(Zarrilli 2009: 54). Zarrilli’s description of the second body is based on Drew Leder’s account in *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1990).



Figure 4: Karl Cassar in *La Reina* (photo by Sandro Spina).

## Conclusion

The article explored the concept of a dramaturgically informed state of embodiment by way of a practice-based collaborative project that involved practitioners within a university context. The first part of the article tackled the aesthetics of the technical and dramaturgical processes involved in the composition of a performance structure that adopted Jean-François Lyotard's account of the sublime sentiment as a guiding factor. The cultivation of vocality and the compositional principles that emerged from the demands of a processually elaborated structure prompted the possibility of a state of embodiment that challenged its immediate performative and performance context. The case study of Icarus Performance Project's *La Reina: A Vocal Structure* made it possible to theorize such a performative condition by combining Lyotard's aesthetic of the sublime with Phillip Zarrilli's phenomenology of

embodied modes of performer experience. The case study indicated that a composition technique which combined an ongoing modality of reworking within a dramaturgical aesthetic of allusion (rather than representation) was conducive to what the article identified as an embodiment state of performative abandonment that ranges from deferred to ecstatic modes of physical/vocal action.

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