

# **PRACTICE BASED RESEARCH**

**-EXPLORING STAGE PRESENCE  
THROUGH IMAGINATION-**

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## Introducing the topic of study

Stage presence is a multifaceted phenomenon that has a lot of definitions and opinions to it. The ability to command the attention of a theatre audience by the impressiveness of one's manner or appearance, is just one of many definitions of stage presence. (Definition of stage presence, 2019, in English Oxford Dictionary). Some experts (Brown, 1978., Sherman, 2016., Smith, 1889.) argue that training of technique, movement control, lines, is crucial for a good base for presence, while others find already presence as a base and think that the spectator has a fair share in this notion.

The notion that can take the eye of the audience and make it seem that the dancer/s are dancing just for them, appearing otherworldly. "These are elemental powers, greater than any natural strength belonging to humans, called up in the place and the act of performance. Something beyond the natural is being evoked." (Goodall, 2009)

Music and scenography, light and costume design, do not matter at that point when the appearance is radiating, and the audience identifies with the dancers. "To have presence' in theatrical parlance, is to know how to capture the attention of the public and make an impression; it is also to be endowed with a *je ne sais quoi* which triggers an immediate feeling of identification in the spectator, communicating a sense of living elsewhere and in an eternal present." (Pavis, 1987)

In this research from the area of dance, theatre and performativity I will be exploring and analyzing how the notion of presence can be trained and improved with professional dancers whilst using imagination in its process.

Through my research questions;

- What are the main characteristics for stage presence in the live performances? Where I will delve deeper into defining presence and separating the classical theories from the alternative ones.
- How can imagination help in the exercises for stage presence?
- What type of exercises can help the dancer to improve their stage presence?

In the last chapter of my research, within the last two questions, my exploration will culminate with practice-based examples. The information within 3 workshops as a final result of this research will give me more practiced base, firsthand information and help me within the final epilogue. The workshop exercises have the aim to make the meaning of presence aware in the bodies of the dancers through imagination and therefore stimulate and trigger different levels of stage presence.

## Theory section

### Stage presence

Sarah Pini, the author of the thesis "Stage presence in dance a cognitive ecological ethnographic approach", is an interdisciplinary researcher and artist working across the fields of anthropology, phenomenology of the body, performing arts, dance and cognition in skilled performance. Pini created a classic model of stage presence for the base of her research to compare with alternative approaches that she investigates on. Unidirectional model starts from the performer and moves towards the audience. The emphasis is on the performers personal quality and learned practice without any exchange. The model accentuates the passiveness and separation of the audience and assumes that the audience is without agency.

### Cognitive ecological approach of stage presence by Sarah Pini

In "Stage presence in dance a cognitive ecological ethnographic approach" Pini collects and discusses multiple viewpoints and opinions from performing art experts on the topic of presence. She then separates them into different sections based on their interpretation.

Pini suggests addressing stage presence through our cognitive ecological approach to explore how presence in performance emerges in relations to a complex and dynamic environment, that includes audiences and performers co-presence and the socio-cultural situatedness of the performance event. She explores the classical views of stage presence, and finds them limited, with the lack of dynamical explanation of the relationship between the performers and the audience. "I have argued that the classic model is limited because it focuses solely on the individual performer's subjectivity, thereby neglecting the crucial interactive aspects embedded in the performance event." (Pini, 2019.) She proposes shifting the focus from an individual to an interactive environment between the performer, spectator and context through explorations of dancers' lived experience.

„Performer's presence emerges in relation to a complex and dynamic environment, which includes audiences and performers co-presence and the socio-cultural situatedness of the performance event.“ (Pini, 2019, p. 273)

This research is supported by America's first major dance critic of 1927 John Martin who in 1946 wrote as in the audience perspective that "the inherent contagion of bodily movement, which makes the onlooker feel sympathetically in his own musculature the exertions he sees in somebody else's musculature." (Martin quoted in Rounds, 2016, p. 11)

Pini's argument is also backed up with an erudite and prolific writer about dance and esthetics Walter Sorell, who in 1976 describes "kinaesthetic or emotional perception" as "the inexpressible dialogue occurring between dancers and between dancers and the

audience; the experienced sensation over and above what can be reiterated in words." (Sorell quoted Brannigan, 2011, p. 12). Therefore, presence is not only including the dancer and its excellent skills, but overall presence is also connected to the presence of the audience and the context of the performance.

In the book "Performing Sexuality, The Scintillations of Movement" of the author Michelle Boulous Walker, dancer, dance reviewer and philosopher, Philipa Rothfield explains the placement of the audiences eye through the video and live performance: "The video tends to invite observation rather than participation, whereas performance allows for feeling, proximity and corporeal relationship ... being in the same room as someone dancing bristles with corporeal interrelations ... the body of the camera and the flesh of the film replace the viscera of performance." (Rothfield, 1994, p.62).

### **Imagination**

People use imagination across the full range of human experiences. For performers, imagination is used as a private playground and is unavoidably attached to the dance. „The act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality. “(Merriam-Webster, 2018.)

Providing dancers with the imagery and freedom gives them the ability to translate through their own movement understanding. Entertaining mental images in dancers in that way develops different movement qualities and opens a door to limitless creativity. One of the definitions of imagination is "the ability of the mind to be creative or resourceful." (IMAGINATION | Meaning & Definition for UK English, 2022). Taking something that is real and adding fantasy or abstraction to it, in the end, becomes fictional.

Candice Schnurr, an American dancer, teacher and choreographer describes imagination as combining bits of the present reality of her body and snatches of residual sensation from other experiences with a dash of fantasy; „a flourish of the impossible. Sometimes the mind can overpower the blunt facts of physicality. I embody imaginary situations and create a sort of magical realism game for myself. I am no longer limited by the confines of technique, style, or anatomical function. “(Schnurr, 2019.).

Training with imagination helps the dancer to connect with themselves and use otherworldly images. „Imagination provides a structure for individuality even when the dancers move simultaneously. “(Geracht, 2019.)

## One case study

In „Stage presence in dance a cognitive ecological ethnographic approach“ Pini investigates variations of presence in three different dance practices: Contemporary Ballet, in the case of the Ballet National de Marseille and the staging of Emilio Greco’s piece *Passione*, Contact Improvisation and the community event of the Global Underscore 2017 in Italy and Body Weather, a radical movement ideology in Australian dance company De Quincey Co. Pini’s research consists of either participating in the companies programs or observing the training and performances for a longer period of time. Afterwards, she interviews both the performers/dancers and the choreographers/inventors. With the collected information she forms a diagram – a unique model of presence, for every location she visits to help her with better understanding of individuals’ work.

### Research of Sarah Pini:

#### **Variations and practices of presence in Contemporary Ballet, in the case of the Ballet National de Marseille and the staging of Emilio Greco’s piece *Passione*:**

In this chapter, Pini addresses the choreographer’s idiosyncratic methodology to train and transform dancers’ bodies so that they can ‘fully’ reveal their presence on stage. This artistic vision influenced the dancers’ understanding and practice of presence.

Emilio Greco and Pieter C. Scholten’s work created their training method called ‘Double Skin/Double Mind’ (DS/DM), with the goal to shape and form their dancers for specific expressive inflection they wanted to produce. It is based upon four basic principles: Breathing, Jumping, Expanding and Reducing. The method helps the dancer infuse every movement with deeper intention and different physical and mental awareness, to bring forth external manifestations of inner thoughts. The dancer doesn’t become another, it stays as their body and mind fully accessing expressive potential and afterwards manifesting a powerful presence on stage while personally interpreting the role. Pini calls it a “Distributed Enacted” model of presence in Contemporary Ballet.

In Greco’s training and work, presence is a fundament: “... it is something that it is able to grasp a moment or to create a situation, even in the stillness it is very aware, this creates the state of the body of constantly aiming for something, wishing, wanting something, this wishing [is what] makes the body very ambitious, and at the same time very vulnerable, and fragile, it doesn’t make it arrogant. It’s the opposite, it is this state, in this state of wanting, [which] sometimes it can bring some failure, and this is another aspect that I consider essential, the attempt to go, the attempt means that it’s a trial, it’s not sure that you’re going to get it.” (Greco quoted in Pini, 2019, p.162)

Part of the daily routine of the dancers is pushing their bodies to the limit of their physical abilities, when the body takes over the mind, so that they can move beyond their comfort zone. The mental exhaustion brings out the presence through the movement that forces focusing on to the certain movement quality of their character which is the choreographers’

way to communicate with the audience. The audience interprets and translates the movement and with their focused energy helps the performer to focus on their role in addition to subjectively revealing the dancers presence.

Pini also interviewed cast dancers on their opinion on presence which they all agreed that the ability of presence is more than essential part of being a performer. Angel Martinez Hernandez, the dancer in Ballet National de Marseille said that: “Stage presence is the capacity to blend together with energy, with the other dancers, with the atmosphere, with what we have to do, with what is being asked.” (Martinez Hernandez quoted in Pini, 2019, p. 273)

### **Variations and practices of presence in Contact Improvisation:**

Pini went on with her research of presence to a contact improvisation class all the way to Bologna, Italy to Teatro Polivalente Occupato—the Multipurpose Occupied Theatre. In contact improvisation behavior evolves from sensing movement and the practice is open to different levels and various degrees of experience non dancers and dancers.

American dancer and founding participant in contact improvisation Nancy Stark Smith explains skinesphere as “the movement arena inside the boundaries of your skin” (Stark Smith, 2013)

Caterina Mocchiola, international CI dancer and facilitator, explained to Pini the idea of the skinesphere as a space to access presence, where contacters can get into contact with self and with the ground, resting and finding deep replenishing connection: „The skinesphere is the starting point where you drop into your body within, the skinesphere is the boundary of your skin that contains all your sensations, all your emotions, all the experiences you go through. The best way initially is to really connect to what’s happening in yourself, and somehow paying attention, observing, listening to what’s happening inside different sensations, you can go into really fine details, and see what is present within your body, and this is the portal, the access point to what presence is, once you then expand to the group.“ source (Mocchiola quoted in Pini, 2019, p.189.)

The dancers said that their bodily awareness and self-transformation while being in the interaction with other performers and members of the audience is awakening presence within the specific framework of the practice. Meaning that presence isn’t an individual skill.

Pini then proposed an Interkinaesthetic Social model of presence in Contact Improvisation that “illustrates the mutual dynamics that inform presence’s experience in this practice, emerging from social and interkinaesthetic interaction of the elements comprised in this performance ecology.” (Pini, 2019, p. 220)

**Variations and practices of presence in Body Weather, a radical movement ideology in Australian dance company De Quincey Co.:**

In her last chapter, Pini presents the research she conducted during a year-long fieldwork in New South Wales, Australia, taking part in Body Weather classes, workshops and dance improvisation events organized by members of the dance company De Quincey Co in 2016.

Body Weather considers the body of the performer “like a weather system, the body is always changing, as is the space”, it is in a continual exchange with its surroundings, the body is the root of the performance. The practice focuses on the awareness of sensation in the body and its surroundings, that includes an openness to receive and respond to both these elements. BW considers the body as “ever-changing, omni-centred, and completely open to external stimuli”. (Fuller quoted in Pini, 2019, p. 249)

The presence for the dancers is situated in the reciprocal relationship between the landscape and its inhabitants, the performers and the audience, the internal and external stimuli.

Pini proposed an Omnicentral Situated model of presence in Body Weather inspired by Min Tanak. The diagram highlights the body of the performer as the stage, the place where the performance unfolds. Rosemary Candelario, scholar and artist, writes about and makes dances engaged with butoh, ecology, and site-specific performances. In her book *The Routledge Companion to Dance Studies* in the chapter: *Butoh and Body Weather as training for ecological consciousness*, Candelario pointed out that in BW “rather than the body being at the center of its own kinesphere, it is both expanded and dispersed” (Candelario, 2019, p. 50). The audience is considered inseparable from the environment, just as the performer is inseparable from the space she inhabits.

## Second case study

### Imagination and stage presence in the Stanislavsky's method

Konstantin Sergeevich Stanislavsky was a Russian actor, director, and producer as well as the founder of the Moscow Art Theatre that opened in 1898. He is best known for developing his method for acting called the Stanislavsky system.

He constantly observed creative and talented actors and attempted to find common ground amongst them, from this, he started to formulate principles which he felt created these great performers. His method was continuously changing and improving because Stanislavsky's research was endless in finding more efficient ways for the actor to perform.

Stanislavsky found the gap between the physical and mental behavior of the performers on stage, along with the missing physical and mental training preparation in the actor's work on the character. Through the actors' process, the internal emotional choices formed a physicality unoriginal and lost the theatrical form. Physical life and psychological processes that the actor experienced, needed to be explored simultaneously, because they were dependent. This led to Stanislavsky's conclusion that the emotions could be stimulated through physical actions. The aim of the actor then, was to create the appearance of reality/'truth' on stage. In his method, Stanislavsky uses imagination because for him the actor shouldn't believe in the truth of the events on stage, only in the imaginative creation of them.

Creating the appearance of reality for the spectator was solved with the 'Magic If' theory where the performer tried to answer the question, "If I were in ... position, what would I do?" and made the audience believe in 'scenic truth' ("on the plane of imaginative and artistic fiction" – Stanislavski, 1924.) which then was, for Stanislavsky established 'art' on stage.

"There is no such thing as actuality on the stage. Art is a product of the imagination, as the work of a dramatist should be. The aim of the actor should be to use his technique to turn the play into a theatrical reality. In this process imagination plays by far the greatest part." (Stanislavsky, 1934)

It was mandatory for the actors to own a rich source of imagination because the choices made in terms of objectives, physical action and creation of the given circumstances around the character would be more interesting. A role of imagination also laid in filling and discovering the intention behind the texts and dialogues. This would not include speaking, only choices in body posture, movement, gestures, intonation, all called 'subtext', which was the most important variable that spoke to the audience. "It gave the spectators the direction to characters emotions, behavior and thoughts and automatically increased the involvement." (Sawoski, 2018.)

Stanislavski was also intrigued with actors getting distracted by the audience's presence while performing on stage. He did not want the performers to forget about the spectators, because they are the co-creators, but he wanted to neutralize the distraction. After realizing

that actors lost control of their basic capacities on stage and had to be re-taught how to accomplish this in public, he found a way for the actor to intensify the observation and help develop an action with it. Stanislavsky believed that the concentration was the key to re-educating the actor and therefore created 'Circles of Concentration'. The smallest circle was called 'Solitude in Public' where the actor was its centre and in their comfort zone. The attention was divided to „external“, directing the focus on objects outside of the actor, and „internal“ based on the imaginary life of the creator. As the circles would grow bigger the performer would realize that it is not always what you have to say that engages the audience, but how you say it, how you focus out into the space and how you treat the audience as one.

## Studio research methods and processes

Exploring and working on different imaginative states of stage presence through dance improvisation with a group of 9 female dancers in 3 sessions.

The first session was located in a studio space. The first assignment called "Full Presence" was created to stimulate physical and mental presence through the dancing body. Dancers received information about visual images of physical and mental awareness and energy (balance between mind and body, centered energy), the fullness of the movement (the expansion and enlargement of the intention within the skin), the idea about expansion of movement energy beyond the room they are physically active in and the channeling of the focus (direction and awareness of guiding the focus).

Therefore, they were stimulated, on the spot, to take all of their previous resources and knowledge to recall full presence. The dancers commented how they felt the energy level in between the body being balanced and how they experienced being both grounded and "more up" at the same time. The group also said that this task was difficult as being the first one and required a lot of energy.

The second exercise was to imagine how would it feel to be "Physically Present Only" but not mentally and express that with the body. Thinking that they "left the mind" somewhere else but were only here with their physical frame. The dancers said that the energy was more grounding and heavier but would not expand further than their own personal bubble.

Third assignment for dancers' improvisation was imagining how would it feel like to only be "Mentally Present" not physically. The imagination task was embodying the mind. The energy state felt more upward and in the "higher" flow which almost made it impossible to touch or feel the ground level. Describing it as almost holy, the dancers did not seem to have any difficulties relating with the topic.

„Presence and absence are simple opposites of each other.“ (Cruz quoted in Goodall, 2008, p.197) therefore the next assignment called "No Presence" was an experiment exercise to see how the body would feel if it would intentionally delete and forget all the previous information and just completely relax and let go of expectations and fears. Realistically impossible state was hard to imagine, and the dancers explained how this state felt like being "all over the place" because of the unknown feeling of not being here at all.

The last exercise was once again "Full Presence", physically and mentally aware to feel the journey made through the workshop and to experience all the changes, therefore gain new knowledge about the body and about the self. The studio was filled with more force and the dancers sensed each other now more than in the start. The group entered the togetherness unintentionally because they were influenced by mutual energy.

As Angel Martinez-Hernandez, one of the dancers of the Ballet National de Marseille told Pini:

“Stage presence is the capacity to blend together with energy, with the other dancers, with the atmosphere, with what we have to do, with what is being asked”. (Martinez-Hernandez for Pini, 2019, p.273)

The contrast between the two states (last two assignments) was made intentionally to feel the bigger gap and with the goal of sensing more changes in the body and mind in comparison with the beginning state. The dancers explained how that helped their body to increase the power of thought and awareness.

A week later the change of location from the studio into a theater was made because of curiosity of how that will affect the body. The space has the empty auditorium which can be used for practicing the projection of stage presence further and wider than in a smaller studio space. I began with the same order of exercises and before the last task, “Full Presence”, I introduced a new exercise with focus and projection in space. The task was to focus on one place and fully project the energy there while staying fully present.

This time the dancers said that improvising was harder, because of the unfamiliar environment they were in. They commented on how they had to use more force in order to transfer the energy into the deeper space and how back in the studio they already knew where they are and where they have to project. More inspiration came in the familiar studio space, said one dancer, while the other one commented on the use of extra energy to show themselves and be more visible because of the thought that the movement looks smaller in the big theater.

Through the two workshops I found that music can be very misleading in the process, so I decided to pick the exact same music composition for the next workshop which was placed back in the studio space.

Since working with imagination, the movement options are limitless. Therefore, I decided to add and switch some of the tasks making it more familiar and closer to the dancers. This time, the first task of the third session was try out a part of Stanislavsky’s method “Circles of Concentration” with my twist on it. For the first exercise the dancers were asked to go “inside” themselves and imagine that the only space existing is their own body. This task was done with eyes closed to give the dancers room to explore within and also not allowing them to focus on an object/audience outside but only inside. The task gave a good warm up into reconnecting with the body and a sense of calmness. One of the dancers said that they were: “focusing on different movement qualities and not where I am going, while hearing the music better. But I was fearing of my balance because our eyes were closed, and I didn’t have any control over it.”

The second task was opening the circle of concentration into giving energy to only one more person. The goal was to engage and focus on each other and share the created dynamic environment. The dancers commented how this required equal presence from both sides to achieve the exercise but was very fun to do in pairs.

In the third task the circle of concentration was the largest and the aim was to imagine it being bigger than the room. The possibilities were then limitless and could include

connecting with different people, self, objects... Since the options were infinite, the confusion in dancers was bigger, subsequently changing their focus often and interrupting other colleagues focus when trying to connect. Even though it brought a feeling of awareness in overall connection with the space and people in it, it was a bit chaotic to go through different choices. "The order of focusing was very systematic: I focused on my arm and then on the wall, after than I focused on all the dancers, it felt free, it felt big, but I am glad I did it in order to avoid the chaos in my mind."

The next exercise was not connected with Stanislavsky's method but only with imagination "Think of when you saw a present performer – which elements make them present – use those elements and try to dance with them to achieve that presence in your body."

"When I was thinking about this person I remembered her look and her movement, which I would then repeat to recall her presence." Another dancer added "I imagined that that person was here, and that I would make the same movements as her, I followed her and if she touched me I would move with her." I, as a spectator, felt bigger concentration and peacefulness in dancers but not in a way of them thinking what to do next but more of a concentration in the moment, which gave the dancers more inspiration in what they will do next without them thinking. The last dancer said that she was trying to copy the body awareness of the person she was imagining which resulted in calmness and listening to her own body while being fully aware of the surroundings.

The last exercises "Full Presence" was the same as in the last two workshops to see the made progress. The dancers showed growth in understanding their body and imagination. They felt more comfortable and secure because the exercise was familiar to them. "I felt my presence becoming bigger and larger form the begging until the end of the workshop. And in the end I didn't have to think about which movement ill do next, it came naturally, I was more relaxed."

## Conclusion

“From imagination to stage presence” is an ever-developing model/method I created through the research of how you can train and improve stage presence through imagination. The exercises explore how presence can emerge in relation to multifaced environment including performers imagination, space, music and performers and audiences co-presence, which are, at the same time, the main characteristics of stage presence. All these factors play a big role in creating the setting for the dancers to experience and practice their skill.

As performance scholar Jane Goodall observed, the phenomenon of stage presence is “intrinsically mutable and dynamic, a product of social construction, shaped by the entanglements of mutually informing cultural, aesthetic, scientific, and political ideas across time.” (Goodall, 2008). Meaning that the dancer/performer constantly builds its presence and experience not only through movement exercises but also throughout their daily life, their views and observations, opinions and fascinations.

Very often the dancers are asked to portray a character during their performance or tell a story through their movement. Certain dance styles insist that the dancers are also actors and within the development of the dance scene and industry. Today, a good acting toolkit became a necessity for professional dancers. Therefore, I was inspired by Stanislavsky’s method in creating my own exercises to shape and form different concertation and awareness in dancers’ bodies through imagination. In his work, he considers imagination as one of the most important factors for performers. Even if his method was initially created for actors only, with his thought that the art is imaginations product, he joins all artists and performers in one and his approach could be inspiring to all.

Imagination helps the dancers move otherworldly and, in the exercises I have set, brings them closer to the topic of the research while obligating the performers to move in specific ways which consequently creates, not only unique movement qualities, but also inner work and understanding of presence.

My method “From imagination to stage presence” in the last shape and form firstly includes three different tasks inspired by Stanislavsky’s method – The Circles of Concentration, which is also used to warm up the body and start to play with the imagination. Containing of widening the personal circle until expansion beyond the room. The tasks continue into reminiscing and evoking the feeling of the person which inspires the individual by its presence and ends with the exercise where full presence is required.

The individual path could be worked on personally or in groups and it is an everlasting process of discovering and producing through imagination and desire.

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