

# The Itinerant Teacher and PETE: An Encounter between Theater People

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## Abstract

The article shares the experience of working with the Portland Experimental Theater Ensemble (PETE), a theater collective based in Oregon, USA. The activities developed there were defined by the post-doctoral project, *The Itinerant Teacher: exchanges and learning in methodological paths*. The article analyzes the similarities and differences between the methodologies for creating and learning theater, developed with groups of professional and non-professional actors. The Institute of Contemporary Performance (ICP) offers short and long-term training courses for professional actors and actresses, and the *Between You and Me* (BYAM) program works with school-age students. Despite having different target audiences and goals, ICP and BYAM use similar methodological propositions, which are the product of PETE's own artistic experiences. In this explanation, we can identify the artistic-pedagogical elements that are possibly determining factors in theater teacher training.

**Keywords:** methodology; theater; learning; teaching; experience.

*The Itinerant Professor: exchanges and learnings in methodological paths* was a research carried out in the context of a postdoctoral internship, between March 2023 and July 2024, with the Graduate Program in Performing Arts – PPGCEN, of the University of Brasília – UnB, whose main objective was to get in contact with different theater teachers, who work with elementary and high school students, and with their learning methodologies. On the other hand, considering that these methodological choices are usually crossed by the artistic experiences of teachers, the other objective, not less important of the project, was to experiment with different representation techniques that can be included in theater teaching practices.

It can be said that the essence, the fundamental part of this research, was to promote good encounters between theater teachers, considering that:

[...] encounters are centrally about the maintenance, production and reworking of difference; that encounters fundamentally frame urban experiences and subjectivities; that encounters produce and encompass multiple temporal registers; and that encounters offer points of possible transformation and an opening to change. These four concerns shed light on how we might better understand encounters as distinct forms of relation (Wilson & Darling, 2016, p.2)

Thus, the meetings intended by the *Itinerant teacher* considered the opportunities for transformation made possible by the relationships built with all the different theater professionals with whom I contacted. In this way, I was able to learn from everyone's subjectivities and shared experiences.

Another aspect related to the idea of establishing relationships is associated with the thought of Martin Buber (2001), when considering that relationships are a connection established between two people, which can constitute a material or mental sphere, and it is also in the relationship that these people can be transformed. Thus, the itinerancy intended here was a journey through paths full of potentially revitalizing encounters with regard to theatrical practices.

Considering the goals of the project, the meeting with PETE (*Portland Experimental Theatre Ensemble*)<sup>1</sup>, and its members Amber Whitehall, Cristi Miles, Jacob Coleman, Rebecca Lingafelter<sup>2</sup> as well as some other collaborators, exceeded all expectations, enabling the development of the research both from my perspective as an actress and as a teacher. And yet, it inspired this essay in order to establish a reflection on how an encounter can happen between people from different cultures, with theater as a common goal, and how such an encounter can be transformative.

PETE is a theater company whose mission is to "Propose new ways of being through creative inquiry and performance." (PETE, Mission, 2023) One of the ways chosen by the group to achieve this mission is to jointly train different acting techniques and teach and share their work with other artists.



Image 1 – Amber Whitehall, Rebecca Lingafelter, Cristi Miles, Jacob Coleman and Mônica Mello (image by the author)

In this sense, they created the *Institute for Contemporary Performance – ICP* as a training center where they offer short and long term training for actors and actresses. In

<sup>1</sup> For more information about the company: <https://www.petensemble.org/home>.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the participants of the company: <https://www.petensemble.org/people>.

addition, the group leads the program *Between You and Me: A High School Devising Residency – BYAM*, which involves two high schools in Portland-OR, during an eight-week artistic-pedagogical process of activities aimed at a creative result.

It was precisely in this “intermediate space”, between the professional training of actors and actresses and the non-professional program with schools, that I perceived a potent opportunity for the research project *The itinerant teacher*. As soon as I had my first contact with the group, I understood that its mission coincided not only with this project, but also with the perspectives of the research group I have led in Brazil<sup>3</sup>, PETECA, whose main investigative approach refers to the possible dialogues between different acting techniques and teaching and learning methodologies in theater.

At first, I attended the two-week *Suzuki/Viewpoints* intensive summer workshop and then I followed part of the BYAM program and long-term ICP training for two months. My perspective as a theater teacher and university professor, who works especially with theater teachers in training, is to reflect on both experiences, observing how they can contribute to the practice of theater teachers. To enrich this reflection, I also brought the perception of PETE members and facilitators who worked directly with high school students and who were former ICP participants. These voices will be present in this text through the interviews that were carried out personally with each one, at PETE’s headquarters and in the schools where the BYAM project was carried out, and whose content was previously authorized for the production of this article. This entire data collection process for the research, including the experience of the workshop, the observations of the ICP and BYAM, as well as the interviews, was carried out from July to October 2023, in the city of Portland, OR, USA.

## **The Suzuki/Viewpoints Workshop**

The experience with the *Suzuki/Viewpoints* workshop brought memories from a certain period of my training as an actress and theater teacher at the University of Brasília, with the research group *Actor: craft and tradition. In search of an identity*<sup>4</sup>. When I tried acting practices based on the Vindenés *Bro/The Bridges of the Winds*<sup>5</sup>. It turns out that even though they are different trainings, I could, once again, perceive that the goal of an actor/actress training is more to experience principles of acting, than to achieve perfect shapes with the body. There are

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<sup>3</sup> Pedagogia de Teatro no Cariri – PETECA (Pedagogia Teatral no Cariri) is a research group at the Universidade Regional do Cariri. Instagram @grupopeteca

<sup>4</sup> Actor: craft and tradition. In search of an identity, was a project developed under the Institutional Scientific Initiation Scholarship Program (PIBIC) at the University of Brasília, for which I was a scholarship holder from 1996 to 1998. The project was supervised by professors Rita de Almeida Castro and Ana Cristina Galvão, as well as Adriana Mariz, who holds a master’s degree in theater.

<sup>5</sup> Vindenés *Bro/The Bridge of Winds* has been an educational project directed by Iben Nagel Rasmussen since 1989. The group is made up of artists from Latin America, Europe and China. Iben is an actress, director, teacher and writer and was the first actress to join Odin Teatret after its arrival in Holstebro in 1966.” Available at: <https://bridgeofwinds.com>. Accessed on: December 25, 2023.

certainly some qualities of our bodies in training that are achieved by daily practice, but these qualities have not only to do with physical capacities, but also with perceptions and cognitive capacities developed by practice. In this sense, despite having only had two weeks of training with PETE, it was still possible to observe initial transformations in the body and in the presence and also in the relationships with space and with other bodies, but above all in self-perception.

This training was, for many years, an important part of the practice of *SITI Company*<sup>6</sup>, a collective created by Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki, and even after the recent closure of the company's activities, the training remains alive, especially through the practices carried out by SITI's alumni community, such as PETE's members.

The *Suzuki* Method of actor training was:

Developed by internationally acclaimed director Tadashi Suzuki and the Suzuki Company of Toga, the Suzuki Method's principle concern is with restoring the wholeness of the human body to the theatrical context and uncovering the actor's innate expressive abilities. A rigorous physical discipline drawn from such diverse influences as ballet, traditional Japanese and Greek theater, and martial arts, the training seeks to heighten the actor's emotional and physical power and commitment to each moment on the stage. Attention is on the lower body and a vocabulary of footwork, sharpening the actor's breath control and concentration. (SITI, Training, 2023)

And the Viewpoints:

[...] is a technique of improvisation that grew out of the post-modern dance world. It was first articulated by choreographer Mary Overlie who broke down the two dominant issues performers deal with – time and space – into six categories, the Six Viewpoints. Since that time the SITI Company has continued to research and expand her original work. Terminology is drawn as much from the visual art world as live performance. The language of the Viewpoints allows the individual artist a way to practice observing the present moment with increasing sensitivity, and to respond with greater range. The Viewpoints also allows a group of actors to function together spontaneously and intuitively and to generate bold, theatrical work quickly. It develops flexibility, articulation, and strength in movement for both the individual and ensemble. (SITI, Training, 2023)

Even if it could be practiced separately, SITI Company and its alumni understand that their characteristics are complementary, and greater success can be achieved in preparing actors/actresses with this *Suzuki/Viewpoints* duo. Thus, the routine proposed by PETE during the workshop was to divide the four hours of daily training in order to practice each of the techniques every day. Thus, it is possible to perceive how each practice affects the other, enhancing the training. For example, while in *Suzuki* there are strict postures and movements to be repeated, the practice of *Viewpoints* consists of improvisation work based on principles, which do not have a pre-established form.

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<sup>6</sup> About the SITI Company: <https://siti.org/>.

On the other hand, the complementarity of these two techniques does not mean that they are opposites, as both practices have common characteristics that can be developed in different ways. In this sense, “stillness” is present in both practices, but is performed in particular ways. While in *Suzuki* I felt the stillness as a suspension of the movement that maintains the previous position, as if time stopped until the next command, in *Viewpoints* the stillness, as I experienced it, is more like an emptiness, to the extent that as movement is restored, the body can assume the form it wants.

Another aspect that shows its complementarity is how some elements of one practice can be used directly in the other, for example, Bogart said that the names of the *Viewpoints* principles “constitute a language for talking about what happens onstage” (2005, p. 8.), and while training *Suzuki*, PETE’s members regularly use principles such as Time and Duration as instructions for the actors, helping them in the execution of each position and movement.

The notions of Focus and the instructions on it during the workshop were diverse, but not divergent, in a way that each concept does not exclude the other. The focus in *Suzuki* can be a physical spot on the wall or a projection of the imagination, but it typically maintains a stable direction of vision and we can perceive it from the audience. It can also be compared to an arrow heading towards its target. With *Viewpoints*, we have *Soft Focus*, “a physical state in which the eyes are relaxed so that, rather than looking at a specific object or person, the individual allows visual information to come to her/him. [...] the individual expands the range of awareness, especially peripherally.” (Bogart and Landau, 2005, p. 23).

The aspects pointed out so far, corroborating the complementary perspective of *Suzuki* and *Viewpoints*, reflect perceptions achieved both during the workshop and in the ICP training observations, thus having two different perspectives of the same practice.

I had to consider my personal perspective from a physical condition, which did not allow me to fully perform all the movements in the *Suzuki* practice and how this generated frustration, while providing me with a personal challenge. These circumstances required an effort to identify the aspects I could develop with this work and invest in them, rather than focusing on the limitations. In this regard, I can say that each of PETE’s members, when teaching us the technique, reinforced the idea that, even if the movement has a specific form and should be pursued, it is necessary to consider the subjectivity of each practitioner, of each body in the room performing the movement. And this idea was also reinforced by the presence of them actively participating in the classes, so that we could see that each one has their own characteristics performing the same technique, even if they have been training together for so long. In my view, this is one of the most important attributes of teaching, that is, encouraging and valuing students to embrace their personal characteristics, thus building their own artistic identity.

I understood, however, that this challenging perspective was not just about me, because there were other people in the workshop with different goals and skills and each one had to deal with their difficulties, which became clear as we carried out the practices together. There were actors and actresses of many different ages and stage experiences, some had never practiced *Suzuki* as myself and others already knew the technique but had not practiced it recently, in addition, of course, to those who practiced frequently with PETE. Therefore, the room was full of people with different origins, backgrounds and even ethnicities, but there, we were a group of artists with a common goal: to be present. Because of the way they organized the classes, there were times when they divided the group into two, so that not only did we perform the practice being observed by the other half of participants, but we could also observe them. When I was training, I found myself connected to the group most of the time, and when I observed the group, I could perceive a sense of unity from those who were training. The execution of *Suzuki*'s movements as a collective provided an effective quality of presence and uniqueness, as intended with a group of actors/actresses on stage.

In *Suzuki*'s training, one of the most prominent aspects was attention to focus. It was quite a challenge to make the moves by staying focused somewhere "outside," which, as stated earlier, could be just a real spot on the wall or something projected from my imagination: a place, a person, an event that helped me direct my intention, rather than keeping me excessively focused on myself. In this respect, the *Suzuki* practice helps us to improve our inner and outer connections at the same time, because we are intensely asked to strengthen these connections to achieve success in the practice.

Another very functional perspective of actor/actress work that can be developed by training is the relationship with the physical body and voice. The *Suzuki* technique proposes that we take "impossible" paths with our body and, at the same time, say a previously memorized text. By managing our entire body in the proposed way, we can truly create an organic, deeply connected movement and voice. The energy mobilized bodily by body positions and movements in the *Suzuki* practice was reflected in the power of the actor/actress's voice. Once, while I was observing an ICP class, Amber said that: The voice in *Suzuki* will be the result of what is happening in my body and my relationship with this outer 'thing' that we call focus.<sup>7</sup>

Another aspect of *Suzuki*'s training that can be highlighted is its rigor, the way actors/actresses seek precision when moving, talking, maintaining focus and correct posture with the positions of the spine and hands and the direction of vision. Even if at times they seemed really "impossible paths" for the body, the commitment of the actors/actresses was felt most of the time, which seems to be one of the gains or results of this practice. It seems

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<sup>7</sup> Free notes taken during observations of ICP training.

like an invitation for actors/actresses to create a real commitment to their craft. I see it as an internal and external struggle to not give up, to keep the body present, at the same time performing the required movements, speaking the text when requested and maintaining an appropriate posture.

With regard to *Viewpoints*, the theater group's workshop was not my first experience with the technique, however, the first contact was through the reading of the book by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau. As a practical guide, the book really allows readers to apply it in a practical way, following only the instructions of the authors. Thus, I used it to develop my doctoral<sup>8</sup> research and teach classes, without having a previous opportunity to learn from the masters of the practice, the actors/actresses of SITI Company. As such, PETE's workshop was an opportunity to experience the technique as an apprentice and renew my understanding of the practice and teaching of *Viewpoints*.

In this sense, I must speak of the "flow", considering that this was the most constant instruction given by PETE's members during the practice of *Viewpoints*. Thinking about it now, it can be said that this simple word means a lot in this work. Firstly, it is about improvising and how this should be carried out as a continuum, which means that the actor/actress should not stop to think about what they are doing or what they are going to do, but just continue, letting the actions emerge from the ongoing movement itself, from their bodies and not be built on a very rational intention. The flow can also be understood as an overflow, because during its practice we can perceive the energy of the group in the classroom going beyond its walls, as in a flood, filling all spaces and beyond them, thus reaching a great vitality.

During the practice, when instructors asked us to "be in the flow," it gave us a strong sense of freedom. We had a few more instructions like "Walk through the doors into the empty spaces," "Experience stillness," "Follow someone," and these guidelines gave us directions but not specific ways to play, so we were free to throw our bodies through the training room space and keep them moving or even silent.

From the beginning to the end of the workshop, we experienced the flow. In the first section, PETE's members didn't specifically talk about the principles that make up the technique, we just learned to be in the flow. Then they started introducing the *Viewpoints* one by one, as I used to do when I trained or taught workshops. With this in mind, I understood that when we had already experienced the freedom of flow and realized its possibilities related to improvisation, as soon as we began to apply each *Viewpoint*, it was as if we had already prepared a field to plant these ideas, or even, it is as if each *Viewpoint* – Time, Duration, Repetition, Kinaesthetic Response, Topography, Spatial Relations, Gesture, Form and

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<sup>8</sup> The thesis resulting from the doctorate is available at the UFBA Thesis Depository: <https://repositorio.ufba.br/handle/ri/18115>.

Architecture<sup>9</sup> – were potentially already present and the flow allowed them to manifest themselves. I would say that the flow is, in addition to an indication of movement, a state of overflow for the actor/actress, because everything can manifest itself in it.

In addition to the flow, another aspect that stands out in this practice was pointed out by Cristi Miles: “*Viewpoints* is about asking questions”<sup>10</sup>, questions such as: “How fast can you move?; What shapes can you build with your body?; How far can you be from someone else?; How close and how far?; How does space affect you?” By posing these and other questions proposed by the practice of *Viewpoints*, actors/actresses can, in a way, analyze themselves, becoming aware of their own bodies in an expressive perspective. The idea is precisely to analyze the actions, not in the sense of becoming excessively self-critical running the risk of blocking oneself in one’s artistic doing, but in the sense of perceiving options and possibilities, expanding consciousness, experiencing differences, opening oneself to the diversity of expressive possibilities from the body to the scene.

The entire workshop, including *Suzuki* and *Viewpoints* techniques, is strategic for actors/actresses’s work, because it gives the opportunity to increasingly develop self-observation from a psychophysical perspective. These practices can be considered appropriate to the expression of Constantin Stanislavski (1994), “Work on oneself”, used by the Russian director to refer to the necessary preparation of actors/actresses, which he considered essential for his craft. However, in addition to this more internalized focus of self-perception, the training analyzed here also contributes to the relationship of these actors/actresses with their peers and with the space that surrounds them, and the interaction with otherness is no less essential for the stage than the inner perspective of these professionals. This proposition of working on oneself is the basis of what has come to be called actor/actress training, which differs completely from the sports notion, but is significantly close to the thought of Eugenio Barba, having been widely discussed among scholars of Theatrical Anthropology<sup>11</sup>.

In this regard, even if PETE’s members have not mentioned it, it can be said, considering the principles of this field of study, that the practices of *Suzuki* and *Viewpoints* are extra-daily trainings. This is clear when we’re faced with Eugenio Barba’s conceptualization of body techniques: “Everyday body techniques are generally characterized by the principle of minimum effort, that is, achieving maximum performance with minimum energy use. The *extra-daily techniques* are based, on the contrary, on the waste of energy.” (Barba, 2009, p 34, emphasis added). The Italian director also uses the notion of “dilated body” to refer to the body of the actor/actress when working in this extra-daily perspective, in the sense of expanding or

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<sup>9</sup> Viewpoints, whenever cited in the text, will be started with a capital letter to differentiate them from the same terms used in another context.

<sup>10</sup> Free notes taken during observations of ICP training.

<sup>11</sup> On Theatre Anthropology read the articles in the Journal of Theatre Anthropology: <https://jta.ista-online.org/index>.

dilating the energy of this body, filling the space as in the “flow” and getting where he/she wants as in the “focus”.

Indeed, the themes here addressed about the workshop given by the Portland Experimental Theater Ensemble are far more exhaustive than what is discussed in this text. Much of what was experienced during this period reaches and impacts one in ways that may not fit into an academic reflection resulting from an investigative experience. However, the body has changed, the perspectives on theater making have shifted from their accommodations, as well as the view on the practices of teaching-learning theater. Once again, considering the aforementioned quote by Wilson and Darling, the potential of this meeting is clear when it “offers points of possible transformation and an openness to change”.

As previously stated, upon completion of the workshop, I had the opportunity to follow PETE’s work with professional actors/actresses (ICP) for two months and high school students (BYAM) for five weeks. Even though it was only a part of each project, it was enough to have a general understanding of both processes. Thus, I will describe the observed aspects, seeking to identify the methodological approximations and distances between the two contexts, emphasizing from this point of the text the contributions of this investigation to the project *The itinerant teacher*, in a pedagogical dialogue between acting and theater teaching practices.

## **BYAM and ICP**

*Between You and Me: A High School Devising Residency* – BYAM, as its name implies, is a program aimed at high school students, linked to the theater classes of the participating schools and their teachers, integrating the school curriculum. Each year, PETE invites two schools and assigns two facilitators to each school in order to run the project with students, in an eight-week process that concludes with a presentation by each school. During this process, students from both schools have opportunities to come together to design scenic materials for their presentations. Among the members of the PETE collective, Cristi Miles and Jacob Coleman are responsible for managing BYAM.

The Institute for Contemporary Performance – ICP is a center with different types of training, however, most of the time when PETE members refer to ICP, they are talking about the long-term training offered annually:

ICP’s one-year certificate program is a rigorous laboratory and incubator for new performance intended for artists who are both practical and visionary, experimental and pragmatic. Participants are engaged with faculty on a daily basis with questions relevant to contemporary performance. (PETE, Training, 2023)

I spent about two months following the ICP 2023/2024 class in the fall, and the participating artists experimented with different practices considered to be a common vocabulary that they shared allowing communication in the creation processes. In addition to

the *Suzuki/Viewpoints* training, I was able to follow the practices of Clown, Alexander Technique, *Maps of Space* and *Devising*.

In working with Clown, the intention was for participants to develop a personal physical vocabulary, exposing their individual psychological presentation, creating individual and group clown scenes. With Alexander Technique, the purpose was for each one to appropriate the principles of this technique, shared by Cristi Miles with the group, in order to develop the ability to become aware and release stereotyped body conditionings, making their performance more true and powerful. As for the work called *Maps of Space*, conducted by Amber Whitehall, it focuses on the development of skills for improvisational movements *in on-site* composition processes. Finally, integrating all the proposed practices, we have *Devising*, which is a collaborative creation process, involving construction tools and *feedback*, resulting in performances that somehow reflect the totality of the learning built throughout the training year. (PETE, Training, 2023) So, in a seasonally organized process, and as stated on the collective's website:

In Spring Term (Jan-May), in addition to continued training, participants become a producing company under faculty mentorship. They develop, rehearse and fully produce a festival of new, site specific performance, with the goal of integrating the trainings into the creation of new work. (SITI, Training, 2023)

In this way, this long-term training allows the participating artists not only to learn and train their techniques, but also to have a complete experience of professional artistic performance in the city of Portland-OR, in constant dialogue with the course faculty, which includes members of the collective and professionals invited to work specific practices of theatrical making, including the complete performance production process.

The current ICP coordinator, Amber Whitehall, recalls that:

When we started our 10-month program we would like to go deeper and be able to ask some questions without the pressure of having to produce a fully completed performance. It would be like experimenting, investigating and having the time and space without having the deadline of a show. And this has to do with the group's interest in learning processes. (Whitehall, 2023, verbal information)

These two lines of work of the collective, ICP and BYAM, are deeply connected, in particular by two aspects that stand out. First, due to the proximity of the methodological propositions, since in both contexts the trajectories of creation are outlined by PETE and, in addition, due to the fact that the facilitators that the collective sends to the schools, aiming at direct work with the students, are always actors/actresses who have already completed the ten months of training offered by the ICP.

In 2023, the schools invited by PETE to participate in BYAM were Roosevelt High School and Franklin High School, both in Portland-OR. The facilitators who worked were: Olivia

Mathews and Kai Hynes at Roosevelt and Ki Starnes and Sofia Marks at Franklin, and the teachers at each school were, respectively, Mrs. Jo Lane and Mr. Josh Forsythe. Thus, before the start of the program in schools, Jacob, Cristi, the facilitators and the theater teachers of the schools, all together, organized the schedule and discussed the practices, considering the stages of the process as a whole. And, in the course of the process, the planning of the classes was defined between facilitators and teachers based on the techniques currently trained by the collective, with emphasis on *Viewpoints* and Composition, and applying some of its concepts of scenic creation such as “*vice list*”<sup>12</sup>, “Composition Assignments” and the “triad: Question, Anchor and Structure”, which will be explained throughout this text.

I had the opportunity to follow BYAM-2023 for five of its eight weeks and observed all classes during this period. In both schools, classes took place twice a week, and it was an optional activity, meaning students chose to be there. Typically, each drama teacher would begin classes by inviting a more experienced student to be the guide for stretching and warming up. After that, the facilitators took over the leadership of the class. They started the work with a recurring proposal to PETE’s different practices, that is, they asked everyone to say their names, their pronomes<sup>13</sup> and something else that varied in each class, having, in general, a very subjective perspective, such as: a play they found interesting, a color that could express how they were feeling that day, a favorite food or an animal that represented them. Information that could stimulate the imagination and, at the same time, value their individual perceptions and feelings. Next, they proposed a game or a few minutes of *Viewpoints* practice as creative warm-up.

From this moment on, the facilitators began to apply PETE’s specific methodology in the sense of scenic creation, proposing to the students the elaboration of a composition. The main idea was to give students a list of criteria that would guide their creative process. For example, the first Composition Assignment Ki and Sofia gave Franklin High School students was called *The First Life on Land* and included the following criteria: “use only the color blue; images of thought; cacophony of sighs; avoid sadness; play with the sounds of the mind; fast time and play with plans, focus or accessories.”

As can be seen, these criteria sound like ideas, images, thoughts to instigate the students’ imagination, while building this situation or story suggested by the given title. They are sometimes called “ingredients”, as if the Composition Assignment were a recipe, even though in the end, for each group, the “recipe” generated very different results. Even if some of these ingredients gave a concrete instruction such as “Quick time”, “play with plans” or “vary the focus”, linked to the practice of *Viewpoints*, none of them determined specific or aesthetic

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<sup>12</sup> There is no translation for the term “vice list”, as it is a neologism proposed by the group.

<sup>13</sup> Saying the pronouns is a way for the students to reinforce their gender identity to the group.

actions or events. In this way, each group was able to create a completely different composition, even though they had the same ingredients.

After the groups made their presentations to the whole class, the facilitators began to ask them questions such as: “What caught your attention?”; “What did you see in the scene?” or “What happened on stage?” and recording the responses of the students, creating what they called a *vice list*. This consists of a list of words and expressions with which the facilitators tried to synthesize the answers given by the students. In Image 2 there is an example of a *vice list*<sup>14</sup> prepared by Olivia and Kay on October 20, 2023, the 3rd week of class.

At the beginning of the first class, the facilitators made their own proposal, but after the first presentation and this first *vice list*, the students began to appropriate themselves of their own process, because the *vice list* reflected their perceptions about what they themselves created on the scene. And in a second moment, in the next class, the facilitators proposed a new Composition Assignment from the *vice list* of the previous class, bringing back the themes and elements that the students had brought in their creation process. These procedures of proposing a composition and talking about it, observing what they created and what really interested the group to be maintained in the next proposition, became a kind of creative routine. In each class, students had the opportunity to create, think and talk about their creation. And, step by step, they gathered scenic materials that could be used in their final presentations.

This methodological proposal, in my view, creates an opportunity for adolescents to be heard and express their ideas and feelings in a creative, yet organized and guided way, generating a very liberating experience, with its own trajectory to be followed. I highlight this liberating aspect because it is very recurrent in North American schools, in general, to limit theater teaching to the production of a known dramatic text and, sometimes, imposed on

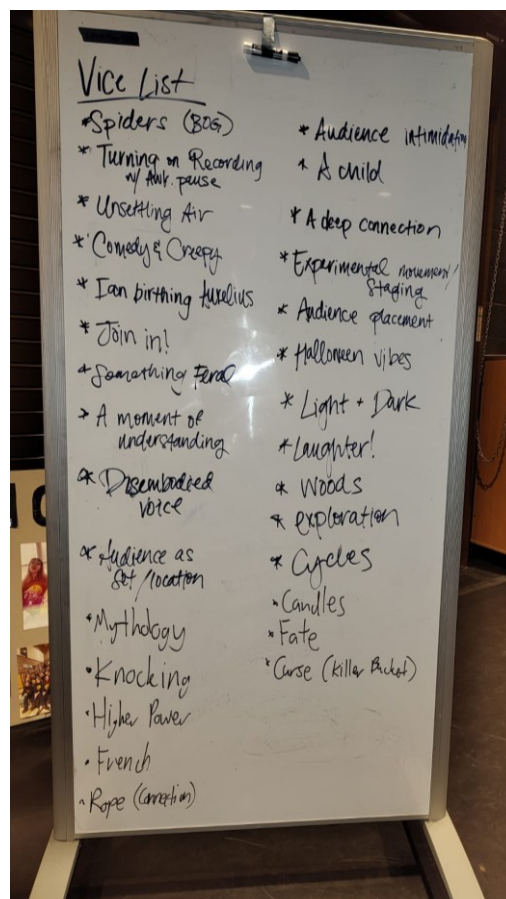


Image 2 – Example of vice List resulting from questions related to presentations (image by the author)

<sup>14</sup> Spiders (Bog); Turning or Recording; Unsettling air; Comedy and Creepy; I am Birthing to Aurelius; Join in; Something feral; A moment of understanding; Disembodied voice; Audience as set/location; Mythology; Knocking; Higher power; French; Rope (connection); Audience intimidation; A child; A deep connection; Experimental movement/ staging; Audience placement; Halloween vibes; Light + Dark; Laughter; Woods; Exploration; Cycles; Candles; Fate; Curse (Killer Bucket).

students, who participate in castings to be chosen for a role, then memorize their lines, learn their movements on stage and participate in a final presentation. I am not saying that it is not good to put these young people in touch with a good dramatic text, as part of their knowledge building process on theatrical language, but experiencing a situation where their voices are heard seems to be fundamental, especially among youth.

Commenting on the context and moment of life of these young people, facilitator Olivia Mathews considers that:

They are in a very critical part of their education in general, where they're constantly being influenced and taking in information from all sides everywhere. After theater they're going to math or and they just came from history and there's so much going on in their brains and in their lives. Whenever I walk into class they surprise me at least two or three times per class and I feel that this is very inspiring. (Mathews, 2023, verbal information)

Sofia Marks, on the other hand, points out that she would like to provide students at schools with the same opportunity she had when experiencing the training with PETE:

Just like PETE gave me permission to be my bigger self, I'd like to give them permission by saying, "Hey, you can do it, you have the ability to do something and make something beautiful and it doesn't have to be perfect, there's no such thing as perfect. So it just feels like I'm learning all the time." (Marks, 2023, verbal information)

Kai Hynes shares Sofia's thoughts when considering that: "PETE's program has forced me and now forces or encourages students to think about what they want to talk about, about what's affecting their lives and their communities and their circles." (Hynes, 2023, verbal information). It is clear from the perspective of the facilitators the need to be able to provide the participants of the BYAM program with this space for personal expression and the understanding that there is real value in the voice of these young people and in their artistic potential. And we highlight the fact that this feeling results from their own experience with the group and from their experiences as artists who know the value of these opportunities to be in contact with themselves and to be able to overflow, beyond themselves, their impressions about the world and their lives.

Now, returning to the description of the method, another activity proposal was presented to the BYAM participants called: Artistic Lineage. The idea was for each one to think about the path that brought them to a drama class and organize a small performance about it. In my opinion, this was an essential part of the process, in order to recognize the students as true artists and encourage them to think about their own relationship with Art and, at the same time, show them how their own stories and feelings can be good material for the conception of shows.

The same proposal was launched with the ICP participants, with some different characteristics and I had the opportunity to follow this process. First, PETE's actress Amber

Whitehal spoke of her own artistic lineage. She used a sheet of paper and, as she spoke, she registered a few things on that sheet of paper, moments and information about her trajectory in her artistic life, creating a kind of map or tree representing her narrative. He then asked the ICP participants to work in pairs and share their own journey with each other, also registering the process. These maps/trees would be the basis on which they would create their artistic lineages, as a performance to be presented to everyone within a few weeks. They also received a document entitled, *Artistic Lineage Composition Assignment*, with further instructions of which they should be aware:

five minutes long; consider the beginning, middle and end; consider the placement and proximity of the audience; consider the specific location; consider the time of day and the light; consider the sound environment and rehearse your performance in the same space in which you will share it, at least once.<sup>15</sup>

What we can see from the two experiences is that the idea was the same, that is, to create a performance on the Artistic Lineage, but the detail of the ICP instructions reflects how much more complex the work was for these professional artists, compared to the proposal made to high school students. Therefore, the methodology for preparing the scenic material is the same, and the results are not being discussed here, but the issue is that the expected involvement of a professional actor/actress, considering the time spent on the activity and the complexity of the production, is certainly different. And yet it could be said that the goal was the same, as well as the method for achieving it. Based on these considerations, what was perceived is that each facilitator functioned as a “filter” to adapt and simplify, in a positive way, the complex process they had already experienced in the ICP. But still, they continued to apply the same methodology they learned from PETE.

Returning once again to the BYAM process, as I said earlier, during the 8 weeks of the program, participants from the Roosevelt and Franklin schools had the opportunity to work together on two occasions, which occurred under the direct direction of Cristi and Jacob, as well as artists invited to work with the students, such as Vin Shambry and Matthew Kerrigan<sup>16</sup>. These meetings were much longer than regular classes.

Two aspects drew attention during the observation of these meetings. Firstly, it was the enrichment of the whole process by bringing these two groups of students from different realities together and allowing them to experience their diversity together. As a researcher, following both school’s classes before this meeting, I was able to perceive the differences on the themes of the compositions, on the bodies on stage and on their attitudes and, regardless

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<sup>15</sup> These instructions were shared with all ICP participants via Google Drive.

<sup>16</sup> Vin Shambry and Matthew Kerrigan are, respectively the artistic and administrative directors of Historic Alberta House, an event space that focuses on giving voice to the community impacted by social, economic and racial injustices in Oregon. For more information visit: <https://www.albertahouse.org/about-1>.

of the result of these meetings, I believe that the richness of this space of exchange and learning experienced by young people was unquestionable.

The other aspect highlighted was that, during the second meeting, instead of PETE's members creating a Composition Assignment, they asked the students from each school to create a Composition Assignment for each other. Thus, in addition to interacting more deeply by sharing their ideas and intentions with each other, the proposal suggests that the method applied could contribute to expanding the autonomy of these students, by instigating them to appropriate themselves of the tools of the proposed practice. When the activity proposals arrive ready, even if they can be mobilizing for the students, they may not reach really significant aspects for these young people, however, if it is up to them to think about the criteria, the ingredients of the Composition, it will certainly be a more challenging activity and the understanding of the process will be expanded.

Considering the ICP program, there were many more techniques, classes and lessons to learn<sup>17</sup>, not only due to the complexity and duration of this training, compared to BYAM, but also due to its objectives. Seeking to understand the scope of the methodology in such different contexts, a group of concepts was identified with which the facilitators worked with the high school participants, the triad: "Questions, Anchor and Structure". In the material shared by PETE with the ICP participants, there is a document entitled *Creation Class: Guiding Principles and Structure*. In this text, concepts also used by the facilitators of BYAM were shared. This material signed by Jacob and Rebecca explains the three concepts in PETE's context:

Question (what questions drives the project), Anchor (What source material or inspiration is feeding the content of the project), and Structure (What structure or framework am I hanging the individual events on the project on- Three Act structure, A Circus structure, a TV SitCom structure, a funeral mass structure, etc.)<sup>18</sup>

As we can see, these are three fundamental aspects of scenic design to give more clarity about the proposed creation process: Question, Anchor and Structure. And as I referred to the facilitators' role as a "filter", they sought to make these concepts as accessible as possible. One perspective on the notion of Question suggested by Olivia and Kay, at the Roosevelt School, was "what is being sought." Thus, the Question, as I understood it, gives students a goal to think about and helps them decide what they will show in the scene. The Anchor, in turn, "as a source of material or inspiration" was explained as a possible "starting point", in which case it could be a text, an image or also an idea or a word. And with regard to the Structure, they defined it as "the bones of the piece", "the shape of the piece" and "the way to relate to the audience".

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<sup>17</sup> For more information about the ICP curriculum, go to: <https://www.petensemble.org/curriculum>.

<sup>18</sup> These instructions were shared with all ICP participants via Google Drive.

Putting it all together: Question, Anchor, Structure, Composition Assignment, here in Image 3<sup>19</sup> we can see a complete example of the set of instructions given in a class at Roosevelt High School. For this class, students were asked to create a Composition by choosing a Question, an Anchor, and a Structure from those listed on the board. All these options were suggested by the students themselves or taken from a *vice list* previously created. As the class was divided into groups that would make their choices, the performances followed very different paths. In fact, the only factors in common were the ingredients that should be included, but this did not determine similarities between the scenes created.

As previously stated, these practices ended up constituting a routine of creation, reflection and registration. In the materials intended for the formation of the long-term class of the ICP, this initial stage is called *Devising*, that is, the moment of creation, of conception: "The conception is made through a dialectical process of making and naming."<sup>20</sup> Among the professional artists, a director is designated, who will not act, thus being able to bring an outside look. Thus, in the "doing" stage, the group of actors/actresses work by themselves, but the nomination procedures would be

carried out by the designated director, preferably in dialogue with the actors. Based on this, it is understood that the facilitators acted as directors in the *High School* classes.

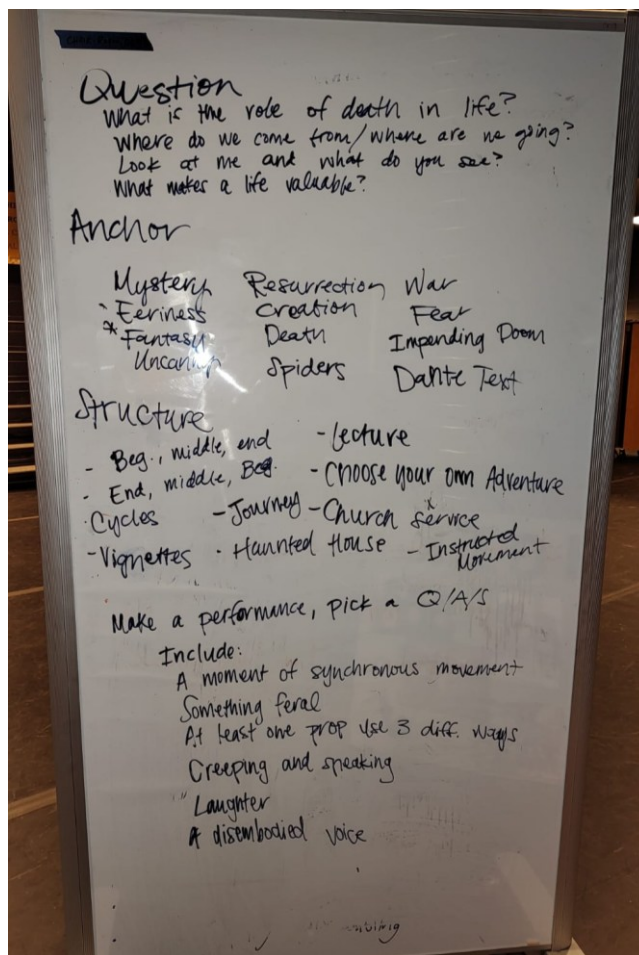


Image 3 – Instructions for creating a Composition, on October 20, 2023, 3rd week of class (image by the author)

<sup>19</sup> "Question: What is the role of death in life? Where do we come from/ Where are we going? Look at me and what do you see? What makes a life valuable?

**Anchor:** Mystery; Eeriness; Fantasy; uncanny; Resurrection; creation; death; spiders; war; fear; impending doom; Dante text.

**Structure:** Beginning, Middle, End; End, Middle, Beginning; Cycles; Vignettes; Lecture; Choose your own adventure; Journey; Church; Haunted house; Instructed movement.

Make a performance, pick a Q/A/S

**Include:** A moment of synchronous movement; Something feral; At least one prop used in 3 different ways; Creeping and speaking; Laughter; A disembodied voice."

<sup>20</sup> Materials for the exclusive use of ICP participants via Google Drive.

As I did not have the opportunity to observe this same process with the ICP, I consider here only a theoretical perspective of how it should be, but with regard to the process in BYAM, what was observed was a constant dialogue, in a way that the resulting materials really reflected the ideas of the students. In the “doing” stage, each student group created a scene and presented it, and in the “naming” stage there was already a selection process, in a collective way, as everyone was called to expose their impressions, but, on the other hand, defined by facilitators/directors who in a way “translated” the students’ speech into words and/or phrases that represented a synthesis of what they said.

Throughout the meetings in which this creation routine took place, the repetition of the elements present in the *vice lists* and in the criteria of the Composition Assignment, already outlined the trends in the construction of a potential final presentation, and the scenic materials were also becoming recurrent. Certainly, there was not yet a complete drawing of the work to be shared publicly, but in the process these trends that would give shape to a final performance were already clearly seen<sup>21</sup>.

Considering once again the methodology in different contexts – the ICP and BYAM – when asked about the similarities and methodological differences between both works, both PETE members and facilitators pointed out significant aspects.

Kai Haynes highlights an aspect that he considers distinct between his two experiences: as an actor at ICP and as a teacher at BYAM. Kai comments that during his formative year with PETE he was fully encouraged to identify and reaffirm his personal artistic identity, his own aesthetics and, as a result, the works were mostly proposed individually for each participant, which generated a powerful space for each one’s voice. With the group of BYAM students, the work proposals were constantly focused on the groups. He recognizes the need in the school context to encourage collective work, but emphasizes the fact that from this perspective young people had fewer opportunities to express their individual thoughts or even to identify more personalized paths in creative processes. On the other hand, there is a caveat in this regard, as this was not the first edition of the program in which the actor participated, he then recalled that in this 2023 edition there was already a proposal to individually create a presentation for the Artistic Lineage that, as seen previously, consists of a totally individualized activity.

Jacob Coleman highlighted the aspect of personal investment, of life, of time that differs between the participants of the ICP and BYAM, but also points out that there is also a significant difference between the level of involvement and commitment of the artists who experience the 10-month training and the artists themselves who make up the group. So, the

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<sup>21</sup> As the observation only took place during the first five weeks of the program and immediately afterwards, a three-week strike broke out, unfortunately, BYAM 2023 could not present the final results.

main difference pointed out is not in the methodological practices carried out aiming at the creative process, but in the engagement and availability that can generate different degrees of complexity and deepening in the accomplishment of the works.

Resuming the whole process in a more summarized way, the scenic creation methodology identified in the practices proposed by PETE, – *Devising* – that is, the path of conception, can be described as a routine of creation, reflection and registration processes, which start from ideas and images informed through the so-called Composition Assignment, resulting in scenic presentations carried out among the participants of the process, who in addition to presenting themselves, enjoy the scenes of others. These scenic results generate dialogues, which will be synthesized in the so-called *vice lists*, which highlight the main perceptions resulting from the enjoyment of the scenes. Following the process, the *vice lists* will be the starting point for the elaboration of new Composition Assignment, resulting in more scenic materials. Thus, a cycle of creation of materials for the elaboration of a final work is established.

As a second layer of complexification of the process, the concepts of – Question, Anchor and Structure – are presented, which are constituents of the Composition Assignment themselves and collaborate in the understanding of each aspect to be observed by the participants, so that they are clear about what they want to show and how they want to show it and use these elements as support in their creative processes.

In addition to all this process that takes place as a group, the company also proposes the realization of the Artistic Lineages that give the members of the BYAM program the opportunity to share elements that constitute their artistic individuality, giving space to their unique voice.

In my view, some of the great values of the observed practice are in the systematized way in which the proposal is organized, the richness of possible results to be achieved in its application and the constant dialogue between artistic and pedagogical activities. Thus, considering the interest of this research in professionals who apply different methodologies in their teaching practices, a final reflection on and with the professionals involved in the process described here follows.

## **Teaching artists and their teaching and learning processes**

It is my professional interest and the objective of the research of “*The itinerant teacher*” to think about the training and methodological choices of theater teachers, recognized by this hybrid term “artist-teacher”, which evokes the idea of an integration of perspectives and not the division between two areas of knowledge in a watertight way, namely, Art and Pedagogy. In this sense, the PETECA research group in Crato-Ceará and the PETE collective in Portland-

Oregon share this notion that being an actor/actress and being a theater teacher consists of a unique “Being” crossed by the different experiences intertwined with each other.

When Amber Whitehall spoke in an interview about PETE’s trajectory, she recalled that:

[What] we all shared when we first met was the feeling of having a value of a continued training, but it wasn’t just about making performances and performing [...] We all had taught that training as well. So we came together as teaching artists who wanted to train together and I have a sense that the teaching is an extension of our creative process and it helps us to continue to be learning (Whitehall, 2023, verbal information)

Rebecca Lingafelter reinforced this idea of conceiving herself as a unit by saying : “The way that I am in a rehearsal room as a director or performer is very similar to the way I am as a teacher or when I am in my most integrated self.” (2023, verbal information) Rebecca also considered that those who inspired her to feel this way were exactly her mentors from SITI Company and her graduate school teachers, because they were active artists teaching what they do.

When these actresses talk about being “One” as an artist and teacher, they mainly refer to their work as teachers in higher education and in the short or long-term trainings offered by the ICP, that is, to the teaching of professionals or students who are preparing to be theater professionals. The facilitators, on the other hand, make direct reference to teaching the students of the *High Schools* in which they develop the BYAM program and the relations of this performance with their experiences in the ICP.

In this sense, a significant comment was made by Olivia, from her work at Roosevelt School:

What feels true about learning this process and teaching it, is that it is always a practice of the open-mindedness, the receptiveness. And as a teacher, it’s something I have to remind myself to do, practice and stay inside of, when I’m teaching. And so that’s something I also find really similar to how I started with this work, and how I feel like we usually start with them. And I feel like my number one goal always is to help them start to conceive of themselves as these beings that have so much to offer to any process, especially theater, but any process in life. (Mathews, 2023, verbal information)

It is clear with what Olívia shared, that the experience lived in the training process orchestrated by PETE provided her with a very firm foundation, with principles that she can adopt and develop when acting as a teacher. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that among the group’s goals on their website about this training mentioned here, there is nothing specific about teaching:

The purpose of this training and this research is threefold:

- To cultivate new artists rooted in a strong foundation of training, history, and theory in a contemporary context.
- To create an environment in which the participating artists can begin to define an individual aesthetic.
- To feed collaborators capable of communicating radical thought in space, time and body. (PETE, Institute, 2024)

But in highlighting this fact, we are not defending the idea that it is not necessary to provide specific training to theater teachers, but that this training needs to be deeply connected with artistic experiences, since from these experiences a teacher is trained and sensitized towards the experience of the others who will be guided in a genuine artistic journey.

Thinking about these overcrossings, one of the most significant aspects about PETE's creative process methodology is its potential to permeate different contexts, adapting itself to different learning situations. In this regard, it can be considered that the journeys of each artist in the group provide one or more points of view throughout the work and as each one was crossed by different experiences in their professional life trajectories, the work they develop today is based on the result of the different encounters they experienced in their paths. However, this trajectory continues and the group, as a living organism, remains open to becoming.

In the time I spent with the Portland Experimental Theatre Ensemble, it was clear how permeable everyone was to the new experiences encouraged by the meetings with each artist who joins the group, either as a guest to teach classes, or someone interested in the training offered by the group, or as young students of BYAM. As Cris Marks suggests about the relationships in general experienced by the group, these are not hierarchical but horizontal, enabling this openness to otherness. And yet, Jacob Coleman shares not only his perception of the relationship between being an artist and a teacher, but also the way he feeds back into his experiences:

For us there is a real back-and-forth between 'teaching and doing' and that all feels increasingly. I would say that the more we teach and the more that stuff expands, the more it becomes clear that it's all part of it and it feeds us in a lot of ways: the people we meet, the things we learn, and the inquiry that we're engaged in. (Coleman, 2023, verbal information)

This availability for the experience provided by the encounters, in my opinion, is an essential characteristic for a continuous learning process necessary for every artist and teacher. And, in this sense, one can resort to the thought of the Spanish pedagogue Jorge Larrosa Bondía with regard to the notion of experience:

The subject of the experience is defined not by his activity, but by his passivity, by his receptivity, by his availability, by his openness. It is, however, a passivity prior to the opposition between active and passive, a passivity made of passion, suffering, patience, attention, as a first receptivity, as a fundamental availability, as an essential openness. (2002, p.23)

The perspective of a passive but attentive availability, necessary for the full use of experience, refers to the thought of anthropologist Tim Ingold when reflecting on the notion of education, when he considers that: “[...] education is, in fact, a practice of attention to things and the world. In short, I want to prove that education is a practice of attention, not transmission—that it is through attention that knowledge is generated and continued.” (Ingold, 2018, p. 2)

We then come to education, which we have been close to since the beginning of this investigation, and the specific focus here is on the ways of learning to do and teach theater. In this regard, thinking in terms of the path taken and the encounters recently experienced by this *Itinerant teacher*, the notion of “attentive availability” understood here defines what is conceived as posture, choice and perspective in the conception of the artist-teacher. In this sense, the practices proposed by PETE give us strong clues as to what comes close to this idea. Amber Whitehall attentive to listening beyond the training room as broader learning:

When we are in that room, during the period of time we can be there, that specific group of people, in that specific room, opens their listening to what is emerging between them. And after we experience this practice, we believe we can take it to other contexts, in other areas of our lives and practice listening to what is emerging anywhere. (Whitehall, 2023, verbal information)

And Cristi Miles highlights the power of choice and presence:

It's about how we want to be in the world and how we can... I think I speak for all of us, how can we face the atrocities and horrors of the world and still carry on with hope, through what we learn by being artists and teachers and being present, always coming back to being present. (Miles, 2023, verbal information)

Perhaps, once again, thinking about theater making and even teaching/learning theater ends up reaching the same point – presence –, followed by other terms of reference, other words that help us to realize the scope of this artistic language and its practices in general: availability, attention, experience, choices, imagination, vision, creation...

Finally, it should be said that the Encounter took place, in the most different possible dimensions: artistic, affective, emotional, academic, ethical, human, ethnic, cultural, etc. The learnings were full, the effective crossings resulting in transformations of perspectives, approaches, thoughts, in addition to those that we were unable to measure or even enumerate.

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