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The Performing Arts as a Method for Public Humanities

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Abstract

The performing arts are, by definition, a public enterprise. Public Humanities are invested in sharing information publicly, reliably, and making it easy to find. Music, dance, theatre, and live art each have their own disciplinary methods and theories that do not necessarily align with those in the humanities. This essay explores how public works and public history projects can intersect with the performing arts. I posit that principles from the performing arts can be applied to public-facing work in the humanities and other disciplines. I detail seven key components of performing arts research and art-making and demonstrate how they can apply to Public Humanities.

Keywords: performance methods; performing arts; practice as research; public history; theater

The performing arts are, by definition, a public enterprise. Whether those publics are local, regional, international, and/or digital, a performance needs an audience. Public Humanities are invested in sharing information publicly, reliably, and making it easy to find. It seems to follow, then, that a public humanities for the performing arts is a double register.

Performing arts departments and programs include those in theatre, dance, music, and live art, and other forms of artistic practice that now extend to the digital arts. Performing arts departments in the United States began in the nineteenth century, many starting out as extra-curricular clubs on university campuses. Music education gained popularity by the mid-nineteenth century, as school bands quickly became a prominent feature of the university.¹ Dance departments grew out of Physical Education departments, whereas Theater departments often grew out of literary and speech studies. Anne Berkeley notes three twentieth-century waves of the growth of theater departments: after the 1925 founding of a Department of Drama at Yale University, after World War II and the growth of universities across the country, and again in the 1970s with the changing demographics in the post-Civil Rights era.² The live and digital arts developed later, oftentimes as specialized programs that developed into their own disciplines.

¹ “History of Music Education in the United States” 2024.

² Berkeley 1997, 117.

As performing arts departments developed from clubs to electives to professional schools within established liberal arts institutions, the practice-based performing arts were often considered distinct from theoretically and historically grounded humanities departments. This perception maintains today and is often articulated in hierarchical terms, with theory understood as distinct from praxis and artistry perceived as less intellectually rigorous than qualitative research.³ The premise of the Public Humanities—to extend the work of the university beyond those who have access to enter—shares its mandate with the performing arts in seeking new and community audiences.

Public humanities work has at times misvalued the work of performing arts scholars and scholarship. Indeed, the performing arts have their own theoretical frameworks, methods, and methodologies that do not require alignment with humanities disciplines. Public-facing humanities initiatives and public history projects that engage the performing arts—whether from within the arts community, from the humanities, or elsewhere—offer a possibility for extending the work of the performing arts in new ways.

I work across Theatre, English, and Latinx Studies. I have taught in both the English and Theater departments, and I hold two degrees each in both disciplines as well as a Certificate in Gender and Sexuality Studies. It was after a decade-long career in strategic planning and finance that I pursued graduate education in the humanities and arts, and in the fifteen years of my academic career, I have been continuously surprised by disciplinary differences. For example, in an English department, dramaturgy, museum cards, audience resource guides, and in-house theater publications are considered public scholarship. In Theatre, they are just part of your workload.

In this essay, I will detail seven foundational principles of the performing arts that can be applied to public-facing work in the humanities and other disciplines. I offer examples based on my own practice and research, as well as examples from others in the field.

1. Collaboration is essential

Collaboration is the foundation of the performing arts. A solo dance performance requires the work of multiple people, including a stage manager, choreographer, lighting designer, costume designer, sound designer, front of house staff, and props manager. A small play will require those plus a director, intimacy director, vocal coach, dramaturg, and more. Last year, *Los Angeles Times* theater critic Charles McNulty revealed that collaboration was the inspiration for his career as a theater critic. He was inspired by several major playwrights of his youth, stating, “It was the combined power of literature and acting, and in particular the way private experience could be lifted into a public forum, that drew me to take up the theater as a main subject of writing.”⁴ The collaboration between the written word, musical notation, and/or movement design and its embodied practice is what constitutes the performing arts. Audiences will attend the same opera, play, or dance performed by different artists and in different spaces; it is the nuances and artistry of each collaboration that audiences seek when they attend familiar stories such as *La Bohème*, *Machinal*, or the ballet version of *Don Quixote*. Public-facing work for the performing arts must take collaboration—with artists, scholars, and community members—as the premise, not the outcome, of a project.

³ Barrett 2007, 1–13.

⁴ McNulty 2024.

2. Praxis is theory

The melding of theory and practice constitutes new methods for gathering data, methodologies by which to analyze the data, and therefore new forms of knowing. The histories of Practice as Research (PaR) vary across countries and arts disciplines, and pedagogies for PaR have shaped researchers who are the “both/and” of the scholar/artist.⁵ A crucial component of PaR is the understanding of art-making as a theoretical and critical practice, not just the subject or object of research for theorists and critics who are not involved in art-making.

Take, for example, the transformation of the methods of engaging with the works of William Shakespeare at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC. The theater that was built within the Folger structure only had its first full production of a play in 1949, seventeen years after the archive opened in 1932. In 1970, shows resumed on a regular basis, but “the newly renamed and reinvigorated Folger Theatre” only got its start in the 1990s.⁶ Today, the Folger Theatre and the Folger Institute run programs both separately and together. As a scholar/artist, I participated on several panels during the 2024 Reading Room Festival, which included staged readings of new works, panels with scholars and artists in conversation, and PaR workshops with actors and scholars working through scenes to test dramaturgical possibilities. Last fall, I served as the dramaturg on the Folger Theatre’s production of *Romeo and Juliet*, in which the Capulets were of Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican heritage. My scholarship on bilingual and Latinx Shakespearean performance enabled me to take part in the creative process, and through the creative process, I advanced my theorization of how bilingualism functions onstage; these learnings have become crucial to my recent academic writing. In this way, more than ninety years after its opening, the Folger Theatre is a successful theater, and it functions as a site of PaR, even though “It was never intended as a performing space.”⁷

3. Critical generosity

Critical generosity is a term introduced by performance scholar David Román and further developed by Jill Dolan.⁸ Dolan argues that to be critically generous means to take into account a work’s “production context and resources, its history and goals, and that you consider its players and producers as people laboring to create meaning with the materials at hand. The terms *good* and *bad* have no purchase here.”⁹

A public humanities for the performing arts does not mean that an academic acts as a cultural critic. It is not about offering a valuation based on whether a performance meets certain political objectives. A public humanities for the performing arts must be founded on an understanding of art as a conversation, an ethics of dramaturgy, and the offering of performance criticism as a form of feedback.¹⁰ A public humanities for the performing arts must also embed the practice of listening—to the art and to the people who make the art.

For example, the online theater platform, *HowlRound*, was launched in 2011 as a resource for artists built on a commons model, “a social structure that invites open participation around

⁵ Nelson 2013, 48–70.

⁶ Poltrack 2024.

⁷ Rose 1991.

⁸ Román 1998. See also Dolan 2013.

⁹ Dolan 2012, xxxvii.

¹⁰ For methods of productive feedback, see Lerman and Borstel 2003.

shared values.”¹¹ It invites essays, performance livestreams, video roundtables, and book launches, and supports new initiatives. The term “HowlRound” connotes “a condition—one that results in a howling noise when sound from a loudspeaker is fed back into a microphone. It’s an amplified feedback loop.”¹² *HowlRound* exemplifies the practice of critical generosity through all its media, prioritizing “Generosity and abundance” as the first of its five core values and publishing articles that are antithetical to judgment-based criticism and instead promoting work that advances the conversation on art-making.¹³

4. The art is the politics

Since the first Ethnic Studies department in the United States was launched at San Francisco State University in 1969, Ethnic Studies departments and programs have had as part of their social justice mission to serve as bridges from the academy to the community.¹⁴ While the performing arts engage different localities, they may not have an explicit socially engaged mission. This does not mean that the arts can be apolitical; the choice of a show, a season, an artist, and a production concept are all decisions that engage with and comment on the contemporary moment. Oftentimes, public history and public works projects for the performing arts are more likely to be funded and greenlit if they have a clear social justice component, whether that is diversifying Shakespeare, teaching music to inner-city public schoolchildren, or creating an accessible resource for students from minoritized groups. Such projects may advance their stated objectives, but they may also overshadow initiatives from those within minoritized communities that have been doing work within their community that does not proclaim “social justice” in its description.

The 2018 digital project, “Dunham’s Data: Katherine Dunham and Digital Methods for Dance Historical Inquiry” placed crucial resources and data online about the famed choreographer and social activist, Katherine Dunham. The creators of the site “manually curate[d] datasets from a large body of undigitized primary source print materials that Dunham herself chose to save, held by seven archives across the United States.”¹⁵ This public history project for dance performance and research does not have a stated social justice component; the bringing together of information, sharing it widely, and making it accessible online is a political act. As Joanna Dee Das writes, “Dunham was a cultural worker in the struggle for racial justice in the twentieth century,” and the scholars who committed to a public history project of her work illuminated Dunham’s politics, not theirs.¹⁶

5. There may not be a definitive result

To claim process, rather than product, as a result or achievement will likely not result in an outstanding annual review. Universities want measurable results, and artists do too; the awards, ratings, sold-out audiences, and profits are clear markers of success. But working in the arts teaches us that staging a performance rarely results in a change of policy the next day. Arts leader Bill Rauch stated, “I understand you can’t predict a direct social impact from

¹¹ “About: HowlRound” n.d.

¹² “About: HowlRound” n.d.

¹³ “About: HowlRound” n.d.

¹⁴ Johnson 2025. See also “About: Latina/Latino Studies” 2024.

¹⁵ “Dunham’s Data 2018”

¹⁶ Das 2017, 2.

the work you're doing. You have to have faith in the work, and you need to put it into the world."¹⁷ Likewise, Tony Kushner was asked about art's meaning in the world, and he replied:

I don't believe that artists should believe that art can change the world. I don't believe you should make art thinking you're going to change the world because I think that art has tremendous power, but mostly I think its power is not in the way that it leads directly to action. I think it's an indirect power... I think art can produce wisdom.¹⁸

Both Rauch and Kushner express their investment in the lengthy process of democracy, art-making, and cultural change. Public works projects for the arts may result in a clear qualitative or quantitative outcome. More often, real change within a person, a community, and/or legislation is the result of layers of experiences and cannot be attributed to one effort or event.

6. Sustainability is key

In the last five years, there have been numerous headlines and reports of the cancellation of the production of plays, the loss of funds for student arts programs, dwindling ticket sales for robust music and performance venues, and the closing of long-running theaters. Within the university paradigm, public-facing projects oftentimes depend on a specific faculty member or members to sustain them. Problematically, funding for new projects is easier to get than funding to sustain them, and any digital project will need significant resources to maintain it for longer than seven years. When a project is forced to sunset due to the loss of funding, public works for the performing arts have strategized how to continue to make information available. Take, for example, the 2008 AHRC-funded *Out of the Wings* database of Spanish Golden Age and Spanish-language plays. Funding was pulled in 2012, and with the loss of sponsorship, the site was "converted to a static website," and some features were disabled.¹⁹ But the site remains online and continues to serve as a resource for plays, translations, and (albeit not updated) production history.

7. Cultivate an audience

Cultivating an audience goes beyond marketing for a singular production or season; it includes building trust with a community over time. Making room for the arts can prove difficult due to limited resources—ticket prices, time, access to a venue, and more. While bandwidth for the performing arts is limited, even for artists to see each other's work, the community of support not only encourages learning from others, but it is the foundation for engaging with art as a mode of conversation.

Those embarking on public-facing projects for the performing arts can look to the festival model as a structure for collaboration and for bringing in their target audience. Although some theaters have the word "festival" in their name and stage productions and host activities, they may not be limited to a certain period of the year or a public event. An arts festival is traditionally a site of exchange in which the artists live in community during the course of the festival. In 2024, the Los Angeles Theatre Company (LATC) hosted its third

¹⁷ Della Gatta 2024, E7.

¹⁸ Isaacson 2024.

¹⁹ *Out of the Wings* 2024.

Encuentro since 2014, a nearly three-week festival of theater and performance with 19 companies from across the United States. Artists shared resources, attended workshops together, and collaborated, as well as performed for the public.²⁰ Each Encuentro has been a success due to the quality of the artistry and the breadth of the events, but also due to the LATC's long-standing commitment to their community which returns to their events year after year.

A Public Humanities for the Performing Arts is a project that advocates for the arts as it structurally and thematically engages new audiences in the conversation about, with, and through art. The humanities study the human experience, and art is one of the clearest expressions of human imagination and possibility.

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²⁰ "Encuentro 2024 n.d."

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