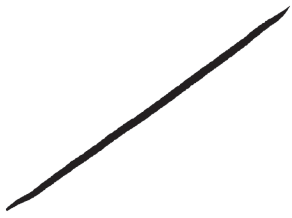


GLOBAL MAPPING OF THEATRE PEDAGOGY: FROM THE CONSERVATORY MODEL TO THE EPISTEMIC HYBRIDIZATION OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract: This article investigates the reconfiguration of university theatre pedagogy in the context of the epistemic transformations of the 21st century, tracing the transition from the vocational conservatory paradigm to the model of “epistemic hybridization” specific to the contemporary university of arts. The study explores how theatre universities have transformed institutions from knowledge transfer into research laboratories based on the concept of “Thinking Practitioner”. Through a comparative analysis, four major pedagogical matrices are mapped: the conservatory centred on guild tradition and technical rigor; the American MFA model, which integrates artistic practice within the liberal arts; the GITIS-type theatre institute model, organized around the master-led workshop; and the integrated arts university model, oriented towards interdisciplinarity and digital technologies. The research examines the theoretical contributions of Erika Fischer-Lichte, Hans-Thies Lehmann, and Robin Nelson to the consolidation of Practice-as-Research methodologies, while also highlighting the current vectors of change—digitization, curricular decolonization, and applied theatre. It argues that the contemporary theatre university trains artist-researcher profiles capable of operating simultaneously in the fields of aesthetic innovation and social responsibility.

Keywords: theatre pedagogy, epistemic hybridization, thinking practitioner, practice-as-research, decolonization, university models.

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Introduction: Theoretical framework and ontological mutations

This article aims to outline the historical and conceptual framework necessary for understanding how theatre universities have evolved in different cultural spaces and how they have generated distinct pedagogical models. Christopher Blame, director of the Munich Theatre Institute, states the following:

Under the broad umbrella of the isomorphic development of the university model, other institutions of higher education also sprang up, sometimes in direct competition with, sometimes broadly allied to the university. Initially they were distinct from it. These included music conservatories, art and military academies and polytechnics, whose distinguishing characteristic was an emphasis on professional training with little to no interest in basic research. Art schools have of course a longer lineage that in Europe goes back to the seventeenth century. Although the French *école des beaux-arts* was originally a highly selective and elitist institution, it was emulated wherever the

French language was spoken, which, in the light of French colonialism, was in a great number of countries. The same can be said for music conservatories, which spread slowly in the nineteenth but very rapidly in the twentieth century. (Balme, 2021, p. 12)

Therefore, a comparative analysis of these institutions allows us to identify recurring patterns of professional training, which are essential for the subsequent definition of a set of best practices applicable in the contemporary context of the performing arts. From a historical perspective, the evolution of theatre education can be traced back to the divergence between the four dominant pedagogical models identified in this paper: the conservatory model, the MFA (Master of Fine Arts) university model, the theatre institute model, and the comprehensive arts university model. A transcontinental perspective on theatre education facilitates the understanding of the phenomenon of artistic professionalization as a syncretic process, deeply marked by the evolution of the university. This mapping reveals the degree of permeability of academic institutions to the profound socio-cultural transformations that defined the 20th and 21st centuries.

The evolution of university theatre education in the 21st century marks a fundamental ontological shift, moving away from the traditional model of vocational apprenticeship towards an interrogative academic paradigm based on research. This transition reflects the need to validate theatre as a legitimate form of knowledge within the global knowledge economy, requiring a multidisciplinary approach that transcends the methodological isolation of the old conservatories. In this context, there is a global structural convergence fuelled by epistemic hybridization, technological immersion, and curriculum decolonization, processes that redefine the identity of the contemporary artist under the umbrella of the concept of “Thinking Practitioner”.

Viewed through the lens of institutional sociology, the theatre university is not just a place for the transfer of knowledge, but represents the result of efforts to academically standardize pre-existing artistic practices, which have migrated from dependence on community traditions or the restrictive apprenticeship system to a formalized structure. This transition involves a redefinition of the status of the artist, from empirical practitioner to intellectual holder of a diploma, a process that has manifested itself differently depending on the cultural specificity of each continent.

From a historical perspective, the evolution of theatre education can be traced through the divergence between ***four dominant pedagogical models:***

A. The conservatory model: This model is found primarily in France, Great Britain, and, to some extent, Italy, and has its roots in the medieval tradition of guilds. Its philosophy is strictly vocational, based on the premise that acting is a craft that must be mastered through physical and vocal rigor rather than intellectual debate. In this model, the curriculum is “vertical”, focusing almost exclusively on the “instrument”—voice, body, and text interpretation:

The oldest model is the conservatory, which goes back to the nineteenth century (and in some cases even further). A conservatory is by definition vocational, highly specialized and usually pays only lip service to scholarly endeavour or research. The best conservatories are highly prestigious such as RADA in London, the École Supérieure d’Art Dramatique in Paris, and various national drama schools in Australia, Canada, India and New Zealand. They are primarily acting schools which may also include directing, design and other theatre professions, and now are sometimes affiliated with a university. (Balme, 2021, p. 15)

B. The MFA (Master of Fine Arts) university model: Also known as the American model, this represents a unique combination of professional training and liberal arts. Unlike the isolated conservatory, MFA students operate in a broader academic ecosystem that prioritizes the “erudite artist”. Actors must be playwrights of their own roles, analysing the socio-political and historical context of a script alongside their studio work:

A second widespread model is the MFA (the Master of Fine Arts) which we find throughout the USA and some other anglophone countries. Here professional training is integrated institutionally into the university; departments often have an academic branch, where they are termed “theory and criticism”, but the primary focus is on the ‘industry’. The MFA is an institutional response to the need for high-level artistic training in the absence of state-run conservatories so the university stepped in to provide the organizational framework. The first university to admit students the degree of Master of Fine Arts was the University of Iowa in 1940. (Balme, 2021, p.16)

C. The theatre institute model: Emerging in Russia after the Revolution and established in the renowned GITIS (1922), this model considers theatre not as a career, but as a state-funded laboratory. The defining feature here is the “Master Workshop” system, where a cohort remains under the guidance of a single master

for up to five years, fostering a level of ensemble cohesion that is impossible to achieve in shorter models.

A third model, which I term here the theatre university, emerged in Russia after the Revolution and became enshrined in the famous GITIS. In 1922 GITIS (Gosudarstvennyi Institut Teatralnogo Iskustva) was established in Moscow, as the name suggests, as a State Institute for the Theatre Arts. It had gone through a number of name changes in a genealogy going back to 1878 when it was part of a music school under aristocratic patronage. The new form became the model, however, of many similar institutes wherever the Soviet Union exercised influence directly or indirectly. (Balme, 2021, p.16)

D. Model of the integrated arts university: The 21st-century response to the globalized media landscape, mainly present in Asia and Australia. These institutions bring together several disciplines—acting, film production, digital media, and design—under a single administrative umbrella, characterized by interdisciplinarity and hybridity:

This approach is called integrated arts education and prioritizes hands-on experiences over theoretical learning, enabling students to comprehend their bodies through physical sensations, articulate these sensory experiences through diverse artistic forms, and cultivate a deeper understanding of themselves and the world. In summary, integrated arts education is an educational approach that combines various art disciplines such as visual arts, music, dance, and drama to provide students with a holistic, experiential learning process. (Ouyang, Park, Suh, 2024)

THE THEORETICAL ARCHITECTURE OF CONTEMPORARY THEATRE PEDAGOGY

Contemporary theatre pedagogy transcends the boundaries of a closed system of exclusively practical training, functioning rather as an organic ecosystem in which abstractions from performance studies and aesthetic theory are transformed into concrete teaching methodologies. Concepts such as “stage presence” or “authenticity” are rigorously applied in the classroom through the assimilation of fundamental landmarks. In this sense, the dynamics of teaching are redefined by Erika Fischer-Lichte’s (2014) concept of the “autopoietic feedback loop”,

which transforms teaching from a unidirectional transmission of information into an event co-created by the student and the observer. Simultaneously, Richard Schechner's (2013) anthropological vision positions technical exercise as a social ritual that links everyday experience to the liminal dimension of the stage.

As theatrical expression migrated towards fragmented and non-hierarchical forms, Hans-Thies Lehmann's influence became essential to the teaching of post-dramatic theatre, marking a paradigm shift in which corporeality and raw presence undermine the historical supremacy of text. This methodological transition is complemented by the analytical tools provided by Marvin Carlson (1993) and Patrice Pavis (2012), which help to decode the performative act semiotically. Thus, it is demonstrated that the student's instinctive exploration activates deep layers of theatrical history, transforming the specialized literature from a static repository of concepts into the main engine of pedagogical innovation.

Extending the analysis beyond the Eurocentric canon, current research integrates global perspectives that subvert traditional cultural hegemony. The performative philosophy studied by Laura Cull and Alice Lagaay, along with Christopher Balme's analyses of the globalization of theatre, illustrate how non-Western institutions assert their local identity by deconstructing European models. The imperative effort to decolonize the curriculum, supported by the writings of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the research of Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, validates the aesthetics of political resistance. An eloquent example in this regard is the integration of Aboriginal cosmology into the Australian performative space, a movement that redefines both the aesthetics and the theatrical chromotrope.

In its most recent stage of evolution, the university functions as a veritable laboratory for social and technological innovation. This transformation is theorized by James Thompson through the lens of theatre applied in vulnerable communities or conflict zones and is methodologically grounded in the concept of Practice-as-Research (PaR), defined by Robin Nelson (2022), which has become the core of vocational doctoral programs. The global convergence of these directions assimilates socio-political tools such as the *Theatre of the Oppressed* developed by Augusto Boal and the new media explorations proposed by Steve Dixon in "Digital Performance". The conclusion of this evolution is clear: contemporary reference literature is no longer limited to pure aesthetics but has become a complex and vital intersection between anthropology, politics, technology, and a profoundly radical pedagogy.

North America: Professionalization of pedagogy and the emergence of the MFA model

The American university theatre model is vast and diverse, distinguished by its structure, philosophy, and pragmatism. In the United States, theatre education is often a combination of artistic development and preparation for a highly competitive commercial industry. A distinctive feature is the duality of the BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts) system, which is similar to the “conservatory” model—an intensive, vocational program where approximately 70-80% of the time is devoted to specialized courses—and the BA (Bachelor of Arts) the “liberal arts” model, where the ratio is often 50/50, the philosophy being to create an “artist citizen” with a broad general culture.

The history of American theatre education does not begin on stage, but in English literature departments. At the beginning of the 20th century, universities considered theatre a place of dubious reputation, with the study of dramaturgy being strictly an act of reading. This academic rigidity began to change with pioneers such as George Pierce Baker (Baker, 2011) at Harvard (and later Yale), who insisted that plays were mechanisms meant to be operated, not just texts to be analysed.

In the mid-20th century, a radical change took place with the spread of the influence of Konstantin Stanislavski and the Group Theatre (Clurman, 1983). The curriculum evolved from the external study of eloquence to a rigorous internal discipline of psychological realism. The methodology underlying American theatre courses remains focused on interpretations of Stanislavski's method (Stanislavski, 2013), complemented by Lee Strasberg's affective memory (Strasberg, 2024), Sanford Meisner's instinctive response, and Stella Adler's text analysis (Adler, 1990).

The American model also focuses heavily on the actual career, not just the craft. In the final year of study, courses emphasize audition techniques, personal branding, and the “business” of the arts. Graduates of top universities present showcases in New York or Los Angeles in front of casting agents, which underscores the pragmatic nature of this educational system.

Europe: Between the Conservatory and Postdramatic Theatre

In Europe, the roots of theatre education lie in the conservatory model, which emerged in the 19th century under state patronage with the purpose of preserving the national language and aesthetic standards. Institutions such as the Conservatoire National Supérieur d'Art Dramatique in Paris and RADA in

London functioned for decades as vocational schools. A major historical turning point was the Bologna Process, which forced the integration of these academies into the university credit system, transforming the study of theatre from a purely technical discipline into one of research.

However, the most significant recent development in Europe is the emergence of the avant-garde model and post-dramatic theatre. This trend has radically transformed pedagogy, shifting from the training of actors-performers to that of artists-creators. The Institute for Applied Theatre Studies at the University of Giessen is considered the epicentre of this movement. Founded by Andrzej Wirth and decisively marked by Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006), the institute broke with conservative tradition: instead of separating actors from directors and theorists, Giessen brought them together in a teaching method that focuses not on “staging a text” but on the “theatrical essay”.

This tendency is also visible in the Netherlands (e.g., Das Theatre in Amsterdam), which has transformed schools into artistic research laboratories. Here, the process is as important as the final product, with studies in curation, visual dramaturgy, and hybrid forms of performance. France lies between theory and practice, where theoretical universities such as Paris 8 have adopted postdramatic discourse, while major acting schools have integrated elements of physical avant-garde.

Asia and Africa: Hybrid Syntheses and Curriculum Decolonization

Theatre universities in Asia often operate at the intersection of codified millennial traditions (such as Beijing Opera, Kabuki, or Kathakali) and modern Western systems. The greatest methodological distinction lies in the direction of the creative process: the Western approach (psychological realism) moves from the inside out, whereas the Asian approach (codified theatre) moves from the outside in. The student first learns the form (*kata*, *mudra*), and through mechanical repetition and the perfection of the external form, arrives at the internal state.

In China, for example, academic theatre education is extremely rigorous, employing a hybrid system. The modern actor must master psychological realism, but also the four fundamental skills of Chinese Opera (*Chang*, *Nian*, *Zhao*, *Da*). In South Korea, at universities such as K-Arts, the methodology integrates the concept of *Han*—a profound sorrow and historical resentment transformed into stage energy—offering a culturally specific alternative to Stanislavskian affective memory.

In Africa, theatre pedagogy has become a method through which communities “re-learn” their history and renegotiate their postcolonial identity. Universities today function as laboratories of decolonization, abandoning the

primacy of the written text in favour of oral traditions and the body as a “living archive”. A telling example is the “Total Theatre” (Oyewo, 2020) methodology in Nigeria and Ghana, which rejects the strict Western separation between acting, dance, and music. Students are not only trained to recite lines, but to use “total gesture”, integrating rhythm and percussion as the foundation for character construction.

Furthermore, in East Africa (Uganda, Tanzania), the dominant methodology is Theatre for Development (TfD). Here, theatre is not studied as an isolated aesthetic art, but rather as an applied social science. Students do not merely stay in lecture halls; instead, they go out into communities, gathering the stories of the locals and creating plays on-site, alongside them, transforming themselves from “actors” into “social facilitators”.

Australia: The development of theatre training between western tradition and indigenous expression

The theatre education system in Australia is highly acclaimed globally (producing actors such as Cate Blanchett, Hugh Jackman, and Margot Robbie) and is distinguished by a vocational pragmatism. Unlike the African models discussed previously (focused on community and ritual) or the Eastern European ones (focused on a single system, such as Stanislavski), Australia employs a “toolbox approach”. In Australian theatre studies and education, this approach refers to a pedagogical and practical framework that provides students, teachers, and practitioners with a versatile set of skills, techniques, and methodologies—a “toolkit”—that can be applied to create, analyse, and understand dramatic art.

There is no single “Australian method”. Australian universities reject dogmatism. Students are exposed to a variety of techniques in order to build their own process. A first-year student will simultaneously study Stanislavski (for psychological truth), Lecoq (for physical expressiveness), and Meisner (for spontaneous reaction). The goal is to create a flexible actor, capable of performing Shakespeare in the morning and acting in a TV series (a soap opera like *Home and Away*) in the afternoon. Pedagogy is strictly tied to the job market. Emphasis is placed on discipline, professional ethics, and the ability to deliver results quickly.

Similar to Africa, Australia is undergoing a process of recognizing First Nations (Aboriginal) culture. However, the approach is different: it is formally integrated into the conservatory structure. Students learn about the “Custodianship of Story”. They learn how to approach stories that do not belong to them and how to respect oral traditions. Deep listening is a teaching methodology that involves a state of profound and conscious listening to the environment and the

partner, derived from Aboriginal practices.

Unlike many European schools that treat screen acting as an elective course in the final year, in Australia, it is central from the first or second year. Because of the “Hollywood Down Under” reality—as many Australian actors target the US market—the methodology focuses on minimalism. Modern American techniques are adapted to achieve quick and authentic emotion on camera. Students take classes on how to self-tape for international auditions (an essential technical skill in the digital age).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: GLOBAL CONVERGENCES AND TENSIONS

The retrospective analysis of university models reveals that, despite economic and political disparities, these systems tend toward a structural convergence accelerated by three fundamental vectors: epistemic hybridization, technological immersion, and curricular decolonization.

A. Theory-practice hybridization. Historically, the dichotomy between the BA (theory) and the BFA (practice) was clear. Today, under the pressure of academic requirements, this barrier is collapsing. In Europe, the integration of conservatories into universities compels acting students to produce theoretical work, giving rise to the concept of the “Thinking Practitioner”. Simultaneously, American performance studies programs are introducing creative laboratories, recognizing that the dramatic text cannot be understood in the absence of corporeality. Convergence reaches its peak at the level of professional doctorates (Practice-as-Research), where practice becomes the central argument, and theory the navigational instrument.

B. Digitalization and Intermediality: Theatre as a Technological Ecosystem. While two decades ago technology was considered a decorative “additive”, today it is rewriting the ontology of theatrical training. Transversal Curriculum, universities in Asia (Singapore, South Korea) and Australia (NIDA) are leaders in integrating Motion Capture and VR into acting courses. Convergence arises from the need for the actor to be able to perform for hybrid environments (video games, volumetric filmmaking, telematic performances). Regarding Intermediality as a Method we are no longer talking merely about screens on stage, but about how digital thinking (non-linearity, interactivity) modifies the dramaturgical structure. Students in Europe and North America are now learning the “dramaturgy of the algorithm”, preparing for a global creative

industry where the boundary between theatre, film, and digital media is fluid. The Pedagogical Consequence, the theatre professor is no longer just the acting master, but becomes a facilitator in a multimedia laboratory, forcing a convergence between performing arts faculties and those of IT/Design.

C. Decolonizing the Curriculum: Re-evaluating the Global Canon.

This is arguably the most profound political and ethical paradigm shift in the university theatre environment. Challenging Eurocentrism, for a century, the methods of Stanislavski, Brecht, or Artaud were considered “universal”. The decolonization movement (prominent in South Africa, Australia, and North America) argues that these methods are specific to European modernism and do not exhaust the possibilities of human performance. Integrating Indigenous Techniques, in Australia, universities are integrating the narrative structures of Aboriginal populations (e.g., *Dreaming stories*), which defy the Aristotelian three-act structure. In Africa, the emphasis is placed on orality and community theatre, where the audience is not a passive spectator but an active participant—a model that is currently influencing participatory pedagogy in European universities. In the Americas, theatre history is being re-evaluated through the lens of racial and gender studies, dismantling the white “universality” of the classical canon. Convergence manifests through a Pedagogical Pluriversalism. Universities are moving toward a curriculum in which Noh theatre (Asia), ritual (Africa), and character psychology (Europe) are studied on equal footing, providing the student with a globalized toolkit capable of communicating in multicultural contexts.

D. Structural differences

D.1. Conservatory vs. university. The university model approaches theatre as a cultural phenomenon and an object of research, placing emphasis on critical thinking and a theoretical-practical balance to train specialists such as critics, theorists, or cultural managers, based on intellectual performance. In contrast, the conservatory functions as an intensive vocational incubator, focused almost exclusively on physical, vocal, and emotional training, relying on the master-apprentice relationship; selection strictly targets native talent in order to deliver performers to the market who are ready to immediately meet the demands of the stage.

D.2. Traditional vs. Community. The global evolution has generated a distinction between the traditional model, focused on individual aesthetic excellence (typical of European academies), and the community-based model,

which redefines theatre as an instrument for social change. In the community model (prominent in North America, Brazil, and Africa), the focus shifts from elite performance toward the process of human interaction. The goal is no longer to train a stage star, but rather an artist-citizen capable of using theatrical tools to foster dialogue and dismantle oppressive power structures.

D.3. Western vs. non-Western tension. In the Western academic space, pedagogy is anchored in the logic of the text and mimetic representation. In contrast, non-Western models propose a vision where the boundaries between art, life, and spirituality are porous. Pedagogy does not focus on the actor's "self-construction", but rather on the dissolution of the ego in favour of a collective energy. Today, this clash of paradigms forces global universities to reconsider the universality of European canons and to accept that theatre education based on trance or ritual is just as academically legitimate as that based on the analysis of Shakespearean texts.

D.4. State centralization vs. artistic autonomy. The relationship between state centralization and artistic autonomy represents one of the most sensitive axes of tension in the architecture of global theatre education, defining how creative freedom survives within public funding systems. In the highly centralized university model, specific to many European countries with a consolidated tradition of state subsidies, theatre education is often integrated into a national strategy of cultural preservation. Here, universities function as pillars of national identity; they receive considerable resources but are subjected to bureaucratic rigors and curricular standardization that can limit experimental flexibility. In these systems, the state acts not merely as a funder, but also as a guarantor of quality, sometimes imposing aesthetic canons or assessment criteria that prioritize repertory theatre to the detriment of alternative forms of expression. The major advantage of this model lies in its financial stability and the students' easy access to infrastructure. However, the risk lies in an institutional inertia that can stifle the individual artistic voice under the weight of official expectations.

Conclusions

The comparative analysis of global theatre training models confirms the central hypothesis of the research: university pedagogy of the performing arts is undergoing a phase of accelerated structural convergence, in which the historical distinctions between conservatories, theatre institutes, and academic universities tend to reconfigure themselves into hybrid forms. This epistemic hybridisation is not a simple curricular adaptation, but an ontological mutation of the status of the artist and the function of the arts university in contemporary society. The study has shown that the theatre university of the 21st century can no longer be understood as an institution for transmitting a stable technical canon, but as an ecosystem of artistic research situated at the intersection of practice, theory, and social responsibility. The integration of practice-as-research methodologies, the emergence of the Thinking Practitioner figure, and the expansion of applied theatre indicate a reorientation of actor training from specialized performer to artist-researcher capable of operating reflexively in complex cultural contexts.

Furthermore, the transcontinental mapping has highlighted that the processes of digitalization, intermediality, and curricular decolonization function as common vectors of change, regardless of local institutional traditions. However, global convergence does not produce standardization, but rather a pedagogical pluriversalism: the legitimate coexistence of Western paradigms based on textual analysis and character psychology with non-Western models centred on ritualistic corporeality, orality, and community performativity. This epistemic plurality redefines the notion of theatrical universality as a dialogic, rather than hegemonic, space. The research results also indicate a significant shift in the ultimate goals of theatre education.

While the conservatory model pursued individual aesthetic excellence, and the American industrial model aimed at professionalization for the job market, the contemporary university tends to cultivate artistic profiles capable of simultaneously articulating aesthetic innovation, critical thinking, and social intervention. Thus, university theatre becomes a laboratory of cultural citizenship, where artistic practice functions as a form of knowledge and as an instrument of social mediation.

From this perspective, the future of university-level theatre pedagogy depends on the institutions' capacity to maintain a dynamic balance among three structural axes, the technical tradition of the craft, the rigor of academic research and an openness to the emerging cultural ecologies of the globalized world. The 21st-century theatre university thus emerges not merely as a space for professional training, but as a strategic cultural infrastructure, capable of producing artistic knowledge, intercultural dialogue, and social transformation through performativity.

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