

# **The Relationship between Dramatic Text and Performance with the Centrality of the Body with a Look at Anne Bogart's Rendition of The Persians**

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## **Abstract**

The dramatic text defines, to some extent, the structure of the work but the type of performance and the physical approach to the text can represent different meanings. The body of the actor, as a means of conveying concepts from the text to the audience, can be effective in creating different interpretations and meanings of the text. Since eons ago, directors have used the body of the actor with different approaches, and the application of body on the stage has always been undergoing changes. Anne Bogart is one of the few directors who is less known in the Iranian theater despite possessing the most updated and well-known methods of practice and performance in the world. Using her viewpoint method, she brings live and dynamic bodies to the stage; bodies that are able to convey the hidden meanings of the text to the audience in the most suitable way. The overall purpose of this research is to find the relationship between the dramatic text and the performance with the centrality of the body with a sociological view toward the body. To this end, by presenting Foucault's theories, the researchers defines the role of the body in the society and its extent of effectivity and impressibility. Finally, this study explores the implications of this role in each element of Aeschylus's *The Persians*, and it shall show how Bogart beautifully represents them using the bodies of her actors during performance.

**Keywords:** Anne Bogart, body, Michel Foucault, The Persians, play, sociology of body, theater

## **Introduction**

Sociology of the Body is an intradisciplinary field of study in sociology that deals specifically with the concept of Embodiment as social phenomena, and it always reminds us that actions constructing the context of everyday life, from the simplest to the most complex, require a bodily intervention and agent (Le Breton, 2008). This field examines the social nature of human physicality, social production and representation of the body, discourses governing the body, social history of the body, and the complex interplay between the body, society and culture (Turner, 1999). Sociology with a focus on the body seeks to make a list of all the factors associated with it and to provide an understanding of the social and cultural reasoning embedded in the human body and movements. Michel Foucault is a sociologist, anthropologist, and social historian whose ideas and writings, in spite of lacking a specific theory, has had a vivid impact on most disciplines of the humanities, particularly on understanding the body in the society. Although he has always written about the main elements of society and the exercise of power in medical and legal systems, his work has been a major driving force behind the sociology of the body.

The body, as one of the main and dynamic elements of theater, has had various functions in this field over different periods of time. Anne Bogart, one of the most creative directors in American theater today, uses her different techniques to discover the bodies of the cast. In her play *The Persians* by Aeschylus, she beautifully presents the impact of institutions of power and surveillance in the society through the unconventional use of the body. *The Persians* is a tragedy written in 472 BC by Aeschylus, a Greek playwright. It is written in Athens. This play is the second and only remaining part of the trilogy to win the first prize at the Dionysia Festival in Athens. It is one of the most important of Aeschylus's works and the oldest surviving play written based on the contemporary events of that time, narrating the reaction of Achaemenid Persians to the news of the defeat of their naval fleet under the command of King Xerxes at the Battle of Salamis. Anne Bogart has transformed this play into a modern theatrical performance thanks to her one-of-a-kind techniques. In Bogart's play, actors' bodies, as one of the key elements of the performance, beautifully convey to the audience the hidden layers of text.

Our purpose in the present study is to examine this relationship, that is, the relationship between the performer's body and the text, with a sociological approach using Foucault's theories of Socialized Body.

### **Body and Society: The Socialized Body from Foucault's Viewpoint**

The human body has a biological nature that results from human reproduction and cellular proliferation, and it functions in conjunction with the psychological and mental system. The

body grows in temporal, spatial, and environmental contexts from birth to death. Therefore, the human body has as much a social basis as it has a biological nature.

In addition to their religious and philosophical views regarding the body, some regard the emergence of body discourse in the 1980s as a result of the evolution in medical sociology. Michel Foucault's work and his contributions to the history of the profession of medicine and the type of body supervision by organizations such as the church, the hospital, and the government fall into this category.

Michel Foucault is a social historian. He does not have a clear theory, but the impact of his thoughts and writings can be felt in most disciplines of the humanities, especially in terms of understanding the body in the society. Although he has always written about the main elements of society and the exercise of power in the medical system the legal system, "his work has stimulated the study of the well-known subject of the sociology of the body (Cregan, 2006).

In the following, this research will deal with the key concepts of Foucault's thought and examine, one by one, their implications in the play and in the performance of Bogart.

### **Discourse**

One of the main concepts of Foucault's thought is discourse. For him, discourse is the point of connection between power and knowledge. Discourse is a set of unwritten rules and regulations that govern the speech and writing of any particular discipline of knowledge in any historical period, which determine what can and cannot be discussed.

Foucault, in *Archaeology of Knowledge*, states that discourses are actions that systematically shape the subjects that speak for themselves... Discourses do not talk about subjects nor do they determine the nature of subjects. They construct the subjects and hide this intervention during the process of this construction. As such, meanings and concepts arise not from within the language but through the social and political interactions of individuals.

In modern societies, according to Foucault, power has a particular centrality to this meaning: The body is the product of political and power relations, and it is produced as the subject of power with the purpose of its own control, understanding and reproduction. Power relations, while investing in the body, try to mark and train it, putting pressure on the body to perform tasks and display all kinds of signs. In institutions like the army, the school, the family, the hospital, etc., the representation of the body depends on the specific discourses of those institutions. Just as the characteristics of the body play a role in determining a person's social position, in all stages of life, bodies are under the influence of sociocultural relations of the society in which they have grown

It means that power is fluid and local, imposing itself on us every day and everywhere, and it can never be superior and ineffective. In fact, Foucault means that power is not concentrated

in a society, in a group or even in a family, and is distributed unevenly among the various elements of a society, and any relation, in Foucault's mind, is a power relation.

There are three main characters in the play *The Persians*. Atossa, Darius and King Xerxes. They are three members of the Iranian royal family whose presence, as three true historical figures, opposite characters of Greek mythological play has been unprecedented.

According to Foucault's theories about the mechanisms of power, all three of the play's main characters are in some way an agent of power, on whom power is exerted in other ways. For example, with the arrival of Atossa on the stage, the power that has previously been in the hands of the chorus is transferred to her, and the chorus moves under Atossa's power. After the arrival of Atossa and after hearing her words, the chorus who, prior to this moment, had resolutely wished good fortune for the Iranian army, say:

"Thou art the mistress of the land, and ne'er shalt summon twice, O Queen,  
Our aid in counselor in act" (Aeschylus, 1939).

These exertions of power have been beautifully represented in Bogart's performance. At the start of the performance, the chorus members set foot on the stage one by one. They walk resolutely and firmly, speak in praise of Iranian soldiers and commanders, and wish them warriors victory and good health. Moreover, they consider themselves guardians and rulers of the Iranian soil on behalf of King Xerxes, who today is in conflict with Greece. Their body language testifies to the high status and power they regard for themselves. However, this display of power only continues until the arrival of Atossa. Upon her entrance, the chorus steps back, beginning with a low tempo and then an increasingly high one, leaving the stage.

After the re-entry of the chorus, they stand around Atossa as she begins to explain the dream she has seen. The chorus, slowly and in tune with Atossa's tempo, fall forward to the ground like dead insects, yet Atossa remains standing with might. In the following, the audience witnesses the lassitude and lethargy of the bodies of the chorus. Compared to the commencing part of the play, the bodies of the chorus spend more time sitting, lying or crawling on the floor or otherwise having their backs toward the audience with an aura of in a frenzy of fear and ambiguity.



In the next scene and after the departure of the messenger, Atossa arrives in a dress similar to that of the chorus with honey, milk and wine as offerings to the gods. She is now no longer any different from others in the eyes of the gods, but a simple servant under the care and control of these deities.

However, the retinue are still sitting on the floor by her side. After summoning Darius and his exiting the stage, Atossa no longer has any superiority over the retinue.

Moreover, with Atossa affected by the news conveyed by the messenger regarding Iran's defeat in battle, her body also gradually creeps toward lassitude and lethargy. However, the messenger himself makes no other moves save for brief movements of the head for the duration of his presence on the stage. His body is an example of a disciplined body within the Iranian Navy.



### Surveillance

Another way to exercise power and control over individuals is surveillance, in which case the best example for Foucault is Jeremy Bentham's plan of the Panopticon. According to Bentham, power must be simultaneously observable and unverifiable. This manifestation of power expands across a range of areas, and obedient bodies are trained to obey. Therefore, a stable state is created in the person who is aware of visibility, and the automatic operation of power by virtue of the panopticon is guaranteed. Real obedience is automatically born out of a virtual relationship in a way that obligating the condemned toward good behavior, the insane toward peace, the worker toward work, the student toward diligence, and the patient toward obeying the instructions of others no longer necessitates the use of force (Cregan, 2015, p. 252).

Thus, in the play *The Persians*, the gaze of the gods and their constant awareness of the status of their servants always act as a panopticonic glance, and the characters constantly feel themselves within the sights of the gods. And this is exactly the power that the gods exert on the characters of the play. The gods of *The Persians* know what the past holds and what the future will bring, and they always have their servants under observation yet cannot be seen. Thus, Atossa, the retinue, King Xerxes, and Darius, who are elsewhere in power, become the objects of power when confronted with the panopticonic gaze of the gods.

From Foucault's point of view, the body, gradually and as a result of constant monitoring, is this time directly influenced by the owner. The physical features of the body give people a different position and stature, which are used consciously. To clarify, Foucault uses the concept of Self-Governance. Foucault emphasizes the point that social order in the modern world relies less on external power and control and more on an individual's inner order. In fact, these systems do not force us to act in a certain way, but we force ourselves to behave in that way.

Therefore, the power of the gods, though invisible, applies to all human beings for they are always exposed to the eyes of the gods. And since people are aware of this oversight, they automatically impose power relations on themselves, thereby subjugating themselves.

In her rendition of this play, Anne Bogart portrays quite majestically the dominance of the panopticonic watchful eye of the religion over the bodies. For instance, in the scene where they all pray to the gods for the summoning of Darius's spirit, all the bodies on the stage first sit and then prostrate on their knees and then fall to and crawl on the ground. In another example, the queuing of the chorus, after Darius's summoning, is evocative of the ranks of the lines in prisons. It is as if they are inmates who are, from one side, dominated by the prison and the wardens, and, from the other, under the watchful eye; in a way that any wrongdoing may warrant further punishment. As Foucault puts it, therefore, discipline and surveillance create new gestures, habits, and actions.



**Sexuality**

Another one of Foucault's major and fundamental topics is sexuality. Sexuality, according to Foucault, is a historical construct in which a set of practices are linked together through strategies of knowledge and power. Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality*, states that prior to the 17th century, the topic of sex and its relevant issues were freely discussed, and no limit was imposed in this regard. However, with the advent of Victorian times and its particular ethics, sexual relations were restricted to homes, and discussing sexual issues was banned. The legitimate couple imposed itself as the model and adopted new laws. In the social space, like the inside of every home, the parental room was the only accepted yet useful and productive place for sex. The rest had to lose color. Behavioral courtesy avoided the bodies, and verbal courtesy refined the speech. If infertility was insisted on and over-manifested, it would find the place of the abnormal, and therefore considered abnormal and deserved punishment (Foucault, 1976, p. 10).

In Bogart's performance, we see that, at the beginning of Darius's presence in the form of a spirit, Atossa is standing in the circular area formed by the trail of her garment does not exit this border same as no one enters it. That area, therefore, is their bedroom and the private space between them. The very moment Darius enters that area, the chorus is out of the scene and behind the curtains, and thus no one is watching them.



Finally, it can be said that Foucault's extensive studies on understanding the human body, supervising the body, exerting power over humans through technology, forcing people to govern themselves, making bodies obedient, etc. have established a notable path of research revolving around the body. They have paved the way for the body to enter other sciences and



arts, as well as being understood and studied in these other fields, including theater, which uses the body as its primary tool.

As we are aware, the body, as one of the pivotal elements and means of performance, plays a major role in conveying the concepts from the text to the audience. The audience is directly connected to the text when reading a play as a written work. In the theater, however, and while watching the play, they understand the hidden meanings of the text through the different mediums, one of which is the actor. And as we know, the main instrument of the actor is his or her body. In a summary review, it may seem that the body has little to do with the text, and the only thing that happens on the stage is that the actor recites text dialogues with the particular tone of the character. In reality, however, just as the body has its own language in everyday life and often transmits human emotions and feeling to others without a word, it has its own language in theater as well, and the actors, through reinforcing and improving their body techniques, can interact with the audience through their bodies.

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