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*Costume Dramaturgies – the dramaturgy of things in performance* (April 2025 – April 2026)

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# DEVISING FROM COSTUME TASKS

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Here you will find some devising with costume tasks. These tasks are part of my long-term research into how costume performs with my teaching of devised dramaturgy at the Prague Academy of the Performing Arts in the program Master of Directing Devised and Object theatre at the department of Alternative and Puppet Theatre. In this program we 'devise from material' meaning that the dialogue with material (physical such as - wood, bricks, flower, milk, tables, windows, paper etc. as well as non-physical material such as - stories, histories, videos, words, songs etc.) is as important as ideas, needs and obsessions that the artist enters the process with. So, the concepts that are made in our heads are not perceived as more important than the dialogue with 'what is there present'. The process of making a performance is perceived as a specific way of exploring, researching and thinking – thinking with materials, thinking with other people, thinking with space, thinking with our bodies. The potential of material and dialogue are the main sources of inspiration and content.

This method comes from traditional dialogues of puppet maker and the puppeteer with the puppet. And is of course quite basic for visual artists both in fine arts and in theatre arts. You cannot make textiles do what it does not want to do. It moves the way it moves; you have to cut it in specific ways and places; it will fall the way it falls.

What this method has to do with dramaturgy is that dramaturgy is based on looking for potential. You cannot build dramaturgy of a performance on nothing. (Dramaturgy here I define as 'how a performance unfolds for the audience'.) You always base dramaturgy on a specific story or an inclination or an irritation. And following the story, inclination, irritation or whatever is guiding you is following the potential at the core of the work. The same way you can follow the physical material, it's logic, it's dynamics, the way it performs, moves, speaks, rolls, eats... As a dramaturg I am always looking for potential, things to build on, things that are already in the material. Everybody else can see the things that are not there in the material, but only trained eye can see what is in the material.

In order to see what is in the material one has to play with it. You move it, ask it questions, shuffle it with other things... Physical playing is crucial. Our mind tends to recognize things that it can classify and name, but our full bodies are also capable of much more. Playing is the best way to go beyond superficial, already known... but obvious is always a good start. Do not neglect the obvious in playing. It can take you far.

Costume is a garment that performs. It can be specially made for a performance or found or bought, it includes accessories, and masks, and all other things we add on to the body – as prosthetics. Agency of objects is different to agency of humans. Objects obviously do not have psychological intentions, but they still do things to us, other objects and the environment. And it is also good to point out that the costume is an object that is closest to the human body. A garment, as I wrote in other texts, always carries a ghost of an absent body, unlike other objects.

Tasks that you will find here are “beginners” tasks; they can be used in very beginning phases of the rehearsals or in workshop settings. They of course need to be adjusted, changed and new tasks need to be defined for later phases of the project – once it is clear what potential one is following.

The few tasks listed here will hopefully inspire you to make your own tasks, versions of these tasks, or combinations of tasks. Tasks are endless.

It is important to keep in mind that all these tasks are ways to find what is ingrained in the garment. Some of them can become the performative material itself and some just point the direction of the potential and topics that are in it that need to be developed into further performative material. But the core of the tasks is to 'think through doing' about the costume, so we can say that these tasks are both usable for research as well as making a performance. What they aim to do is to allow the performer practicing it to access the intuitive response to specific material via having a dialogue with the physical undeniable material in front of them. The dialogue is a negation of what the material wants to do (which is not psychological and intentional) and what the person wants to do (which can be psychological, intentional, creative, imaginative, subconscious etc.).

So. here you will find some tasks for devising with a costume. When making or giving a task in this method, it is important to keep the wording simple and clear. This ensures the people

joining the task to understand its precision and openness. If the people joining the task start suspecting that the person giving the task has an agenda, they will either try to fulfill it or be frustrated that something is expected from them that they do not understand. The simplicity of the tasks aims to give focus without the pressure of fulfilling a specific intention or image, and this way allows for creative reaction of the person doing the task. It is very good not to explain too much even if the participants feel like the tasks are partially cryptic (which sometimes they are).

When doing individual tasks, it is good to show the results – the etudes, to each other one by one without nitpicking individual results. Most of the tasks are about building the material and too much judging does not work. Keeping an open atmosphere will allow for more creative risk taking. I usually talk about all the etudes together at the end of the round – asking about what stayed in people's memory, and what worked and what did not work. Most of the performative material works or doesn't work depending on other performative contexts (things that come before and after, the space, the rhythm etc.).

## READING ONE COSTUME

“Reading” a costume or a group of costumes is about looking at them and seeing what is written in them.

Task 1: take a piece of garment and write a story about it that is based on the reality of the garment.

When reading a single piece of garment you can look for:

*- What is it? - What audience sees at first sight, - What could it be? What is behind? What could it become? – functional potential What is it made to do? - phenomenological potential: color, sound, shape, soft/hard, touchable (functional and non-functional, taste; What does it look like? – metaphor - What does it behave like? - Potential in context (how it changes depending on context) - Potential in time (decay, getting old, reparability, age) - Reference cultural - Memory of the material (scars) - Paradox layer - Where does it come from? - Where does it go to die? – Does it have an inside? – Does it raise curiosity (to touch, to open etc.)/ questions it raises -*

*Possibility of consistency change – Historical story – Economical story – Geographical story - What would happen if you made it smaller or bigger? - What does google lens think it is? (from different perspectives) - How can you kill with it? - Bartering power - Age and previous ownership etc.*

## READING A GROUP OF COSTUMES

Reading a group of garments is different from reading only one. When looking at a 'group' we seek similarities and differences in order to understand what makes them a group.

Task 2: lay down a group of garments (minimum 3) and look at them together. Read them together

When reading a group of garments you can ask these questions:

*What connects them? What are the similarities? What are the differences? You can group them in subgroups. Which ones don't belong to the group? Or are strangers to the group? What is their mentality? What music band could they be? What kind of meal would they be? How do they work compositionally? What about logic of colors? What is the person that collected them thinking about? What are they dealing with? Which story are they telling? If they were an essay, what would it be about? If they were a love poem, what would they be about? What is the dynamic between them? Is some dominating, are some faster, are some more silent? Etc. etc.*

Task 3: lay a garment next to another object (or material, image, or word): tell a story by looking at the dialogue between them, looking for similarities and differences and connections. (Or tell a story of the garment through the story of the object.)

## LISTENING TO A GARMENT

Listening to the costume can happen through literally listening to what it sounds like, or through how it moves, or how it moves a body or many other ways.

Task 4: Play with the garment. Make a short etude, a story through movement.

*See how it moves, see how it stretches, see how it falls, see how it hides, see how it dances, see what kinds of gestures are inside the garment.*

Task 5: Play with the garment sounds. Make a concert of the sounds that the garment makes.

*What sounds, instruments and rhythms can the garment make.*

Task 6: Wear the garment. Make an etude that is a dialogue between your body and the garment.

*See how it makes you move, see how it inspires your body, see where it itches, where it is tender on your skin, see how it directs your movement, how it restricts your movement.*

Task 7: Wear the garment. Make an etude that is a dialogue between your body and the garment by putting it on in unconventional ways.

*Try all the different ways to wear it – in ways that is it not supposed to be worn.*

*What can it become? What images does it make? What are its other abilities? Can it be used as something else than a garment?*

## JAMMING

Jamming is about improvising together, thinking about a garment while doing things with it

Task 8: place one garment in the performance space or in the middle of a circle of people and ask them to come out one by one in silence and do things with the garment. It's listening to the garment but by thinking through doing and doing it as a group.

*Again: See how it makes you move, see how it inspires your body, see where it itches, where it is tender on your skin, see how it directs your movement, how it restricts your movement. Try all the different ways to wear it – in ways that are not supposed to be worn. What can it become? What images does it make? What are its other abilities? Can it be used as something else than a garment?*

Task 9: place multiple garments in the performance space and do the same ritual in parallel places. It is very good not to allow for direct physical dialogue between the multiple garment-performances. The dialogue that you should be looking for is in timings, images and composition.

## TRANSLATING

Translating is a tasking strategy that works with understanding a character-characteristic of an object-garment and translates it into something outside of itself. You can translate it into movement, texts, sounds, light etc.

Task translating to movement 10: Observe how a costume falls and learn to fall in the same way with your own body. Become the costume. Follow how it flies, how it folds, how it drops, when the fall stops. Try to do it in as much detail as possible. (This task can be applied to multiplicity of movement – how it rolls, how it slides, how it crawls, how it collapses etc.)

Task translating to text 11: Observe the costume and write a Haiku about this garment (you can make up other kinds of text to turn it to a nightmare of this costume, or a love poem, a map, a list, childhood history, labor history etc.)

Task translating to process 12: Observe the processes that are ingrained in the garment or that the garment reminds you of (braiding, knitting, decaying, folding etc.) Perform the process with the garment.

Task translating it into drawing 13: Observe the garment and draw its structure. Or observe the garment and how it moves and draw the movement. Observe the garment and draw it as if it was a little girl. Observe the garment and draw it as if it was a fruit.

Task retelling 14: Close your eyes and retell the costume. Let your memory decide what is important in the garment.

Task retelling 15: Retell the costume through your movement.

## SPACING / PLACING

Spacing and placing kinds of tasks seek to understand the costume in its spatial and contextual potentials.

Task 16: Find a perfect spot for this costume to rest. Find a perfect spot for this costume to hide. Find a perfect spot for this costume to show its full potential. Find a perfect spot for this costume to roar. Find a perfect spot for this spot to make music etc.

Task 17: Find a perfect placing for this costume to become something the audience can enter. Find a perfect placing for this costume to become a shelter etc.

Task 18: Make a spatial installation of costumes, just by simply placing them in space with whatever is around, in such a way for it to become a story; in such a way for it to become a road or a journey; in such a way for them to perform absence etc.

## GAME JAMMING

Game jamming are tasks that provide simple rules that have a character of a game that allow participants to improvise by following a simple rule.

Task 19: Jump until the garment falls off of your body (individually or in a group).

Task 20: Or use more traditional improv games: such as three people becoming one expert talking together about the garment, mixing imagination and reality of the costume.

You can of course mix and match all of the above-described tasks to make a jam.

## LIVE DIRECTING

Or give participants a variety of game/process tasks at the same time. This way you can see material in context of other material and already in compositional and dramaturgical relations.

Task 21: One person jumps until the garment falls off, another one touches the garment looking for pleasant touch, while another one is trying to retell it by memory.

You can give multiple tasks at the same time. Or leave tasks on small papers in the performance space and allow for people to come into the space and pick their task based on simple rules (for instance: you can enter the space only after someone else finishes, there should never be less than 2 or more than 5 people on stage.) Or you can do some live directing (I usually allow participants to live direct) which means that you quietly speak during the improvisation to shift the composition, density and the rhythm of things happening on stage. Live directing mixes improvisation (performers developing activity through tasks that they develop creatively) and a person from outside, a facilitator that shifts images and situations softly.

Final recommendation is that it is important to maintain playfulness and the feeling that all creativity is welcome throughout the work as well as to be concentrated and attentive enough to follow the things that work and to build on them. Speaking to participants in between the tasks to ask: What happened? What was interesting? What was boring? is crucial. And can give your insight into what their way of thinking, misunderstandings, and interests are.