

***Pindorama: a performance of resilience in moments of personal and collective crisis***

Twentieth-century French theatre practitioner Antonin Artaud argued in his seminal work *The Theatre and its Double* that “the stage is a tangible, physical place that needs to be filled and it ought to be allowed to speak its concrete language” (Artaud, 1970, p.27). He maintained being a spectator in an awe-inspiring performance is a magical experience, one that transcends language due to its impossibility in conveying what has just occurred (Artaud, 1970). The contemporary dance performance of *Pindorama*, performed in March as part of the Perth International Arts Festival (PIAF) 2016 wholeheartedly embraced these Artaudian principles, demonstrating the gravitas of a performance designed for the senses, independent of speech and employing the body as the primary means of communication. *Pindorama*, by Brazilian choreographer **Lia Rodrigues** and The Lia Rodrigues Dance Company, is a confronting, compelling and sensory performance experience challenging ideas of spectatorship, dance and the infinite expressive potentialities of the human body. In a bare room, with a single sheet of plastic tarpaulin, water and naked bodies, **Lia Rodrigues** and her dancers entice us into a spectacular promenade performance summoning the natural elements before our very eyes demonstrating the resilience of the human spirit in moments of personal and collective crisis.

*Pindorama*, defined as “land of the palms”, was the name given to the landmass of Brazil by the Indigenous Tupi people prior to Portuguese colonisation. **Rodrigues’s** piece was inspired by **Igor Stravinsky’s** *Sacre du Printemps* (Stravinsky, 1913), in a nod to **Pina Bausch’s** reimagining of the ballet in 1975, and is the last in **Rodrigues’s** trilogy following on from *Piracema* (Rodrigues, 2012) and *Pororoca* (Rodrigues, 2009) (Climenhaga, 2009, p.10). **Lia Rodrigues**, a central figure in contemporary dance in South America, and her company, the Lia Rodrigues Dance Company, are based in Rio de Janeiro’s largest *favela*, or slum, *Mare*, and provide education, professional dance training and cultural events to one of the poorest areas of Rio (Hellerau, 2016). Inspired by the history of Brazil’s invasion, Indigenous languages and the Brazilian landscape, the company strives for an engagement with the ‘other’ and challenges concepts of cultural exclusion and elitism. In an interview with French magazine *La Croix* in 2016, she stated: “In my country, I think the political act cannot restrain itself only to the creation of a work of art. You have to first and at the same time occupy a space, create a territory and provoke the conditions to survive in it” (quoted in Soyeux, 2016). *Pindorama* occupies these liminal spaces: between performative and sculptural, creation and destruction, the personal and political inspiring us to think deeply about the complex nature of social change.

*Pindorama* is compelling precisely because it is tempting danger, requiring the audience to make leaps, both ideologically and physically, questioning what this ‘sacred’ space we call the theatre could be or can become. There was a re-signification of the performance space and a re-defining of the regular performer-audience contract from the moment of being asked to politely remove my footwear prior to entering and through to a theatrical space without seating. Even without a performer being physically present in front of us, the ‘performance’ had already begun as the audience milled around barefoot, slowly becoming aware of buckets being brought

out with water-filled condoms scattered around this black room. In the centre lay a folded piece of plastic and the audience adjusted themselves around this object.

A naked woman emerged out of this confusion and curiosity, standing in the middle of the space, pouring an entire bottle of water over her body. My eyes were drawn to the droplets of water clinging to her skin and to the topography created by the rivulets of water mapping the journey of her body in the space. PIAF Artistic Director expressed that “the plastic becomes like a landscape the dancers perform on” and this woman is tossed, turned, spinned and flipped across the plastic by people at either end of the sheet (Martin, 2016). They do not speak but expel visceral, guttural screams; each rise and fall of the sheet is punctuated with grunts and howls. The sounds of their deep cries and the noise and movement of the plastic are the music of the dance. Throughout the performance, this plastic sheet becomes the site of raging oceans, of shipwrecks and discarded bodies, of displacement and survival. From lone individuals, ten dancers morph into a heaving beast, a collective entity moving as one protecting itself against the elements (PIAF program, 2016).

I was reminded that I am a living and breathing being as I felt the water flowing over my feet and the rush of the wind stinging my face confronting me not only with a raging, rushing torrent of water but with the frailty and brevity of my existence. This was performance as Artaud described, with “language created for the senses...tak[ing] care to satisfy the senses [and] permit[ting] spatial poetry to take the place of language poetry” (Artaud, 1970, p.27). Artistic Director of PIAF Wendy Martin declared, “it’s not a show you sit in your seat and watch...At first you feel alienated but then you feel connected to the other audience members...[as the] audience moves together like a migration of birds” (Martin, 2016). **Rodrigues** expands on American director Anne Boggart’s concept of “theatre as a series of collective agreements”, reminding us that not only is theatre a contract between the performers and the audience; it is also an agreement between a group of human beings who do not know one another other and who will never meet again in this way (Boggart, 2012). They exist together in a space, sharing and bearing witness to a moment that will never again occur in history. **Rodrigues** and her dancers have managed to “cultivate the kind of spaciousness where permission is possible...[and] create[d] the room in which everyone is both participating and responsible” (Boggart, 2014, p.22). Once *Pindorama* was over, a collective out-take of breath occurred before spectators towelled their feet dry, recovered their shoes and stepped back out into their separate worlds. **Lia Rodrigues** and her company of dancers flirted with our conceptions of polite and passive spectatorship, forcing audiences to connect physically, mentally and spiritually with the work.

**Rodrigues’s** innovative staging and choreographic selections engaged with complex issues surrounding immigration and displacement, refugees, resource scarcity and the climate crisis, connection to landscape and empathy. It is evident **Rodrigues** made a conscious choice that the dancers have simple ways of travelling across the space with their faces always towards the floor. In the context of a global refugee crisis on a scale unseen since the Second World War, this quality of movement is reminiscent of the iconic image of our time—Nilüfer Demir’s photograph of three year-old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi lying face down and lifeless on the

shore at Bodrum, Greece in September 2015 (McGillivray, 2016). This was further reinforced with the imagery of the dancers lying completely still while they were wrapped up in the tarpaulin, giving the impression of dead bodies washed up by the sea. Therefore, Rodrigues effectively linked performative technique with subject matter and utilised philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and Peggy Phelan's ideas of "the face-to-face encounter [as] the most crucial arena in which the ethical bond we share becomes manifest," recognising that in employing this bond "live theatre and performance might speak to philosophy with renewed vigour." (Phelan quoted in Grehan, 2009, p. 14)

Furthermore, **Rodrigues's** choreographic choices have acknowledged that

"viewing suffering is especially problematic when the object of suffering is presumed to be real...when the spectacle of the unfortunate and his suffering is conveyed to a distant and sheltered spectator there is a greater likelihood of this spectacle being apprehended in a fictional mode the more the horizon of action recedes into the distance" (Boltanski quoted in Grehan, 2009, p.15).

However, the nuance and success of the performance were due to a careful use of spatial relationships between both the audience and the performers, and the performers to each other, engaging what Artaud described as "a language of movement in space" (Artaud, 1970, p.34). The dancers "show[ed] themselves able to profit from the direct physical potential offered by the stage, to replace the set forms of the art with living, threatening forms" (Artaud, 1970, p.28). It would have been much easier to alienate the 'others', both those who we define our culture against and the Natural elements that were such an integral part of the performance. However, rather than a romanticisation of the 'other' as one who suffers passively at a considerable distance from the dominant culture, she was able to illuminate our collective consciousness, probing us to view the world from a place of empathy.

In a world of fragmentation where individuals seek instant gratification over compassion with oppressed people, **Lia Rodrigues's** piece *Pindorama* is an urgent call for connection and for spectators to be actively engrossed in issues and forms that might make them uncomfortable. Through a removal of the traditional separation between spectator and performer, simple yet effective staging and a theatrical language which engages the senses, **Rodrigues** and her dancers have weaved together a rich tapestry of poetry for the stage. This is a work that lives on in the mind, bodies and spirits of spectators long after they have left the theatre and one that not only needs to be seen, but experienced as a phenomenon. Above all, *Pindorama* is about hope even in times of hopelessness, of a human being's foremost obligation to other beings to listen, bear witness and be moved to action.



Plastic sheeting engulfs the dancers.

Photographer: Sammi Landweer

Retrieved from: <https://au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/entertainment/events/a/31005246/pindorama-an-ever-shifting-landscape/>



Bodies are tossed, turned and pummelled in **Lia Rodrigues's** *Pindorama*.

Photographer: Sammi Landweer

Retrieved from: <http://www.mousonturm.de/web/en/veranstaltung/pindorama>



## Noemie Huttner-Koros – Pindorama Academic Review

Dancers searching for water amidst the audience in *Pindorama*.

Photographer: Sammi Landweer

Retrieved from: <http://www.mousonturm.de/web/en/veranstaltung/pindorama>

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