

# Prosthetic Ontology into Pedagogy: Applying Garoian's Theory to the Performing Arts

*“By encouraging students to embrace and even exist in significant moments of their past, we empower them to use those moments now as they create new worlds through their art”.*

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## ABSTRACT

*Prosthetic pedagogy, as developed by Charles Garoian, provides a framework for using artificial-real worlds created by the arts to influence and impact teaching practice. The prosthetic space is artificial, separate, from the artist and audience, yet it is felt authentically, as if it were part of their being. Garoian explored prosthetic pedagogy through visual arts and museum experiences. This research further examines prosthetic pedagogy by applying it the Theatre. The art of theatre builds worlds onstage and through performance that allow performers to be and exist apart from their physical selves in the realm of prosthetic reality. The artist and audience are able to transcend the natural and real world to enter a place of internal reality. Through a blend of auto ethnographic reflection and contemporary research, this paper considers theatrical artistic experiences as an application of prosthetic ontology and then explores how that ontology influences pedagogy.*

## KEYWORDS

*Prosthetic Pedagogy, Performance Theory, Art Education, Theatre*

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The concept of prosthetic ontology, as developed by Charles Garoian (2013), provides the framework for using the artificial-real worlds created by the arts to influence and impact teaching practices. The prosthetic space or encounter is artificial or separate from the artist and audience, and yet is felt as authentically and deeply as if it were part of their being. The characters written by an author might become real friends in the heart of their creator. The landscape within a painting might become an authentic mental place of refuge for the viewer. After being developed by Garoian (2013) as an application for visual arts pedagogy, Schulte (2015) applied prosthetic pedagogy to preschool aged children who often live within the imagined worlds of their artistic creations. O'Donoghue (2015) applies the theory to art-based research and Thompson (2015) expands the application into early childhood art education. In this paper I hope to open up a line for future research that applies prosthetic theory, with influence from performance theory, to the performing arts.

This research explores the prosthetic space as a metaphor of embodiment in performance-based education. The prosthetic space or encounter is artificial or separate from the artist and audience, just as a prosthetic limb is artificial from its bearer. Yet, the prosthetic world is felt as authentically and deeply as if it were part of our being, just as that prosthetic limb becomes one with its bearer.

### **Performance Theory**

Before I go further, it is impossible for me to ignore how my application of prosthetic pedagogy in the performing arts overlaps with performativity, as developed by Judith Butler (2010). I must admit that I am still developing these concepts for myself, differentiating and defining the theoretical applications. I hope that I can make the distinctions clear and create opportunities for other researchers to explore the application of prosthetic pedagogy to theatre and other areas of the performing arts. As a child, the make-believe world I fashioned for myself through play was more real to me than the physical world in which I lived. In the world of my creation I was free to be and become all that I imagined I could be, without the restrictions and expectations that my family and society placed upon me. This would eventually lead me to the theatre, to worlds created onstage and through performance that allowed me to be and exist apart from my physical self in the realm of prosthetic reality. The prosthetic ontology of art allows for both the audience and participant to step outside of themselves to learn, grow, and discover. Through artistic experiences in what Garoian (2013) coins "prosthetic spaces," the artist and audience are able to transcend the natural and real world to enter a place of internal reality. In that internal space, the prosthetic device is a real extension of the individual.

For me, the prosthetic space has always been performance. My first experience being shaped prosthetically was at age five and the space was a movie theatre. In that space I began to discover my talents as extensions of myself, and was able to identify them clearly for the first time. As I grew, I experienced evolution and reshaping through performing. I learned who I am as a performer but also as an individual. My time in the theatre's prosthetic space allowed me to discover and discern how my beliefs, faith, talents, and desires shaped who I chose to be and who I learned I could be. Along the way, I learned that I had a voice as well. I could

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write my own words and sing my own songs. This empowered me in a way that performing the works of others never had. This paper attempts to explore the prosthetic ontology, as developed by Garoian (2013) through the lens of performance theory. “This turn understands performance to be a way of knowing, a way of creating and fostering understanding, a method that persons use to create and give meaning to everyday life” (Denzin, 2009, p. 255). In my life, my journey of becoming through performance has been a central part of many critical moments of evolution or revelation.

Performance theory, as a lens, is illustrated by Schechner (1977) as a fan (Fig. 1), with different categories and extremes reaching out from a central common denominator of performance. These categories range from rites and ceremonies on one extreme, to ritualization on the other extreme. The qualities of performance upon which I will focus fall into the more central branches of this fan. My first vignette, centered on the movie musical *Annie*, lies in the performance branch of *play*. The second story, occurring as I performed in the musical, *Gypsy*, falls in the midst of *performance in everyday life* and *art making*. Other observations lie in the *art making process* of the fan while my final exploration, *Growing Up*, moves to another performance road altogether and incorporates *eruption and resolution of crisis*. My hope, through this reflection, is to learn and grow from a prosthetic space of performance and facilitate the creation of prosthetic spaces for others to learn and grow, as well.



Figure 1: The Performance Theory Fan  
Source: Schechner, 1977

## Purpose

This is not a standard research paper wherein the author conducts experiments or applies interventions. This paper's conclusions come directly from the author's experiences reflecting on prosthetic encounters in her own life. This research identifies examples of Garoian's prosthetic spaces in the life of the author. The author draws conclusions and suggests strategies for others to apply in their own performing arts learning spaces. Through the course of this project, the author explores the past and applies those lessons to the present, as an educator. The goal of this paper is to offer strategies to other performing arts educators to learn from their experiences using these methods.

## **Annie – Discovering Prosthetic Spaces**

“The ontology of play constitutes the body's prosthetic augmentation, it is both *not* the body and not-not the body...as of this writing, I'm not-not in the gallery, yet I may always be...” (Garoian, 2013, p. 59).

I spent the earliest days of my childhood playing through performance. My toys, mostly dolls, sang to each other rather than speaking their conversations. I told stories as songs and read my books with melodies. My personal relationship with my art form was yet undefined but it impacted every facet of my life nonetheless. At age five, my older sister took me to the movie theatre to see the musical movie, *Annie*. The experience was profound and life shaping. On one level, I suspended my disbelief and was transported into the world of a poor orphan who struggles to find her place of belonging in the home of a loving adoptive father. On another level, even at age five, I understood that the people on the screen were, in fact, actors. With that realization, I believed they were just like me. They sang when others would talk, communicating through song. What I did not fully comprehend was that, as actors, the people on screen inhabited a world of make-believe. Their roles, their jobs, required singing. The actors were not, in fact, just like me, a real little girl singing through a life of ups and downs, struggles and triumphs. I left the prosthetic space of the cinema, the artificial environment that created such a very real experience for me, feeling a life validation that I had never before experienced. As I began to incorporate this experience into my life, the truth emerged that acting is not the same as real life. The actors were portraying characters. They were not behaving as they would in real situations. This meant I was still an anomaly. I was still the only singer in a world full of talkers. At age five, the answer seemed relatively simple. If actors are allowed to sing their conversations then I needed to be an actor. My future was set and I would not be deterred.

As is evident by my lived-experience in the prosthetic space of the movie theatre, I was confused by the aspects of the characters on the screen. They were real people who were not the characters they portrayed. Yet, they were real, and at the moment I saw them, they were not-not the characters. This is the mental space in which I existed for some time. So immersed was I in my prosthetic movie experience with *Annie* that I began to write my name on worksheets at school as Annie. My teachers told me this was unacceptable so I began to write Aileen instead. Aileen is the first name of the young actor who portrayed Annie in the movie.

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The teachers did not appreciate my name change and did not allow me to continue using Aileen. Nevertheless, I felt, that I had found my true identity. I felt liberated from the constraints my existing reality placed upon my use of singing. Actors perform in their real lives, therefore, I thought that I would perform in my real life. I lived inside *Annie*. Within the world created by that cinematic experience I began to observe and experience my talent in new ways. It was as if the cinema experience created a new quadrant in my mind, exclusively reserved for the exploration of the possibilities created by performance.

### **Gypsy – Expanding Prosthetic Spaces**

Fast-forward ten years from that little girl finding her voice through *Annie*. In high school, now fully fluent in the world of musical theatre, I was cast in my first major, leading role, the title character in the musical *Gypsy*. The plot follows a young girl, Louise, as a child and teen dominated by her controlling and manipulating mother, the quintessential stage mother, Mama Rose. After breaking free from her mother's control, Louise asserts herself and becomes Gypsy Rose Lee, of burlesque fame. Previously trapped in the expectations imposed upon her by her mother and her own insecurities, Louise's ascension to stardom as Gypsy is a moment of self-actualization. She makes her own choice for the first time in her life. She asserts her will in opposition to her mother. In this act of rebellion, Louise finds her own identity.

She was me. My delving into the history and character of Louise's transformation into Gypsy Rose Lee released something from within me. Louise found her voice and declared her freedom. I could do the same. Just as the little orphan Annie had been a decade prior, *Gypsy* became a "line of flight" (Thompson, 2015, p. 560). It interrupted my pattern of usual behavior and transformed my perception of the world and my place and power within it. As I, the actor, walked through the process of transforming Louise into Gypsy, I myself metamorphosized from a self-restrained and cautious girl into an emboldened, more confident young woman. The transformation was evident to all. As I incarnated Louise and acted out her assertion of independence, so I began to assert my own independence. For the first time in my life, I made choices without asking permission. I advised my parents of my plans rather than inquiring if my plans were acceptable. The beauty of the evolution in my nature was that my parents accepted this emboldened version of me with no question. As I invested myself in the formation of Louise's character, I embraced her power. The voice that I gave Louise to speak became mine as well. I gave her life and she returned it back to me in the form of courage and independence. She became the part of me that was not afraid to take chances. I was not afraid to risk being different or upsetting others' expectations of me.

### **Growing Up – Using Prosthetic Spaces**

The story behind this next vignette is very personal. It involves an incident of extreme gender-based harassment. While broken, insulted, and recovering, I reached back through my inner archives and found my voice in a song. As myself, I was not free to rise up and speak out against my predator. However, through a stage character there were no such restrictions. The character was stronger than I, and so I robed myself in her mantle. I wore her costume and

sang her words. I wrote the words especially for her. My aggressor sat in the audience and I performed. Few knew that the words had any meaning beyond the character's own intention. "The norms that preexist us, shape, to some extent, what is possible to say, do, and how to appear in the world" (O'Donoghue, 2015, p. 522).

### **Ontology into Pedagogy**

Based on my own experiences outlined above, I believe that the practice of prosthetic ontology in art is a deliberate act of seeing things not as they are, but as they could be. The act of removing oneself from the physical and placing oneself in the possible or imaginable is, in itself, a removal away from normalization. By making ourselves vulnerable to the possible changes brought through art, we are allowing for the unexpected. The prosthetic ontology of art allows us to make ourselves vulnerable to the lessons taught through art making and art practice.

My journey as a performer and as a writer has shaped the person I am today. In the prosthetic spaces of the movie theatre, the stage, and the writing studio, I found myself, defined myself, and reshaped who I could be. I have learned that these profound experiences can be shared. I can use my prosthetic space to facilitate the creation of prosthetic spaces of discovery for others. This is the power of prosthetic ontology applied through performance theory. It allows the performer and the audience to shape their spaces, building bridges and associations, creating worlds and shaping paradigms. This is what I accomplished at Burkesville Academy of Fine Arts.

### **BAFA Magic**

Not too long ago I posted an update on Facebook where I communicated the many ways the arts have shaped my life. A parent of some of my students commented, "And if art had not changed YOUR life, think of how different mine would be... and that of my children..." (November 17, 2017, Facebook comment, *emphasis in original*).

Burkesville Academy of Fine Arts (BAFA) operates in a remote community in the Appalachian region of the U.S., in the state of Kentucky. "BAFA Magic" began as a phrase used by students practicing magic tricks instead of "Abra Cadabra," "Hocus Pocus," or "Alakazam". The phrase slowly evolved to describe, define, and eventually embody the spirit of the organization. Through the community created with these young people, BAFA Magic became a constant presence in the atmosphere of our classes, rehearsals, and performances. It lives today as real to those students as their friends with whom they perform. BAFA Magic became a prosthetic space.

In that space, we created an atmosphere where students were free to question generational assumptions, ask any question, explore identities and expectations, all within the practice of their artistic discipline. The following are specific examples of students embracing and embodying BAFA Magic. One student had recently experienced the loss of a loved one. She came to our summer program and took a songwriting class. During her time working with the instructor she wrote a song about rising from the brokenness and challenges to keep

going. She began to sing this song during a public performance and forgot the words mid-song, overcome with emotion. She left the stage crying. I encouraged her to think about the words she was singing. She could go up on that stage right now and rise from the brokenness and embarrassment and overcome, just as she wrote in her song. She accepted my challenge and performed superbly. After the performance she ran off the stage and hugged me and said, “Thank you for giving me BAFA Magic,” as if I had bestowed upon her a tangible strength. These next two quotes are from parents of students on the autism spectrum. BAFA is not an art therapy organization and I hold no specialty in that area, but everyone was welcome and the environment created was real and tangible such that it specifically affected these students.

“BAFA Magic set him free.” (parent).

“BAFA Magic made her feel safe to embrace who she is without apology. Once she learned to do that, she allowed herself to reach out to others for the first time in her life.” (parent)

And finally, from a student, “I believe in #BAFAMagic!” (student)

### **Prosthetic Implications**

Garoian (2013) states that after his first experience in an art museum, “I felt a compulsion to risk everything, to go beyond what I already understood about art and my life” (p. 59). This is the single-minded compulsion that overwhelmed a five-year-old girl into shaping every aspect of her future life so that she could live in a world that allowed her to sing her way through. The prosthetic space of the movie *Annie* intimately became a part of me. It was a core formative experience that would validate my life, passions, and desires. This film would tell me that it was possible to live the life I had always dreamed of. It was not the life depicted by the plot of the movie, struggling through poverty in the midst of the Great Depression, but the life of the actors on screen who could sing on a whim without being silenced or admonished. I could live in the prosthetic world they created, then expand their world to include me.

“The responsibility of art teachers is to foster children’s play, their improvisations, explorations, and expressions through art” (Garoian, 2013, p. 44). I cannot claim that I was forcefully discouraged from my love of singing. In fact, it was almost always complimented and encouraged and my talent was a source of pride for my parents. However, the lesson of maturity was that this could only be one part of me, able to be revealed only on appropriate occasions. It would never be considered socially acceptable for me to sing conversationally with others. I am aware that this very concept might seem absurd to my reader, but as a child, I did not consider that singing was a talent I possessed. It was a way of communicating, my preferred way of communicating. By relegating it to a place of “only for performance” or even “only for personal enjoyment” robbed me of something innately mine. It robbed me of my voice.

With this central part of my being designated as only appropriate for specific times and places, the theatre, my existence as an actor, became my personal prosthetic space. In the walls of the theatre, my voice was returned to me and I was free to use it whenever and however I chose. Thompson (2015) quotes Mary Ann Reilly,

Lines of flight are creative and liberating escapes from the standardization, oppression, and stratification of society. Lines of flight, big or small, are available to us at any time and can lead in any direction. They are instances of thinking “outside of the box,” with a greater understanding of what the box is, how it works, and how we can break it open and perhaps transform it for the better. (p. 560)

The theatre became my line of flight, the interruption in everyday life where newness arrives, ingenuity is possible, and uniqueness embraced. It was the first time in my memory that an experience outside of me so shaped my vision of myself. Even now, as I consider that experience in the cinema, a part of me is there, captivated by the new world growing not on the screen before me, but within my own mind.

Garoian (2015) described a prosthetic device as dissimilar ideas or actions that are encountered in unpredictable ways to create an assemblage of unexpected and unending alliances. Just as *Annie* is always with me, or the child who was me, so is *Gypsy* a part of me. To her and for her part in my formation, I will always be grateful. *Annie* helped me find my voice, and *Gypsy* taught me to use my voice. Schechner (1988) describes the cyclical nature of live theatre for the actor. In the course of performing a role repeatedly, “The actor makes a journey that ends where it began” (p. 172). The strength of this performative experience is that by asserting Louise’s independence over and over again, I became proficient at exerting my own as well. Performance taught me a lesson artificially that became mine in reality. In like manner, every role that I have ever played on stage has become a part of me, as I become the role. There is a mutual sharing, a giving and receiving, between the character which is embracing me, teaching me and welcoming me in as I give myself and all of my own history over to the longings, passions, desires, hopes, dreams, weaknesses and uniqueness of that character’s identity. The act of erasing myself behind the embodiment of the characters I have played has empowered me to envision new possibilities in the world, to see reality differently than it is but rather as it might be. Garoian (2013) believed that prosthetic ontology had the potential to resist, oppose, and overcome society’s normative expectations. Performance provides interruption, intervention and resistance (Denzin, 2009). My assuming of other roles, in this case *Annie* and *Gypsy*, created prosthetic spaces that liberated me to learn, discover, and evolve.

When I assumed a role that gave me courage and confidence to face what I alone could not face, it was the character that stood there in me, with me, beside me, holding me up, speaking to me and through me. The character’s words were my words just as I had written them for her. She was me, as I became her directly. The performance was impacting and affected the space I shared with others, the circumstances around me, and the situations in

which I found myself. As suggested by Schulte (2015), by assuming that role, the agency was mine to affect difference and change in those proximities. Denzin (2009) described performance sometimes as a form of activism, inspiring and empowering the performer to act. This was certainly true for me. I could not do what needed to be done, but by partnering with a prosthetic version of myself, a character of my creation whose words were mine before I first gave them to her, I found my agency. Schechner (1988) called this an “art- life, personal testimony” performance (p. 124). The strength that I had written into her came back to me and provided the strength I needed to confront what I alone could not. In this assumption of that character’s aspect, a prosthetic space was created. In that space I could exist and express myself, even though I was not myself.

O’Donoghue (2015) recognized that the journey toward fluency between art making and our interactions with the world is a process that has to have a genesis somewhere. We are not born able to make sense of our world and represent it through art. This ability comes with training, information, and development. He challenged that current art is often a propagation of normalization, because art is most often representational. In my view, that is the power of prosthetic ontology applied through performance theory. It allows the performer and the audience to shape their spaces, building bridges and associations, creating worlds and shaping paradigms. Schulte (2015) identified pedagogy as the way students draw from experiences and reform them to compose meanings that transform their future experiences. Combining these thoughts, we begin to understand how prosthetic ontology can move into pedagogical practice, through deliberate efforts designed to inspire the creation of prosthetic spaces.

### **Applications in the Performance Classroom**

In the performance classroom, specific and intentional strategies can evoke the prosthetic learning experience that I, as a young performer and then educator, experienced accidentally. Many actors will be familiar with the idea of “Don’t act. BE!” The implication and instruction in this guidance is that the performer does not act like they are a certain character, or a certain type of person. They do not act like they feel happy or sad or whatever else the script might evoke. Rather, the actor is instructed to become. Become the character as only you can. This is important because if I, as I am with all of my own experiences and history become a character, then that character will be unique from any other individual portraying that same character out of the same script. This is where our ontological exploration of prosthetics can move into pedagogy. By encouraging students to embrace and even exist in significant moments of their past, we empower them to use those moments now as they create new worlds through their art.

This can happen by chance, as it sometimes did for me, but it can also happen by design. In the art classroom, Garoian (2013) accomplished this by linking art work to specific and meaningful experiences of his students. He deliberately prompted them with themes that would be personally relevant and emotionally evocative. Performance educators can use these

same methods to help students create their own worlds, informed and inspired by individual memories and experiences, but wholly new with the influence of the author's script.

### Conclusion

Through reflection on personal moments when prosthetic experiences informed my own development I examined when and how the prosthetic device might be useful for educators in the performing arts, specifically theatre. This is just an introduction to the idea. Much more can be learned and discussed about the distinctions between and integrations of the prosthetic space and the performative act.

Shakespeare (trans. 1966), wrote, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts," (2.7.139-142). Perhaps my experiences with performance indicate not that we live on a stage reciting the lines of our various roles, but rather, that the stage itself can shape our roles, and help us discover who we can be, and then we, in turn, can build those worlds for others.

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