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Sewing Pain: Using Costume to Bring The Clinical Body Forward

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Making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger. The danger was of an exposure. (...) For a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries: the possessors of large, aging, and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach, of overly rouged cheeks (...) were at once caught out by fate and blameworthy.¹

What started as an actress' intimate desire for personal research transformed itself into a statement of performative outrage based on vulnerability and dialogue. This article looks at how memory of pain and physical change provoked by surgery can be translated into costume design, understood as an extension of the performer's body in action. My main question is in what way the design and construction of a performer's secondary skin—bringing her wounds outward and forward through the sculpting of fabric into form, texture and color—can mediate between performer and spectator and shape her extended body. By making the performer's embodied knowledge visible through costume, costume is used to enlarge her capacity for expression.

Isabel Craveiro (Isa), actress and artistic director of O Teatrão,² having endured a lengthy process of bodily transformation as a consequence of several surgeries and subsequent extreme loss of weight felt the need to enact her changes onstage. She had had to get a laparoscopic adjustable gastric band as a way to treat her obesity, and she had faced specific traumas: the acceptance, social as well as intimate; she was overweight and the daily and fast-paced transformations her body was put through resulting in large scars, loose skins and loss of recognizable shape. She felt her body as something foreign to her. As a consequence, she thought it interesting to externalize such experiences through performance. She suggested a performance made out of four solo scenes and one collective closing scene which, together, portrayed multiple facets of the body and how they can interact with each other. She is one of the four actors who developed solos for *Anticorpos* (Coimbra 2017, production credits below) on the subjects of the clinical body, the social body, the body for sale and the spiritual body. Each solo was staged in a different space of the theatre and the public was led from one to the other until they converged on the main stage for the final scene. In this article, I will analyze the first solo, the clinical body, as rehearsed and presented by Isa in the theatre's main dressing room.

As a scenographer, the challenge was to establish a dialogue not only with the actress searching for a scene but also with the pain and struggle she went through by using scenographic materials. I have watched many actors and performers transform themselves into different roles, their bodies trained and, at times forced, to withstand difficult rehearsal conditions, changes in age or even gender. I observe and take note of

two things: how to make their inner work visible and how to provoke them further in their work for transformation and character building. Their tribulations can either be appeased or harnessed by the creative process, often both. It is in this strange (in)balance, on the knife's edge, that their "second skin" can be found. Costuming an actor is giving her body new shape, texture, and color, even a new spatial dimension as well as converting gesture and movement into material traces.

Gesture and movement are central to a costume designer's creative process. In the case of *Anticorpos*, we were also working with Isa's personal memories of body change. It was crucial that the design incorporated the performer's verbal and sensual account of the multiple surgeries she had been subjected to over the course of four years. As she made these visible through action, I used them to inform the costume design, which in turn allowed her to choose what to show of her body, and when. Fabric would at times constrain her into a new shape, at other times expand her gestures, convincing spectators her hands had pulled at that dress for years, that her feet had lived in those shoes for most of her life, and her legs had worn out the interior of the pants because she had, sometime in the past, been much bigger. Fabric used in costume conveys time as well as space. It is also the result of an actress's and her character's manipulation. As Aoife Monks puts it, costuming is a verb:

... an act or event that is centered on the ways in which audiences look at an actor dressed up onstage. (...) We can consider the power of costuming to shape identity and form bodies. Costuming can also invoke the audience's deeply complicated act of looking at the surface of the actor's body, and allows us to recognize how the performance might not want us to 'see' the actor's surface, but rather encourage us to look beyond past, or through it to some imaginary internal substance or being.³

Consequently, as scenographer designs for both surface and beyond it, observation of rehearsals is a fundamental part of understanding where and when action leads to transformation in the body and in the character.

In rehearsal, Isa searched for a way into a story. She tried out posture, voice, gesture, and movement. She molded her body to whichever space she believed the story occupies. Action over time and space of performance was our mutual playground. Her body was our canvas. And, in this case, the story was her story. Or rather, the story of her body.



Figure 1. Isa Craveiro in *Anticorpos*, photo by © Carlos Gomes.

Narrative in performance emerges in words, actions and the scenographic. It emerges in the detail that we recognize as a trace of a life being lived. It is those traces we emulate on stage—we enlarge them, bringing them forward to discuss and question. In terms of costume, those details can be a tear in a fabric or the cut of a cloth hugging a breast. They speak of a scar made by a surgical blade or the comfort of a newly shaped body. They are performative in nature, as they reflect present and past action. They are material and they make visible and concrete that narrative which so often escapes us at first look. Finding a way into this action-driven narrative is a scenographer’s first concern. The process of approaching action can be done in different ways, but it is not irrelevant: the medium of registration and observation influences the outcome. Drawing, in its broadest definition, is an important instrument of observation since it slows down the eye to the speed of the hand and allows time to be proved into the paper. More importantly, as Deanna Petherbridge puts it, it adds a sense of touch to the process of visual analysis “where fingers act as seeing and intelligent digits, [and] are part of the reciprocity with the *apparent* tactility implicated in gestural line, mark and strokes.”⁴ As such, drawing is the medium through which a scenographer is able to “touch” the performative body and transfer that sensation onto a design. In fact:

... touch relates to the performative, and has never ceased to be an important element in relation to the emphasis upon emitted sounds by the pressure of fingers (...) In the making of a drawing, touch resides in the very fingertips - or

the pressure of a body against a wall (...) it is most acute when the tools of drawing are closely bonded to the hand that holds them and become an intelligent extension of the digits.⁵

Understanding the performative body with your fingertips rests on the ability to understand it through the scenographer's own body. It is in this study of the actress' body in motion that a narrative emerges—the first step towards a costume design.

Dressing Isa for *Anticorpos* posed several new challenges to our habitual process of rehearsal. For a few years, she had been going through a number of surgeries aimed at controlling her weight. Her body was put through traumatic transformations that, even though we all knew about them, she had never fully disclosed her experience of them to the rest of the theatre company. Here, she had decided not only to discuss it but to study it, in and through performance. Facing her story meant facing her own body. She had collected her medical exams and photographs of each stage of her surgeries and those became properties for performance—proof of transformation and also of the violence she had been experienced. This violence had been looked upon as necessary, by both Isa and her doctors. It was important to reveal this violence, but also find a way of doing so that questioned conventional definitions of the perfect body and how it influences our own life-stories. We agreed then that “all autobiographical productions involve processes of selection, scripting, editing, revising, etc. (...) autobiographical performances strategically work with life experiences, but rather than rendering them self-evident the political task is to discern the subtext.”⁶

For Isa this journey needed to be, as Park-Fuller proposes “a site of narrative authority, offering her the power to reclaim and rename her voice and the body privately and in rehearsal, and then publicly in performance.”⁷ Being in control of her own vulnerability meant she could use it to express pain and make sense of her estranged body. The fast pace of its transformations had not allowed her time to look upon it as herself since, as Deirdre Heddon explains “the primary effect of trauma is understood to be a ‘wound’ to the sense of self.”⁸ Nevertheless, Isa also agreed that

“it is also through constructing a narrative from the fragmented memory of trauma that the traumatic event is given a place within the life-story, and to that extent the trauma becomes ‘mastered’. (...) In this sense, narrative memory is a performative act that enables the recreation of a ‘self’ (...) and narrative memory needs to be understood as an act of creativity.”⁹

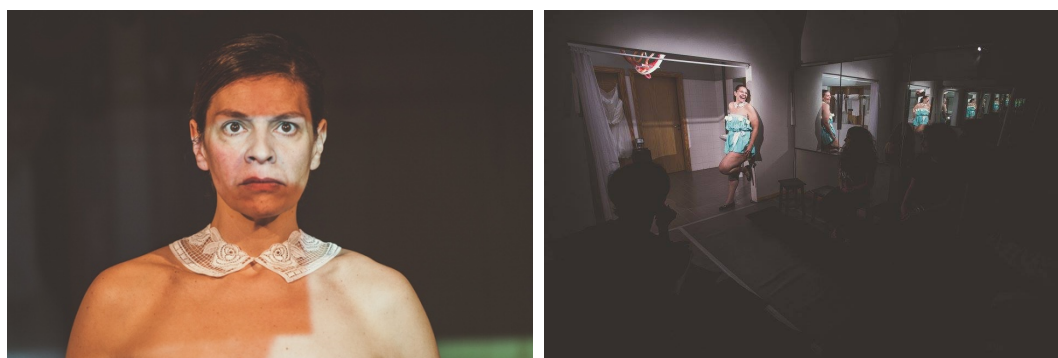
By the act of performing her journey, Isa created a narrative for her new self. In some way, her clinical body, by being performed and materialized—and as it was shared with spectators—gave way for another body to take its place. It was a shedding of a skin,

and cathartic for both actress and spectators. The role of costume was to make that journey visible, and offer a way to express and maximize, materially, the actions involved in it. As such, showing a progression in the costumed body was critical. Next, I will look at the sequence of costume transformations in the scene, following the performer's actions and intentions in rehearsal.



Figures 2 and 3. Isa Craveiro in *Anticorpos*, photo by © Carlos Gomes.

The performance started with images of circus women, overweight and of oddly proportioned bodies, famous for it, explored for it. Isa superimposed her own body onto this projected images, comparing shape and size. Her costume, a naïf construction of a short light green organza dress and a detached lace collar, mimicked the strange contrast of child-like behavior and overbearing feminine presence which had excited spectators of circus performances in years past. “So this is the body you have come to see? Large, powerful thighs under pale green organza?”, she said. Enacting the “circus freak” gave us a starting point. This costume was put together during rehearsals from pieces of fabric and props at hand and it presented Isa’s critical look upon her body. An actress, whose body is invariably at the center of her work, looked at it as a costume, a circus costume; she was never allowed to take off. She confronted spectators in the dressing room, exposing their gaze as perversely interested in deformity. By doing so, she was also admitting she viewed it similarly.



Figures 4 and 5. Isa Craveiro in *Anticorpos*, photo by © Carlos Gomes.

As she finished this scene, she closed off the curtain, creating a temporary backstage where she wrapped herself in a long strip of white cloth, which was her body's only protection from the spectators' gaze and the first hint of the clinical body to come. As we saw her shadow moving behind the curtain, medical photographs of different bodies were projected onto the screen. She reappeared wearing a surgical mask and walked out into the dressing room, the cloth holding to her naked body. She paraded her costumed body as if on a fashion catwalk, smiling at the spectators. Behind her, in the background, a white wedding dress and a men's formal shirt hung from a doorknob. None was used in performance. They served only as reminders of her unfulfilled wish of a beautiful marriage, where she would look her best and be the center of attention. Instead, her white cloth and mask worked as her wedding gown. As the cloth started to fall apart, and her body appeared increasingly vulnerable, she progressed back to safety, behind the hospital curtains and once again undressed, unseen.



Figure 6. Isa Craveiro in *Anticorpos*, photo by © Carlos Gomes.

Part of costuming an actor is understanding transition and how it can often say more about the performance than each costume by itself. The action of undressing before an audience creates a pause in performance. It is a suspension in the narrative, as the actress is momentarily looked upon as herself and whichever character she was thought to have portrayed so far gives way to a gesture of intimacy with the spectators.

For us, this intimacy and its eroticism, needed to be achieved not by undressing but by being naked, and by withstanding the performer-spectator gaze over the time of performance. As a result, we realized the change into a full nude would have to be made once again behind the curtain.

Therefore, in the next part of the scene, Isa walked out holding only a plastic 80's mannequin in front of her. Her body showed from behind it, much larger than the sickly thin doll, looking strong and real, textured and fleshy—incredibly sexy against the idealized fashioned dummy, and wearing nothing but red lipstick. Her body, which had been viewed earlier as deformed and freakish, was now shown as sexy—it was even sexier because of the contrast with an idealized body.



Figure 7. Isa Craveiro in *Anticorpos*, photo by © Carlos Gomes.

The erotic found in this relationship between a live performing body and a lifeless prop emphasized Isa's nude presence and it made visible her wish for a thinner body. Her stylized gestures and movements indicated an intention to seduce through an artificially erotic choreography. As she crossed the very small dressing room, an intimate space, spectators became more and more aware that she was naked. Whatever doubts there might have been in the beginning as to if she was to undress fully, it became clear when she waved off the top half of the mannequin and pressed her breasts against its waistline creating something of a half-breed of woman and doll: a nude

wearing a representation of a nude. It was a step towards the clinical body, her wish of a perfect body before surgery.

Now completely naked, Isa immersed herself in manifestations of bodily actions: skin, fluids, and textures, searching for the erotic in the materiality of her body. She worked around a strange chandelier made of a steel structure and hanging surgical tubes filled with colored liquids, earth, and sand. It was hung from the dressing room's ceiling and she would pull at it as if she was playing with her own entrails, enacting what she felt had been done to her body during surgery. Looking at the most basic aspects of a body, at its functions, was a step towards her clinical body, that which had been cut, shaped and sewed back together.



Figure 8. Isa Craveiro in *Anticorpos*, photo by © Carlos Gomes.

Covered in dirt and sweat, Isa's body was a show of the ordeal she had been through on the hospital bed. But as we continued our search, it became clear that we needed to undress this costume, a nude. Defining costume as "that which is perceptually indistinct from the actor's body, and yet something that can be removed," Aoife Monks introduces the notion "costume is a body that can be taken off."¹⁰ Eventual separation of costume and body is what brings back the actor from the grasp of the story being told on stage. But since the narrative being told was that of the actress herself, and of her body, we needed to find a way to transition from a nude into a costume which would make apparent the inner process of trauma she had been through. We needed to

materialize the inhabitation of her own body and her sensual memories of a distraught body. Her nudity as shown to the spectators at that moment, belonged to the present, it was not a strong enough materialization of her clinical body.

As a consequence, for the last sequence of the scene, more than designing a conventional costume, we were looking for the materials to reveal the wear and tear of the remaking of a body, a shedding of a skin. When an actor wears a costume over the time of rehearsal, there are movements that are repeated, stretching and even tearing at the fabrics. They respond to these gestures and are proof of performative action and of the habitual practice of the actor. They become inhabited.¹¹ Many of the events of rehearsal and of performance get lost in the process. Costume can bring them forward by editing connections between events and its consequences on materials. Costuming this final clinical body meant working from both Isa's memories and from conventional parameters of a sick, hospitalized body. The costuming had to also consider what to cover up. Contrary to other performances where the body is covered by costume from the start and patches of skin can be shown, here the body was nude and patches of skin had to be covered. Since she changed at the interval and appeared ready for the final scene on the main stage, there needed to be a visual connection between her previous actions and this last costume. In addition, it had to be understood as a secondary skin in a process of transformation, an evolution on the first white cloth costume which would have been, by then, subjected to time and inhabitation.

Looking at the history of costume, a body which is dressed for medical intervention or demonstrates the result of such an intervention, is a vulnerable body. Both costume and body are exposed in places, torn in others. In this production, costuming was designed at its most intimate level, since what is usually on the inside is brought to the forefront.¹² In order to show Isa's ragged memories of post-surgery, we created a thin layer of mesh fabric, which wrapped around her torso and legs and was kept in place by three padded belts: one around her waist, another around her neck and the last around one of her wrist and forearm. A cross between an undergarment and medical clothing, this evoked the previous white cloth, as if it the layer she had wrapped herself in had been subjected to multiple interventions and had to be sewed and patched time and time again. It was as if her body was healing and finally shedding its protective shell.

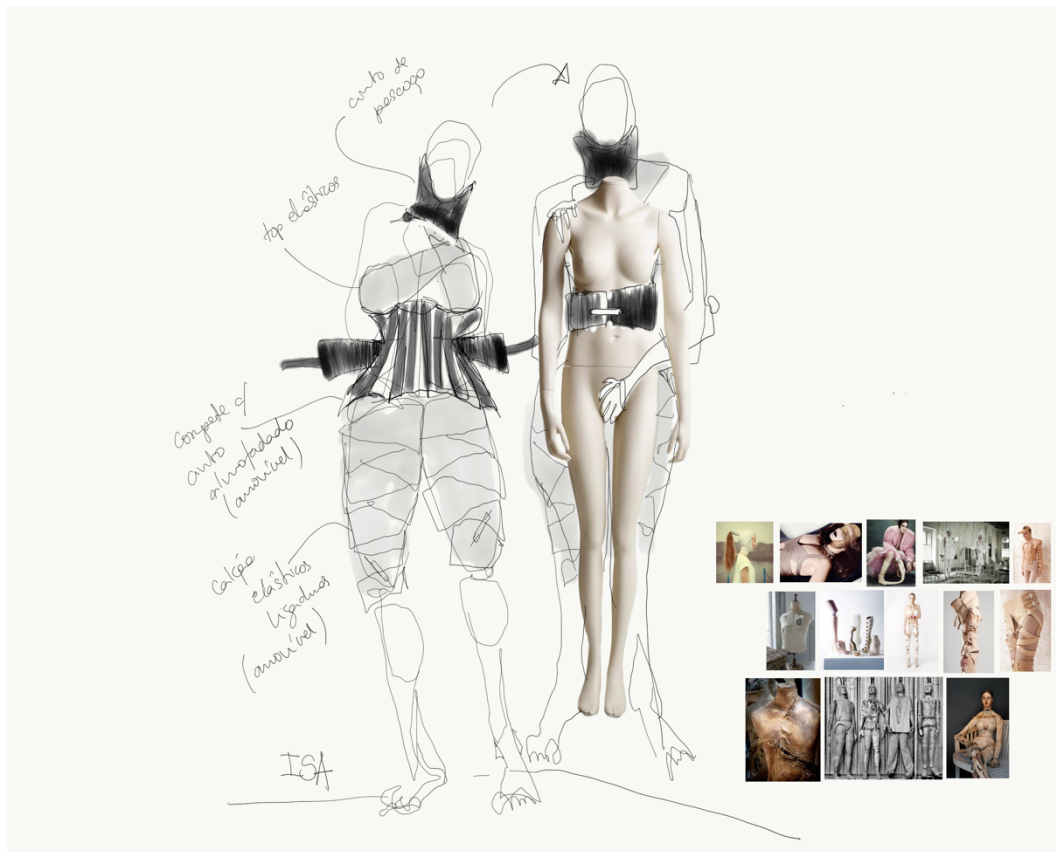


Figure 9. Costume design for *Anticorpos*, digital sketch by Filipa Malva.



Figure 10. Isa Craveiro in *Anticorpos*, photo by © Carlos Gomes.

As rehearsals for the final sequence of the scene progressed, Isa's costume became increasingly tattered. Initially looking like a closely swaddle made by a conscientious nurse, it transformed into a bundle of torn mesh. Given the opportunity to remake it, we decided to keep it as was. We realized that the contrast between the mesh's elasticity and the restriction of the canvas in the belts had been developed to its extreme by its constant use in rehearsal. What had initially been designed to restrict movement—the belts—had molded to Isa's body and was now part of her shape. And what was initially seen as a tight textured skin, the mesh, became loose, reshaping itself with each performance. Often, as Monks says, "costuming is indistinguishable from the actor, indeed, that it makes the actor's body possible, and is fundamental to the relationship between the actor and the audience. However, the bodies produced by costuming are not stable objects that are simply 'there' on the stage. Rather, these are bodies that are unstable, unreliable and occasionally disconcerting."¹³



Figure 11. Isa Craveiro in *Anticorpos*, photo by © Carlos Gomes.

Isa's extraordinary performance, fast-paced and committed, ripped apart any image of what her body, as known to spectators at the beginning of the scene, was capable of doing. Her appearance of weakness, underlined by the depiction of the clinical body we designed, was taken apart throughout the final sequence. And her costume mirrored that conversion. That incongruous tension is that of theatre.¹⁴ The strength of her performance lay in the tension between the spectators' expectations of

her body's abilities and action being developed during the time of performance. We knew, as Collete Conroy explains, that "there are conventions of presenting and viewing bodies on stage. Questions about what sorts of bodies may appear on stage, questions about who may play which part, are important to the way we understand and make theatre."¹⁵ Nonetheless "the body is a site of power, and a site where power can be questioned and explored."¹⁶ We chose to question the idea that a large body, appearing weak from traumatic experience, needed to be presented in that way. As in the dressing room, Isa's interaction with the plastic mannequins in this sequence emphasized the ruggedness of her body. Either using them as objects of desire or as partners in dance, her textured figure, with an irregular silhouette was in stark contrast with the plain, sleek, paint coat of the dolls. Her costume appeared poorly built to allow her body to expand through it, exploding in action in all directions. The choreography demanded every breath of her energy, and the costume made that effort visible. It was the culmination of a path towards a clinical body as she had described at the beginning of rehearsals which had, in the process, transformed trauma into power.



Figure 12. Isa Craveiro and João Paiva in *Anticorpos*, photo by © Carlos Gomes.

Isa's multiple costumes and the evolution of her actions over time created "a composite of different theatrical practices, or modes, that come in and out of focus. (...) Costume works as a hinge in the audience's vacillation between the different versions of the actor's body—although, of course, these bodies aren't completely distinct and

they don't come into focus in orderly succession.”¹⁷ Costuming Isa's performance presented a challenge, not only because of the content's autobiographical nature, but particularly because of the fast-paced transformations Isa went through on stage. The piece started with the strong image of circus freak, then was followed by the overlaying of her shadow, before moving into a naive lace and organza dress—which was then replaced by a straight white cloth and a mask, before moving into a nude; and all within ten minutes of performance. All of these fast changes meant that the materials had to connect with Isa's actions, while also possessing meaning and context in themselves. Their evolution towards a nude was important in the narrative, and dealt with an expectation of the spectator's gaze upon Isa's body, and also with how she would deal with it. The initial slowness of her solo at this part allowed for costume changes, and for her body to be shaped and presented through the sculpting of fabric. It was a game of show and tell, a balance between what Isa needed to share and what she was willing to show. The fact that fabrics were unstructured and simply cut allowed me to work it out in rehearsal, reacting to the progress of her work. This process also permitted her to adjust them at every step of every performance.



Figure 13. Isa Craveiro in *Anticorpos*, photo by © Carlos Gomes.

In the final choreographed sequence, Isa's mesh and belts costume reacted, quite extremely, to her gestures and movements. Her body, by this point shedding its

skin, refused the costume's constraints. This was the only costume that was designed as a fully constructed garment. Nonetheless, as we have seen before, it was torn apart over rehearsals, becoming a reflection of Isa's actions. It was designed to support parts of her body, like the waist and neck, and simultaneously restrain them. By the end of each performance, not even the strong padded belts were in place. Once again she reverted to the nude with only pieces of mesh still covering her torso and legs. There was no question her body had broken off its clinical skin.

Isa's willingness to put herself through multiple stages of a "clinical body" came from her desire to exercise her traumatic experience as a surgical patient and her wish to make her body her own. The empowerment that came from rehearsals and discussions over her several "skins" and how they were used in performance transformed her experience into a narrative. And as Deirdre Heddon explains "if autobiographical performance is a potentially powerful tool of resistance, intervention and/or reinvention, then it must be so for the spectator as much as for the performer."¹⁸ Walking through her multiple bodies allowed us, spectators, to analyze our own. We sit in a performance, we watch it, and we see it through our spectating body. It filters our physical and intellectual activity as an active spectator. In fact, as Conroy states:

the analysis of the performing body also tells us something about the spectating body. Whenever I watch or analyze a piece of theatre I occupy a physical perspective, and I rely on my own physical body as the vantage point of my analysis. So my analysis is always subject to the restrictions or possibilities that my own body imposes or opens up.¹⁹

After the performance, many spectators spoke to Isa. They praised her courage in being so vulnerable. How could she, a large woman with such marks on her body, have the nerve of showing her body like that? To exhibit herself as naked and provocative—and above all, sexy? Isa never really considered that an act of courage. To her, it was a necessity, a trial. For me, as an observer and a scenographer, it was a shock to look at each scar, each crease in her body and understand the pain she surely went through. So why were spectators more preoccupied with the idea that she would need courage to show her body to others in the context of performance? Her pain is not shameful. Her vulnerability was honest. Her eroticism was powerful. Taking her clothes off was not the purpose of Isa's performance—it was a necessity in order to discuss her story. But it seems that anybody who does not present a socially acceptable standard of a beautiful woman is not to be shown. Isa was literally making a spectacle of herself. And even though nowadays it is less likely our mothers would tell us off, "courageous" is still the adjective for any woman willing to look at her body as her own. For that

reason, I wonder if every layer of costume we dressed Isa in was seen as a piece of her story of pain, or rather as fabric which covered the shame of the spectator's gaze upon her skin—filters and masks, allowing spectators breathing space in-between appearances of an inappropriate nude. We can easily compare any body to a specific construct of the perfect body,²⁰ but we cannot always empathize with it. Costume, by making visible and sensual Isa's trauma, served as a translation of her journey and offered spectators a path into her pain.

Production Credits

Anticorpos (Coimbra, 2017)

Produced by O Teatrão

Directed by Patrick Murys

Set and costume design by Filipa Malva

Light design by Jonathan de Azevedo

Photography by © Carlos Gomes

Endnotes

- ¹ Mary Russo, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory" in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (Chichester, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997), 318.
- ² O Teatrão is a theatre company based at Coimbra, Portugal: <http://oteatrao.com>.
- ³ Aoife Monks, *The Actor in Costume* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.
- ⁴ Deanna Petherbridge, *The Primacy of Drawing: Histories and Theories of Practice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 109-10.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Deirdre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 9.
- ⁷ Park-Fuller quoted in Deirdre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 3.
- ⁸ Heddon, 55.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Monks, 11.
- ¹¹ Sofia Pantouvaki (ed.), *Critical Costume 2015: New Costume Practices and Performances* (Espoo: Aalto University, 2015), 41.
- ¹² C. Willet and Phillis Cunnington, *The History of Underclothes* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2000), 13.

- ¹³ Monks, 12.
- ¹⁴ “Theatre frequently creates tension from incongruity. The gap between the body that one has (or is) and the actions that are expected from it appears to be part of the structure of theatre,” Collete Conroy, *Theatre and the Body* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 57.
- ¹⁵ Collete Conroy, *Theatre and the Body* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 4-5.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Monks describes several types of bodies which may happen simultaneously or in succession: the working body where we see the actor’s body at work; the aesthetic body a symbolic body, seen as a scenic object; a self-expressive body which draws attention to the presence of actors’ ‘real’ selves; the sensate body that shows the sensations undergone by the performer onstage while wearing costume and the transformation of the actor’s body; and the historical body which is the product of an social belief system circulating around the body. Aoife Monks, *The Actor in Costume* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 21-24.
- ¹⁸ Heddon, 5.
- ¹⁹ Conroy, 6.
- ²⁰ “‘The body’ that we read or hear about in the news is necessarily a generalized construct, an abstraction. But each of us remains firmly enveloped in a specific body, subject to its own idiosyncratic dynamics, its strengths and weaknesses. There may be a tantalizing future for the universal body -of youth and vitality restored to the aged, of vastly extended lifespans, of a range of improvements hitherto relegated to the realm of science fiction - but ultimately each person has to confront his or her own corporeal reality”. William A. Ewing, *The Body* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 238.