

On **War of Fictions**

Sidney Leoni and Luís Miguel Félix
interviewed by Ben Evans



- Can you address this notion of "war" as you see it, in terms of fiction? What is its relation to fiction, if any? Is it more than simply a title?

Luís Miguel Félix (LMF): The "war" in the title expresses the desire to create a zone where fictions can meet, overlap, contradict each other. I don't take the war in the title literally, not in the sense of a battle between opposing forces where one will supplant the other. I'm thinking of war as a field of potentiality, an area of (re)negotiation, not necessarily through force, but through co-existence, even if a troubled one. The war concerned in the title is a meeting of different fictions whose outcome is unexpected. And this idea leads me to connect to a certain notion of chaos that I associate with war. It's an organized chaos with many flows of intentions, practices, events that constantly intersect each other, redirecting, restructuring them - it makes me think of a hole with holes in it - and that is how I would like to consider the war in the piece.

For now, we don't stage a war, I mean we don't fictionalize a war, but we do experience contrary forces, overwhelming impulses and strong emotions at once.

Sidney Leoni (SL): I find titles often tricky to deal with either as audience or as maker. Titles can color the way the audience grabs the "purpose" of a performance as it can inform a specific point of view chosen from the maker about his work. We found the title of the piece pretty early in our process. And we immediately responded to it by fantasizing about multilayer's of fictions that would cohabitate inside physical assignments such as: a body bumping, a body feeling a constant pain or a body constantly going up and down. We decided to address each of these tasks with a duration until the moment our body would function or "behave" accordingly to unexplainable logic and intentions. We invested in those tasks everyday as our physical practice. Later on, we started to compose from it series of short situations-fictions where Luís and I would relate to each other, with the space or with an audience. Those short fictions carried with them their own narrative and imagery, which we decided to not necessarily invest in time. That was in order to maintain our focus on the physical aspect of the material, rather than approaching the psychological and narrative aspects of it. We ended up with snippets of narratives that we would never totally complete. That is possibly when the war starts - in between what we propose as material for Fiction and what an audience perceives of this material as a narration, an image, a space, a behavior, an experience, etc...

- How has the notion of fiction/s shifted, if at all, for you? What is your interest in a fictive approach - does it inspire character or narrative? Is it related to theatre as storytelling?

LMF: When we were still writing the project I always thought of fiction as implying a coherent narrative structure, even if within it were abstract areas. I imagined a full organization of behavior and environment proposing a structured universe. Shortly after that period I came across Rancière's definition of fiction: a specific arrangement of actions that doesn't seek recognition. Well, this proposition allowed me to rethink fiction as a flexible concept from which I could extract some guidelines for a practice of rearranging actions. Fiction is then less produced by the actions in it than by the way they are combined. Somehow this acknowledgment liberated us from stiff narrative structures. In the piece we transition between inhabiting pre-determined fictions and the performance of physical tasks that we explore based in the sensation it produces, mainly in our own bodies. I think that the first situation is more likely to produce a recognizable narrative with characters with whom you can

empathize, and in that sense some storytelling takes place. The second situation, on the other hand, produces a fiction we are not really aware of since our awareness is fully committed to the experience of the physical task. In this case, the fiction results in a more active compositional work of the spectator that often has more difficulty in naming the situation as it doesn't resemble the quotidian. In that sense I think we do not stay in the realm of storytelling, possibly emancipating the actions from the question "what is it?", proposing instead the question "what does it do?"

One other aspect I would like to mention is produced by exploring, in duration and intensity, physical tasks combined, in different ways, with expressions. With this strategy we aim toward the production of behavior that dictates how we interact with the surroundings. The process of decision-making is then challenged as we are guided by a new set of priorities and values that are not the ones already inscribed.

- How are you working with fiction not only as concept, but as material?

SL: One way to apply the notion of fiction in this performance comes from a physical investment in specific sensations and motions, which we isolated from their original context and then invested separately or together in duration. From the start, we thought of the body as a medium for sensation, as a sort of mass that feels and uses its instincts to pass from one situation to another. We then thought of sensation as possible material to convey a fiction in which the body would become self-referential and function as a sort of figure with its own internal logic. Therefore we could potentially move the body away from any psychological or narrative motivations, so that for instance, after a while, a cry would not be perceived anymore as a cry, even though we would still be crying. That is specifically this moment that I am interested in: when a cry would not be related to an idea of war, destruction, pain or illness, but to something else. The outcome of the sensations we go through could eventually be perceived by an audience as unusual and mysterious ways for human beings to behave and interrelate with each other and with their surrounding. That is clearly the case when I again imagine being in a world where bodies would, instead of walking, be bumping or going up and down the floor in order to move.

Another principle we applied to the notion of fiction was to conceive situations only from a very strict and minimal use of gestures and actions which then reduced our activity on stage to a gaze, a hand on a shoulder, a step back, etc... It was a strategy, among others, to empty a fiction of its content in order that the intention of a gaze (for example) could refer to a multiplicity of meanings, so that consequently the audience would have to use their imagination in order to make sense of the fiction that is taking place, or to produce their own fiction. This way of composing - by emptying our material of any narrative - also allowed each of our little actions to gain amplitude and to become the main element of tension or of relief between performers, the space and the audience.

- How are you placing your body in relation to the other mediums you are using, like scent, sound, light, senses? How are you thinking, if at all, of the spectator's experience? Their corporeal experience? How is this different from your own?

LMF: It's hard not to have the body of the performers as the main event on stage. We are not trying to completely undo that but we are interested in decentralizing the body as the main performative event by means of using other mediums at our disposal. In that sense we think of them as independent performative agents that participate in the piece. They carry with them the possibility of bringing the audience's attention to areas that the body, because of its saturated signification, cannot. Scent, sound and light allow the creation of pure sensory fictions that are not limited to the human action and representation.

Apart from this, we use the other mediums to interfere with certain actions we perform, mainly affecting the audience's perception and reading of the piece. When we think about the light of a scene, for instance, normally we don't think it in terms of enhancing what the scene is already producing but actually suggesting other flight lines of signification. We think of sound and smell in the same way - they can open fictions inside the fictions we are producing.

The work developed with scent, sound and light is also deeply related with the interest in sensory stimulation. It is specifically the scent that helps me to frame how we consider the audience's corporeal experience. This might sound too literal, but diffusing a certain smell in the room is a way of addressing the audience's body in a completely new form for us as it implies a sensory region that lies within, the smell reaches the inside of the body. I like to think, then, that the performance happens there too. For us, the subcutaneous level that we can reach immediately with smell renders the audience's experience and presence very concrete and palpable.

Combining the physical performance with the other mediums we attempt to address the audience's body, considering it in its full capacity of perceiving and sensing. Nevertheless it's important for us to think of a certain economy in relation to how these mediums are used - it's a very thin line from sensation to sensational - a line that we are not interested in crossing as we are more inclined to work in the realm of suggestion rather than imposition.