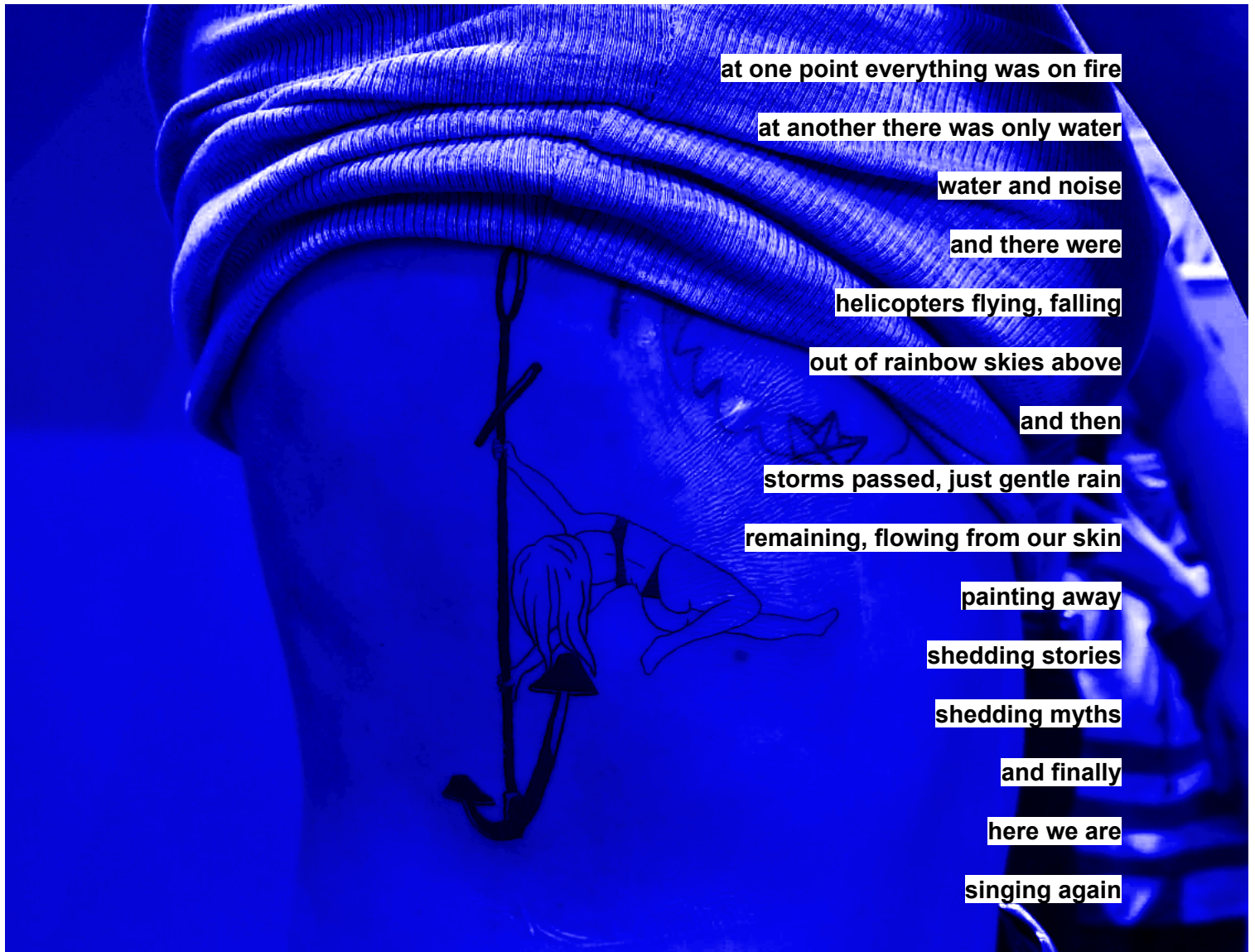


# Queer Healing: Exploring Dramaturgies of Suspension in Queer Contemporary Performance



Iris Jasmijn van Lieshout  
Universiteit Utrecht  
Contemporary Theatre, Dance and Dramaturgy  
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# Abstract

This thesis explores the transformative and *queer healing* potential of queer contemporary performance and artworks with *Ophelia's Got Talent (2022)* as a focal point. In *Ophelia's Got Talent (2022)*, Austrian-born theatermaker and choreographer Florentina Holzinger reimagines Shakespeare's Ophelia as an empowerment symbol, interpreting her death as an act of agency. The performance, rich with water-themed imagery, features an all-female cast reclaiming trauma through daring acts in a talent show format. In 21st century Western society, one could argue we are experiencing a *collapse in imagination*, leading to a constant state of collective trauma. Lauren Berlant's notion that normativity is violent is used to elucidate ways in which queer contemporary art can prompt *queer healing*. Drawing on Berlant's "cruel optimism" and "crisis ordinariness", six elements of *queer healing* are defined: community care, alternative kinship, Jack Halberstam's "queer failure", José Esteban Muñoz' "disidentification", subjugated healing knowledges and Tony Wells' "imagination". Through a dramaturgical analysis of *Ophelia's Got Talent (2022)* along the planes of spectatorship and statement it was found that the performance keeps the spectator suspended and in a state of what Victor Turner calls "betwixt and between." Through the compositional element of watery imagery the performance produces a *porous spectatorship*. The ways trauma is represented in the performance aligns with Berlant's concept of "crisis ordinariness" as the traumatic stories that are reclaimed are clearly embedded in societal systems of power and oppression. The performance *Ophelia's Got Talent (2022)* strategically uses water to both engage with and subvert traditional gendered representations of water, thereby disidentifying with the passive victimhood often associated with femininity. From the analysis four dramaturgical strategies are identified and applied to three other queer contemporary performances. The dramaturgical strategies are: *ebbing*, *flooding*, *crystallizing* and *dissolving*. In applying these dramaturgical strategies to the other case studies within a comparative analysis, it is revealed that these dramaturgical strategies can support different statements in queer contemporary performances. Additionally, these strategies undo progress-oriented, linear dramaturgies and emphasize fluidity, change, and destruction as necessary means toward transformation. These findings highlight the significance of these strategies for prompting *queer healing* in the face of violent normativity.

**Keywords:** queer healing, dramaturgies of suspension, porous spectatorship, betwixt and between, queer failure, disidentification

# Preface

This thesis discusses various sensitive topics, such as homophobia, sexual violence and abuse. In line with the theme of *queer healing* and trauma central to this thesis, I have included trigger warnings for content that may be distressing to some readers. These warnings are provided at the beginning of each chapter in italics, like so:

*Trigger warning: mention of homophobic violence*

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# Introduction

*Trigger warning: mention of eating disorders, homophobic and transphobic violence*

## **Dramaturgies of Suspension in *Ophelia's Got Talent* (2022)**

In *Ophelia's Got Talent* (2022), Austrian-born theatermaker and choreographer Florentina Holzinger (she/her) reimagines Shakespeare's Ophelia as an empowerment symbol, interpreting her death as an act of agency.<sup>1</sup> The performance, rich with water-themed imagery, features an all-female cast reclaiming trauma through daring acts in a talent show format. Mid-performance, Holzinger shares a pivotal childhood moment at age ten, narrating how she concealed her anorexia by over-drinking water, essentially drowning herself. This led to her hospitalization in Vienna where she underwent force-feeding through a nasogastric tube. Then, in a mesmerizing scene reminiscent of Roman fountains, the all-female cast uses this nasogastric technique around a pool. Two performers create luminous arcs of water, threading tubes through their nostrils, down their throats, and out of their mouths. They are visibly uncomfortable, yet determined, as they turn this childhood trauma into a circus talent act, presenting their tubes with showy poses.

Watching it, I squirmed and felt apprehensive of what would come next. Despite the discomfort and nausea the scene induced, the self-determined performance struck a powerful and empowering chord for me. Transforming childhood trauma into a talent act, the nasogastric tube became something horrifyingly beautiful, changing my perspective of the image while retaining its discomfort. As a spectator I couldn't seem to shake the feeling of being suspended in time and space. I had the feeling that, just like the theme song of the performance (Ellie Goulding's "Anything Can Happen"), anything could happen, which excited me as well as frightened me a little.<sup>2</sup> I also felt more aware of my surroundings, like the "anything" could also come from "everywhere" (meaning literally in the space of the theater as well as inside and outside the theatrical framework).

My selection of *Ophelia's Got Talent* as a focal point for analysis was thus deeply influenced by a profoundly personal experience I had while attending the performance. Unlike many other theatrical encounters, this particular production left me feeling

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<sup>1</sup> *Ophelia's Got Talent* (2022), directed by Florentina Holzinger, Volksbühne, Berlin, Germany, September 15, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Ellie Goulding, "Anything Could Happen," on *Halcyon*, Polydor Records, 2012, track 1.

empowered and liberated, as I was able to identify with what was presented on stage. Throughout the performance, there is a constant movement between withholding or pulling back and overwhelming or engulfing. Theatrical frameworks disappear and reappear in different forms as well, keeping the spectator in this state of suspension.<sup>3</sup>

This spectatorial experience of suspension intrigued me and I was reminded of the edited volume *Queer Dramaturgies*, in which theater scholars Stephen Farrier (he/him) and Alyson Campbell (she/her) write about queer contemporary performance and affect, and emphasize moments that allow for a "queerly transitory suspension:"<sup>4</sup>

This small suspension meant that we could contemplate other ways of being in the world, play out non-normative identities and imagine, rehearse and form new ways of expressing an experience of the world. Powerfully, this allowed us to refuse a position that maintained that the world outside this rare moment was somehow set, fixed and given.<sup>5</sup>

Reflecting on the performance, I drew connections between these moments of suspension and their transformative potential. While suspension can be liberating and euphoric, it also has the potential to evoke feelings of insecurity, anxiety, discomfort, nausea, and pain. Suspension could potentially act as a catalyst for introspection, urging individuals to reflect. This aligns with anthropologist Victor Turner's (he/him) notion of the "betwixt and between," describing a liminal stage during rites of passage, a period marked by ambiguity, discomfort, and transition.<sup>6</sup> Turner perceives this discomfort as an antidote to the rigid structures in today's society.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As this dramaturgical movement resembles the tide, mirroring the patterns of ebb and flood, I identify these movements as dramaturgical strategies of *ebbing and flooding* in Chapter Four. *Ebbing* involves slowing down or pausing the narrative or imagery, allowing for reflection and the revelation of previously submerged details. *Flooding*, on the other hand, overwhelms the senses, creating disorientation and vulnerability, obscuring certain elements while enveloping spectators in a multitude of sensations. Continuing with these water metaphors, this process of disappearing and reappearing of frameworks is later identified as dramaturgical strategies of *dissolving and crystallizing*.

<sup>4</sup> Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier, *Queer Dramaturgies: International Perspectives on Where Performance Leads Queer* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier, *Queer Dramaturgies: International Perspectives on Where Performance Leads Queer* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). p.3.

<sup>6</sup> Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 76.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

## Theoretical Framework

In 21st century Western society we might say that we are grappling with a *collapse of imagination* beyond these rigid structures, making it crucial to explore alternative perspectives. We can find it challenging to think beyond capitalism towards sustainable living, move past fixed gender categories for more inclusivity, or envision a peaceful future beyond colonial violence. This *collapse of imagination* could be seen as a form of cruel optimism if individuals or societies continue to hold onto outdated or unsustainable norms and structures, despite the pressing need for change.

In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant (they/them) argues that clinging to certain beliefs or systems, even if they are inherently flawed or damaging, may provide a sense of stability or familiarity, making it difficult for people to embrace alternative perspectives or envision more sustainable and just futures.<sup>8</sup> Berlant also argues that we are living in a state of constant trauma, something she calls “crisis ordinariness.”<sup>9</sup> She acknowledges the role of the collective or society in traumatizing individuals, moving from an individualizing perspective on trauma towards a systemic one.

This is what makes it clear to me that contemporary Western society is in need of healing. Furthermore, by drawing upon gender studies academic David Halperin’s (he/him) notion of queer as “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant,” it is clear that *queer healing* in particular can open up a world of possibilities beyond what we have envisioned so far.<sup>10</sup> In my view, *queer healing* involves practices such as community building and care, building chosen families or alternative kinship, and unconventional ways of healing that disrupt the underlying notions of dominant Western forms of healing such as symptom management or overly relying on medication.

*Queer healing* also includes exploring oneself outside of society’s norms, holding space for one’s oddities. Queer theorist Jack Halberstam’s (he/they) “queer failure” is pertinent here. “Queer failure”, as described by Halberstam, is not a defeat but a conscious refusal to participate in a system that excludes and marginalizes certain identities and experiences. By embracing failure, individuals can redefine success on their own terms, challenging the binary constructions of identity that support hegemonic power structures. In my belief, this can potentially empower queer individuals to think beyond established boundaries, to understand and dismantle oppressive systems, to foster creativity and to dream

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<sup>8</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 45.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). 43

of unconventional futures — think “somewhere over the rainbow” or as later mentioned in Chapter Four, the notion of destruction as a necessary means towards transformation.

As a queer person however, I also acknowledge and wish to address the specific traumas associated with societal nonconformity. Normativity can be violent. Facing rejection and even physical or emotional violence can be incredibly stress-inducing. The body naturally reacts to stress and threats by freezing/fleeing/fighting, which can be damaging to the body long-term. Therefore, the aim of this introduction and this thesis as a whole is to sketch parts of a path towards healing that are sensitive to the nuances of queer identity and the challenges it may hold.

Campbell and Farrier highlight the transformative potential of queer performance through their personal and professional experiences as makers, spectators, and academic researchers. They note that these performances serve as sites where performances deeply affect individuals on a corporeal, gut level. The authors emphasize that queer performances foster a sense of community and identity, illustrating the powerful relationship between sexuality and shared experiences. This transformative potential of queer performance, or even queer contemporary art, might also invite healing in the audience.

While many scholars, including Campbell and Farrier, theater scholars Jill Dolan and Anna Renee Winget, and queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz, discuss queer performance and its healing potential, their work often does not explore *how* queer performance prompts healing from a dramaturgical perspective. By conducting a dramaturgical analysis of my main case study, *Ophelia's Got Talent*, and a comparative analysis of three other queer contemporary performances, I identify four dramaturgical strategies, with the aim to concretize this transformative healing potential. This led me to my main research question: in what ways can the dramaturgical strategies of suspension (namely *ebbing and flooding*, *dissolving* and *crystallizing*) prompt *queer healing* in queer contemporary performance?

## Methodology

In my approach to the research question, I employed qualitative research methods, including literary research, dramaturgical analysis, and comparative analysis.<sup>11</sup> In September 2023, I attended the performance of *Ophelia's Got Talent* at the Rotterdamse Schouwburg and later obtained access to the video recording of the performance through Florentina Holzinger's

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<sup>11</sup> For the literary research, most of the texts were accessed online through WorldCat or in print via the Utrecht University Library.

production team. To further my analysis, I also utilized interviews, articles, and reviews. For Jacolby Satterwhite's (he/him) *Pygmalion's Ugly Season* (2022) I found the full video piece online and supplemented my analysis with secondary sources such as interviews and articles.<sup>12</sup> I watched Tibau Bernaerts (they/them) *F A G G O T S* (2023) twice at Festival Cement in Den Bosch and relied on my notes for further analysis.<sup>13</sup> To analyze FK Alexander's (she/they) *(I Could Go On Singing) Somewhere Over the Rainbow* (2016), I used performance excerpts available online, along with interviews, reviews, and articles.<sup>14</sup>

For this master's thesis, the aim is to explore how dramaturgies of suspension in queer contemporary performance can facilitate *queer healing* in the spectator. I use the term "spectator" as defined by Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink (she/her) and Sigrid Merx (she/her) in "Dramaturgical Analysis: A Relational Approach," focusing on spectatorial address rather than audience reception.<sup>15</sup>

Using their approach to dramaturgical analysis, this analysis examines three planes of dramaturgy: composition, context, and spectator. Composition involves the arrangement of space, time, and action, which generates specific meanings and experiences. Emphasizing spectatorship (composition and spectator) explores how performances construct the spectator's position. The method also considers the statements (composition and context) performances make, reflecting and commenting on the external world. Lastly, situatedness (spectator and context) acknowledges the specific contexts of both performance and spectators, influenced by social identities, political affiliations, and personal experiences. Use of this method does not require equal attention to each plane or combinations of planes. However, focusing on one almost always leads to insights in the other planes and combinations as well.

Therefore, focusing on the *queer healing* potential of queer contemporary performance, this analysis examines how spectators are addressed through the performance's composition (spectatorship) and its relation to context (statement).<sup>16</sup> Yet, insights into the spectator and their context (situatedness) will also come to light in this analysis.

In Chapter One: Queer Healing, I aim to answer my first subquestion: What is *queer healing* and why do we need it in today's Western society? In *Ophelia's Got Talent* (2022),

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<sup>12</sup> *Pygmalion's Ugly Season*, Jacolby Satterwhite, video, YouTube, September 23, 2022

<sup>13</sup> *F A G G O T S*, performed by Tibau Bernaert, Antwerp, Belgium, June 2023.

<sup>14</sup> *(I Could Go On Singing) Over The Rainbow*, performed by FK Alexander, Glasgow, Scotland, January 26, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx, "Dramaturgical Analysis: A Relational Approach," \*Forum+\* 28, no. 3 (2021): 4-16.

<sup>16</sup> Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx, "Dramaturgical Analysis: A Relational Approach," \*Forum+\* 28, no. 3 (2021): 9

stories and representations of trauma are always clearly entangled within systems of oppression. Using Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism," I argue that many of these systems of oppression stem from a collective *collapse of imagination*. By examining capitalism as one of these systems and drawing on the work of Daniel Lord Smail, who writes about the struggles of our bodies under capitalism, I clarify the connections between the context of *Ophelia's Got Talent* and the elements of *queer healing*. These elements include practices of community care, alternative kinship, Halberstam's "queer failure," Muñoz's concept of "disidentification," Toni Wells' use of "imagination," and subjugated healing knowledges that disrupt notions of healing underlying dominant Western cultural practices.

In Chapter Two: Suspension and Spectatorship in *Ophelia's Got Talent (2022)*, I aim to answer my second subquestion: "In what ways does *Ophelia's Got Talent* produce a spectatorial state of suspension?" In this chapter, I conduct a dramaturgical analysis of *Ophelia's Got Talent*, focusing on the type of spectatorship it produces to explore its *queer healing* potential. Firstly, drawing on Turner's concept of "betwixt and between," I argue that *Ophelia's Got Talent* produces a sense of suspension. Secondly, as the performance is framed as a high-risk talent show, I demonstrate how the intentional failure of one of its acts dissolves this theatrical framework, resulting in an intermission that leaves the audience in this suspended state. Thirdly, using Neimanis's concept of "unknowability" and analyzing the performance's watery imagery, I argue that a *porous spectatorship* is produced.

In Chapter Three: Navigating Bodily Trauma and Healing in *Ophelia's Got Talent (2022)*, I aim to answer my third subquestion: "In what ways does *Ophelia's Got Talent* navigate and address trauma and healing?" I dramaturgically analyze four specific moments in the performance where the performers reclaim their trauma by engaging in dangerous and daring acts. Focusing on the statement produced by the performance, I analyze these moments using José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification, arguing that through the consensual retelling or representation of traumatic events and self-chosen body modifications, the performers assert agency over their bodies and lived experiences, thereby redefining their narratives. Lastly, I connect this to the compositional element of water present in these traumatic stories, arguing that the performance strategically uses water to both engage with and subvert traditional gendered representations, disidentifying with the passive victimhood often associated with (white) femininity.

In Chapter Four: Deriving Dramaturgies of Suspension, I aim to answer my fourth and final subquestion: "How can the dramaturgical strategies of *ebbing, flooding, dissolving, and crystallizing* identified in *Ophelia's Got Talent* be applied to other examples of queer

contemporary performance? How do these performances navigate and address trauma and healing?" I derive four dramaturgical strategies (*ebbing*, *flooding*, *dissolving*, and *crystallizing*) from the performance of *Ophelia's Got Talent* and demonstrate how they can be used to analyze queer contemporary performance and their *queer healing* potential. I contextualize these strategies by applying them to three queer contemporary performance: FK Alexander's *(I Could Go On Singing) Somewhere Over the Rainbow* (2016), Jacolby Satterwhite's *Pygmalion's Ugly Season* (2022), and Tibau Beirnaert's *F A G G O T S* (2023). These works suspend the spectator and prompt elements of *queer healing* by creating safe spaces and exploring themes of therapy, self-help, and introspection.

These particular case studies were chosen because together they present a broad scope of what queer contemporary performance has to offer. From one-on-one performance, to digital art, to drag performance. Even though the realm of queer contemporary performance has much more to offer, due to scope I have narrowed the choices down to what was available to me in terms of video footage and secondary sources.

The analysis revealed that these dramaturgical strategies can support different statements in queer contemporary performances. Additionally, these strategies undo progress-oriented, linear dramaturgies and emphasize fluidity, change, and destruction as necessary means toward transformation. These findings highlight the significance of these strategies for prompting *queer healing* in the face of violent normativity.

Finally, I conclude my research with a summary of my findings and research process, and I suggest paths for further research or inquiry.

# Chapter One: Queer Healing

*Trigger warning: mentions of addiction, homophobic violence*

The aim of this chapter is to give a working definition of *queer healing* and to argue why this mode of *queer healing* is necessary in our 21st century Western society. In the performance *Ophelia's Got Talent* stories and representations of trauma are always clearly entangled within systems of oppression.<sup>17</sup> Using Berlant's "cruel optimism," it can be argued that many of these systems of oppression stem from a collective *collapse of imagination*.<sup>18</sup> Taking capitalism as an example of one of those systems and by drawing on the work of Daniel Lord Smail, who connects capitalism to the body and trauma, connections are increasingly clear between the context of *Ophelia's Got Talent* and the elements of *queer healing*.<sup>19</sup> These elements are in brief: practices of community care, alternative kinship, and Halberstam's "queer failure;" Muñoz' concept of "disidentification"; and subjugated healing knowledges which disrupt notions of healing underlying dominant Western cultural practices.<sup>20</sup>

## Cruel Optimism and Crisis Ordinariness

As mentioned in the introduction, we might say that we are grappling with a *collapse of imagination* in 21st century Western society, making it crucial to explore new forms of imagining.

The US-American scholar and cultural critic Lauren Berlant (they/them) explores issues of intimacy and belonging in popular culture, examining these themes in relation to the history and fantasy of citizenship.<sup>21</sup> In her book *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant argues that the persistence of certain attachments can hinder progress and prevent individuals or societies from effectively addressing the challenges they face.<sup>22</sup> The idea is that clinging to certain beliefs or systems, even if they are inherently flawed or damaging, may provide a sense of

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<sup>17</sup> *Ophelia's Got Talent*, directed by Florentina Holzinger, Volksbühne, Berlin, Germany, September 15, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 45.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 23.

<sup>20</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 49.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*



stability or familiarity, making it difficult for people to embrace alternative perspectives or envision more sustainable and just futures.<sup>23</sup>

Our present *collapse of imagination* could be seen as a form of cruel optimism, when individuals or societies continue to hold onto outdated or unsustainable norms and structures despite the pressing need for change. The struggle to envision a world beyond existing norms could be seen as an attachment to familiar but problematic ideologies.

Berlant explains that while these attachments may seem optimistic, they can actually be harmful when they prevent us from thriving or adapting to our current circumstances.<sup>24</sup>

What's cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.<sup>25</sup>

Cruel optimism reflects the challenges of living in a world where our ideals of a 'good life' are no longer attainable. They criticize more traditional theories of trauma and everyday life for failing to capture the complexities of modern existence.<sup>26</sup> For example, Dutch psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk (he/him) defines trauma as "the lasting impact left in the brain by overwhelming events, leading to fragmentation and disconnection within the individual."<sup>27</sup>

However, Berlant approaches the topic of trauma through a lens that emphasizes the complex interplay between individual experiences and broader socio-political contexts. They situate trauma within a framework of "crisis ordinariness," highlighting the ways in which systemic pressures and inequalities shape individuals' everyday lives.<sup>28</sup> Through this lens, trauma is not just an isolated event but a pervasive condition influenced by broader social, cultural, and economic factors.

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 52.

<sup>25</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 47.

<sup>26</sup> References in this context would include foundational works in psychology and psychiatry, such as Sigmund Freud's writings on trauma and its effects on the psyche, as well as subsequent developments in trauma research by figures like Anna Freud, Pierre Janet, and Bessel van der Kolk. (Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Liveright, 1961). Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* (London: Karnac Books, 1992). Pierre Janet, *Psychological Healing: A Historical and Clinical Study*, trans. E. Paul and C. Paul (New York: Macmillan, 1925)

<sup>27</sup> Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Viking, 2014). 23.

<sup>28</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 56.

A traumatic event is simply an event that has the capacity to induce trauma. My claim is that most such happenings that force people to adapt to an unfolding change are better described by a notion of systemic crisis or "crisis ordinariness" and followed out with an eye to seeing how the affective impact takes form, becomes mediated.<sup>29</sup>

Central to Berlant's analysis is the role of affect and attachment in shaping individuals' experiences of trauma and resilience. They explore how desires and attachments are entangled with systems of power and oppression, complicating traditional understandings of trauma as solely rooted in individual pathology. But how does this perspective translate to performance and dramaturgy? How does it relate to *Ophelia's Got Talent* specifically?

## **Bodies Under Capitalism: Our Damaged Nervous Systems**

The ways in which trauma is reclaimed by the performers of *Ophelia's Got Talent* can be crystallized by using Berlant's perspective on trauma. The retellings and representations of trauma on stage are shown to be entangled in these systems of power and oppression. In *Ophelia's Got Talent* these systems are exposed through the diverse all-female cast, including performers of different ethnic backgrounds, as well as differently abled bodies.<sup>30</sup>

For example, in *Ophelia's Got Talent*, there is a focus on failure from the start. The performance introduces a framework of a talent show, thus every performer is judged on whether or not they perform and entertain well enough. This fits into the capitalist framework of constantly working, producing, expending all energy towards profit perfectly. In capitalist societies, failure is often stigmatized and seen as a personal shortcoming rather than a natural part of the human experience. In contrast to this, in this performance, the intentional failure of one of the acts makes space for new possibilities to emerge. From that moment on, the performance is in a constant state of becoming and transforming. Performances that embrace failure in this way can be perceived as anticapitalist because they challenge the capitalist ideology of constant success and productivity.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 58..

<sup>30</sup> This cast was mostly found by Florentina Holzinger herself, via Craigslist. There she posted a message asking for women with "special" talents.

<sup>31</sup> However, one could ask whether or not there is a difference between this intentional failure and perhaps the actual possibility of failing in the light of this anticapitalist framework. By intentionally failing, or performing failure, not risking actual failure in that moment, the performance could potentially remain relatively safe from this stigma associated with actual failure. It is perhaps not the moment of intentional failure that really challenges the capitalist framework, but more so the way in which the performer's bodies are used.

“Life under capitalism encouraged individuals to perfect themselves,” Holzinger says in an interview with Thomas Rogers, adding that her work delves into the ways this shaped women’s bodies. “We are in a society where you are able to purchase and create your own femininity, and optimize yourself in ways the system wants you to,” she said.<sup>32</sup> In her work, she added, she tries to find “unexpected” ways of using the body (for both performer and spectator), which has been conditioned to look and move a certain way by social pressures.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to conditioning the body, capitalism can also induce stress and trauma. According to what the US-American historian Daniel Lord Smail (he/him) writes in his book *On Deep History and the Brain*, capitalism relies on collective trauma for survival.<sup>34</sup>

Smail argues that capitalism exploits the body's survival responses by also providing relief through addictive substances and practices.<sup>35</sup> Since its inception, capitalism has been intertwined with the production and consumption of mood-altering substances (often extracting these through colonialist endeavors), which have become dominant coping methods for managing stress induced by the pressures of capitalism.

Exposure to this constant traumatic stress can harm the nervous system, leading to chronic hyperarousal and the constant release of stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. Chronic trauma increases the risk of mental health disorders like depression, anxiety or PTSD, perpetuating the cycle of trauma. Moreover, it impairs neuroplasticity, making recovery and coping difficult, reinforcing the cycle of stress and dysfunction.

By recognizing how systemic stress and trauma manifest in both individual and collective experiences, I am better equipped to explore and articulate the transformative potential of queer contemporary performance as well as its *queer healing* potential.

## Queer Healing

Under capitalism, individuals trade time for capital, which they then exchange for other goods and services, ranging from luxuries to basic necessities. Due to this trading of time, society becomes hyper-individualistic and focuses on community. This then leads to and perpetuates loneliness. According to van der Kolk, our ability to heal from trauma depends

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas Rogers, "Florentina Holzinger Makes Everyone Uncomfortable," *The New York Times*, September 14, 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Rogers, "Florentina Holzinger Makes Everyone Uncomfortable," *The New York Times*, September 14, 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 23.

<sup>35</sup> Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 26.

largely on who is there for us when we require help. Community and support keep our bodies and minds from collapsing.

Drawing upon US-American queer theorist David Halperin's (he/him) notion of queer as "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant," *queer healing* can open up a world of possibilities beyond what we have envisioned when it comes to healing. Healing in this capitalist framework often becomes about being better, conforming more to this model of success, something you do in order to become normal again. *Queer healing* could then become more about healing from queerness and 'returning' to heterosexuality or being cisgender.

However, *queer healing* is more than healing done by queer people; it is about healing *in a queer way*. Looking at healing in a way that is "at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" goes beyond conventional Western forms of medicine.<sup>36</sup> *Queer healing* is about healing from the violent normativity in society.

In the next section I will be zooming in on community care and alternative kinship as part of *queer healing*.

## **Community Care and Alternative Kinship**

Chosen families are a distinctive aspect of queer culture, representing intentional networks of support formed by individuals who may not share biological or legal ties. Queer individuals often face challenges within biological or legal family structures due to societal prejudices and lack of acceptance. Chosen families emerge as a response to these challenges, providing a space for individuals to build meaningful connections based on shared experiences, affinities, and a shared understanding of the unique struggles within the queer community. The intentional nature of these relationships fosters a sense of agency and autonomy in constructing one's support system.

The artist Johanna Hedva (they/them) also writes about community care and radical kinship as the ultimate form of anti-capitalist protest. Johanna Hedva describes themselves as a "Korean American writer, artist, and musician, who was raised in Los Angeles by a family of witches'." In their essay "Sick Woman Theory," they write that:

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<sup>36</sup> By this I mean beyond issues such as overreliance on pharmaceuticals and symptom management. Beyond the medicalization of normal life processes which leads to unnecessary interventions, biased research and funding priorities favoring profitable treatments. Beyond the neglect of holistic and preventive approaches to health, inequities in healthcare access and delivery based on demographics. Beyond medical paternalism and lack of patient autonomy, as well as environmental impact and sustainability concerns such as pharmaceutical waste.

The most anti-capitalist protest is to care for another and to care for yourself. To take on the historically feminized and therefore invisible practice of nursing, nurturing, caring. To take seriously each other's vulnerability and fragility and precarity, and to support it, honor it, empower it. To protect each other, to enact and practice community. A radical kinship, an interdependent sociality, a politics of care. Because, once we are all ill and confined to the bed, sharing our stories of therapies and comforts, forming support groups, bearing witness to each other's tales of trauma, prioritizing the care and love of our sick, pained, expensive, sensitive, fantastic bodies, and there is no one left to go to work, perhaps then, finally, capitalism will screech to its much-needed, long-overdue, and motherfucking glorious halt.<sup>37</sup>

To take care of ourselves and each other, shared spaces are needed. US-American performance scholar Anna Renee Winget (they/them) writes about artistic spaces and emphasizes the communal nature of queer performance in their dissertation *Performing Possibilities: Trans-Healing in Activist Performance* stating that "queer performance often fosters community by creating spaces where individuals can come together to share experiences, express themselves authentically, and find support and validation."<sup>38</sup> As Groot-Nibbelink and Merx state "being able to fully identify with a presented point of view might produce a sense of empowerment, especially when this viewpoint relates to a minority perspective."<sup>39</sup> Performances that are made for queer audiences or present a queer point of view can thus become empowering for queer audience members.

This empowerment and community can also be related to the all-female cast in *Ophelia's Got Talent*. As individuals they might face trauma, societal prejudices and a lack of acceptance, but this "chosen family" on stage emerges as a response to those challenges. They support each other during this reclaiming of trauma, forming a rebellious, charismatic, liberated and ultimately joyful group on stage. The women on stage are naked, however not in the way we are used to seeing (catered to the male gaze). They are shown to be strong, capable, assertive, fearless and also odd. This embrace of oddity is further explained in the next paragraph as a cornerstone of *queer healing*.

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<sup>37</sup> Johanna Hedva, "Sick Woman Theory," *Mask Magazine*, January 2016, <https://www.maskmagazine.com/not-again/struggle/sick-woman-theory>.

<sup>38</sup> Anna Renée Winget, *Performing Possibilities: Trans-Healing in Activist Performance* (UC Irvine, 2019). 52.

<sup>39</sup> Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx, "Dramaturgical Analysis: A Relational Approach," *\*Forum+\** 28, no. 3 (2021): 11.

## Queer Failure and Dismantling Oppressive Systems

In US-American queer theorist Jack Halberstam's (he/they) book *The Queer Art of Failure*, he explores how success under capitalism is synonymous with financial prosperity, and those with the most wealth wield the greatest influence, drowning out other voices. Halberstam contends that within the capitalist framework, winners emerge at the expense of losers, emphasizing the inevitable existence of losers in a system driven by continuous economic growth.<sup>40</sup>

Halberstam references Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, explaining it as a system where a dominant group establishes power through the subtle persuasion of ideas rather than coercion. Utilizing “common sense,” which for example encompasses the persuasive beliefs that maintain societal norms and behaviors, the dominant group shapes individuals' identities and actions.<sup>41</sup>

According to Winget, Berlant's assertion that "normativity is violent" holds significant relevance in advocating for failure and the subsequent healing it can bring. They say that, “embracing a pedagogy of queer failure can serve as a means for marginalized individuals to navigate and survive oppressive systems that perpetuate their suffering or erasure.”<sup>42</sup> Winget writes that healing from violent normativity involves understanding and dismantling its invisible power. This understanding and dismantling is framed by Winget as a form of healing.<sup>43</sup>

Halberstam contends that in a world dominated by winning and conforming to common sense, queer individuals inherently fail to meet societal standards. However, Halberstam suggests that recognizing one's failure within these established norms can lead to recognizing that identity is fluid, unfixing the concept of self. Halberstam's notion of the unfixing of identity is rooted in the idea of embracing failure as a subversive act against hegemonic structures.<sup>44</sup>

Including *Ophelia's Got Talent (2022)*, this notion of failure propels many dramaturgies forward. Winget also writes about queerness, failure and performance in their essay on the artist duo DarkMatter, whom they describe as follows.

Their name, DarkMatter, they explain, is that “space between”

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<sup>40</sup> Jack/Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). 12.

<sup>41</sup> Jack/Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). 13.

<sup>42</sup> Anna Renée Winget, *Performing Possibilities: Trans-Healing in Activist Performance* (UC Irvine, 2019). 52.

<sup>43</sup> Anna Renée Winget, *Performing Possibilities: Trans-Healing in Activist Performance* (UC Irvine, 2019). 53.

<sup>44</sup> Jack/Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). 55.

that gave birth to us. The nothingness of the phenomenon of dark matter could be read as “failure” since it has not realized itself as anything. Yet nothingness or emptiness, as Buddhists and some scientists would argue, literally contains worlds of possibilities. The natural phenomenon of dark matter, which scientists theorize accounts for approximately 85% of matter in the universe is unknowable by Western scientific standards, since all direct experiments have failed. Failure, then, allows the possibility of exploring freely that which has been dismissed by western paradigms of knowledge. This is very much at the heart of what the performance duo DarkMatter is about.<sup>45</sup>

In this context, queerness becomes not just a sexual or gender identity, but a mode of resistance, a refusal to adhere to the rigid categories imposed by hegemonic culture. “Queer failure”, according to Halberstam, is not a defeat but a refusal to participate in a system that excludes and marginalizes certain identities and experiences. By embracing failure, individuals can reclaim agency over their own narratives and redefine success on their own terms, challenging the binary constructions of identity that underpin hegemonic power structures.

## **Disidentification and the Transformative Potential of Art**

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cuban-American queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz (he/him) explores how marginalized individuals, particularly queer people of color, navigate societal expectations regarding identity.<sup>46</sup> Muñoz underscores the performative nature of identity and introduces the concept of “disidentification” as a strategic means of resistance and negotiation within normative structures.

Disidentification, as described by Muñoz, involves a nuanced engagement with mainstream culture wherein individuals simultaneously embrace and challenge dominant norms. This process allows marginalized groups, such as queer people of color, to adopt elements of mainstream culture while subverting or transforming them to assert their unique identities. Disidentification manifests through various strategies, including humor, irony, and

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<sup>45</sup> Anna Renée Winget, *Performing Possibilities: Trans-Healing in Activist Performance* (UC Irvine, 2019). 112.

<sup>46</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

code-switching, enabling individuals to navigate multiple cultural identities and resist assimilation into dominant norms.<sup>47</sup>

Disidentification resists the interpellating call of ideology that fixes a subject within the state power apparatus. It is a reformatting of self within the social, a third term that resists the binary of identification and counteridentification.<sup>48</sup>

Muñoz writes about what he calls “the terrorist drag” of Vaginal Creme Davis, a drag superstar who emerged from the L.A. punk scene, but through disidentification resisted “its whitewashing and heteronormative protocols.”<sup>49</sup> Muñoz discusses Davis's strategic use of terrorist drag as a means of cultural critique, contrasting it with more commercialized and sanitized forms of drag aimed at mainstream consumption.<sup>50</sup> Muñoz takes two quotes by Vaginal Davis in which she elucidates the origin of her name and uses these to show this process of “disidentification”. In the first quote Davis explains her “snow-period,” which Muñoz also calls the assimilationist period. “You kinda want to be white at first, it would be easier if you were White.”<sup>51</sup> She then goes on to explain a conscious shift into militancy. Muñoz writes:

The ultra militant phase that Davis describes is a powerful counteridentification with the dominant culture. At the same time though, Davis’s queer sexuality, her queerness and effeminacy, kept her from fully accessing Black Power militancy. Unable to pass as heterosexual black militant through simple counteridentification, Vaginal Davis instead disidentified with Black Power by selecting Angela and not the Panthers as a site of self-fashioning and political formation.<sup>52</sup>

Muñoz also calls this an intersectional strategy, becoming both Black and queer. Davis's drag performances are seen as unsettling and subversive, creating an uneasiness in desire and

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<sup>47</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). 96.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> "terrorist drag" is a term coined by Muñoz to describe Vaginal Creme Davis's drag performances that are radical, confrontational, and aimed at subverting mainstream cultural expectations and norms. It highlights Davis's use of drag as a form of political and cultural resistance, challenging dominant ideologies through provocative and unconventional means.

<sup>51</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). 98.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*



“breaking away from representations and restraints on the social body.”<sup>53</sup> This breaking away will be further exemplified in Chapter Three which focuses on the bodywork of *Ophelia's Got Talent* and its subversion of passive victim stereotypes.

## **Imagination and Subjugated Healing Knowledges**

Winget explores how queer performance serves as a tool for reclaiming marginalized identities, fostering empowerment, and challenging societal norms. They emphasize the communal nature of queer performance as well as its embrace of failure as a pathway to resilience. Winget also highlights the importance of decolonial approaches to healing, as “coloniality has made healing a subjugated knowledge.”<sup>54</sup> In the works they analyze, spirituality, and a return to rituals is often part of the composition. They write:

Many are inviting their ancestors, their spirit guides into the healing space with them. Many practice witchcraft and read tarot cards and meditate as part of their self and communal care practices. Others are reclaiming their cultural practices as one of their decolonial and healing tools.<sup>55</sup>

According to Winget, queer dramaturgies thus offer significant healing potential, empowering individuals and advocating for justice and liberation, through their emphasis on imagination. They write:

“Passive notion” or “wish” is not to be confused with “imagination” which, as I show throughout the dissertation, can have great healing and decolonizing potential. The emphasis here is on “passive” which is a kind of blind acceptance of “the way things are.” One can actively resist this [passivity], even only on the level of imagination.<sup>56</sup>

In their dissertation, Winget emphasizes the importance of imagination by analyzing art’s ability to transform and aligns herself with the US-American writer Toni Morrison’s (she/her) notion of “imagination” as becoming, which encapsulates the transformative power of imaginative thought and creative expression.<sup>57</sup> Rather than merely a passive act of

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<sup>53</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). 100.

<sup>54</sup> Anna Renée Winget, *Performing Possibilities: Trans-Healing in Activist Performance* (UC Irvine, 2019). 69.

<sup>55</sup> Anna Renée Winget, *Performing Possibilities: Trans-Healing in Activist Performance* (UC Irvine, 2019). 89.

<sup>56</sup> Anna Renée Winget, *Performing Possibilities: Trans-Healing in Activist Performance* (UC Irvine, 2019). 121.

<sup>57</sup> Toni Morrison, “Romancing In The Shadows” *Playing in the Dark* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992). 29-61

envisioning, Morrison emphasizes the dynamic process through which “imagination” shapes and reshapes reality, allowing individuals to transcend present circumstances and envision alternative futures.<sup>58</sup> “Imagination,” in Morrison's view, is not just about conjuring up new ideas but also about actively engaging with those ideas to bring about change.<sup>59</sup> It involves a continual process of becoming, where individuals harness the power of their imaginations to challenge existing norms, explore new possibilities, and ultimately transform themselves and the world around them.

As this research is exploring the *queer healing* potential of queer contemporary performances, these elements of *queer healing* (community care and alternative kinship, “queer failure,” “disidentification,” “imagination” and subjugated healing knowledges) concretize this potential. This discussion can then be connected to the dramaturgical strategies present in *Ophelia's Got Talent*, to see how they prompt *queer healing* through performance.

## Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, the necessity of *queer healing* is explored through the theoretical works of Berlant, Halberstam, Smail, Muñoz and Winget. This literary analysis revealed that the *collapse of imagination* can be seen as a cruel attachment to familiar but problematic ideologies such as capitalism. Capitalism was used as an example of a system of oppression that keeps us in a traumatized state and thus perpetuates its power. Adding to that, the analysis shows that *queer healing* is necessary to understand and dismantle these oppressive systems.

These findings highlight the significance of the elements of *queer healing*, namely community care, alternative kinship, “queer failure,” “disidentification,” “imagination” and subjugated healing knowledges. By illustrating how they manifest in queer contemporary performance and examining *queer healing* potential, this chapter addressed the research question of: “What is *queer healing* and why do we need it in today’s society?” The analysis demonstrated that we are in need of ways to heal from the violence of normativity as a whole, thus contributing to our understanding of queering healing and healing queerly.

This discussion of *queer healing* leads us to consider what queer contemporary performance produces in terms of spectatorship. In Chapter Two I will closely analyze the

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

performance of *Ophelia's Got Talent* , relating it to the concept of “queer failure,” which will allow us to further understand the theme of suspension.

# Chapter Two: Suspension and Spectatorship in *Ophelia's Got Talent* (2022)

*Trigger warning: mentions self-injury, eating disorders, blood.*

In this chapter *Ophelia's Got Talent* will be analyzed, focusing on the type of spectatorship it produces to explore its *queer healing* potential. Firstly, drawing on Turner's concept of "betwixt and between," I will argue that the performance of *Ophelia's Got Talent* produces a sense of suspension in the spectator.<sup>60</sup> Secondly, as the performance is framed as a talent show, I will demonstrate how the intentional failure of one of the talent acts dissolves this theatrical framework, resulting in a blank space that leaves the audience in this suspended state. Thirdly, drawing on Astrida Neimanis's concept of "unknowability" and by analyzing the performance's watery imagery the production of *porous spectatorship* will be argued for.<sup>61</sup>

## Suspending the Spectator Through Alluding to Boundlessness and Risk

The performance starts off with a video on two screens on each side of the proscenium stage of the Grote Zaal in the Rotterdamse Schouwburg. In this video the audience can see a woman dressed up as a pirate, sitting in a helicopter, pointing down to the theater. She then lands in front of it using a parachute. The video switches to an animation of the talent show logo to Ellie Goulding's song "Anything Could Happen."<sup>62</sup> Suddenly, the doors of the theater open and the pirate runs in, still wearing the parachute. Gritty-voiced she starts to welcome the audience to the show: "Ophelia's Got Talent: the show where anything can happen!" She introduces herself as the host of the night: Captain Hook! She states: "We will be moved, we will be inspired. And... for the women tonight, life is going to change forever!"

Consequently, the frame of a talent show is introduced, with a leader song, a logo and a presenter, parodying the classic trope of the overwhelmingly commercial talent show.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 77.

<sup>61</sup> Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). 205.

<sup>62</sup> Ellie Goulding, "Anything Could Happen," on *Halcyon*, Polydor Records, 2012, track 1.

<sup>63</sup> Talent shows normally have a predictable format, as each time, they see a new contestant, but follow the same structure. First is the introduction of the contestant, often sharing their life story and very personal trauma right

However, there are signs of this not being a conventional talent show right away. For example, the presenter is dressed as a pirate, yet naked from the waist down. The incorporation of nudity within the context of a talent show disrupts traditional ideas surrounding female hosts and talent shows themselves. In mainstream talent shows, female hosts are typically expected to conform to certain standards of appearance and behavior, often emphasizing their physical attractiveness and projecting a polished, glamorous image. However, by presenting the female host as partially naked but acting traditionally masculine (standing wide, speaking with a low gritty voice, having a beard), the performance challenges these norms and introduces an element of subversion and critique. Nudity in this context can be interpreted as a form of reclaiming agency and autonomy over one's body, defying societal expectations and norms regarding female visibility and sexuality.

Furthermore, the announcement that “anything can happen” within the theatrical frame of the talent show adds another layer of complexity to the performance. While talent shows typically follow this predictable and formulaic structure, this announcement destabilizes expectations and introduces an element of unpredictability. This sense of unpredictability challenges the audience to question the boundaries of the theatrical space and the conventions of the talent show genre.

I feel suspended in time and space, which is both exhilarating and unsettling. The excitement comes from the limitless possibility and anticipation of unexpected events. However, this excitement is tempered by fear, reinforced by the dangerous acts and trigger warnings (“self-injurious acts, blood, needles, strobe lights, explicit depiction or description of physical or sexual violence”) that highlight the potential risks and emotional intensity of the performance.<sup>64</sup> As a spectator, I become very aware of my surroundings, attuned to every movement and sound. The sense that “anything” is possible extends beyond the stage, heightening my sensitivity to the environment and challenging my fears and preconceived notions of safety and risk.

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away, in order to get the viewers to connect to them and their narrative. The introduction sets up certain expectations of them doing well or not and serves to either make you like the contestant or dislike them. Then, the performance act takes place. Sometimes the expectation that was set up is affirmed and resolved, sometimes it is subverted. Finally, there is the feedback. The judges give their notes on the performance, often in an exaggerated manner and they can also vote for the performer to continue or stop.

<sup>64</sup> "Ophelia's Got Talent," accessed June 2, 2024, <https://www.theaterrotterdam.nl/agenda/10148/volksbuhne-am-rosa-luxemburg-platz-florentina-holzinger-at/op-helia-s-got-talent>.

# Betwixt and Between, Liminality and the Transformative Potential of Suspension

As mentioned in the Introduction, this sense of suspension and its potential transformative potential aligns with anthropologist Victor Turner's (he/him) notion of the “betwixt and between”.<sup>65</sup>

Turner's theoretical framework, while foundational in anthropology for its insights into rituals and symbols, might be considered outdated due to several factors.<sup>66</sup> However, his concepts of “liminality” and “betwixt and between” remain useful for this analysis that explores suspension and the transformative potential of queer contemporary performance. “Liminality” refers to a state of transition or ambiguity, often experienced during rites of passage or other important life events. In the liminal stage, individuals or groups are temporarily removed from their normal social roles and structures as they enter a period of ambiguity and uncertainty. During this time, they exist in a state of “betwixt and between,” neither fully part of their old identity nor yet integrated into the new. “Liminality” is characterized by a suspension of normal rules and hierarchies, allowing for the possibility of new perspectives, behaviors, and identities to emerge.<sup>67</sup>

Turner emphasized the transformative potential of liminality, viewing it as a transitional phase where individuals challenge existing norms, experiment with alternative ways of being, and undergo personal or collective growth. This concept relates to *queer healing* through the understanding and dismantling of normativity and the formation of alternative kinships.

Turner also acknowledged the discomfort and uncertainty of “liminality,” describing it as a state of “communitas,” marked by intense solidarity, vulnerability, anxiety, and disorientation.<sup>68</sup> Despite these challenges, he argued that “liminality” is crucial for social and cultural transformation, allowing individuals to navigate change collectively and reintegrate

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<sup>65</sup> Victor Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 76.

<sup>66</sup> The field has evolved since the 20th century, with new findings and interdisciplinary approaches that offer more nuanced understandings of social phenomena. Globalization and technological advancements have transformed cultural interactions beyond the scope of Turner's work. His emphasis on symbolism and functionalism is critiqued for oversimplifying complex social dynamics and neglecting power conflicts. Emerging theories, such as postmodern, post-colonial, and intersectional analyses highlight the limitations of Turner's perspectives in addressing contemporary issues, especially in exploring trauma within oppressive systems and advocating for their dismantlement.

<sup>67</sup> Victor Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 76.

<sup>68</sup> Victor Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 79.

into society in a renewed form. This intense solidarity and collective navigation also align with the *queer healing* elements of community care and alternative kinship.

However, *queer healing* is not about reintegrating into society's normative structures. This is where *queer healing* distinguishes itself from Turner's framework, as it is not about returning to a certain stasis and instead about finding new ways of imagining. Overall, Turner's framework helps us understand how queer performance's embrace of ambiguity can prompt elements of *queer healing*.

As Winget argues, queer performances could also be seen as rituals and use "liminality" to challenge traditional norms and identities, often exploring themes of transformation and self-discovery.<sup>69</sup> Winget writes about how these performances foster solidarity and connection within queer communities while also acknowledging feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty.

## **Suspending the Spectator Through Theatrical Failure**

In *Ophelia's Got Talent*, the sense of suspension is intensified in the talent acts that are performed. Traditional elements of the talent show are presented in an unusual way as the on the screens judges emerge from cars, naked except for sunglasses. Show music plays while the judges are introduced as the Empathic Judge (Inga Busch), the Tough-Nut-To-Crack Judge (Renée Copraij), and the Sharp-As-A-Knife Judge (Saioa Alvarez). By explicitly naming these judge-tropes, a meta-theatrical frame is created, as this is not normally done.

The first contestant, Sophie Duncan from Chesterfield, UK, performs an aerial pole act based on a true story of her godfather, a diver who got lost in the deep sea. Sophie's act, accompanied by water sounds and a walkie-talkie voice, mimics swimming and diving while suspended on a pole, portraying being trapped underwater.

The second act, by Fibi Eyewalker, involves sword-swallowing and a unique display using a camera to show her insides. She introduces herself and says: "I want to show you my ocean" before performing with swords and a swordfish. Despite a judge pressing a red button, she continues by swallowing a camera that displays her internal organs and images of fish and a knife on the screens. Looking into her body makes me very aware of my own insides. The disorienting journey, interspersed with glitching footage of the ocean, suggests that our bodies are part of a larger, dynamic ecosystem. The third act, by Zora Schemm, mentions

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<sup>69</sup> Anna Renée Winget, *Performing Possibilities: Trans-Healing in Activist Performance* (UC Irvine, 2019). 42.

water pollution and involves a lip sync performance of a song by German folk singer Udo Jürgens.

The fourth act unfolds as an homage to history, drawing inspiration from the enigmatic escapades of Harry Houdini. While the presenter-pirate sets the stage with anecdotes about Houdini's fascination with mortality and the inherent risk in circus acts, a performer readies herself, clad in shackles, chains, and a neck restraint. Positioned beside a water tank, she gets ready to execute a contemporary daredevil act. Despite questions from the judges, the escape artist remains silent, fully immersed in preparation.

She suspends above the water, accepting a hairpin from the audience to free herself with. She drops in and with each passing second, anticipation mounts. At the 40-second mark, her hands are freed, followed by her body restraints at 1 minute, 14 seconds. However, as the timer ticks on, she struggles with the final neck shackle, panic visible in her movements. With the audience holding their breath, Florentina Holzinger herself intervenes just in time, rescuing her from potential disaster.

The overly commercial and absurd talent show pace morphs into an unplanned intermission of sorts. From the moment the escape act fails, the whole frame of the talent show seems to vanish. The talent show frame is quite carefully set up for the audience using traditional signs (using the judges, the decor, the presentation, the acts, the feedback, the logo), but is then pulled out from under you. The decor is taken away, the judges disappear, the lighting, the whole setup that has been introduced is gone.

This “unplanned” intermission feels strange. Suddenly the performance is derailed and as a spectator you are left in the dark as to what comes next. This heightens this experience of suspension even more. The already shaky framework disappears and this feels a bit like losing your piece of driftwood in the open ocean, with no way of knowing what is near/under you.

Relating this to the definition of “queer failure” that was given in Chapter One, Halberstam suggests that recognizing one's failure within established norms reveals the fluidity of identity, unfixing the concept of self.<sup>70</sup> Embracing failure as a subversive act against hegemonic structures allows individuals to disrupt societal expectations and explore alternative modes of existence. The performance's breakdown of this talent show format embodies this concept, as its recognition of failure within the established norm of the format

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<sup>70</sup> Jack/Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). 67.



reveals a fluidity of identity and new possibilities. From the disappearance of the theatrical frame, new life and acts slowly emerge.



*Figure 1: Houdini-inspired daredevil act in Ophelia's Got Talent (2022) Photography by Nicole Marianna Wityczak*

## **Suspending the Spectator Through Dismantling Normativity and Reclaiming of Agency**

After about two minutes of awkward shuffling, Saioa, now in construction clothes and tap shoes, rolls across the stage with her rollator, chewing gum. Meanwhile, the drowned performer dries off, calming herself through slow breathing. Saioa asks, “Something wrong? Let me see! Nothing I can’t fix! Let me take this to my workshop.” She opens a toolbox, inspects the failed neck shackle, and works on it with a wrench. “Honestly? I’m a plumber. But it looks fine to me! Just try again tomorrow!” The nearly-drowned performer, now in tap shoes, dances across the stage.

The text “Sailor Dance” appears on the screen as other tappers join her, dancing to joyful folk music with a techno beat. They dance in rows and formations, clapping and

shouting. The performers easily morph into other roles, from judge to plumber, from almost drowned to tap dancer in mere seconds. The roles and images they embody are quite fixed, however, the way they quickly move between them is quite fluid. This fluidity demonstrates the possibilities that come after an unfixing of self, in this case accomplished through failure. In the performance this is continuously done by changing costume, or movement, or by simply stating it.

For example, Ginuwine's "Pony" starts playing, and Saioa rides her rollator to center stage, dancing seductively while lip-syncing.<sup>71</sup> The lights turn blue, and the other performers join in, mimicking slow, sexy movements reminiscent of Channing Tatum's character in the movie *Magic Mike*.<sup>72</sup> Saioa strips from her jumpsuit, performs a pull-up with a plumbing device, and uses a rope to sway. Her performance disrupts gender roles and challenges ableist norms. Magic Mike-esque stripteases are typically done by extremely muscular, conventionally attractive men. Saioa's confident and powerful performance showcases her strength and challenges spectators' expectations.<sup>73</sup>

This failure, this breakdown of frame allows the performers to embody at will, to move from one image to another. The acts, or scenes, flow into one another. The performance starts to feel like tidal waves, like ebb and flood. Sometimes the spectator is confronted with an overwhelming amount of sensory input, and sometimes they are confronted with empty, echoing, blank spaces. Ebb and flood will be further discussed, identified and applied as dramaturgical strategies in Chapter Four. But for now, ebb and flood leads me into how the spectators are addressed through the performance's watery composition.

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<sup>71</sup> Ginuwine, "Pony," on Ginuwine... The Bachelor, 550 Music/Epic Records, 1996, track 1.

<sup>72</sup> *Magic Mike*, directed by Steven Soderbergh (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2012).

<sup>73</sup> On her website (<https://saioa-alvarez.de/about>), Saioa states her lived experience with disability serves as her highest form of education, incorporating survival strategies and keen observation into her work. She explores themes like shamelessness, queer and disability culture, anger, self-determination, and the body as a powerful tool.



*Figure 2: Saioa as plumber/stripper in Ophelia's Got Talent (2022) Photography by Mayra Wallraf*

## **Watery Imagery and Porous Spectatorship**

Aerial pole dance, acrobatics, sword swallowing, long-diving, synchronized swimming, male striptease, ensemble tap, and folk dancing. When putting all these special talents together, especially because they are performed by this diverse and differently-abled cast of women, we can see how the spectators are being addressed as if they are in a high risk/circus/talent show.<sup>74</sup> Addressing the audience as spectators in this framework taps into themes of voyeurism, as spectators gaze at what society deems as Other, mirroring this social process of judging. However, the performers each reclaim agency over their bodies, challenging the audience's expectations and perceptions, and subverting the traditional power dynamics of these kinds of shows. This provokes reflection on broader societal issues of how marginalized individuals are staged or perceived. This approach not only entertains but also encourages critical reflection on themes of otherness, control, and the nature of spectacle.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Florentina Holzinger also calls it a freak show in some interviews. However, because of the scope of this thesis and the need to nuance the term freak show properly I will be referring to it as a talent show instead.

<sup>75</sup> The use of parody, pastiche, mainstream culture and humorous critique is also notable as it goes against the idea that silliness or playfulness is not allowed in the 'high arts'. With references spanning from Schiller to Magic Mike, the performance embraces all kinds of aesthetics, similar to how Halberstam uses the concept of

Then there is the way the overall theme of water is represented in the composition of *Ophelia's Got Talent*. In the middle of the stage there is a large but shallow swimming pool that turns from clean and blue to murky and red from the blood that is dumped in there from the ceiling. There is also a tank of water on stage left, where one of the performers is submerged with diving gear and a large tank in the back. The performers morph from pirates into drunk sailors, moving through the semblance of fish, fishermen, nymphs, fountain statues, mermaids and finally to oiled-up sirens. In this performance, water is many things at once.

In "Thinking with Water," Canadian cultural theorist Astrida Neimanis (she/they) introduces five "hydro-logics" of water, each emphasizing a specific property.<sup>76</sup> Firstly, water's ability to give life, challenging water as a passive backdrop ("gestationality"). Secondly, water's ability to wash away life, recycling matter ("dissolution"). Thirdly, water's ability to be medium and messenger ("communication"). Fourthly, water's ability to have thresholds and membranes, highlighting its memory-holding function ("archive"). Fifthly and finally, water's ability to resist complete human understanding and control, highlighting its elusiveness ("unknowability").<sup>77</sup> When thinking about performance and dramaturgy with water in mind, we might see how these concepts map onto for example the dramaturgical model by Groot Nibbelink and Merx. These "hydro-logics" might emphasize ambiguity, fluidity or elusiveness in performances.<sup>78</sup> Especially this notion of "unknowability" might highlight what escapes our perspective, view or understanding. It is this same notion of "unknowability" that persists in the performance's representation of water, by representing water as many things at once as well as beyond our understanding.

The metaphor of being suspended in water can help in thinking more specifically about the spectatorship this performance induces. Though unconventional, I will address you directly in the next section, to get a feel for this metaphor.

When you are suspended in water you feel weightless. In that weightlessness you may feel empowered but perhaps frightened. You float on the surface, yet feel the capacity of the depth underneath you. At any point the water you find yourself in may change, just as the water in the performance also changes constantly, from crisp, clean, chlorinated water to

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"low theory" (a term they adapted from Stuart Hall's work) and popular knowledge to explore alternatives and to look for a way out of the usual traps and impasses of binary concepts.

<sup>76</sup> Astrida Neimanis, "Thinking with Water," in *Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Rob Nixon and Ursula K. Heise (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 201-218.

<sup>77</sup> Astrida Neimanis, "Thinking with Water," in *Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Rob Nixon and Ursula K. Heise (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 205.

<sup>78</sup> In Chapter Three, I quote Cara Berger's article on hydro-dramaturgy, which further shows how this thinking with water can map onto dramaturgical modes.

murky, bloody depths, to fiery oceans, stormy rain or pretty ponds. You might feel free in these waters, but you are also vulnerable from all sides. You become more porous in these waters. You are opened up to your senses, to your own body and those of the other bodies in the water with you. You leave the water changed in some way.

The performance constitutes a *porous spectatorship* through its watery imagery and constant suspension of spectator. Just as water envelops and surrounds the individual, performances can create immersive environments that engage the senses and immerse the spectator in a transformative experience. At the same time the spectator is made aware of their own gaze. Addressing the audience as spectators in a talent show setting creates a dynamic that both entertains and confronts them with the spectacle of difference.

Spectators are made to let go of these traditional roles and expectations. The feeling of weightlessness in water reflects this sense of liberation and empowerment that *porous spectatorship* can evoke. However, like the vulnerability experienced in water, *porous spectatorship* also exposes individuals to the emotional and sensory currents of the performance. Just as the water can shift and change around them, performances can elicit a range of emotions and sensations, from exhilaration to discomfort. Spectators may feel both liberated and vulnerable, empowered by their immersion in the performance yet aware of their susceptibility to its influences.

Moreover, the porous nature of its spectatorship, akin to being in water, opens individuals up to a heightened awareness of their surroundings, their own bodies, and the bodies of others. Ultimately, like emerging from water changed in some way, spectators may leave the performance transformed by the experience, having been moved in ways they may not have anticipated.

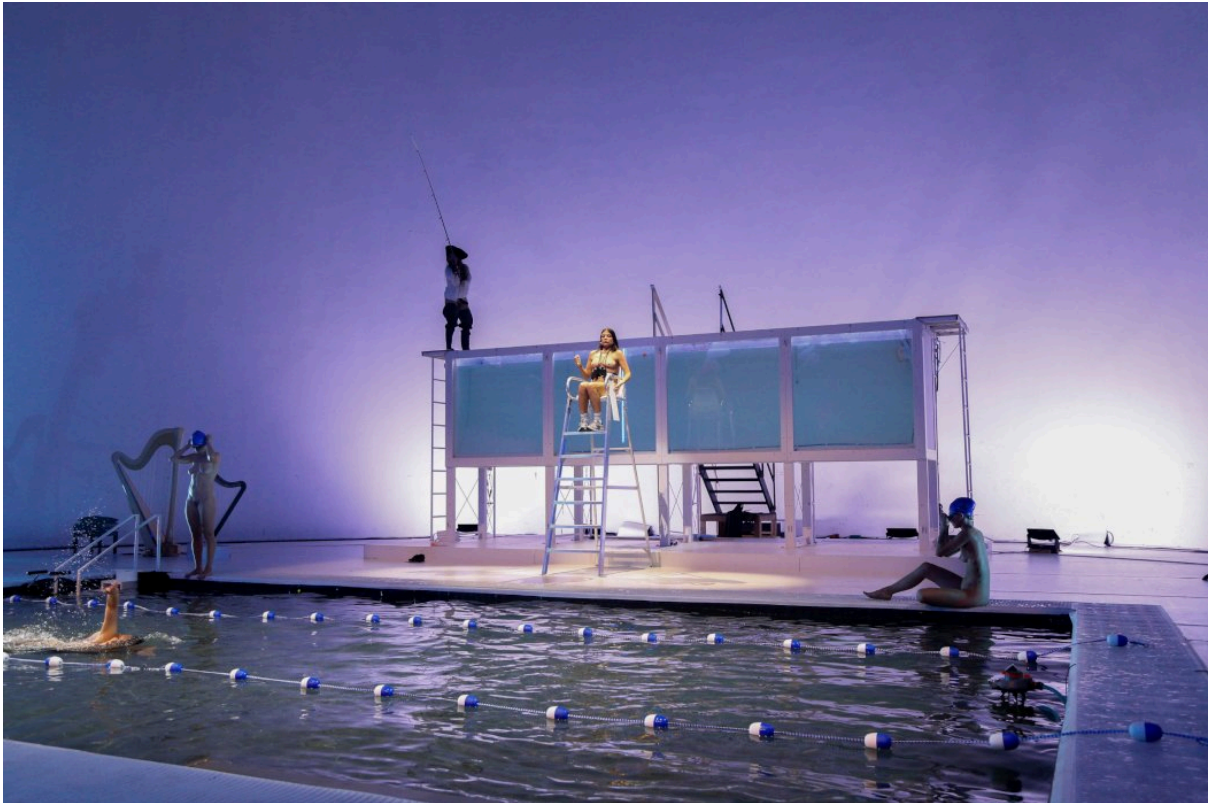


Figure 3: Watery scenography in *Ophelia's Got Talent* (2022) Photography by Mayra Wallraf

## Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, the beginning of *Ophelia's Got Talent* was analyzed along the planes of composition and spectator, resulting in an analysis of spectatorship and suspension. In the analysis Turner's concept of "betwixt and between" and Halberstam's concept of "queer failure" revealed that the spectator is kept in a state of suspension through a breakdown of the talent show framework. This intentional failure unfixes the performance's boundaries even more, which leads to new possibilities in terms of theatrical material and embodiment. Finally, the analysis zoomed in on the water imagery used in the composition of the performance. Neimanis' concept of "unknowability" made clear how the performance constitutes a porous spectator.

By examining suspension, this chapter addressed the research question of: "In what ways does *Ophelia's Got Talent* produce a spectatorial state of suspension?" The analysis demonstrated that this is done through the breakdown of theatrical frame, by the performers reclaiming their agency through embodiment and by this constant alluding to risk or boundlessness.

This embodiment and reclaiming leads me to Chapter Three where the performance's navigation of bodily trauma and healing will be investigated. This will allow us to further understand how these dramaturgies of suspension can prompt *queer healing*.

# Chapter Three: Navigating Bodily Trauma and Healing in *Ophelia's Got Talent* (2022)

*Trigger warning: mentions of self-injury, eating disorders, blood, discussion and depiction of (sexual) violence, needles.*

In this chapter, three specific moments in the performance where the performers reclaim their trauma by choosing to engage in certain dangerous and daring acts will be analyzed. By analyzing these moments using Muñoz' concept of "disidentification" the analysis will argue that through the consensual retelling or representation of traumatic events and self-chosen body modifications these performers assert agency over their bodies and lived experiences, thus redefining their narratives.<sup>79</sup> Lastly, I will connect this to the compositional element of water present in these traumatic stories. This will result in my perspective on the statement of the performance that strategically uses water to both engage with and subvert traditional gendered representations of water, thereby disidentifying with the passive victimhood often associated with (white) femininity.

## Disrupting the Idea of Therapeutic Rape

On the background screen, the text "LEDA" appears as the lights turn dark blue. Inga recites William Butler Yeats' poem "Leda and the Swan."<sup>80</sup> Princess Tweedle Needle lies on a chair in the pool, with Renee, wearing a swan mask, positioned between her closed legs, instantly transforming into a swan-gynecologist hybrid. On the projection screens on each side the swan-gynecologist can be seen wearing plastic gloves, asking for lube and a speculum, with her dry, serious voice amplified by microphones on fishing lines. The sound of water ripples can be heard with every movement, emphasizing moments of quiet and stillness. The swan-gynecologist warns Princess and inserts the speculum. Despite flinching in pain, Princess consents.

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<sup>79</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>80</sup> Yeats, William Butler. "Leda and the Swan." In *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, edited by Richard J. Finneran, 213-214. New York: Macmillan, 1989.



Princess then recounts her story of sexual violence, detailing how a tattoo artist raped her after giving her a tattoo. She describes the traumatic scene, laying there naked as the swan-gynecologist examines her. Her story is incredibly graphic in its detail of all the different liquids that were present during the rape. She mentions sweat, tears, blood, urine, ejaculation fluid, and spit. Her narrative shifts to survival and her escape starts with her being afraid she might die and that, consequently, she might never have a cupcake again. This idea, this anxiety keeps her resilient and alert enough to stay awake once her rapist has fallen asleep. She loosens the ropes, finds a key (at this point a key is pulled from her vagina), and runs into the street naked. She enters the first bakery she sees and eats a cupcake.

The scene evokes discomfort, blending physicality and narrative, ending with this ambiguity in the final scene. The Leda and the Swan imagery that is used raises questions about misogynistic depictions of sexual violence as romantic. Florentina's later monologue on women always waiting and wanting to be taken by force, critiques this romanticization of rape in art, further highlighting the survivor's control over her story, reclaiming trauma without glorifying violence.

(...) carried like the wings of a dream, like the crash of a wave washed to shore, weightless aside from helplessness and willing submission, fascinating for the voyeur who looks on from a distance, forever pleading to be taken by force. Yes, also the mythology of therapeutic rape comes from there, French academic, French symbolism, turn of the centuries, Waterhouse, Shakespeare, Rimbaud, Homer, Ovid (...) <sup>81</sup>

When looking at the poem more closely, this theme of therapeutic rape mentioned in the monologue comes up in the last verse. Yeats uses a third-person omniscient perspective, vividly depicting the assault on Leda by Zeus, who is disguised as a swan. This narration, while detached, focuses intensely on Leda's experience of violence and helplessness.

Being so caught up,  
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,  
Did she put on his knowledge with his power

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<sup>81</sup> *Ophelia's Got Talent*, directed by Florentina Holzinger, Volksbühne, Berlin, Germany, September 15, 2022.

Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?<sup>82</sup>

The poem subtly suggests a transformative moment for Leda, asking if she gains some of Zeus' knowledge and power before being released by him. This insinuation of a therapeutic or enlightening outcome from a violent assault is societally harmful, as it romanticizes the trauma and implies a positive resolution to a deeply distressing event. The poem also emphasizes Leda's helplessness, whereas Princess bravely recounts her experience of sexual violence while consensually undergoing a gynecological examination. Despite the discomfort and vulnerability of the scene, Princess asserts her resilience and agency by retelling this Leda-like story from her perspective as victim, subverting this idea of therapeutic rape by highlighting the terror and anxiety she felt.

This scene subverts the idea of therapeutic rape not by identifying or counteridentifying with it, but by disidentifying with it. "Disidentification," as described by Muñoz, involves a nuanced engagement with mainstream culture wherein individuals simultaneously embrace and challenge dominant norms.<sup>83</sup> The scene both embraces and challenges this depiction of Leda and the swan, which has countless renditions and could thus be considered mainstream.

## **Subverting the Idea of Victimhood**

After a second Sailor Dance the performers start to brawl and fight drunkenly. Fighting effects, grunting and slapping sounds are played while they meander on stage, stumbling and hitting each other on the head with bottles of sugar glass. While this starts to die down, a wind machine is rolled onto the left side of the stage. It is turned on. They start walking against the wind. Behind them the text "The Storm" appears on the background screen. Their clothes blow off. They wave to the sky with their shirts.

Then a yellow helicopter floats down from the ceiling. An actual-size helicopter. The helicopter floats back up as ropes float down. Five performers run into the pool and attach themselves to the ropes. They float up slowly, horizontally. They seem to be swimming in the air, suspended from their midriff, completely naked except for the harnesses they wear. They float up and grab the helicopter. Saioa is in the cockpit, talking on the communication system

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<sup>82</sup> Yeats, William Butler. "Leda and the Swan." In *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, edited by Richard J. Finneran, 213-214. New York: Macmillan, 1989.

<sup>83</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). 4.

as we see her face on the screens. “Strong wind, strong wind, losing reference point, we are flying too close to the mountain, losing altitude!”

The performers now lie on top of the helicopter and move around on it. Techno music starts playing as the women start grinding on the helicopter. Losing control as they start to moan loudly, approaching a collective climax. The lights flash as Saioa screams, unclear if it is from pleasure or pain. Then when they reach climax, a viscous, clear fluid drops from the door of the helicopter into the pool. The women remain on the helicopter as it floats down to the pool.

What I find especially interesting is this subversion of the trauma helicopter. Conventionally, when naked women and a trauma helicopter are represented in an image together, the women have to be rescued (by men) from some terrible danger (from men). In this scene, the performers disidentify with the typical role of helpless victims awaiting rescue by men. Instead, they take control of the helicopter, a symbol of power, control, escape, saviourism and traditional masculinity, and repurpose it for their collective pleasure. This act challenges and reconfigures conventional ideas of victimhood and trauma.

The chaotic atmosphere and surreal imagery underscore the performative nature of their actions. By engaging with the helicopter not as a tool of rescue but as an instrument of their empowerment and satisfaction, the performers disrupt the normative association of women with passivity and helplessness in crisis situations.

Their actions serve as a form of resistance against and a transformation of the hegemonic narrative. Instead of conforming to the expected dynamic where they are saved by men, they disidentify with this narrative by showing they are powerful and self-sufficient.

However, I do want to add here that “disidentification” is a concept used by Muñoz to explain how marginalized queer people of color navigate mainstream culture and norms. This use of “disidentification” is performed by a predominantly white cast, in the context of predominantly white aesthetics. These notions of passive victimhood are also often associated with white femininity. Black women and women of color are often not afforded the same kind of vulnerability, instead having to remain resilient and powerful under the most difficult and painful circumstances. This stereotype of the strong black woman has its roots in colonialism and slavery. Adding to that, these stereotypes often cast white men as the heroes, whilst Black men and men of color are automatically assumed to be criminals. By positioning white men as protectors and white women as fragile and in need of their protection, this framing justifies control over both women and people of color.

Given that the performance does not highlight the colonial roots of these stereotypes it also perpetuates certain norms, such as whiteness remaining unmentioned and unseen. By not including this perspective the performance fails to subvert how conventional femininity is constructed around whiteness. Therefore, this performance only partially subverts mainstream norms and stereotypes, as it reinforces others along the way.



*Figure 4: Trauma-helicopter with suspended performers in Ophelia's Got Talent (2022) Photography by Nicole Marianna Wytyczak*

## **Self-modification and Reclaiming the Body**

Before the storm and helicopter scene, Princess Tweedle Needle rolls on the stage a tray with different needles, knives, scissors and cleaning materials. She starts cleaning her left mouth corner, unwraps from plastic a fishhook and attaches a needle to it. She then holds her cheek, pinches it and from the inside pierces through it with the needle. The light on stage is brownish, the music is like one of those music boxes with a ballet dancer figure in it: sweet but unsettling. She pulls on the fish hook slightly, barely flinching. She walks to the front of the stage and shows it to the audience.

This fishhook performance disconnects the fishhook from the fishermen, instead showing the “fish” piercing her own cheek, suspending herself for a moment by holding the hook up and letting her head fall down. Piercing her skin on her own terms. It rhymes visually with an earlier scene, right after the first Sailor Dance, where Florentina herself attaches to a rope with her mouth, biting down on it to allow herself to go up high above the pool. This hanging from the rope and piercing of the cheek is done with agency and completely disconnected from the fishing rod and a potential fisherman.<sup>84</sup>

In the fishhook act, while Princess Tweedle Needle shows the audience her hook, another performer lays down and Fibi Eyewalker starts tattooing her. A large anchor drops down slowly from the ceiling. Sophie Duncan, the aerial performer, gets on the anchor, twirling up again.

On the screens we can see a close-up of the tattoo needle and the disinfecting of the skin. Even though it seems to be done professionally, the unsettling music, the close-ups, and the dirty brown lighting make this an incredibly unnerving scene to watch. The tattoo is revealed to be of an anchor. The fishhook performer has taken her fishhook out, you can see blood on the hole in her cheek as she spits out some blood and saliva and laughs in the camera. Then they play, fight, laugh, clean up, and smoke a cigarette.

Queer theorist Legacy Russel (she/they) writes about the skin, the way it gives shape to bodies and how a tear or rupture can open a whole new world of possibilities.

Skin is a container. It is a peel that contains and cradles wildness. It gives shape to bodies. A break, a tear, rupture or cut in skin opens a portal or a passageway. Here, too, is both a world and a wound.<sup>85</sup>

Here, Russel encapsulates the symbolism and significance of the scene as the skin indeed acts as a container, cradling the wildness and agency of the performer. By piercing her own cheek with the fish hook, Princess Tweedle Needle not only breaks the surface of her skin but also opens a metaphorical portal or passageway.

Through this act of self-inflicted injury, she navigates the duality of the skin: it serves as both a boundary that defines the body and a potential opening to the outside world. The

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<sup>84</sup> In this part of the performance there are “fishermen” with rods, but they only have small microphones on the end, that they maneuver so we can hear the women in the pool speak. Florentina hangs there for a while while they narrate the Story of the Trout through the fishing rod microphones.

<sup>85</sup> Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2020). 101

scene portrays this concept vividly, as the performer takes control of her own body, transforming it from a passive vessel into an active agent. Furthermore, the mention of the skin as both a world and a wound resonates deeply with the performance. In this act, the performer's skin becomes a world of its own, where boundaries are blurred and new possibilities emerge. Yet, simultaneously, the act of piercing creates a literal wound, emphasizing the fragility and impermanence of the body.

Princess Tweedle Needle asserts her agency and autonomy by piercing her own cheek with a fish hook, symbolically disconnecting herself from traditional narratives of victimhood and passivity. By piercing her own cheek with a fish hook and displaying it, Princess Tweedle Needle redefines the fish hook's traditional symbolism. Typically, a fish hook represents control and capture, when used by a fisherman. Here, she subverts this by using the hook herself. This act rejects the passive victim role, asserting control over her body and narrative.



*Figure 5: Florentina hangs by her teeth in Ophelia's Got Talent (2022) Photography by Nicole Marianna Wytyczak*

# Disidentifying with Traditional Gendered Representations of Water

These scenes collectively explore themes of trauma and healing through a series of visceral and provocative performances. Each scene prominently features characters who reclaim agency over their bodies and narratives in the face of trauma. By asserting control over their bodies and stories, the characters challenge traditional narratives of (white) victimhood and passivity.

Throughout the scenes, there is a palpable sense of corporeal discomfort and pain. This raw portrayal of pain adds depth and authenticity to their experiences, highlighting the visceral nature of trauma, and the complexity of healing. By confronting danger, pain and trauma head-on, the characters demonstrate courage and resilience, refusing to be defined by their traumatic experiences. The performance navigates trauma and healing using the theme of water as a common thread. With the fishhook, the storm, swan, and liquids, this theme of water becomes part of many elements of the performance's composition.

Situating this theme of water in societal context reveals that water, throughout history and across cultures, has been deeply intertwined with feminine symbolism. Traditionally associated with qualities like nurturing, receptivity, and fluidity, water has often been personified as a goddess or a mother figure in mythologies worldwide.<sup>86</sup> From ancient civilizations generating water deities to contemporary literature and art depicting serene oceans and flowing rivers as symbols of femininity, the connection between water and the feminine is deeply ingrained in our collective consciousness. Many feminist scholars are also critical of this association, according to dramaturg Cara Berger (she/her).<sup>87</sup> Berger writes:

This nexus of associations runs the risk of naturalizing women as passive receivers; mute, fluid matter incapable of giving shape to discourse – as they are shapeless themselves – thus always in need of man to contain their liquescent minds and bodies.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> For example Nehalennia in Germanic/Celtic cultures, Yemaya among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, Amphitrite and Thalassa in Greek mythology, Melusine and Salacia in Roman mythology, Rán in Norse mythology, Indu and Ganga in Hindu culture and many more.

<sup>87</sup> Cara Berger, “A Chain of Creation, Continuation, Continuity,” *Performance Research* 21, no. 2 (2016): 17.

<sup>88</sup> Cara Berger, “A Chain of Creation, Continuation, Continuity,” *Performance Research* 21, no. 2 (2016): 17.

Berger uses Helene Cixous (she/her) *l'écriture féminine*, as well as Neimanis' "hydro-logics" to constitute a dramaturgy that goes against the hegemony of patriarchal culture in two ways as "it revalues the creative potential of the feminine while at the same time allowing the generative capacity of the more-than-human to play a role in performance practice."<sup>89</sup>

Beyond this gendering of water also lies a queer potential, as water possesses transformative power to transcend binaries and embrace multiplicity. It is ever-changing, unpredictable, and as we saw in Chapter Two, unknown in many ways. From water's ability to erode societal norms to its role in shaping landscapes of identity, water could potentially emerge as a strong symbol of queer liberation, resistance and healing. Water is also intricately linked to subjugated healing knowledges in various cultures and practices around the world. Its buoyancy reduces stress and pain, and the minerals found in water (magnesium, sulfur, and silica) have supposed healing properties. Additionally, in many spiritual and religious traditions, water is used as a symbol of purification and renewal in rituals (such as baptism and holy water blessings in the Christian tradition for example). Lastly, water is often believed to have the power to facilitate emotional release and healing.

The performance *Ophelia's Got Talent* strategically uses water to both engage with and subvert traditional gendered representations of water, thereby disidentifying with the passive victimhood often associated with (white) femininity. The imagery of sirens, mermaids, nymphs, and Ophelia invokes the historical and cultural links between water and the feminine, but the performance subverts these images by stripping them of their passivity.

This approach is vividly illustrated in the scene where Florentina is coached by Inga to reenact Ophelia's fall into the water, right after she was suspended on a rope by her mouth. Florentina's enactment of Ophelia's drowning is a direct engagement with the trope of the tragic, passive, white, female figure. Ophelia is often portrayed as hysterical, victimized, and passive. Her death is not shown on stage, only announced in reference to the male protagonist's feelings.

However, this reenactment, where she falls to death again and again, thrashing in the water, is subverted by the performative instructions given by Inga: "Cry, but be happy. Smile. You are beautiful. Turn around. We need to see your boobs." This directive highlights the absurdity and objectification inherent in traditional portrayals of feminine suffering, forcing the audience to confront the performative and constructed nature of these stereotypes. The repetitive splashing into the water and the conflicting emotions demanded of Florentina

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<sup>89</sup> Cara Berger, "A Chain of Creation, Continuation, Continuity," *Performance Research* 21, no. 2 (2016): 24.



emphasize the artifice and challenge the authenticity of the passive, victimized, white female archetype. Additionally, when thinking about the *Ophelia* painting by Millais, this image is completely destroyed.<sup>90</sup> Instead of floating peacefully in the pretty pond, Florentina splashes around, screaming.

Renee's meditation that goes on at the same time, connects women to water through tears, reinforcing the traditional narrative: "Water is the organic symbol of the woman, who drowns her pain in tears." Yet, this is juxtaposed with the performers' visible struggle to keep their eyes open, shown in close-up on screens. This struggle symbolizes a resistance to the passive suffering associated with (white) femininity, portraying the effort and discomfort involved in maintaining such an image.

This scene demonstrates how the performance disidentifies with the traditional gendering of water by both engaging with and subverting its associations with (white) femininity and passive victimhood. The performance's statement challenges the audience to look more critically at these naturalized stereotypes of women and water.

## Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, four scenes in *Ophelia's Got Talent* were analyzed along the planes of composition and context, resulting in an analysis of statement. The concept of "disidentification" revealed that the performance subverts the notion of passive victimhood often associated with (white) femininity. Through retelling, reclaiming and self-chosen body-modification the performers assert themselves in the context of their traumatic stories. Finally, by examining the gendering of water, I argued that the performance also disidentifies with the naturalizing stereotypes that connect women with water. By examining the connection between the gendering of water and the traumatic stories, this chapter addressed the research question of: "In what ways does *Ophelia's Got Talent* navigate and address trauma and healing?"

This leads to Chapter Four, where I will derive dramaturgical strategies from the performance, showing how they subvert stereotypes as part of the performance's statement.

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<sup>90</sup> John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851-52, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 111.8 cm, Tate Britain, London.

# Chapter Four - Deriving Dramaturgies of Suspension

*Trigger warning: mentions of homophobia, violence, bullying, sexual violence.*

In this chapter I derive four dramaturgical strategies, namely *ebbing*, *flooding*, *dissolving* and *crystallizing*, from the performance of *Ophelia's Got Talent* as well as reflect on the spectatorial position that the performance produces through these unique strategies. I will be contextualizing these strategies by applying them to three queer contemporary performances that suspend the spectator and prompt elements of *queer healing*. These works include FK Alexander's (she/they) *(I Could Go On Singing) Somewhere Over the Rainbow* (2016), which delivers a one-on-one performance where they take your hand, make eye-contact and serenade you over the last recording of Judy Garland's queer anthem and noise music.<sup>91</sup> The comparative analysis also includes *Pygmalion's Ugly Season* (2022), which is a collaborative video project by Jacolby Satterwhite (he/him) that transforms 120 crowd-sourced drawings into coded animations and vogue performances, exploring themes of therapy, self-help, and introspection.<sup>92</sup> Lastly it includes the performance *F A G G O T S* (2023) by Tibau Beirnaert (they/them).<sup>93</sup> *F A G G O T S* transports the audience to a world where queerness takes precedence over traditional masculinity. The performance creates a safe space offering solace, freedom, healing, and community, while simultaneously confronting its limits. In this chapter I will be defining and identifying these dramaturgies of suspension and their strategies. In applying these strategies I aim to demonstrate how they can be used to analyze queer contemporary performances and their *queer healing* potential.

## Dramaturgical Strategies: Ebbing and Flooding

As mentioned briefly in Chapter Two, there is a constant movement between withholding or pulling back and overwhelming or engulfing in *Ophelia's Got Talent*. This dramaturgical movement is akin to the tide, mirroring ebb and flood. The *ebbing* suggests also a slowing down or pausing of narrative or imagery, allowing for reflection. It also allows for the

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<sup>91</sup> *(I Could Go On Singing) Over The Rainbow*, performed by FK Alexander, Glasgow, Scotland, January 26, 2016.

<sup>92</sup> *Pygmalion's Ugly Season*, Jacolby Satterwhite, video, YouTube, September 23, 2022

<sup>93</sup> *F A G G O T S*, performed by Tibau Beirnaert, Antwerp, Belgium, June 2023.

revelation of previously submerged details and (just as when you swim during ebb) it pulls you into the performance. *Flooding* is about overwhelming the senses, akin to being engulfed by a flood. It creates disorientation and vulnerability, obscuring certain elements while enveloping the spectators in different sensations.

In *Ophelia's Got Talent* these moments of ebb are characterized by softened blue light and the (re)arranging of space. Sometimes the new props are rolled on or off stage by the crew. The performers do not engage with the audience and often seem to be preparing for the next thing, by stretching for example. These moments of ebb create anticipation, just like in a roller coaster, where you anticipate the drop on the way up.

This ebb and flood can also be applied to other performances. In *F A G G O T S*, Tibau Beirnaert takes the audience to another planet. A planet (called Ramrod) where it's not the men, but the queers who call the shots. The performance commences with Beirnaert positioned at the focal point of an encircling audience within a black box studio. They are wearing a nude colored slip and a grayish wig, that is wet and hangs in front of their face. As a narrative unfolds, made clear by a pre-recorded audio account of their personal history, Bernard synchronizes his physical movements with the cadence of the spoken narrative. This narrative tells about how they had to endure bullying during their younger years, a consequence of their perceived non-conformity to traditional masculine norms.

The performance starts quite slow, with Tibau setting up a platform whilst this voice explains the planet they will be traveling to. When they disappear from the stage shortly, green lights swirl across the room to a building soundtrack of electronic organ music. Suddenly, they come out in a different outfit, holding a stripper pole. The voice is loud over the music, introducing the audience to the planet of Ramrod in a highly expressive manner. The music stops, and slowly and seductively they secure the stripper pole onto the platform. Then, they explain, they start their day on Ramrod by thinking about beginnings. For about two minutes, they are completely quiet. After this sequence, they explain the seasons of Ramrod, now using the stripper pole. While twirling, the voice rambles off all the different seasons.

The composition of the performance is thus constantly changing. The tempo, the costumes that Tibau wears, the seasons on imaginary planet Ramrod and the way the audience is addressed.<sup>94</sup> The context in which the performance is situated is that of homophobia and violence. The statement of *F A G G O T S* thus seems to revolve around this

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<sup>94</sup> This will be further explained in the next section Dissolving and Crystallizing.

vulnerability that lies in fluidity and allowing ourselves to change and morph constantly. It is about the power of fantasy and escape, as well as the power of connection. This fluidity, changing and morphing is heightened by the dramaturgical strategy of *ebbing* and *flooding*. While watching you are pulled in and pushed away constantly. Tibau asks the audience to travel with him, but also to reflect on the shared space that is created. *Ebbing* and *flooding* here thus creates both absorption and critical distancing.



Figure 6: Tibau as Vivi Sauterelle on pole-platform in *F A G G O T S* (2023) Photography by Giada Cicchetti

In FK Alexander's work (*I Could Go On Singing*) *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* this dramaturgy of ebb and flood is also present, however in a much more structured manner. In this performance FK Alexander serenades audience members over the last recording of Judy Garland's queer anthem "Somewhere Over The Rainbow" and noise music by the abrasive Glasgow-based noise band Okishima Island Tourist Association.<sup>95</sup> Audience members can

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<sup>95</sup> Harold Arlen and E. Y. Harburg, "Over the Rainbow," performed by Judy Garland, recorded 1938, Track 6 on *The Wizard of Oz: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*, MGM, 1956.

self-select using a handwritten ticket and be serenaded one by one, thus creating a looped performance. During this performance, audience members sat in a half-circle in a theater hall, church or studio. After a brief instruction, FK Alexander removes their black sequin cabaret jacket, harness, sparkly-gold shoes, and red lipstick. An audience member stands on a black cross, waiting for FK to smile, walk over, and take their handwritten ticket to stuff in their bra. FK then sips water and puts the harness, jacket, lipstick, and shoes back on. Holding the microphone, they stand in front of the audience member, smile, make eye contact, and take their hand. Raising the mic, the soundscape begins to fragment into “Over The Rainbow” performed by Judy Garland. The duration of the show is one hour, no allocated time spots, so you take the space if you want to. When the hour is up, they stop. For each audience member that takes a spot, the ritual is repeated from start to finish.

This loop of preparation to performance back to preparation follows that same principle of the ebb and flood, rejecting more progress-oriented dramaturgies. However, in this performance this push and pull has a rather different effect. Because of the methodical repetition of this ritual, the audience has time to sink into their own memories. The song carries with it a whole world of associations. For example, it is officially a gay anthem and the song had such a following that gay men used to call themselves “friends of Dorothy” to suggest sexual orientation while avoiding hostility. Judy Garland is also considered a gay icon.<sup>96</sup> Apart from this connection to queerness however, the song also carries more personal memories for people. The repetition allows room for these to come up.

Adding to that, this relation that ebb and flood has with overwhelm can also be clearly seen here. In her artists’ statement, FK Alexander writes that she strives for radical healing and recovery “through sensory overload together with grueling repetition and ritual”.<sup>97</sup> This is done with the noise music. After being exposed to these loud sonic noises for an hour or so, the quiet that comes after is like ebb after a huge flood. In a review by dramaturg Dorothy Max Prior (she/her) on the performance, she reports to have felt much lighter when she left.<sup>98</sup> Her repetition and physical discipline to sing over the music is also emphasized through this dramaturgy of ebb and flow, contributing to its statement of wanting to radically heal through overwhelming the audience.

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<sup>96</sup> Michèle Mendelssohn, *Dorothy and the Wizard of Oz: The Surprising Influence of Judy Garland on LGBTQ Culture* (New York: Perseus Books, 2017).

<sup>97</sup> FK Alexander, artist statement, "FK Alexander," Artsadmin, accessed June 16, 2024, <https://www.artsadmin.co.uk/profiles/fk-alexander/>.

<sup>98</sup> Dorothy Max Prior, "FK Alexander (I Could Go On Singing) Over The Rainbow," review of Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2016, August 7, 2016.



Figure 7: FK sings to audience member in *(I Could Go On Singing) Over The Rainbow* (2016) Photography by Jannica Honey Photography

In terms of ebb and flood, Jacolby Satterwhite's video piece *Pygmalion's Ugly Season* opens with a slowed down ritual where Satterwhite's body is painted by two naked male performers. They use green paint, with green screen technology revealing structures resembling gold metal and gemstones seemingly underneath his skin. Zooming in on these individual structures the video starts to journey through CGI neighborhoods representing different utopian visions.

This preparatory ritual acts as a calm before the storm as the rest of the video is filled with colorful, wiggly imagery and loud, invasive sound. Jacolby Satterwhite enjoys working with excess, as in a society where his identity is often labeled as 'too much' he aims to create space for queerness in all of its overflowing multiplicity. This moment of ebb thus emphasizes this overwhelming amount of imagery and sound even more. The video piece ends again with this painting ritual, where Satterwhite's skin is painted back on. By constantly zooming in and out, Satterwhite creates the effect of ebb and flood by initially allowing only a few elements in the shot and gradually filling it up, before zooming in on a specific detail once more. The dramaturgical strategy of ebb and flood thus contributes to Satterwhite's statement on wanting to embrace queerness in all of its 'muchness'.

The works all pull you into a world and push you out slightly, to allow you to see certain details or structures more clearly, to reflect on your experience or memories or to allow you to recover from or through overwhelm.



Figure 8: Skin painting ritual in *Pygmalion's Ugly Season* (2022) screenshot by me

## **Dramaturgical Strategies: Dissolving and Crystallizing**

As mentioned in Chapter Two, theatrical frameworks and roles dissolve and crystallize constantly throughout the performance. Dissolving typically refers to the process of a solid substance becoming incorporated into a liquid and becoming a homogeneous mixture. It involves the breaking down of solid particles into smaller particles that spread evenly throughout the liquid, resulting in a solution. In a broader sense, dissolving can also mean breaking down or dispersing something, whether it's a physical substance or a concept.

*Dissolving* in the context of *Ophelia's Got Talent* relates to the notions of decay, death and failure. It signifies the breakdown and destruction of material, in this case theatrical elements, allowing for renewal through the transformative power of water to wash away and recycle matter. From the dissolution and decay new life and possibilities can crystallize. *Crystallizing* refers to the act of forming crystals from a solution. During the process of crystallization, the atoms or molecules rearrange themselves into a highly ordered, repeating

pattern. In a figurative sense, it can refer to the process of making something clearer or more defined. *Crystallizing* represents growth and transformation arising from failure, which suggests a cyclical process of creation and destruction.

In *Ophelia's Got Talent* the framework of the talent show is dissolved through the failure of one of the talent acts that are performed. From this dissolution of framework, new acts are born. The solid substance of the theatrical framework of the talent show, becomes incorporated into the liquid that is the rest of the performance. The solid particles of this talent show break down into smaller particles and spread evenly. Some of the elements of the talent show can still be seen throughout the performance, though much smaller and less defined. From this intentional failure, acting as the solvent, these theatrical elements break down. From this solution (the intermission) new crystals (theatrical elements) form, arranging themselves in a repeating pattern of ebb and flood.

In the worlds that they build up, all three of the other works also engage in some sort of breaking or disrupting of the worlds. Satterwhite intricately integrates his crafted neighborhoods into the scene, blending animated visuals with real-life footage. The neighborhoods emerge from his skin, and digital versions of Satterwhite and Hadreas inhabit them. Subsequently, the neighborhoods catch fire, revealing real-life performers dancing on New York brownstones. Following a similar preparatory ritual, Satterwhite's skin is repainted, causing the neighborhoods to dissolve as his body crystallizes again. By zooming in and out constantly this process of dissolution and crystallization also becomes more clear. By zooming in he allows the audience to see more clearly the details, the small parts that operate in the larger images. By zooming out he allows the audience to see the patterns, the over-all structures to this imagined world, that is slowly *crystallizing* in real-life as well. The imagined community-made drawings also crystallize through a process of animation and performance. Forming real-life performances out of these imagined worlds, making them more concrete and situating them in a societal context.

In Jacolby Satterwhite's work, trauma and healing are mostly viewed through a lens of refusal to conform and through powerful reclaiming of space and expression. Satterwhite vogues in the streets of New York, moving his body in non-conforming ways in public space. He is also shown meditating, naked, with other naked men caressing his body. In the video he constantly creates unapologetically queer images, which he also dares to disrupt. He deliberately performs liberation, by creating a flood of queer images, by creating his own queer world where multitudes of himself can vogue into eternity. He shows that these queer worlds full of muchness dwell within us, through his dissolution of skin.



Voguing is, of course, already an example of “disidentification” as the movements that are performed reinterpret and subvert mainstream cultural symbols and norms, providing a platform for marginalized individuals to assert their identities and experiences in creative and defiant ways, while also subverting conventional standards of beauty and gender expression. By performing this in the public space, Satterwhite also creates space for queer people to be free. Adding to that, through the imagery of meditation and for example the reference to Nigerian fire rituals prompting purification and connection to the ancestors, these subjugated healing knowledges are also again embraced.

Furthermore, “imagination” is key in this video work as Satterwhite created his world through asking more than 100 people for their personal utopia’s and dreams (creating community and alternative kinship in the process). Carefully translating these and mixing the images with his own imagined and real selves he creates an imaginary world that slowly crystallizes towards reality.

Tibau Bernaert builds up the world of Ramrod very carefully, through their literal careful construction of the elements in the space, to the ever-changing outfits and their narration. However, when they explain how the inhabitants of Ramrod experiment continuously until they die, the lights suddenly go dark and the room goes quiet. This moment of dissolution indicates the collapse of the meticulously constructed world, metaphorically signifying the disappearance of established paradigms and the theatrical frame being suspended.

After a good minute, they scream: “SLAYYYYYY!” All the house-lights turn on at once and without the “safety” of the anonymous darkness the audience was in, the room now feels vulnerable. Bernaert also looks vulnerable, emerging from a cocoon of dark-blue tulle. This new character seems immediately tired and thirsty of this exhortation and starts looking around for something to drink. They find a glass of water under one of the audience member’s chairs. Chugging the glass, they go on to look at what is left of this world.

The performance undergoes a transformative shift, where vulnerability, flirtation, curiosity, intimacy, and mutual reciprocity were first introduced more as themes, they now become viscerally affective. The vulnerability that is perhaps mentioned in the first part of the performance is now crystallized through the dissolution of the carefully built up world. The vulnerability can be felt, experienced and is thus more clear and well-defined.

Bernaert also seems to be shedding layers of fabric, skin and even voice. They start the performance out with a voice that is not theirs, then using their drag character's voice and in the last few sentences their normal speaking voice. This shedding makes the end-statement

an even more vulnerable question to the audience. Tibau asks: “Please, let me love you and please, love me back.”

Tibau Bernaert invites us into their imagined realm, a space that stems from the need to navigate the traumas of male violence of their youth. As the space undergoes its transformation and Bernaert's drag persona, Vivi Sauterelle emerges, a sense of vulnerability can be experienced. The deliberate arrangement of the audience in a half circle produces intimacy and mutual gaze and creates a shared experience and a sense of at least temporary community. Bernaert interacts directly with the audience, sitting beside them and engaging through dialogue or touch, which further blurs the line between performer and spectator. This gradual dissolution of layers or barriers leads to a crystallization of vulnerability and connection.

Relating this back to the elements of queer healing, Bernaert employs strategies of “disidentification,” subjugated healing knowledges and “imagination” and they embrace their “queer failure.” By acknowledging their divergence from societal norms and seeking refuge in imagination, Bernaert not only confronts personal struggles but also constructs a vibrant world, only to deconstruct it. This act of “queer failure” offers space for alternative modes of existence and challenges dominant narratives. In the performance he also mentions and performs the healing properties of touch, sexuality and movement. These relate to subjugated healing knowledges, as this embodied healing is often not perceived as legitimate within dominant Western healing traditions. In dominant Western forms of healing, we are often recovering from sexuality in some way, not healing through it (which is fair, considering that sex under patriarchy and colonial homophobia can be incredibly traumatizing). Additionally, Bernaert subverts the patriarchal image of pole dancing by renaming the stripper pole as “Ramrod,” symbolizing their queer utopia. Through fluid movements and intentional recontextualization, Bernaert transforms this mainstream dance form that often caters to the male gaze into a tool for reimagining embodiment and expression, prompting a reconsideration of the image.

The version of “Over The Rainbow” used by FK Alexander is the last recording done by Judy Garland before she passed away. Therefore this recording carries with it this theme of death, but also rebirth as FK Alexander sings over it. The song conjures a world, that of the *Wizard of Oz* (1939), but also of Judy Garland herself.<sup>99</sup> FK Alexander breaks the world of the *Wizard of Oz* up into fragments and cuts of the song and accompanies it with noise

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<sup>99</sup> *The Wizard of Oz*, directed by Victor Fleming (1939; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment), film.

music. She sings over the noise and the recording, maintaining eye-contact. Because she disrupts the original version and thus dissolves parts of it, or breaks it up into smaller parts and through repetition, she allows the audience to further crystallize their connection to this world. By repeating the performance, each small part becomes more clear and defined everytime she does it. The use of costumes also relates to these themes of decay and rebirth. In *F A G G O T S*, the costume acts as layers of identity to be put on and shedded. The same goes for *(I Could Go On Singing) Somewhere Over The Rainbow* where FK Alexander takes her clothes off after each performance, to put them on again for a new audience member. In his video, Jacolby begins naked, being painted, shedding his skin as it seems.

For each of these performances, dissolution is a way towards crystallization. For Tibau Bernaert, their fantasy is their means of survival and through embracing failure and death, a vulnerable call for connection is born. By creating a new world in fantasy and allowing it to break down, they dissolve the framework, yet bring a piece of fantasy planet Ramrod to the present moment, where this element of vulnerable connection can crystallize further. Jacolby Satterwhite also aims to create space for queer ‘muchness’ and utopia. He does this by creating CGI worlds, breaking them down and performing in public spaces. He dissolves his fantasy utopia and claims the public space, *crystallizing* more space for queerness in the streets of New York. FK Alexander builds up this world of the *Wizard of Oz* and Judy Garland, yet simultaneously breaks it down into parts and disrupts the experience with noise music. From this dissolution, memories and associations crystallize. By overwhelming the audience she hopes to prompt radical healing.

This idea that dissolution can be a precursor to creation, renewal or transformation is deeply rooted in various philosophical, cultural and natural frameworks. Think of a river flood that in its destruction leaves behind silt and nutrient-rich sediment, supporting the rapid growth of new vegetation and the life of a more robust and diverse ecosystem. This cycle of destruction and renewal demonstrates a natural process that can dismantle existing conditions, leading to the creation of better circumstances for growth.

This focus on renewal or transformation also relates to the necessity of understanding and dismantling oppressive systems that perpetuate trauma. The dramaturgical strategies of *crystallizing* and *dissolving* thus supports this idea of growth through failure present in the statements of these performances. By breaking down their fantasy worlds, utopia’s, or theatrical frameworks these performances emphasize this idea, allowing new and unexpected possibilities to crystallize.

## Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I derived four dramaturgical strategies from *Ophelia's Got Talent*, namely *ebbing*, *flooding*, *dissolving* and *crystallizing*. In applying these to the three other case studies the analysis revealed that the dramaturgical strategies can support different statements in queer contemporary performances. Adding to that, I found that these dramaturgical strategies undo more progress-oriented, linear dramaturgies as well as emphasize fluidity, change and destruction as a necessary means towards transformation. These findings highlight the significance of these strategies for prompting *queer healing*, as this transformation is necessary in the face of violent normativity. By illustrating how the dramaturgical strategies helped in analyzing the *queer healing* potential of the other performance examples, this chapter addressed the research question of: “How can the dramaturgical strategies of *ebbing*, *flooding*, *dissolving* and *crystallizing* identified in *Ophelia's Got Talent* be applied to other examples of queer contemporary performance? How do these performances navigate and address trauma and healing?”. This discussion of dramaturgical strategies and *queer healing* potential finally leads us to the conclusion. In the Conclusion I aim to reflect on my research and writing process as well as answer my main research question.

# Conclusion

As I started on the preliminary research for this thesis, my fascination with *Ophelia's Got Talent* and its watery dramaturgy was clear. I was equally drawn to the intersection of this theme with queer dramaturgies. However, the exploration of healing and trauma emerged much later in the process and was accompanied by some anxiety. It has only been in recent months that I started to delve into literature and performances aligned with these themes, which coincided with my own deliberate efforts to address past traumas, specifically those concerning the body. While it felt fitting to incorporate these themes into my academic work, it also felt like a rapid evolution. Each day spent writing this thesis has been a mix of exhilaration and apprehension, discomfort and liberation. I've experienced the suspension I've written about almost daily and have felt my own in-between states vividly, sometimes to the point of overwhelm or stress. Yet, I was also receptive to the insights and revelations guiding my writing process. As I write this conclusion, my journey with the thesis, and with the research and subject matter, continues.

Throughout the writing process, the thesis has taken numerous unexpected turns, often leaving me feeling disoriented (once again mirroring this concept of suspension). However, reflecting on the depth and breadth of its content, I now recognize the richness of its potential avenues for further exploration. For instance, delving into hydro-feminist performance, an area still relatively underexplored in performance studies, could reveal valuable insights, given the prevalence of water-themed performances in the field right now. Something I was absolutely interested in but also felt too broad for the scope would be to relate this performance to climate change and ecological theory. Additionally, deeper investigations into queer video performance and utopia, queer one-on-one performances, and for example the use of drag within theatrical contexts hold promise for enriching our understanding of these subjects. Each case study examined in this thesis merits more extensive scrutiny, given the scope of their complexities. Adding to that, in this thesis I have mostly focused on ways that these dramaturgical strategies could prompt *queer healing* for the audience. However, for future research, the *queer healing* these strategies could offer the performers could also be looked into deeper. Thinking for example on how the process of art-making can become healing for the artist, or even the act of performing. This would require following an artistic process closely or experiencing it personally and would thus

require more embodied research methods, such as rehearsal ethnography, critical auto-ethnography or re-embodiment.

Chapter One: Queer Healing, demonstrated that the *collapse of imagination* can be seen as a cruel attachment to familiar but problematic norms and structures. By using Berlant's "crisis ordinariness" as a lens to look at *Ophelia's Got Talent*, the analysis found its representation of trauma to be embedded in systems of power and oppression. The state of our collective nervous systems under capitalism was used as an example to also explain our collective need for community in order to heal from this "crisis ordinariness." This led to the definition of six elements of *queer healing*, namely community care, alternative kinship, "queer failure," "disidentification," "imagination" and subjugated healing knowledges. These elements were connected to examples in queer contemporary performance.

In Chapter Two: Suspension and Spectatorship In *Ophelia's Got Talent* (2022), the analysis of the talent show framework and the intentional failure of one of the talent acts elucidated the experience of suspension as a spectator. Using my own spectatorial experience as a guide light in the analysis it was argued that this spectatorial experience of suspension and porosity was compositionally produced through blank spaces, vanishing frameworks, boundary-breaking bodywork, and watery imagery. Astrida Neimanis' concept of "unknowability" made clear the connection between this compositional element of watery imagery and spectatorial experience of suspension, together producing a spectatorship of porosity. This *porous spectatorship* was shown to be conducive to transformation in the spectator and thus connected back to elements of *queer healing* and *queer healing* potential of queer contemporary performance.

In Chapter Three: Navigating Bodily Trauma and Healing in *Ophelia's Got Talent* (2022), the analysis showed how the performance is situated in a context of shared trauma, navigating healing through visceral acts of endurance and self-inflicted pain, which serve as metaphors for reclaiming control over one's body and narrative. Muñoz' concept of "disidentification" further explicated the way in which the performers engage with and distance themselves from these mainstream representations of women and trauma. This reclaiming of trauma is further done through a subversion of the gendering of water, refusing passive victimhood as the statement of the performance.

In Chapter Four: Deriving Dramaturgies of Suspension, four dramaturgical strategies are identified and applied, namely *ebbing*, *flooding*, *dissolving* and *crystallizing*. In applying these to *F A G G O T S* by Tibau Bernaert, *(I Could Go On Singing) Over The Rainbow* by FK Alexander and *Pygmalion's Ugly Season* by Jacolby Satterwhite the analysis found that

these strategies work to support the different statements of these queer contemporary performances. From subverting passive victimhood and the gendering of water in *Ophelia's Got Talent*, to creating and destroying fantasy worlds in both *F A G G O T S* and *Pygmalion's Ugly Season*, to healing the audience through overwhelming sound, repetition and endurance in *Over the Rainbow*.

*Ebbing* and *flooding* helped emphasize change, fluidity and repetition in these performances. *Dissolving* and *crystallizing* gave way to undoing or destroying certain frameworks, systems or worlds, giving space to new possibilities, new ways of moving and being together.

Connecting this back to *queer healing*, these dramaturgical strategies supported many elements of *queer healing* as well. *Ebbing* and *flooding* gave space for “queer failure” to be embraced, as this dramaturgical strategy goes against progress-oriented dramaturgies, relating to the anti-capitalist nature of “queer failure”. *Ebbing* and *flooding* also emphasized change and fluidity and thus gave more room to the importance of “imagination.” This *ebbing* and *flooding* also gave way to ritual and repetition, connecting to subjugated healing knowledges.

*Crystallizing* and *dissolving* both aligned with the need to understand and dismantle oppressive systems. This *dissolving* and *crystallizing* gave way to “disidentification,” dissolving parts of mainstream culture to crystallize new ways of engaging with it. From a dissolution of framework new ways of being together, becoming community or kin crystallized.

The dramaturgical strategies of *ebbing*, *flooding*, *dissolving*, and *crystallizing* prompt *queer healing* in queer contemporary performance by creating transformative experiences that challenge and subvert conventional norms. I found that these dramaturgical strategies undo more progress-oriented, linear dramaturgies as well as emphasize fluidity, change and destruction as a necessary means towards transformation. These findings highlight the significance of these strategies for prompting *queer healing*, as this transformation is necessary in the face of violent normativity.

These dramaturgical strategies and their *queer healing* potential can be a relevant lens through which to look at queer contemporary performance, because they allow us to carefully build and bravely break. In this time of collapsing imagination, “crisis ordinariness” and collective trauma, we must care for another and take care of ourselves. We must do so in the queerest of ways, always at odds with what is dominant, challenging oppressive systems of power as we go.

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*F A G G O T S*, performed by Tibau Bernaert, Antwerp, Belgium, June 2023.

*(I Could Go On Singing) Over The Rainbow*, performed by FK Alexander, Glasgow, Scotland, January 26, 2016.

*Ophelia's Got Talent (2022)*, directed by Florentina Holzinger, Volksbühne, Berlin, Germany, September 15, 2022.

*Pygmalion's Ugly Season*, Jacolby Satterwhite, video, YouTube, September 23, 2022

## Films

*Magic Mike*. Directed by Steven Soderbergh. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2012.

*The Wizard of Oz*, directed by Victor Fleming (1939; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros.

## Songs

Ginuwine. "Pony." On *Ginuwine... The Bachelor*. 550 Music/Epic Records, 1996.

Goulding, Ellie. "Anything Could Happen." On *Halcyon*. Polydor Records, 2012.

Harold Arlen and E. Y. Harburg, "Over the Rainbow," performed by Judy Garland, recorded 1938, Track 6 on *The Wizard of Oz: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*, MGM, 1956.

## Artworks/poems

Millais, John Everett. *Ophelia*, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 111.8 cm, Tate Britain, London, 1851-52.

Yeats, William Butler. "Leda and the Swan." In *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, edited by Richard J. Finneran, 213-214. New York: Macmillan, 1989.

## Figures

Figure 1: Houdini-inspired daredevil act in Ophelia's Got Talent (2022) Photography by Nicole Marianna Wytyczak

<https://www.theaterrotterdam.nl/agenda/10148/volksbuhne-am-rosa-luxemburg-platz-florentina-holzinger-at/ophelia-s-got-talent>

Figure 2: Saioa as plumber/stripper in Ophelia's Got Talent (2022) Photography by Mayra Wallraf

<https://saioa-alvarez.de/ophelias-got-talent>

Figure 3: Watery scenography in Ophelia's Got Talent (2022) Photography by Mayra Wallraf

<https://saioa-alvarez.de/ophelias-got-talent>

Figure 4: Trauma-helicopter with suspended performers in Ophelia's Got Talent (2022) Photography by Nicole Marianna Wytyczak

<https://transmedialekunst.com/news/2023-04-19-florentina-holzinger/>

Figure 5: Florentina hangs by her teeth in Ophelia's Got Talent (2022) Photography by Nicole Marianna Wytyczak

<https://www.theaterrotterdam.nl/agenda/10148/volksbuhne-am-rosa-luxemburg-platz-florentina-holzinger-at/ophelia-s-got-talent>

Figure 6: Tibau as Vivi Sauterelle on pole-platform in F A G G O T S (2023) Photography by Giada Cicchetti

<https://www.toneelhuis.be/nl/programma/f-a-g-g-o-t-s/>

Figure 7: FK sings to audience member in (I Could Go On Singing) Over The Rainbow (2016) Photography by Jannica Honey Photography

<https://ums.org/performance/i-could-go-on-singing-over-the-rainbow/>

Figure 8: Skin painting ritual in Pygmalion's Ugly Season (2022) screenshot by me

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQ5kdR\\_N3Vo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQ5kdR_N3Vo)

