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Healing Flavours

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Healing Flavours. An Immersive Emotional Perception of Asklepieion Sanctuary's Landscape

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Abstract

Space has the ability to modify our perception. Human entity retains the stigmata of time and space traversed and encountered, as an indelible marker of the experience (Béligon & Digonnet, 2020). Body becomes a sensitive interface through which we apprehend spatiality. In the process of the participatory workshop *Healing Flavours*, inhabitation was achieved through the experiential observation provided by the practice-based laboratory session. The workshop was held on August 29th, 2022, as part of the *Performing Space 2022* project organised by the Department of Theatre Studies of the University of Peloponnese and the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. It consisted of an interactive emotion walk that invited participants to move and halt through a series of ancient sites in an open space, immersing themselves in a range of emotional states. The workshop was based on the holistic system of R. Schechner's *Rasaboxes* and S. Bloch's *Alba Method* patterns, where muscular activity and specific breathing patterns can be consciously controlled and manipulated to induce and regulate emotional states. The methodology of perception entailed the implementation of a specific protocol that consisted of three key elements: a. visual gaze to facilitate the exploration of the surroundings, b. revelation of the emotion and c. physical discovery and involvement in varied ways, meant to enhance the emotional experience of participants and to encourage them to engage with the environment.

Keywords: Site-specific laboratory, embodied experience, physical immersion, performers training, Alba Method, rasa, cognitive theory.

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Richard Schechner (2003) suggests that spatial arrangements of a performance result from temporal developments of public events, based on two basic structures of spatial development: a) the explosive nuclear structure, such as the circle formed by passers-by around an accident and b) the ephemeral structure of the nomadic procession (as in the epitaphic litany or nomadic parasitism). This ephemeral structure consists of a planned course, which includes stops and moves, with linear spatial development and culmination.

In the case of the *Healing Flavours* workshop, the procedure consisted of a five-stop processional site-specific emotion walk that invited participants to move and halt through a series of ancient sites in an open space. The workshop was held on August 29th, 2022, as part of the *Performing Space 2022* project organised by the Department of Theatre Studies of the University of Peloponnese and the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. It was based on the holistic system of Richard Schechner's *Rasaboxes* and Susanna Bloch's *Alba Method* patterns where muscular activity and respiration specific patterns can be consciously controlled and manipulated to induce and regulate emotional states. The experiential journey invited participants to traverse various historically significant locations, commencing from a forest area adjacent to the Epidaurus Theatre and concluding at the Propylaea (Figure 1).

The Protocol: Transitioning From Visual Stimulation to Emotional Embodiment

In order to transition from the realm of architectural considerations into the realm of emotional and physical space, an identical and precise protocol was consistently implemented at each stage of the process. This protocol entailed the articulation of a series of stimuli, comprising three key elements: 1. visual engagement with the space, 2. emotional revelation and 3. embodied engagement.

Visual Engagement with the Space

The first element of the protocol involved directing one's visual gaze to the external environment, in order to perceive the external space and stimulate the revelation of an emotional state.

In Western culture, vision dominates all other senses. It is through the articulation of the visible aspects that spatial perception is organised and understood (Ardenne & Polla, 2011). What articulates vision is:

- The structure of the space: the spatial relationship between objects and their observers. It involves the analysis of how objects are situated in their environment and how individuals perceive their own spatial positioning within that context.
- Its emotional attribution: it has a subjective nature, depending on individual associations. The resonance ascribed to the visual components of an environment is variable, shaped by personal experiences and emotional inclinations.
- Its identity: in this context, it is related to the unique features and characteristics that distinguish one spatial environment from another.

Space as perceived through individual gaze served as the primary focal point during the immersive workshop, acting as an external stimulus that triggered the initial engagement. It functioned as an environmental cue, drawing participant's attention outwardly, thus generating a new emotional meaning of space structure.

In accordance with this perspective, Konstantin Stanislavski, though renowned for his emphasis on the actor's internal processes to elicit emotional reactions, recognised the profound influence of the gaze as an environmental stimulus on an actor's emotional subconscious. He claimed that "surroundings have a big influence over the feelings. And this happens on the stage as well in real life" (Stanislavsky, 1989, p. 170).

This perspective highlights the intricate interplay between the visual perception of the external environment and the resulting emotional experiences.

From the vantage point of the facilitator, space emerged as a canvas, upon which personal perceptions were projected onto the world. It unveiled intentions and functioned as a conduit for the purposeful navigation of participants to each designated stop with clarity and purpose.

Emotional Revelation

The second element of the protocol implied an emotional reaction to the impact of the space.

In the emotional walk workshop participants were guided to explore a range of emotional states in the specific locations, using the gaze as the initial trigger and attributing emotions to what they visually perceived.

The same physical space could evoke diverse emotional responses even in the same person, for example associated with joy, nostalgia, or serenity. In order to maintain a framework of emotionally responsive immersion in each location, this process was based on the holistic system of Schechner's *Rasaesthetics* and from neurobiologist Susanna Bloch's *Alba Method*.

In *Rasaesthetics*, *rasa* is an emotional experience and an aesthetic flavour that extends from the physical presence and movements of performers, as well as the spatial relationships between performers and the space itself (Schechner, 2003).

According to Schechner, there are eight basic flavours/rasas: *adbhuta* (surprise, wonder), *sringara* (love, romance), *bhayanaka* (fear, shame), *bibhatsa* (disgust), *vira* (courage, heroism), *hasya* (laughter, joy), *karuna* (sorrow, compassion), *raudra* (wrath). On the other hand, Bloch (2015) proposed six basic emotions: joy, sadness, fear, anger, sexuality, and tenderness.

Throughout the workshop, the utilization of the concept of *rasa* was predominantly focused on the participants' embodiment of their emotions by physical attitudes and breathing awareness. Due to time constraints, the decision was made to work primarily with a selection of identical emotions/flavours, drawn from both the *Rasaesthetics* and *Alba Emoting* systems, following the example of primary emotions suggested by Antonio Damasio or Paul Ekman (Prinz, 2004). It included emotions like joy, sadness, fear, and some more complex ones, such as pride/heroism and surprise, each with its own spatialisation in the Asklepieion area.

Embodied Engagement

The third element of the protocol involved the embodied engagement. William James maintained that emotions consist of the subject's internal awareness of the bodily responses resulting from the interaction with her environment (Deonna & Teroni, 2012). He claimed that each emotion corresponds to a distinctive type of bodily awareness, that may in turn generate an array of physical attitudes. The embodiment of emotion includes information derived from diverse sources, such as facial feedback, alterations in skeletal muscles, the autonomic nervous system (e.g., respiration, heart rate, digestion, etc.) and the endocrine system.

For the purposes of the workshop, the embodied engagement to emotions was divided to the following components:

- a) breath, as a foundational element in modulating the participant's affective experience,
- b) and physical attitudes, so as to experience the actions of the body influenced by the overall engagement.

Breath

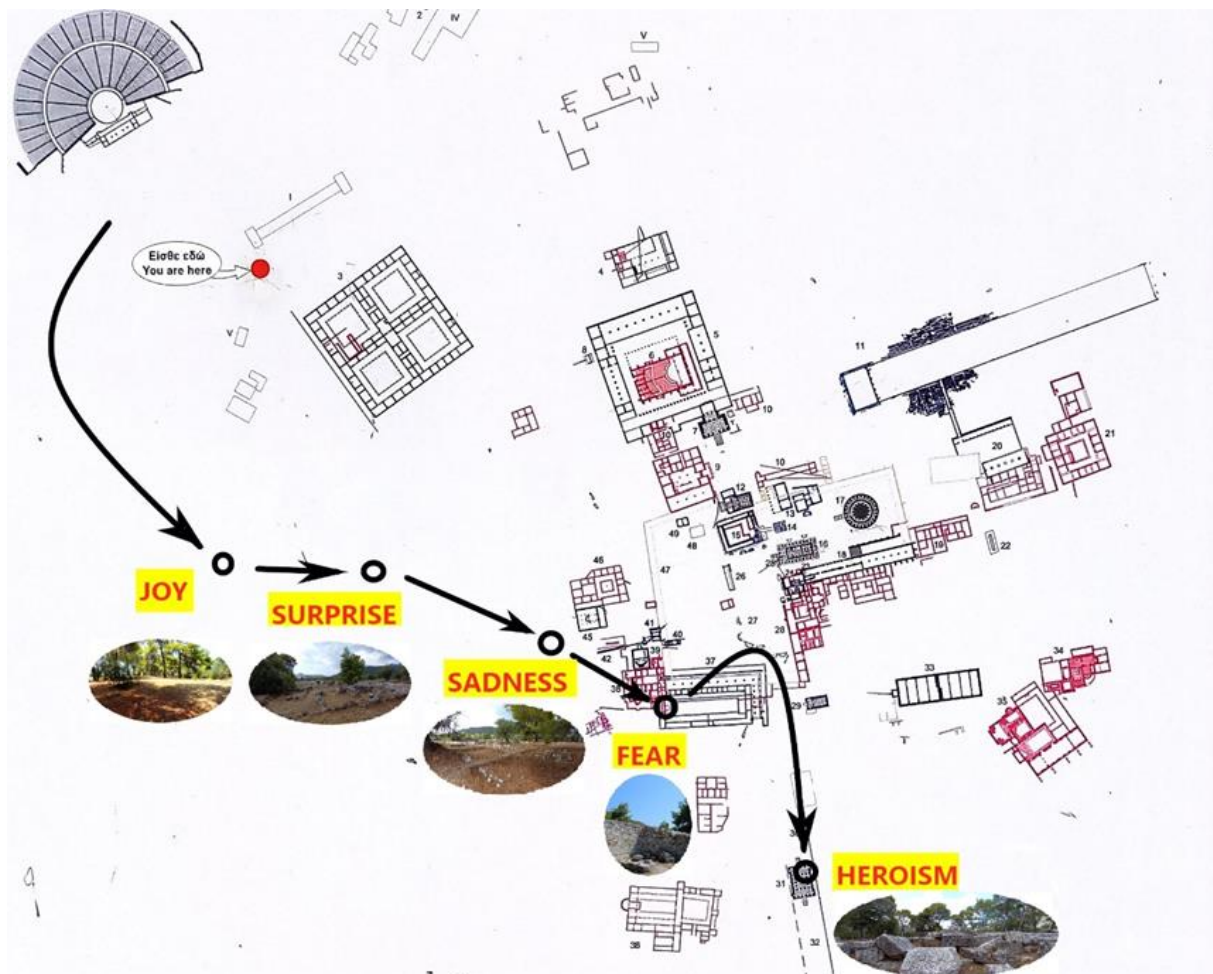
A cascade of physiological changes and psychological states within individuals is triggered by emotions. As those emotional waves wash over us, breath naturally responds, adapting in terms of rhythm, depth, and intensity. This breathing adaptability is an instinctive response governed by the autonomic nervous system. As Antonin Artaud (1958) aptly noted, breath is an incomparable source of life and an essential element in the work of a unifying performer. The performer may harness the power of breath and emotions to engage in a profound exploration, akin to an "affective athlete" or an "athlete of the heart."

In the context of exploring emotional states, neurobiologist Bloch conducted a comprehensive analysis, involving the measurement and examination of various physiological and motor parameters. These dealt with respiratory movements, the motor activity of the trapezius muscle, heart rate, blood pressure, facial expressions, and subjective impressions that accompanied physiomotor reactions in individuals experiencing different emotions. Through the systematic collection and analysis of this data, the experimenter was able to identify emotional effect or patterns, leading to the development of the *Alba Emoting method* (Bloch, 2015). The method is frequently employed in the realms of drama and performative somatic education, enhancing the understanding of how emotions are embodied and expressed.

Participants were led towards breathing patterns, in order to perceive the emotional intelligence of the physical body. The intentional awareness of breath not only aided in emotional expression, but also served as a safeguard for the participant's psychological equilibrium, as it enabled individuals to discern and attend to their emotional states.

Figure 1

Map of Asklepieion Sanctuary Showing the Promenade and the Locations of the Five Stops in the Emotional Walk Workshop "Healing Flavours"



Physical Attitudes

As mentioned, emotions may correspond to a bodily change. Physical actions and emotions are intertwined and mutually influential. In theatrical drama theory, a large number of directors sought to comprehend the function of the nervous system and the relationship between thought, emotion, movement, and speech. Vsevolod Meyerhold, Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba and even Stanislavski in their laboratorial work researched the body, brain, and mind, aligning them with a scientific approach.

A similar correlation may be found in Michael Chekhov's psychological gestures (Chekhov, 2014), which also utilise the notion that bodily movements and gestures are interconnected with cognitive sensomotor processes. M. Chekhov, as a student of K. Stanislavsky, asserted that movement and emotion and sound are interrelated. Movement should not take place, until it is instigated by an emotional drive that overflows outward and manifests itself in gesture or, possibly, in sound.

During the workshop, attendees were led towards acceptance of a somaesthetic proprioceptive result—an embodied action of their emotions, so as to discover their *soma*, the body endowed with life, sensation, movement and perception.

Brief Overview of the Emotional Walk Workshop

As previously mentioned, the *Healing Flavours* emotional walk workshop consisted of five stops within the Asklepieion Sanctuary Area. Here is a concise summary, outlining the associated protocol.

First Stop

The first stop examined the emotion of joy. During this phase, there was a deliberate intention to establish a slow pace, so as to cultivate a sense of inner calm. The tempo served to redirect the participants' awareness inward, facilitating the cultivation of an enhanced proprioception, with a particular emphasis on being present. Furthermore, commencing the emotional walk with gentle movements contributed to the establishment of a centred ambiance, thereby creating a foundational context for further explorations.

Protocol

Visual Engagement

The forest area near Apollo's Temple. The starting point of the walk was situated in the woods near the Temple of Apollo and Asclepius. This location was intentionally secluded from the typical tourist routes.

Emotional Revelation: Flavour of Joy

The calm, the coolness and the shade of the trees brought about a delightful sensation of serenity and happiness. It generated very pleasant feelings, which is particularly noteworthy given the scorching late August afternoon.

Embodied Engagement

Breath

The primary respiratory manifestation of this emotional state was characterised by a composed, expansive inhalation through the nose and a serene exhalation through the mouth.

Physical Attitudes: Participants Oscillated Around the Vertical Axle

This physical inclination represented a sense of upliftment, indicating an organic response to the emotional stimuli and enhancing the participants' embodiment of the joyful flavour. The incorporation of slow and low-amplitude movements in the process aimed to promote body awareness and mindfulness. Attendees surrendered themselves to the floor during moments of intense emotion, suggesting a profound release to the experience (Figure 2). Progressively, the eyes developed an unfocused gaze, shifting the attention from the external environment to the internal emotional state. This altered visual perception enabled a heightened introspective experience, fostering a deeper connection with the participants' inner selves.

Figure 2

Physical Engagement of Corporeal Release to the Flavour of Joy



Second Stop

The second stop examined the emotion of surprise. The duration of the stop was brief, yet effective. The effectiveness was attributed to the participants' sensitivity, cultivated through the first stop.

Protocol

Visual Engagement: Panorama of the Asklepieion Site

The second stop of the emotional walk was strategically positioned in the juncture of the woods and the panoramic vista overlooking the site. This specific location provided a significant backdrop for the participants' experience.

Emotional Revelation: Flavour of Surprise

The juxtaposition of the dark woods with the open sunny panorama of the Asklepieion site created a contrast in the participants' visual experience. Transitioning from the secluded, sylvan surroundings of the woods to the expansive, breath-taking view of the site, provoked a sense of surprise among the participants.

Embodied Engagement

Breath

In accordance with the breathing pattern typically associated with the emotional state of surprise, the participants' breath was characterised by very brief inhalations – an apnea-like breathing. It was succeeded by passive, partial exhalations and occasionally punctuated by an expiratory phase resembling a sigh.

Physical attitudes

Participants established steady foundation to contemplate the change. The body remained mostly immobile, in a vertical position, which hinted at a subtle tension underlying their physical presence.

Third Stop

The third stop examined the emotion of sadness. The landscape created a correlation between the historical and spiritual aspects of the site of Asclepius, where water once flowed. Hollow squares juxtaposed with real tears created a contrast between presence and absence, as if the tears were trying to fill the void, yearning to restore what was missing, or lost.

Protocol

Visual Engagement: Ground Square

The participants' visual orientation was towards a continuous geometrical arrangement of hollow squares. Due to its shape and enclosed nature, the spot demonstrated visual and symbolic aspects similar to those of burial sites. The resemblance triggered emotional associations to mortality (Figure 3).

Emotional Revelation: Flavour of Sadness

The deliberate inclusion of the square formations evoked introspection and a connection to themes of impermanence of life. The arrangement's resemblance to empty bug chambers served as a catalyst for participants to explore a range of sombre reflections.

Figure 3

Area of Ground Squares. Flavour of Sadness



Embodied Engagement

Breath

Participants experienced lassitude and an overall difficulty in movement, during the observed state. The primary focus was directed to the breathing. It consisted of inhaling through the nose and exhaling through an open mouth. As emotional tension increased, attendees breathing patterns underwent a transformation, evolving into short and abrupt inhales and exhales, as well as brief saccadic outbursts, occasionally leading to tears.

Physical attitudes

Bodies became slow and heavy in movement, indicating a lack of energy caused by the emotion. While being in this state, they surrendered to inertia. The downward position reflected the physical manifestation of burden, fatigue, and emotional weight. The heaviness in the body illustrated a sense of disconnection and withdrawal from the external reality (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Third Stop. Experiencing Physical Attitudes in the Flavour of Sadness



Fourth Stop

The fourth stop examined the emotion of fear. During this stop, interruptions and distractions played a significant role. They drew attention away from the task at hand. And fatigue had settled in, due do the emotional burden.

Protocol

Visual Engagement: Roman Baths

The site comprised a network of narrow corridors, disorderly rows of small rooms with dilapidated stone walls.

Emotional Revelation: Flavour of Fear

The worn-out state of the edifice and the sense of disarray within the layout, elicited feelings of vulnerability, apprehension and fear.

Embodied Engagement

Breath

Participants adopted a breathing pattern marked by irregular inhalation and exhalation; it was maintained during several breathing cycles.

Physical attitudes

Posture was characterised by increased muscular tension and immobility at the same time. Bodies were motionless, as if paralyzed by fear.

Fifth Stop

The fifth stop examined the emotion of heroism. The site of Propylaea, remotely located among the stops, situated in the shade of trees, enhanced the participants' concentration and provided a sense of satisfaction for the journey undertaken. It contributed to an overall positive evaluation of the entire experience.

Protocol

Visual Engagement with the Space: Propylaea of the Sanctuary

What remains of the entrance space to the Asklepieion site consists of stone squares that resemble a platform, a large pedestal that dominates the surrounding plain (Figure 5).

Emotional Revelation: Flavour of Heroism

Participants were guided to ascend the platform. They swiftly embraced a sense of leadership and active involvement. The platform provided them with a position of visibility and prominence that encouraged the exhibition of willingness, cultivating an atmosphere of empowerment.

Embodied Engagement

Breath

Breathing pattern mirrored a particular blend of pride. Inhalation and exhalation occurred through the nose. It was characterised by cycles of high frequency and great amplitude.

Physical Attitudes

Participants exhibited tension in their bodies, especially in the neck and back muscles, tilting the head slightly back. The gaze was unwavering and determined, indicating focus and commitment (Figure 6). The overall attitude was firm and coordinated, conveying a sense of control.

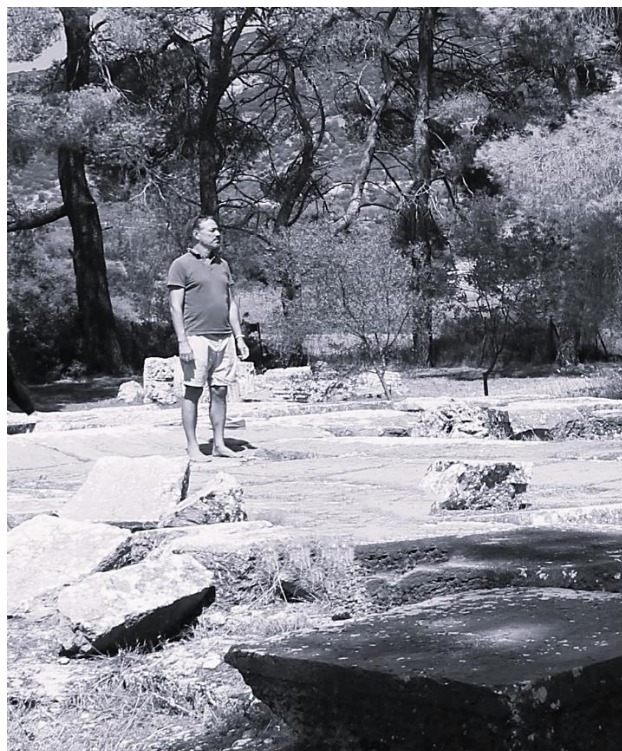
Figure 5

Fifth Stop. Propylaea Area in Asklepieion Sanctuary



Figure 6

Physical Engagement to the Flavour of Heroism



Conclusion

The workshop reaffirmed the profound influence of the environment on emotional experiences and highlighted the significance of embodiment in the expression and understanding of emotions, within the sacred grounds of the Asklepieion. The interconnectedness of external space and emotions, the power of embodied action in revealing emotional states and the intricate relationship between breath and physical attitudes were all pivotal aspects of this immersive experience.

Furthermore, there are certain conclusions that contribute to our understanding of the relation between space and emotional state.

The first conclusion is that spatial proximity of the areas utilised in the workshop played a crucial role in shaping the emotional sequence. Arranging the spaces in close proximity created a logical progression and a sense of continuity in the emotional journey, facilitating the emotional flow and potentially amplifying the emotional impact on participants. The physical proximity of the locations, where the flavours of joy, surprise, sadness, and fear were evoked, allowed a sense of coherence and narrative flow. On the other hand, the area of the Propylaea, where heroic states were experienced, introduced a physical separation, and change of atmosphere. Shifting into this particular location caused a slight lapse of concentration, as participants transitioned from one emotional state to another. However, this spatial separation and the resulting decrease in focus also brought emotional relief. Moving away from the previous emotions, which may have been intense or burdensome, allowed participants to mentally and emotionally distance themselves from them. This distancing provided a chance to mentally reset, before engaging with the next emotion.

A second conclusion is that the workshop acted as a performance that was directed inwardly towards the group of participants. In this context, the participants played dual roles as both creators and receivers of their own "spectacle." It allowed them to become the architects of their emotional experience, as well as the audience, witnessing and reflecting upon the emotional landscapes they traversed.

As a final conclusion, the workshop demonstrated that participants, through their active engagement, re-appropriated the site in the sense of establishing a new connection in the borders of historical essence. By immersing themselves in the spaces and being in tune with their own emotions, they attributed an emotional identity to the location. The re-appropriation of the site transformed it from a historical relic into a living, breathing space, where the past and present converged, redefining its essence and ensuring its continued vitality and relevance to the present.

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