

## PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

(2025)

PERFORMANCE & SPACE II. PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2024 CONFERENCE

PS

### PERFORMANCE & SPACE II

PROCEEDINGS OF THE  
PERFORMING SPACE 2024 CONFERENCE

Edited by

Pablo Berzal Cruz, Athena Stourna, Tyrone Grima, Alba Balmaseda Domínguez



University of the Peloponnese

2025

### The Body in the Theatre-The Body on the Operating Table Super Hospital with Performative Entertainment

*Olav Harsløf*

doi: [10.12681/ps2023.8387](https://doi.org/10.12681/ps2023.8387)

## 29

# The Body in the Theatre-The Body on the Operating Table Super Hospital with Performative Entertainment

**Olav Harsløf**

Professor of Performance Design, Roskilde University

### Abstract

Epidaurus is world famous as a well-preserved ancient theatre with good acoustics. The daily tourists are informed that it was connected to the medical sanctuary behind it. In the museum below the theatre, you can clearly see that this 'sanctuary' was a highly specialized super hospital. The instruments on display document surgical expertise on joints, muscles, internal organs and the brain.

Epidaurus Medical Centre was from the 3rd century BC and a few hundred years later the Mediterranean world most specialized hospital. In addition to injuries from war, sports and old-age, medical and mental illnesses could also be treated here.

Outside the very large hospital and the hotel for the relatives, a space was set up with at theatre to entertain patients and relatives. The popular genres of music, dance and reprise theatre (4th century classical comedies and tragedies) were shown here. International music and sports competitions for the entire Greek-speaking Mediterranean world took place here too thanks to large and persistent sponsorships for the super hospital. At the same time, the medical understanding of 'recovery' at the time contained a series of aesthetic experiences of a visual, aural and rhythmic nature, which could be fully achieved within a theatre space: The operated or weakened body had during medical treatment to be exposed to the singing and dancing body to ensure safe healing and complete recovery.

Using the example of Epidaurus, my paper will analyse the relationship between the two bodies - the medical and the artistic - the latter's healthy function for the former. What scientific thinking and experience was behind it? In addition – attending a performance at Epidaurus you have at the same time the most beautiful view of the Greek Peloponnesian landscape. As an audience you can at the same time concentrate and relax, take the landscape in.

*Keywords:* Greek sanctuaries, performance spaces, collective spaces, festivals, healing space.

## The Body in the Theatre-The Body on the Operating Table

Epidaurus is world famous as well as a well-preserved ancient theatre with good acoustics. The daily tourists are informed that it was connected to the medical sanctuary behind it. In the museum below the theatre, you can clearly see that this 'sanctuary' was a highly specialized super hospital. The instruments on display document surgical expertise on joints, muscles, internal organs and the brain.

### Figure 1

*Epidaurus ruined Super Hospital*



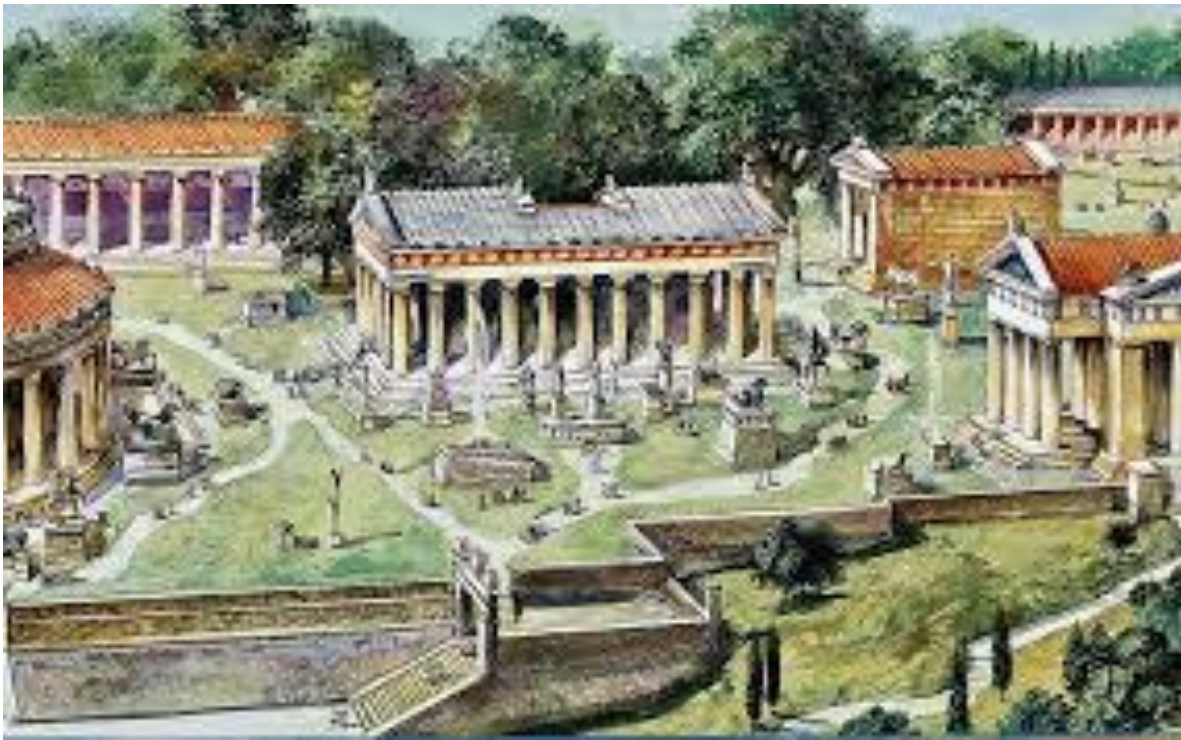
The Epidaurus Medical Center was from the 4th century BC and a few hundred years later the world's - and that is the Mediterranean world's - most specialized hospital. In addition to war injuries from war, sports and old-age medical and mental illnesses could also be treated here. The location of the hospital was not accidental. The area's many springs with mineral water made it an optimal health resort.

Outside the very large hospital and) the hotel for the relatives, a space was set up with at theatre to entertain patients and relatives. The popular genres of music, dance and revival theatre (i.e. 5th century classical comedies and tragedies) were shown here. International music and sports competitions for the entire Greek-speaking Mediterranean world took place here, too, thanks to large and persistent sponsorships for the super hospital. The excavation of the hospital and theatre took place at the end of the 19th century and, as was still

customary among archaeologists of the time with deep roots in the world of romantic ideas, the archaeological find was allowed to retain its ancient strategic brand: The Sanctuary of Asklepios, the sanctuary of the god of medicine. The super hospital bent in religious neon.

**Figure 2**

*The heart of the Epidaurus sanctuary. The Tholos and the Abaton (left) and the Temple of Asclepius (center right). DeAgostin.*



The establishment had its heyday in the 4th century BC. With its location on the Peloponnese, it benefitted from the success of Sparta's victory over Athens in 404 and was then able to gain from Sparta's continued wars with the Persians and Macedonians, which ensured the hospital a stable patient base. Epidaurus' golden age coincides with Aristotle's lifetime. It is a cherished thought that he may have enriched his soul and restored his body several times as a spa guest here.

Of course, the theatre was built as entertainment for the patients (and their relatives), just as it functioned as an advertisement for "the good hospital stay". But at the same time, the medical understanding of 'recovery' at the time contained a series of aesthetic experiences of a visual, aural and rhythmic nature, which could be fully achieved within a theatre space: The operated or weakened body had, during medical treatment, to be exposed to the singing and dancing body to ensure safe healing and complete recovery.

**Figure 3***Epidauros Performance Space.*

Let's take a closer look at the relationship between the two bodies - the medical and the artistic - the latter's healthy function for the former. Which scientific thinking and experience was behind it? – Are we talking about regular therapy? - And as far as the offer from the stage is concerned: are we talking about art or entertainment?

In order to understand and answer these questions, we have to be very specific: What was shown from the stage and in the round front stage below, the orchestra? Which artistic genres? What content? What type of audience engagement and reaction?

Can we imagine the audience that in the 330s BC expectantly took the seats in the theatre? - Many spa guests but also medically and surgically treated patients supported by carers and relatives, or with crutches, canes or wheelchairs? - And how many? - hardly the 14.000 that there was actually room for. 'Full House' was only at theatre festivals, sports games and musical competitions where the audience flocked from all over the Greek mainland, the islands and abroad. Otherwise, the audience consisted of just a few hundred spa guests, patients, relatives, carers and other employees at the hospital. A thousand at most. It has been this audience that the performers met after their entrance on stage or in the orchestra.

So, what did the audience get to see? – What performance?

**Figure 4**

*Aulos player – playing double aulos (with two pipes), on a fragment of a red-figure amphora, c. 510 BC. Munich Archaeological Museum (photo: Wikipedia).*



Mostly music – played on the guitar and the aulos, the oboe-sounding reed instrument. The guitar was the male amateur's instrument and symbol of noble and bourgeois education, while the aulos was the professional musician's instrument and lead in all theatre performances. Educated upper-class women played the harp, and there must have been concerts with this instrument as well, paid for/sponsored by the convalescing husband or newly operated father straight from the lounge or hospital bed.

The music was not only instrumental. Most often, it was accompanied by singers who performed popular songs from the classical tragedies and comedies – typically Euripides' now fifty-year-old melodies that everyone knew from music school books. They were incredibly popular.

As is well known, music is a quick art form, meaning that the musicians do not need long to line up and then start playing. Nor do they need scenery or other aesthetic and physical facilities.

Another quick art form is the dance. It was probably the most successful entertainment in the hospital theatre: seeing the dancing bodies musically accompanied by shrill aulos playing and muted rhythmic phrasing on the snare drum has been both aesthetically and mentally healing for both the sick, healthy relatives and staff - and thus had the function we in performance terminology call 'communitas'.

**Figure 5**

*Relief plaque depicting women dancing. Beginning of 4th cent. BC. Acropolis Museum, Athens.*



We know that dance as an art form was popular from the thousands of vases and jars that depict dancing men and women in all imaginable positions – graceful as well as spectacular. The human body – biologically perfected according to the norm of the time, in position or moving, was the highest ideal of beauty and therefore the goal towards which all personal development strove. Hence it was a vision that was necessary and motivated the lame, the overweight and the operated body. If nothing else, for them it felt like a dream.

**Figure 6**

*Men dancing in padded costume. Black-figured kylix. 580BC-570BC. British Museum.*



The dance's physical signal to the patient in a muscular sense was emphasized by occasional displays of sports matches that focused on the well-developed and strong body. The large patient clientele of professional sportsmen who frequented the hospital due to fractures and injuries to joints, muscles and bones were catered for. Here, the original Olympic discipline, wrestling, the largest and most prestigious sport, was the most commonly practised at the Epidaurus theatre's Orchestra – since javelin and discus throwing could be

a danger to the audience, and precisely because wrestling as a moving sculpture is probably the sport that most exhaustively exposes the body. The wrestlers were naked during the match. However, the hospital also had a running and throwing stadium.

Of course, theatre performances were also staged at the Epidaurus Theatre. This alone justifies the 14.000 seats. Annual theatre festivals and frequent revivals of the old masters from the 4th century: Aiscylos, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes, who could be bought in writing right here in the 4th century BC. But probably mostly the last two: the musical master – the playwright, composer and choreographer Euripides and the satirist Aristophanes.

We must remember that the Sanctuary of Asklepios was not an Athenian institution. For 100 years the Greek world had been divided into an Athenian-led Delian Confederation and a Spartan Peloponnesian Confederation – a modern Nato-Warsaw construct. The Epidaurus Super hospital with a theatre space on the scale of the Athenian theatre of Dionysos was not only an aesthetic counterpart to (not to say a response to) Athens' annual Dionysos festival with theatre, sports and competitions comprising all genres, functions and disciplines. Epidaurus, with its medical-universal starting point and its aesthetic-humanist perspective, was an absolutely gifted counterpart. In the war they waged against each other, thousands of Athenians died of plague within the city walls during Sparta's siege, and eventually lost, while the victor could send his wounded for treatment and cure – including performances of music, song, dance, theatre, and sport – at the region's new and ultra-modern hospital.

Epidaurus Super Hospital is intellectually a scientific and performative product. In the 4th century, medical science is at its peak, supported by several ancillary sciences developed over the centuries – mathematics, physics, philosophy, and the basic science of music theory. The home for this was the first institution of knowledge and learning in classical antiquity, the conservatory. Here, music theory was developed on a scientific basis as well as in practice through the learning of instruments and singing.

In the 7th and 6th centuries BC conservatories spread throughout Greece, on the mainland as well as on the islands. Besides Sparta, Lesbos was also a musical and innovative powerhouse. The spread of conservatories and musical environments continues to the outermost colonies of southern Italy and Sicily.

Throughout the 6th century, music thus seems to have been the main instrument that brought together cohesively the Greek-speaking world. It has bound all ritual, political, communicative, sporting, entertaining, partying and erotic forms of behavior together. At the same time, with its countless music schools and their teachers, it has been able to demonstrate a far greater theoretical basis than other contemporary art forms (poetry, storytelling, architecture, visual arts, theatre).

Sparta based its military strength on the conservatories, but also developed a non-gendered schooling based on musical education. And thus, a super hospital with an in-house performance space.

### Figure 7

*New North Zealand Hospital, Hillerød, Denmark - Herzog & de Meuron / Vilhelm Lauritzen Arkitekter, 2013 (model).*



Did these music theorists, pedagogues, physicists and philosophers also develop a form of therapy that had a healing effect on patients and spa visitors?

As for the music: Yes. Both Plato and Aristotle state that the aulos instrument, with its high frequency of oscillation and the possibility of great timbre variations, could bring the listener into all emotional states from rage to emotion. Aristotle actually calls the aulos sound 'orgastic' and mentions it together with the drum in a cultic context - i.e. as communitas-creating. Music therapy is today a widely applied science. It was also so in ancient times.

The instruments are linked to a number of rituals and liminal states, Contemporary music theorists and educators have noted how "the auloi playing a melody for those who are mourning are the lighteners of their grief", or how the wedding is enlivened by the use of the auloi and guitar among the dancers.

And this is where body therapy comes in. The music promoted the dance, and the dance exposed the perfection of the body in movements that accentuated the body's ideal healthy and aesthetic expression.

The patient – the wounded officer, the injured sportsman, , the -wearyed-out grain merchant, the architect, sculptor, philosopher and conservatory teacher or the many constipated spa visitors – all found themselves in a new and better state – stimulated,

encouraged, mentally strengthened, feeling validated, happy when, with difficulty or help from relatives and staff, moved their diseased body from the operating table, the lounge or the mineral springs and gently moved to one of the padded marble seats around the super hospital's performance space.

Here they felt in full symbiosis with the dancing bodies that artistically, and completely without embarrassment performed in front of their grateful eyes. A moving movement.

In Denmark, we are in the process of building 6 modern super hospitals distributed throughout the country (Figure 7). All with the same highly specialized functions as Epidaurus Super Hospital, and of course with fully digitized programming and medical operating techniques. How many of them do you think have marketed performance space on their designs for collective aesthetic and therapeutic entertainment of patients, relatives and staff?

### Figure 8

*This presentation's author as spa guest in Epidaurus Hospital Theatre anno 2023 AC.*



### References

- Hannah, D., & Harsløf, O. (Eds.) (2008). *Performance design*. Museum Tusulanum Press.
- Harsløf, O. 2020. *The great festival : a theoretical performance narrative of antiquity's feasts and the modern rock festiva*. (K. Sanders, Trans.). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429261848>
- Kristiansen, E., & Harsløf, O. (Eds.) (2015). *Engaging spaces: sites of performance, interaction and reflection*. Museum Tusulanum Press.