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## Memories that will not die – Roberta Carreri in *Flowers for Torgeir*

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**ABSTRACT** *Memories that will not die – Roberta Carreri in “Flowers for Torgeir”*

This essay charts Roberta Carreri's performance *Flowers for Torgeir*, a solo performance, dedicated to her partner in life and art. Torgeir Wethal died in 2010. The performance is a co-creation together with the German-Italian video-artist, Stefano Di Buduo and the Danish dramaturg, Anne Middelboe Christensen. *Flowers for Torgeir* had its official premiere on 4 September 2020. Through the prism of the diapason between light and darkness, the essay throws another light on the performance *Flowers for Torgeir*. It is perceived as an interweaving of not only a staged professional biography as a theatrical scope of life but also performing memories of a co-creativity in the performance history of Odin Teatret. Torgeir Wethal was cofounder of Odin Teatret together with the theatre director, Eugenio Barba in Oslo in 1964.

**KEYWORDS** Performance biography, acting, video art, Torgeir Wethal, Roberta Carreri, Stefano Di Buduo, Anne Middelboe Christensen, Odin Teatret

### Light in darkness

Theatre is undoubtedly full of paradoxical surprises and phenomena requiring both consideration and reconsideration. It is often said that theatre makes the invisible visible. For instance, it is only possible to perform outdoors during daylight if you throw light on light, i.e. if you install large numbers of powerful lamps so the audience can experience this daylight. This seems like a paradox. The question of how to enlighten darkness in a black box theatre space so the audience can sense the deep layers of light in darkness also requires some reflection about how to perceive life differently in light than in darkness.

In this essay, I would like to shed light on the way in which theatre expresses layers of time in darkness when a sense of deep time of darkness occurs in a powerful but light way, still keeping the diapason between the apparent contradiction of the two ways of seeing and perceiving. From our perception of light and darkness follows, that they are also metaphorical issues. Both the concrete and the perception of imageries lead to the central case in this essay about a solo performance entitled *Flowers for Torgeir* by and with Roberta Carreri. *Flowers for Torgeir* had its official opening on 5 September 2020.

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Photo 1: *Flowers for Torgeir* with and by Roberta Carreri. Holstebro 2020. Photo: Stefano Di Buduo.

## Roberta Carreri

Roberta Carreri has been an actress at Odin Teatret / Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium since 1974, when she was a young student in art history who travelled from Milan to Holstebro in Denmark. Her professional biographical trajectory in theatre involves numerous artistic as well as pedagogical encounters. Not only has she been part of the vast majority of the Odin Teatret ensemble productions. She has also shown the solo performances *Judith* (1987) (Christoffersen and Fowler 1993, 149-57) and *Salt* (2002, accompanied by actor-musician Jan Ferslev) (Chemi 2017, Carreri 1988, 1991). Her work demonstrations, *Traces in the Snow* (1988)<sup>1</sup> and *Nora's Way* (2011)<sup>2</sup>, alongside her solo performances, make a perfect transition to *Flowers for Torgeir* (2020).

Furthermore, Roberta Carreri has published widely about her artistic research.

1. *Traces in the Snow* is Roberta Carreri's first work demonstration, which she has shown since 1988 in many countries and in different languages. Roberta Carreri's first version of the text to this work demonstration came out in 2000 (Carreri 2000, 53-69). From this text on the work demonstration Carreri developed the book on her artistic autobiography, which has been published in several languages (Carreri and Rietti 2007, Carreri 2011a, Carreri, Camilleri, and Carreri 2014). My article on *Traces in the Snow* came out in Chinese and English (Kuhlmann 2015). The references to the present essay only represent her selected bibliography.

2. *Nora's Way* was originally performed as a duo work demonstration by Roberta Carreri together with Torgeir Wethal. I saw this work demonstration taking shape in February 2000, at the Department of Dramaturgy, Aarhus University. See also (Andersen 2000, 92-102).

Her articles have appeared in journals like *New Theatre Quarterly*, *Teatro e Storia*, *Máscara*, *The Open Page*, and *Peripeti*.<sup>3</sup> Roberta Carreri is unique in the sense that her artistic research is disseminated broadly not only through acting in performances or directing them herself, but also in workshops and other pedagogical contexts worldwide (Bălăiță 2018, Ledger 2005).

### A transparent performance portrait

In Roberta Carreri's latest solo performance, *Flowers for Torgeir* (2020) it is as if all the different qualities of her previous work come together very organically in one performance, which nevertheless is different from everything else I have seen of Roberta Carreri's work. *Flowers for Torgeir* is definitely a performance; but at the same time, as a personal biographical statement it scrutinises the artistic lives of Torgeir Wethal and Roberta Carreri as well as their relationship.<sup>4</sup> Roberta Carreri is both the actor and the director of this performance.

*Flowers for Torgeir* is strictly speaking a solo performance, produced in collaboration with the famous German-Italian video artist Stefano Di Buduo.<sup>5</sup> However, as we shall see, the solo performance is based on a deep sense of partnership in the bodily voice of Roberta Carreri.

The performance throws light on darkness in theatre both artistically and existentially. Roberta Carreri's poetic playfulness with all possible objects in the performance space enlightens the act of remembering Torgeir Wethal (1947-2010), who was a founding member of Odin Teatret from 1964 until 2010, when he died of cancer at the age of 63.

Torgeir Wethal was an unforgettable actor who embodied an extraordinary physical presence in the many theatre productions in which he took part during 45 years of acting in the Odin Teatret ensemble. To Roberta Carreri, Torgeir Wethal was not only a partner in the theatre – he was her partner in life. These two conditions merged into one trajectory, as we see the two actors reunite in different representational modes of presence in *Flowers for Torgeir*. In *Flowers for Torgeir*, the encounter takes place in Roberta Carreri's memories in a performative gesture of love, full of flowers for Torgeir, using different visualisations of Torgeir's life as an actor.

The human nature of memories is normally slippery and can turn into surpris-

3. Carreri 2003, 44-54, 1998-1999, 245-258, 2011b, 100-110, 1992.

4. Torgeir Wethal (1947-2010) participated in almost all the performances of Odin Teatret. See: [http://old.odinteatret.dk/about-us/actors/actors-in-the-past/torgeir-wethal-\(1964-2010\).aspx](http://old.odinteatret.dk/about-us/actors/actors-in-the-past/torgeir-wethal-(1964-2010).aspx)

5. Stefano Di Buduo, b. 1985, is a German-Italian video artist, photographer and documentary film-maker, who founded AESOPSTUDIO. He worked with the *Vision of Odin* in Holstebro/Denmark and the celebration of *Luther 500 years*. The project *Città Invisibili*, originally from Teatro Potlach in Italy, has travelled to many cities in Europe. Di Buduo has worked with several major theatre institutions in Germany, lately Düsseldorf Schauspielhaus, Berliner Ensemble, and Münchener Kammerspiele. <https://www.aesopstudio.com/about>

ing sensations. Sometimes they vanish. Sometimes they become trauma. With *Flowers for Torgeir*, memories become persistent and physical in the intimate discourse surrounding the ephemerality of life and of performance. In the performance, it is as if Roberta's professional presence is a testimony not only to the memories of Torgeir, but to a way of transforming memories into a performance that transgresses different borders between light and darkness, remembrance and reality, and showing and enacting. In a way, Torgeir becomes a participant in the performance. For instance, one of the first lines, which Roberta Carreri pronounces as her own words, addresses the audience directly:

I am an actress. I have lost my work and life partner of many years. Tonight, I want to celebrate him, sharing the stage with him one more time. Torgeir! Let's bring back our memories!<sup>6</sup>

In these lines, Roberta addresses the performance of memories of Torgeir by not only sharing the stage with him but also allowing the audience to immerse in her and their collective and shared memories, as if these also belonged to the audience, some of whom experienced Torgeir in many of Odin Teatret's performances throughout his career. The first time this performance was shown was ten years after Torgeir died. Ten years of layers of living memories, a living archive of experiences which the audience also have, see also (Watson 2013).

However, Roberta Carreri's performance is also an artistic discourse about re-living a partnership on stage and using various media such as images, films, sound recordings, props and especially bodily rhythm, which was so characteristic of the way in which Torgeir Wethal performed.

*Flowers for Torgeir* balances on a subtle edge between personal and professional memories. This balance turns the performance into a deeply theatrical and emotional act of vibrant remembrance, which resonates in the spectator, who can be both an onlooker and a coexisting compassionate participant in the performance memories.

The flowers represent an act of remembrance.

### Performed ephemerality

Sometimes it sounds hopelessly banal to state that theatre performances represent the art of the moment, and that the act of disappearance is the legitimate answer to theatre and performance history. In my view, this is not exactly a full answer, and in the case of *Flowers for Torgeir*, this statement is far from being banal.

I would like the reader to bear in mind while reading the following lines that

6. The sources for this essay are my personal and subjective spectatorship, Roberta Carreri's script, and the programme for *Flowers for Torgeir* (Carreri 2020). I have followed the work of Roberta Carreri and Odin Teatret for many years, leading to the formation of a personal archive which inevitably resonates in this essay.

not only does staging the past need a particular sense of presence; performing ephemerality takes the artistic task further in order to embrace the absence of life, as well. Thus, *Flowers for Torgeir* artistically asks the question about what it means to embody grief on stage without creating a sentimental, naïve demonstration. What does it mean to *perform* grief in a nonrepresentational tradition? How can one transform grief into an aesthetically valid expression? *Flowers for Torgeir* deals with the nature of the art of acting in an interesting way. As the performance narrates the story of a lifelong dedication in art, the gesture of using the many flowers in the performance becomes a dedication to Torgeir Wethal in memoriam.<sup>7</sup> A gesture of love takes place.

The question of how to carry out a personal dedication in an artistic way has been investigated by Stefano Di Buduo and Roberta Carreri, who have collaborated with the Danish dramaturg Anne Middelboe Christensen, who was the dramaturg of the production and has written an essay in the programme for the performance.<sup>8</sup> The way in which the filmic elements are embedded in the performance pays tribute to Torgeir's work as a film-maker. He was one of the first actors to document both training and theatre productions, so a great deal of historical archive material has been kept for future generations, see *Training at Grotowski's Teater-Laboratorium in Wrocław*.<sup>9</sup> For example, he not only recorded but also edited the films about physical training and plastic for actors from Ryszard Cieślak's teaching in 1972.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, it was Torgeir's idea to film all the performances of Odin Teatret. Today, we tend to think that everything is on YouTube, but YouTube is young and does not store all theatre performances.

7. Turning a performance into a gesture of dedication is characteristic for *Flowers for Torgeir*. It is rare to see dedication as a gesture, built artistically into a performance. Most frequently, it is added afterwards on a particular occasion. Odin Teatret's tradition contains quite a few performances which have the gesture of dedication as their purpose. *The Chronic Life* is dedicated to Anna Politkovskaya and Natalia Estemirova, Russian journalists and human rights activists who were murdered. *Andersen's Dream* (2005-) is dedicated to Torzov and Doctor Dappertutto, artistic pseudonyms of the Russian theatre innovators Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vsevolod Meyerhold. *The Tree* (2016-) is dedicated to Inger Landsted, the nurse who convinced the mayor of Holstebro to house Odin Teatret in 1966. Finally, *The Great Cities Under the Moon* (2003-), which first had a portrait of Jens Bjerneboe, then a portrait of Jerzy Grotowski, and now a portrait of Torgeir Wethal. I see this gesture of gratitude and love as a way to pay tribute to the human beings in life and art who make a difference to artistic expressions.

8. Anne Middelboe Christensen, b. 1964, has been a theatre and ballet critic for the Danish newspaper *Information* since 1995. She has also been a dramaturg at Vendsyssel Teater in Hjørring, Denmark, and she has been on the board of national stage art awards for many years. Her books cover ballet and dance in a very aesthetic way.

9. <https://odinteatret.dk/shop/dvd-cd/training-at-grotowskis-teatr-laboratorium-in-wroclaw/>

10. Ryszard Cieślak (1937-1990) was a Polish actor who worked closely with Jerzy Grotowski during the years of the Theatre of 13 Rows. Cieślak had focus on corporeal exercises with a flow in the gesture and plasticity of the body in an almost transparent relation to the body memories of the actor. It was during this period that Torgeir Wethal directed the film about Grotowski training. Cieślak visited Odin Teatret and worked several times in Denmark with actors and students at Aarhus Teaterakademi and with the group Kimbri, in Aarhus, in the 1980s.

At the age of 17, Torgeir Wethal was one of the founding members of Odin Teatret, together with Else Marie Laukvik, Anne-Trine Grimnes, Tor Sannum and Eugenio Barba as the director of a group of actors who had been refused admission to study acting at the State Theatre School in Oslo, Norway.

### From personal grief story to poetic performance

In the performance Roberta Carreri plays the part of a woman who has lost her loved one. Almost symbolically, she calls forth Torgeir from her memories so that he can become part of the performance. The first ensemble performance which Roberta took part in with Torgeir was *Come! And the day will be ours!* (1976-80). Somehow, *Flowers for Torgeir* connects their first and last performances, and including the audience it makes the day ours. It is as if their first and last performances merge into one, and fragments from other performances become part of it like chapters in their artistic life notebook.

In *Flowers for Torgeir*, theatrical objects and devices interfere with Roberta Carreri's performance, interwoven with the way in which scenography, film clips and video projections are used in the complexity of Roberta's actions and the performance as a whole.

### Flowers

The flowers in the performance play a very poetic role. The materiality of the flowers allows them to transform into non-material performance gestures and actions, and thus they seem to relate the living to the non-living. Every time Roberta passes through the curtain, she brings flowers for Torgeir with her. The flowers for Torgeir make the memories and emotions manifest. They become door openers because they make it possible for her to share some time with him. I believe that most of the audience can identify with the gesture of flowers and with grief, so the flowers also carry a collective gesture for Torgeir.

### Light in darkness

The audience witnesses darkness, slowly becoming illuminated with a short sentence: "In a country called Norway lived a boy who loved to do theatre. His name was Torgeir Wethal." This opening narrative sounds like a fairy tale, with magic making it slowly dissolve and vanish like ephemerality on stage and in life, already giving a sense of a different use of time and space. Moments cannot be stored in reality or put on repeat. One needs to remind oneself, to remember, to practise memories, to not forget. Let me give some more examples of how this performance deals with the presence of absence and with light in darkness.

A tall curtain, made out of thin but relatively weighty silver grey threads, delicately frames the performance space as a curved sensible horizon of subtle vibra-

tions in the space. The sound of birds marks the beginning of the performance, and to my mind this referred to *Birdlovers (Ornitofilene)*, which was Odin Teatret's first performance in Oslo in 1965, and in which Torgeir Wethal took part.<sup>11</sup> The artistic birth of Torgeir in Odin Teatret is therefore used as the point of departure for the performance. The spectator already knows the end of the story, as the flowers for Torgeir are present, and therefore combine admiration both of the living artist, and of her dead partner in the graveyard.

As the text dissolves and turns into slowly falling snow like stars in a bright night sky, accompanied by Ólafur Arnalds and Alice Sara Ott in the contemporary but classical piece entitled *Reminiscence*<sup>12</sup>, from the left enters a profile image of Torgeir sliding slowly over the screen image, all dressed in white and carrying a rope over his shoulders. The slow and peaceful rhythm of the image gives a sense of infinity, recalling Samuel Beckett's use of Lucky, tied by a ridiculously long rope in *Waiting for Godot*. This enigmatic theatre image, which also closes the performance, is an example of how silent framing allows a number of connotations to become part of the spectator's perception of how one could articulate the purpose of artistic devotion in theatre.

### Gesture of love

The staged memory presents the image of Torgeir located somewhere in the infinite space of stars. On the back wall of the theatre space the audience can see the shadow of Roberta, reaching out to Torgeir with her hands, as if she would like to invite him to be present and part of the performance and to caress him one more time. This gesture merges into the ephemerality of memories of time, as if investigating how presence can evoke a caress from the past to the present. The materiality of the curtain invites transgressive actions from Roberta, passing slowly through the curtain, so when the image of Torgeir freezes for a brief moment, Roberta's interaction with light becomes visible as if a cluster of stars had fallen from the sky and come into the theatre. The flow of transformation from Torgeir in the stars to Roberta's flowers becomes a very special light connection. A true metamorphosis of lights unites the threshold between different modes of being. The light from the stars has materialised and turned into a bouquet of flowers, and from that moment the audience realises that the flowers are more than flowers.

Objects and props are also part of the memories of the past with Torgeir. For example the rocking wood horse, which was present in several of his performanc-

11. *Birdlovers (Ornitofilene)* was based on a text written by the Norwegian playwright Jens Bjørneboe (1920-76). Despite the fact that there is very little material about *Birdlovers* in the archives, some iconic photos and a short film clip remain. This reminiscence was present in the performance *Clear Enigma*, given on Odin Teatret's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. See my paper about digging into the archives of *Birdlovers* (Kuhlmann 2018a, 21-31).

12. *Reminiscence* is part of a Chopin project which Ólafur Arnalds has composed. The composer Alice Carreri, daughter of Roberta Carreri, has created a large part of the music in *Flowers for Torgeir*.

es. Last time I saw this horse was in *Andersen's Dream*.<sup>13</sup> The wooden horse is a symbol, pointing at many allusions such as childhood, repetitive dreams of riding away and lullabies before sleeping. In theatre, objects are typically not only objects. They carry an imaginary universe with them. This is also the case in *Flowers for Torgeir* when the black and white horse image is projected onto the curtain. As Torgeir is no longer visible, like a coup de theatre, the image of the horse explodes into the particular spatial universe of the performance. This horse also has a larger implication, as it reminds us of the symbol of Odin Teatret, with reference to Norse mythology and Odin's horse, Sleipner. Somehow, the use of the horse makes the performance embrace the story of Odin Teatret, as well.

It is characteristic of the performance that the grief relating to the loss of Torgeir brings light. At the moment the image of the wooden horse explodes, Roberta draws the curtain, and her entrance through the curtain creates another light in the performance space as if opening a new universe. This light is like a fire, and her passage through the curtain gives the illusion of opening a golden gate. Her costume reminds me of a montage of elements from costumes from a few past performances at Odin Teatret. She is dressed in a thick black velvet dress, wearing bright-red dancing shoes, veiled in dark-red transparent cloth, with a crown of dahlias on her head. She grasps the crown, and with her head in circular movements the golden passage slowly follows the circles and is transformed into an axis of another universe, which eventually becomes the light universe with clouds and shadows of a landscape portrait of Torgeir.

Previously, Roberta Carreri has worn veils, sometimes also masks, in performances. I realise that she has often used the veil as an almost conventional index of embodied sorrow. The veil obviously also carries the imagery of a theatre curtain, and in *Flowers for Torgeir* it echoes the way in which Roberta uses this double image of the curtains, a thick metaphor for a transition between Torgeir and her.

Every time she goes through the curtain, a new image of Torgeir appears and disappears as projections on the curtain, for example from *The Million* (1978-84), which was a performance journey to different dancing and ballroom cultures. The curtain in the performance becomes more than a curtain. It is a metaphor for powerful transformation in theatre. Roberta gropes and searches for the images, as she faces the projections with stills, which become living images. Sometimes it is as if the intensive quality in Roberta's voice corresponds to Torgeir's very expressive body language in *Mythos* (1998-2005), where he has the monologue "Vi er de levende" ("We are the living"). Similarly, passages from *Kaosmos* (1993-96) significantly show Torgeir as the-man-who-will-not-die.

13. *Andersen's Dream* (2005-11) was based on the Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen's dream diaries, in which he noted the visions he had in his dreams. As always, Odin Teatret's performances have two tracks. The other track in *Andersen's Dream* could be seen as the dream of the theatre. See also (Kuhlmann 2005, 217-44).



Photo 2: *Flowers for Torgeir* with and by Roberta Carreri. Holstebro 2020. Photo: Stefano Di Buduo.

### Solo but not alone

In one sense, *Flowers for Torgeir* is a solo performance – but this is not the whole story. Recordings, memories and the temporal use of rhythmic body elements, which were characteristic of Torgeir's presence in performance, are used as partner material in a way which makes the performance a living memory of the ephemeral presence of an actor who sadly died too early. The performance does not only enact stage memories – it also recycles theatrical material from Torgeir's presence in Odin Teatret's performances.

Light branches and naked branches appear as projections on the curtain, and one sees close-up portraits of Torgeir appear in the images of branches. The portrait of Torgeir has become a landscape, a sky, and a physical space to share.

While singing a Portuguese Fado, which I know from another performance, Roberta is carrying a bunch of sunflowers with tiny lamps in, showing her the way while her eyes are blindfolded. Blindness as an ancient metaphor of the seer in theatre history which also relates to the history of Odin Teatret, where blindness has occurred very often, having been portrayed by both Torgeir and Roberta. In the shining light, the sunflowers are for Torgeir, as they show the way to the memories of him.

Photo 3:  
*Flowers for  
Torgeir* with  
and by  
Roberta  
Carreri.  
Holstebro  
2020. Photo:  
Stefano Di  
Buduo.



### Musicality

Music plays a beautiful role in *Flowers for Torgeir*, and each image has its own music. It creates an atmosphere in which we can be immersed and become sentimentally surrounded by Roberta's grief. The lightness in life has the same effect. At some point, the musical score turns into Columbian sounds and dancing rhythms. Torgeir appears in his famous character from the street parade – the physically demanding dwarf – walking around like an almost dismembered torso. The character of the cat followed him for more than thirty years. This refers not only to the parades, but also to *Ode to Progress* (1997- ), and to *Talabot* (1988-91) with the little Greenlandic mummy child.



Photo 4: *Flowers for Torgeir* with and by Roberta Carreri. Holstebro 2020. Photo: Stefano Di Buduo.

Facing these memories, Roberta falls to the floor bursting into laughter, and the situation retransforms into an image of stars whirling into infinity. Optically, one experiences her memories as dense situations, which dissolve and turn into exploding fragments of nature, visualised by a video of flowing fractals. Torgeir appears in this video, practising the physical skills which were part of his training as an actor, while Roberta comments on his mastery of the acrobatic techniques required to fly freely through the air: “Time and censorship do not exist in your training.” He continues and dances the last dance until he falls down exhausted into the water to the sound of drums. This culmination of Torgeir’s physical energy becomes the lasting impression of the performance.

### The funeral

All this affirmative life energy suddenly changes Roberta’s body language. As the music changes into some kind of southern state jazz funeral music, she walks like a marionette with a skirt of flowers to follow him to the grave, with an umbrella of dreams and light. This funeral situation evokes dreams and despair, anger and gratitude in her, when the memories of the last sigh turn breathing into something we cannot take for granted. Once again, the image of Torgeir appears with his voice whispering a message for her. She cannot express her anger, but he calmly asks her if she has seen her father die. This question echoes in many of Odin Teatret’s theatre productions, also the latest one, *The Chronic Life* (2011-),

Photo 5:  
*Flowers for  
Torgeir* with  
and by  
Roberta  
Carreri.  
Holstebro  
2020. Photo:  
Stefano Di  
Buduo.



which Torgeir was rehearsing with the ensemble until one month before he died.

The number of flowers on the stage increases, and eventually we realise that we are witnessing Roberta at Torgeir’s funeral. The flowers become a bodily embrace as they turn into a body. However, Roberta destroys this beauty and the image physically dissolves, as we saw with the projected images on the curtain. This energy speaks louder than a still-life photo.

“Grief can illuminate your path”, says Roberta Carreri at the end of the performance – a confirmation of life overcoming death. This experience is met by Torgeir’s last question: “Have you seen your father die? Or do you remember when you suddenly fell in love?”, referring to the fact that light is more than illumination: it is something easy, almost flying, losing weight. This is what remains. *Flowers for Torgeir* is a gesture of love.

## An epilogue

In this performance, it is important for Roberta to give voice to theatre as a way of being together. Life at Odin Teatret was like living in a village called Odin. The narrative of *Flowers for Torgeir* becomes the personalised story of one of the oldest theatre laboratories in the world. She lets Torgeir have the last word, using words taken from his notebook, where he describes theatre as “a kingdom which one day will disappear like all fairy tales”.

The blues from the funeral music transforms the light of darkness into blue light.

As I have been working on the present essay on *Flowers for Torgeir*, it strikes me how much this performance writes not only a story, but also a history about acting in a world-famous theatre group, as well as being a very personal love and life story in art, interwoven with the history of the theatre productions at Odin Teatret, see (Kuhlmann 2018b, Kuhlmann and Ledger 2021). Such a performative historiography of ephemerality in performance is an invitation to share grief through love of the craft involved in acting and performing.

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