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Between Direction and Discovery: Embodied Practice in A Director-Led Practice-As-Research With Student-Actors

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I explore the creative processes of my student-actors, James B. Libo-on (Luyo sa Musika) and Razel Jay B. Agoylo (Sugilanong Bakak), in a Drama class under the Bachelor of Culture and Arts Education program at Ramon Magsaysay Memorial Colleges, Inc., General Santos City. Using a director-led Practice-as-Research (PaR) approach, I guided, observed, and collaborated with the students as they developed and performed their creative monologues. Through video documentation, semi-structured interviews, post-performance dialogues, and reflective journaling, I examined how my direction influenced their embodied practice, emotional expression, and personal growth. Five key themes emerged: self-affirmation through performance, emotional labor and vulnerability, performer identity in academic and cultural contexts, technology as metaphor for alienation, and collaborative discovery through dialogue. The findings highlight how director-led PaR can foster reflective practice, creative risk-taking, and self-discovery, showing that performance is not only an artistic act but also a transformative pedagogical space where guidance and collaboration enrich both the process and the performer.

INTRODUCTION

“For theater to resonate, it must embody the complexities of human experience” (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). This statement reflects the core of my recent practice-as-research investigation, where I guided two of my Drama students, James B. Libo-on and Razel Jay B. Agoylo, in the creation and performance of their culminating monologues, Luyo sa Musika and Sugilanong Bakak, respectively. Both pieces emerged from the Bachelor of Culture and Arts Education program at Ramon Magsaysay Memorial Colleges, Inc., General Santos City, during the first semester of the academic year 2024–2025, with their final performances staged on December 10, 2024, at Studio B, RMMC Annex Building. These works not only represent the students’ artistic development but also reflect the collaborative nature of director-led practice-as-research, wherein my feedback, guidance, and pedagogical interventions were central to their creative process. This embodied approach reflects Artaud’s (1958) emphasis on the actor’s corporeal engagement and Turner’s (1982) view of performance as socially meaningful, ritualized action, situating theater as a dynamic site of personal, cultural, and social meaning (Carlson, 2004; Tiatco, 2015). Recent studies in Arts and Human Science have emphasized how learning style practices, learner engagement, and multimedia use can significantly influence students’ proficiency, creative skills, and performance outcomes (Batonghinog & Osias, 2025; Sedigo, Labadan, & Comon, 2025; Generalao, 2025). Iterative rehearsal, reflection, and feedback support student self-awareness and critical thinking, echoing the principles of reflective practice and contemplative pedagogy (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Bolton,

2010; Brookfield, 1995; Schön, 1983). The use of video documentation also highlights the interplay between live performance and mediated observation, where student-actors can engage with their embodied practice from a reflective standpoint, aligning with Auslander’s (1999) concept of liveness in mediatized performance. These findings underscore the importance of structured yet flexible pedagogical strategies in nurturing expressive, reflective, and skillful student-artists.

The interplay between performance, embodiment, and psychological depth has long captivated scholars in theater studies (Baker, 2015; Fischer-Lichte, 2008; Schechner, 2013). Research has emphasized how performance can function as both a reflective and transformative medium. In particular, storytelling and cultural practices have been found to enhance learner reflection, empathy, and engagement in performance tasks (Arcido *et al.*, 2025; Butali *et al.*, 2025). These insights support the integration of culturally grounded and reflective methodologies in director-led PaR, highlighting the potential of narrative and embodied exploration to deepen both understanding and expressive skill. Furthermore, student-actors considered how their performative choices would resonate with audiences, reflecting Bennett’s (1997) theory of production and reception, which emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between performer intention and audience perception. For instance, Fischer-Lichte (2008) and Barba & Savarese (2006) stress the role of bodily actions in meaning-making, while Meisner (1987) and Stanislavski (1989) highlight the importance of truthful emotional preparation for authentic characterization. Navigating the actor’s internal conflict aligns with Kohut’s

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(1971) psychoanalytic framework of the self, while Goffman (1959) highlights the performative presentation of identity, complementing the embodied approach emphasized by Artaud (1958). Similarly, Kirkwood (2010) and Murray (2013) explore how actors navigate psychological complexity to enhance performance, illustrating that embodiment is central to both the creative process and audience reception. Within the Philippine theater, studies have underscored the significance of cultural context, heritage, and student-centered pedagogy in shaping performance (Alfonso, 2007; Bonifacio-Ramolete & Tiatco, 2015). Complementing these, research in the Philippine Arts and Human Science context highlights how multimedia integration, active engagement, and the inclusion of culturally relevant narratives can improve student performance and creative learning outcomes (Generalao, 2025; Arcido *et al.*, 2025; Butali *et al.*, 2025). These monologues are situated within Philippine cultural heritage and postcolonial discourse (Gomez, 2014; Bhabha, 1994; Zialcita, 2005; Lumbea, 1986; Fernandez, 1996), reflecting traditions preserved through performance (Taylor, 2003) and contributing to a broader Asia-Pacific theatrical context (Harrison, 2005). Such findings support a director-led PaR approach that simultaneously nurtures cultural literacy, reflective practice, and embodied artistic growth. These studies demonstrate that theater can serve as a medium for self-expression, social critique, and cultural identity formation. However, there remains a gap: while scholarship examines theoretical frameworks and pedagogical strategies, there is limited documentation of director-led practice-as-research with undergraduate student-artists in the Philippines, particularly regarding the integration of embodiment, character psychology, and reflective performance. Recent studies examining learner engagement, storytelling, and culturally embedded arts pedagogy (Batonghinog & Osias, 2025; Sedigo,

Labadan, & Comon, 2025; Arcido *et al.*, 2025; Butali *et al.*, 2025) provide a relevant backdrop, reinforcing the need to explore how structured guidance, iterative reflection, and culturally situated performance can foster authentic, psychologically grounded, and pedagogically rich learning experiences.

This study is grounded in Integrated Performance Dynamics within a director-led Practice-as-Research (PaR) approach, where iterative cycles of creation, reflection, and refinement generate knowledge about performance and the actor's creative process (Nelson, 2013; Conquergood, 1985). The iterative cycles of input, process, and output in PaR foster reflection and embodied learning, as highlighted in reflective practice frameworks (Bolton, 2010; Brookfield, 1995; Schön, 1983; Barbezat & Bush, 2014) and informed by theoretical perspectives on performance as socially and emotionally engaging (Carlson, 2004; Artaud, 1958; Turner, 1982). To examine the student-actors' creative processes in Luyo sa Musika and Sugilanong Bakak, three theoretical lenses are applied: Performance Studies (Schechner, 2013; Roach, 1996), framing performance as a cultural, social, and personal act to interpret identity, societal realities, and cultural narratives; Embodiment Theory (Bial, 2016; Fischer-Lichte, 2008), highlighting bodily presence, gesture, movement, and spatial awareness in meaning-making and emotional expression; and Psychological Realism (Stanislavski, 1989; Meisner, 1987), emphasizing truthful portrayal of human emotion and internal conflict for authentic character engagement. Conceptualized as Input → Process → Output, inputs include director's guidance, prior experience, texts, and socio-cultural context; process involves iterative rehearsal, reflection, embodied practice, psychological engagement, and collaborative analysis; and outputs comprise authentic, expressive performances, student-actor development, audience engagement, and scholarly documentation. This framework illustrates how

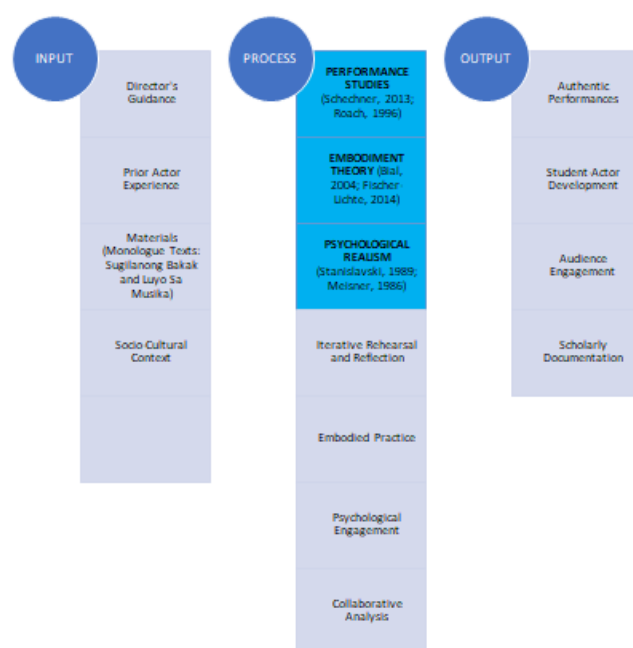


Figure 1: Integrated Performance Dynamics Framework: Input → Process → Output in Director-Led Practice-as-Research

embodiment, psychological engagement, and director-led guidance converge in PaR to cultivate artistic growth, reflective practice, and culturally situated performances, demonstrating the interplay of body, mind, and context in shaping monologue performance.

Sugilanong Bakak explores the psychological intricacies of remorse, guilt, addiction, and self-deception through the story of a recently released convict struggling to reconcile his past with present consequences. In directing Razel's piece, I focused on performative strategies that aligned character creation with actor self-analysis, emphasizing the intricate connection between the actor's body and emotional life (Meisner, 1987; Stanislavski, 1989). Similarly, Luyo sa Musika emerged from intensive collaboration with James Libo-on, integrating devised theater methods with embodied performance. The work engages with themes of poverty, frustration, and self-affirmation, illustrating how socioeconomic constraints can both hinder and motivate creative expression. Rehearsals emphasized the interplay of dialogue, music, and choreography to cultivate holistic and authentic performances, reflecting principles of embodied dramaturgy and practice-as-research (Nelson, 2013; Kershaw, 2009). Globally, theater has long functioned as a reflective medium for examining human psychology, social inequities, and cultural narratives (Brecht, 1964; Cohen, 2002; Dolan, 2005). Nationally, Philippine

theater education increasingly prioritizes integrating cultural heritage, social critique, and student-centered pedagogy (Alfonso, 2007; Bonifacio-Ramolete & Tiatco, 2015). Locally, my students' performances reveal the lived realities of young Filipino artists navigating structural limitations while cultivating creative voices, demonstrating the potential of director-led practice-as-research to support both artistic growth and pedagogical insight. Despite the growing scholarship on pedagogy and performance, few studies document director-led PaR in Philippine undergraduate contexts, particularly regarding embodied practice, psychological realism, and reflective student performance. The urgency of this study lies in its potential to: (1) inform performance pedagogy, (2) demonstrate the value of embodiment in actor training, and (3) contribute to discourse on cultural and psychological dimensions of theater.

Through this investigation, I aim to illustrate how director-led practice-as-research fosters artistic growth among student-actors while advancing scholarly discourse on embodiment, cultural identity, and psychological insight in performance. By examining Luyo sa Musika and Sugilanong Bakak, this study situates undergraduate creative monologues within a broader pedagogical, cultural, and theoretical context, offering a model for integrating practice, reflection, and scholarly inquiry in the performing arts.

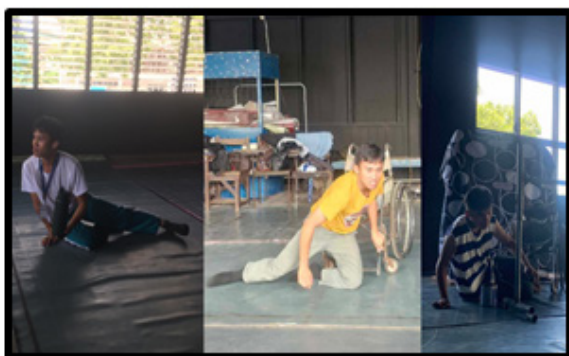


Figure 2.: Rehearsal Highlights from Director-Led Practice-as-Research

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Photo 1 (Left): Razel Jay B. Agoylo during rehearsal for Sugilanong Bakak, engaging in creative exploration and character development under my direction as part of the Practice-as-Research process. Photo 2 (Right): James B. Libo-on during rehearsal for Luyo sa Musika, participating in embodied practice and character exploration under my guidance as director-researcher.

This study employs a director-led Practice-as-Research (PaR) design to examine the creative processes of two undergraduate student-actors, James B. Libo-on (Luyo sa Musika) and Razel Jay B. Agoylo (Sugilanong Bakak), in the Drama course of the Bachelor of Culture and Arts Education program at Ramon Magsaysay Memorial Colleges, Inc., General Santos City, during the first semester of AY 2024–2025. Guided by the principles of PaR (Nelson, 2013; Conquergood, 1985), the students

engaged in iterative cycles of rehearsal, reflection, and refinement under my directorial guidance. Data were collected through rehearsal observations, semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and video recordings, with attention to embodied practice (gesture, movement, voice, and spatial awareness), psychological engagement with character motivation and emotion, and cultural-social identity shaping performance choices. Using Integrated Performance Dynamics as the analytical framework, which integrates Performance Studies (Schechner, 2013; Roach, 1996), Embodiment Theory (Bial, 2016; Fischer-Lichte, 2008), and Psychological Realism (Stanislavski, 1989; Meisner, 1987), thematic analysis was conducted to identify how director-led guidance, actor reflection, and cultural context converged to produce authentic, expressive, and psychologically grounded performances while fostering student-artist development, audience

engagement, and scholarly insight. Ethical considerations were observed through informed consent and careful

representation of student experiences.



Figure 3: Key Performance Highlights

Photo 3 (Left): Main highlights from *Sugilanong Bakak*, showcasing Razel Jay B. Agoylo's embodied performance and character exploration as guided by the researcher-director. Photo 4 (Right): Key scenes from *Luyo sa*

Musika, illustrating James B. Libo-on's integrated use of dialogue, movement, and music under director-led practice-as-research.

Photo 5 (Left): Razel Jay B. Agoylo during a semi-



Figure 4: Semi-Structured Interviews and Post-Performance Dialogues

structured interview, wearing a school uniform, reflecting on his creative process under the guidance of the researcher-director, Ismael Gallaza Pantao (right). Photo 6 (Right): James B. Libo-on during a post-performance dialogue with the researcher-director, discussing reflections on embodied practice, character development, and creative insights from *Luyo sa Musika*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The director-led Practice-as-Research investigation revealed five key themes that illuminate the creative journeys of James B. Libo-on (*Luyo sa Musika*) and Razel Jay B. Agoylo (*Sugilanong Bakak*), highlighting how embodied practice and reflective collaboration shaped their performances.

Self-Affirmation through Performance

Both James and Razel discovered a sense of empowerment through inhabiting their characters. James, portraying a youth constrained by social and economic struggles in *Luyo sa Musika*, described moments during rehearsal when he felt his frustrations transform into creative energy. He noted that each gesture, pause, and musical cue allowed him to articulate personal challenges in a

public and meaningful way. Razel, portraying a released convict in *Sugilanong Bakak*, reflected on how facing the psychological depth of remorse and guilt strengthened his confidence as a performer. Through repeated rehearsal and my guidance, he learned to trust his instincts and navigate the emotional layers of his character. Both students reported a sense of ownership over their monologues, recognizing that the final performance was a reflection of their interpretive choices as much as the text itself. My interventions provided reflective checkpoints, allowing them to pause, reconsider, and internalize the lessons from each rehearsal. James explained that the process made him more aware of his own potential as an artist, while Razel emphasized the personal growth he experienced in confronting challenging emotions. They both acknowledged that performance served as a form of self-affirmation, validating their creative identities. Ultimately, this theme illustrates how director-led PaR can foster self-expression, confidence, and a deepened sense of agency among student-actors.

Emotional Labor and Vulnerability

Both monologues demanded extensive emotional engagement, requiring the student-actors to access

feelings that were personally challenging. James navigated the interplay between frustration, hope, and self-assertion, carefully refining gestures, voice modulation, and stage presence to convey authenticity. Razel confronted intense guilt, remorse, and self-deception, exploring how these psychological states manifest physically in posture, facial expressions, and movement. During rehearsal, both students experienced moments of discomfort and emotional exhaustion, revealing the labor inherent in embodying complex characters. My guidance created safe spaces where they could explore these vulnerabilities without fear of judgment, fostering emotional resilience. Reflective dialogue after rehearsals allowed both actors to process their experiences and translate vulnerability into deliberate artistic choices. Both noted that vulnerability was not a weakness but an essential tool for connecting with the audience and evoking empathy. They also observed that navigating emotional labor enhanced their capacity for self-reflection, helping them identify personal biases, fears, and strengths. For James, moments of frustration became catalysts for artistic innovation, while Razel's moments of guilt informed subtle shifts in timing and gesture. Collectively, this theme underscores the essential role of emotional labor and vulnerability in achieving authentic, psychologically rich performances.

Performer Identity in Academic and Cultural Contexts

Through these monologues, both James and Razel negotiated their identities as student-artists within academic and cultural frameworks. James's character reflected the socio-economic struggles of Filipino youth, compelling him to explore how personal experiences intersect with broader societal issues. Razel's character, a released convict, challenged him to consider how social judgment, redemption, and personal responsibility shape identity. Rehearsals involved discussions on cultural representation, ethical portrayal, and societal implications, helping both actors understand their responsibilities as performers. The iterative feedback process allowed them to connect their artistic choices to their own experiences, enhancing their awareness of the cultural and academic context in which they performed. Both actors acknowledged that these performances helped clarify their emerging identities, blending personal growth with artistic development. James noted that embodying the struggles of his character gave him insight into his own resilience, while Razel recognized that navigating his character's guilt illuminated aspects of moral and social consciousness. My role as director guided them to interpret characters with sensitivity to both personal and communal narratives. They also learned to balance their individual voices with fidelity to the text and socio-cultural context. This theme highlights how director-led PaR supports the development of performer identity, emphasizing the convergence of personal, academic, and cultural dimensions.

Technology as a metaphor for Alienation

While the narratives themselves were not explicitly technological, both performances incorporated elements that reflected contemporary societal realities. Razel integrated stage gestures, spatial composition, and pauses in *Sugilanong Bakak* to symbolize isolation and disconnection, reflecting the alienation experienced in modern society. James, in *Luyo sa Musika*, explored societal pressures on youth, showing how economic constraints and social expectations affect creative potential. Rehearsals emphasized the deliberate use of stage space, movement, and voice to convey these societal commentaries. My feedback encouraged them to consciously embed critiques of social structures within their performance choices. Both actors reflected on how performance could function as a mirror to societal realities, providing commentary without explicit verbal exposition. They experimented with timing, movement, and tone to highlight these tensions, learning to manipulate audience perception while maintaining authenticity. Each performance became a subtle yet powerful reflection of Filipino youth navigating societal and cultural expectations. Through PaR cycles, both students observed how their embodied choices communicated socio-cultural narratives effectively. This theme demonstrates how director-led PaR can support the integration of societal commentary within personal and artistic exploration.

Collaborative Discovery through Dialogue

The iterative, director-led PaR process fostered profound collaborative learning. Rehearsals became investigative spaces where dialogue, improvisation, and reflection converged to shape performance decisions. James and Razel described these sessions as co-creative laboratories, where experimentation with movement, gesture, and voice was encouraged. My feedback and guidance served as scaffolding, helping them reflect on choices and explore alternative interpretations. The actors discovered innovative approaches to embodying character, refining pacing, and utilizing stage space. Collaborative discussions illuminated insights that neither actor would have reached alone, highlighting the value of dialogue in artistic growth. Both students reported that working together, even when focusing on individual monologues, enhanced empathy, understanding of pacing, and awareness of audience engagement. They also observed that collaborative reflection cultivated confidence and critical thinking skills, supporting both artistic and personal development. The rehearsal process revealed that dialogue and shared reflection are as integral to performance as movement or vocal delivery. This theme emphasizes that director-led PaR facilitates co-creation, critical reflection, and discovery, enriching the overall artistic experience for student-actors.

In summary, the findings of this director-led Practice-as-Research investigation illustrate how Performance

Studies, Embodiment Theory, and Psychological Realism collectively illuminate the creative processes of James B. Libo-on and Razel Jay B. Agoylo. Performance Studies frames their monologues as acts embedded in cultural, social, and personal contexts, revealing how their choices reflect identity, societal realities, and audience engagement (Schechner, 2013; Roach, 1996; Carlson, 2004; Turner, 1982). Embodiment Theory underscores the significance of bodily presence, movement, gesture, and spatial awareness in meaning-making, demonstrating how the student-actors translated psychological states and socio-cultural experiences into physical and expressive forms (Bial, 2016; Fischer-Lichte, 2008; Artaud, 1958; Taylor, 2003). Psychological Realism highlights the truthful portrayal of emotion, motivation, and internal conflict, explaining how James and Razel engaged authentically with the psychological dimensions of their characters (Stanislavski, 1989; Meisner, 1987; Kohut, 1971; Goffman, 1959). Together, these lenses show that director-led PaR serves as a dynamic and iterative space where guidance, reflection, and embodied practice converge, fostering self-affirmation, emotional depth, cultural awareness, and collaborative discovery (Bolton, 2010; Brookfield, 1995; Schön, 1983; Barbezat & Bush, 2014). These performances are situated within Philippine cultural heritage and postcolonial discourse (Gomez, 2014; Bhabha, 1994; Zialcita, 2005; Lumbera, 1986; Fernandez, 1996) and contribute to a broader Asia-Pacific theatrical context (Harrison, 2005). The study thus provides both pedagogical and scholarly insight into how undergraduate student-actors can develop resilience, critical reflection, and expressive authenticity through guided practice, reinforcing the interplay of body, mind, and context in shaping transformative, culturally situated performance experiences.

Discussion

The findings of this director-led Practice-as-Research study reveal the intricate interplay between guidance, embodiment, and psychological engagement in the creation of undergraduate student-actors' monologues, *Luyo sa Musika* by James B. Libo-on and *Sugilanong Bakak* by Razel Jay B. Agoylo. From the lens of Performance Studies, their artistic choices reflect both individual identity and broader societal narratives, demonstrating that theater functions as a space of self-expression, social commentary, and cultural dialogue (Schechner, 2013; Roach, 1996; Carlson, 2004; Turner, 1982). Embodiment Theory highlights how gestures, movement, spatial awareness, and vocal modulation translated complex emotions and narrative intent into authentic stage presence, enabling both performers to embody psychological depth and communicate nuanced character experiences (Bial, 2016; Fischer-Lichte, 2008; Artaud, 1958; Barba & Savarese, 2006; Taylor, 2003). Simultaneously, Psychological Realism allowed the student-actors to navigate internal conflict, emotional motivation, and truthfulness in portrayal,

fostering audience empathy and demonstrating the transformative potential of reflective rehearsal and responsive direction (Stanislavski, 1989; Meisner, 1987; Kohut, 1971; Goffman, 1959). The iterative cycles of creation, reflection, and refinement within the director-led PaR framework positioned the students as co-creators of meaning, where embodied practice, character exploration, and collaborative dialogue intersected to produce psychologically authentic, culturally situated, and pedagogically significant performances (Bolton, 2010; Brookfield, 1995; Schön, 1983; Barbezat & Bush, 2014). These monologues are informed by Philippine cultural heritage, postcolonial discourse, and regional theatrical traditions (Gomez, 2014; Bhabha, 1994; Zialcita, 2005; Lumbera, 1986; Fernandez, 1996; Harrison, 2005), reflecting performance as a medium for cultural memory and identity (Taylor, 2003). Collectively, these findings illustrate how PaR cultivates artistic growth, resilience, and creative agency among student-actors while contributing to scholarly discourse by documenting the dynamic integration of theory, pedagogy, and practice, ultimately showing that performance is simultaneously an artistic, reflective, and transformative space.

CONCLUSION

This director-led Practice-as-Research investigation demonstrates that the creative processes of undergraduate student-actors, as exemplified in *Luyo sa Musika* and *Sugilanong Bakak*, are profoundly shaped by the interplay of guidance, embodied practice, and psychological engagement. By integrating Performance Studies, Embodiment Theory, and Psychological Realism, the study reveals that effective direction fosters not only technically and emotionally authentic performances but also critical reflection, self-affirmation, and cultural awareness among student-artists. The iterative cycles of rehearsal, feedback, and collaborative refinement within the PaR framework allowed the students to internalize narrative, character, and socio-cultural context, thereby producing performances that resonate both personally and with audiences. Pedagogically, these findings underscore the value of director-led approaches in theater education, where reflective practice and embodied engagement contribute to the holistic development of student-artists. Practically, the study highlights how monologue performance can serve as a site for exploring identity, social critique, and emotional resilience, offering strategies for integrating practice, theory, and cultural discourse in creative curricula. More broadly, the research contributes to scholarship by documenting the nuanced processes through which body, mind, and context converge in performance, affirming that theater can be both a transformative pedagogical space and a vehicle for artistic and cultural expression. These insights provide a model for educators, directors, and researchers aiming to cultivate reflective, embodied, and psychologically grounded performance practices, while also enriching the discourse on Philippine undergraduate theater pedagogy.

and practice-as-research methodology.

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