

Vysoké učení technické v Brně
Fakulta výtvarných umění

Habilitační práce

Obor Výtvarná tvorba

Název
From lip-synch to singing
Taking the voice through performance

Jméno a příjmení (s tituly)
Julie Béna, MgA.
Rok 2025

Julie Béna's attraction to performance, probably stems from, a rejection of theatre. Julie spent her childhood in a touring theatre company, the Tréteaux de France, which operated like a circus with a big top tent and caravans. It was a life punctuated by the set-up and dismantling of sets, town after town, village after village, city after city. For a child, being part of a touring theatre means living a life that is different from most other people's.

Julie's mother is alone. She grows up at the work of her mother, with the stage crew, in wardrobe and under the stalls. Julie gets older: she sees how certain men with power treat her mother and the role she, her mother, can never take on in this theatre and the price she is made to pay. Julie doesn't always go to school but she knows the plays off by heart, she sees them every night.

From the age of five until she reaches fifteen, Julie plays the roles of a child William the Conqueror, the page in Anouilh's Antigone, Polyxène in Giraudoux's The Trojan War Will Not Take Place. She plays in "her" theatre and, elsewhere, Molière, but it's hard, the atmosphere in "normal" theatres and the castings full of children, surrounded by predatory adults talking about their careers. The theatre becomes oppressive, it's difficult for her mother: "I started thinking that all of it might be bullshit, the power relations, the domination of bodies. Something resembling society, but which I understood at my level." She rejected theater.

In the second year of fine art school, at Villa Arson (Nice, Fr) , she paints a velvet curtain red and she creates a short piece called "RIDEAU !". Julie then does what she describes as her first performance: about theatre, on the concrete veranda of Villa Arson, somebody plays the harp, costumes in crêpe paper and text. It's funny but it's met with silence, nobody has anything to say, it stops there, "but for us, it was really something!".

Julie isn't really involved in school life, she has to work and works nights in bars and nightclubs. It's this nighttime, made up of pole dance podiums, that feeds into what will become the artist's universe and teaches her, yet again, the forbidden life of porosity: life in a touring theatre that never encounters that of school; the daylight life of an art student that never meets the nocturnal life of a worker.



Julie Bena as a kid, in William the Conqueror, 1987, Treteaux de France



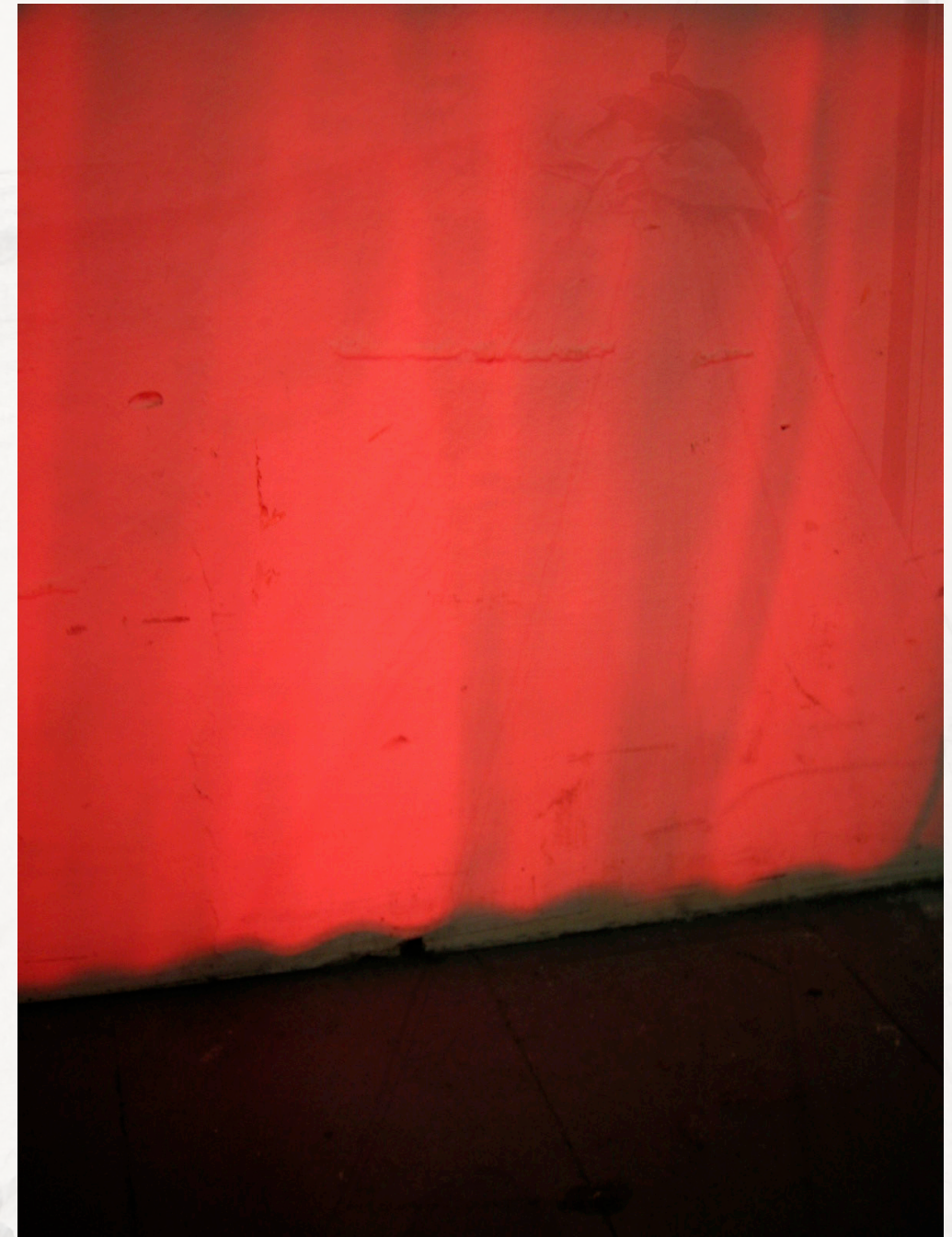
Avant la tombée du jour, 2010, Parc Saint Leger, Nevers



Avant la tombee du jour, 2010, Parc Saint Leger, Nevers



Avant la tombee du jour, 2010, Parc Saint Leger, Nevers



RIDEAU, 2004, Villa Arson

In 2010, Julie is invited to create a performance in Nevers (Fr). She chooses a house with a staircase and begins to understand that in situ is essential to what she wants to relate. There's "a melody, actions, music, dance, odours and a very strong audience presence". The performance is called Avant la tombee du jour.

Julie hadn't completely rejected theatre: from the angry and contrite memories, the night lights and the flashes of understanding that coursed through these first performances, she forms a synthesis.

From a gesture, which contained her long ruminations and all these feelings, in 2011¹, Julie Béna took on the role of Rose Pantopon. Rose herself is a furtive creature, a fleeting image: she appears in the last chapters of William S. Burroughs' Naked Lunch², emerging from the nebulous mind of one of the book's characters. Rose is everything the artist wants to be, and, at first, she's the knife. She cuts, in this quest, she knows what theatre has done to her: she has lost her voice, she is practically mute. She has the gestures, the hand movements, the cocktails and the dance. And, in front of her, or with her, there's a Choir, the old-fashioned kind, which motions towards the "original theatre" and pushes Rose around.

Later, the performer takes on other alter egos such as the Jester, or the character from the film STRAKATI³ who makes its shrill renditions heard. These figures are the subject of a reconstruction and a deconstruction.

Rose is the character who enables this construction and this reconstruction. Julie sees her, in the novel, as a woman devoid of substance: she doesn't speak, the Choir speaks for her, mocks her. Rose acts but doesn't have a voice until the final episode, the film The one-woman show (2017). Rose represents a decision made: Julie will make use of everything shameful and transform it into creatures and movements in the air. With Rose and the performance, she comes out of herself.



Have you seen Pantopon Rose?
Fahrenheit, Los Angeles, 2014
Performance, 35mn,



Have you seen Pantopon Rose?
Fahrenheit, Los Angeles, 2014
Performance, 35mn,



Have you seen Pantopon Rose?
Installation view
Performance, 2014, Fahrenheit, Los Angeles



Have you seen Pantopon Rose?
Film, 30mn , 2014-2017, NYC





Have you seen Pantopon Rose?
The One-Woman show
Film, 25mn, 2017, Brest



The Jester arrives with the birth of her daughter, struck by an encounter with the spirit of Anna Morandi Manzolini, an 18th-century Bolognese artist and anatomist, during a commissioned for the anatomical museum of Bologna. Julie can't directly embody Anna (since she is always creating her own characters), so she creates the character of the Jester, who will help her to embody different voices at the same time: Anna Morandi, an eye, 2 ears and 3 dead fetuses).

Strakati is the result of a twist in the Jester, becoming a nightmarish Joker, grotesque figure of the artist as someone-who-puts-work-before-family. Béna is employing all her family in the film (mother, daughter and husband). No more limits, to the point of bad taste, ridiculousness, theatricality, pantomime, excess. There's nothing left to hold back. Strakati is the exaggeration of physiognomy, the opposite of glamour, the creative as a violent clown.

Everything that is shameful for her, and for others (AIDs, cruelty at school, our dead embryos) is present. All these creatures, from Rose onwards, share preoccupations and methods: they roll in social judgement, tickle themselves with self-reproach when work-family conflicts arise, they rummage through the trunk of issues around conformity, normativity, accessibility and visibility. They have chosen to exaggerate. They go too far. [But who is going too far?]

“Do you know what a story is?”⁴ gives its title to this text. It's a phrase taken from Stories of Rivers, a 2023 performance: a cabaret about abortion where another alter ego of the Jester and the clown with the contorted face live. Since it's not theatre, not dance, because there are cocktails, numbers and something nocturnal about it, it brings to mind other places: the sets of musicals, cabarets, bars, burlesque revues, dinner-shows, a 24/7 shop and tutti quanti, as nobody says in Hollywood.



Anna and the Jester, 2017, Anatomical museum, Bologna
Performance, 20 mn





STRAKATI, Portrait, 2022

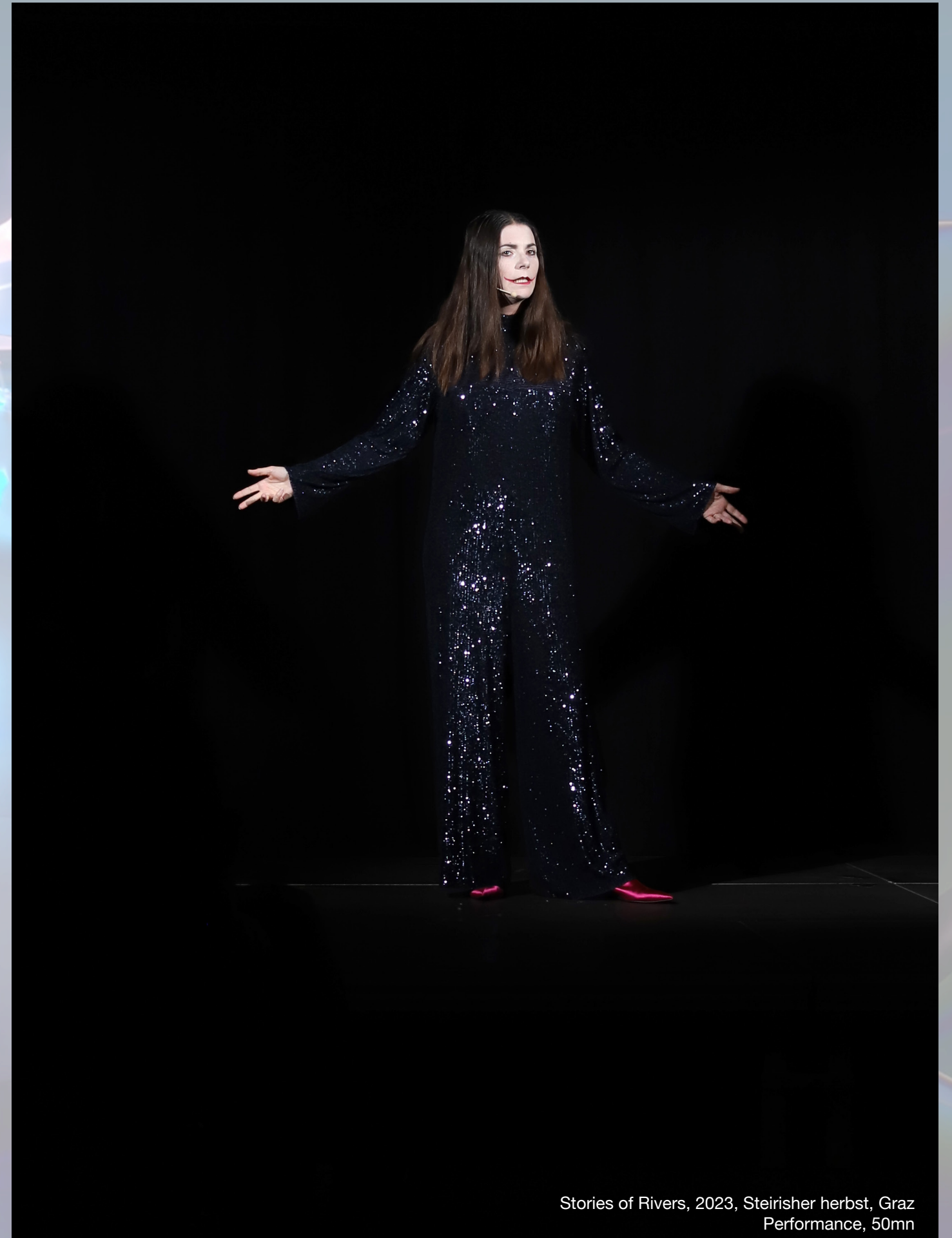


STRAKATI, 2022
Film, 25mn, Prague





Stories of Rivers, 2023, Steirisher herbst, Graz
Performance, 50mn



Stories of Rivers, 2023, Steirisher herbst, Graz
Performance, 50mn

Stories of Rivers is about judgement and the inexpressible. This thing that cannot be expressed takes shape in the between-text-body: the moment when what we cannot read, or say, becomes a gesture, an image. The inexpressible is also worked by the way the written text vibrates, is proclaimed and swallowed. And so it blends into shrieks and laughter. For Julie, a performance is first and foremost a context: a situation, a moment, a place.

She begins with the costumes: they are there almost before she starts writing, and she sketches them out. Sensations, glimmers, colours come to her. The costume determines a character's grammar: how you move, your gestures, your posture, what you stand for. Then comes the question of language, of communication, and set design. Something has taken shape.

About the premiere of Soir de Paris, a performance that tells the story of her grandmother's abortion (who died at the age of 42 after an illegal abortion, leaving Julie's mother orphaned at the age of 14): It was a really difficult evening, too difficult. People were crying, it was very emotional, but it was hard. And yet, Soir de Paris goes on to flow into Stories of Rivers, a cabaret about abortion informed by more extensive research. When the stories of the dead women leave the breakfast discussions, something has happened, and it passes through the audience like a gentle and powerful understanding.

That which impacts daily life, the domestic, the body and the organs, has taken performance form: transmits, flows, liberates. Gratitude for the performance: the culmination of what we do with our strange tragedies. Since Julie's story, desire to see the performance again, like a dynamic material, not like something dead and limp, to think about the responsibility of all those who accommodate it and bring it to life.

Gratitude for the performance: the culmination of what we do with our strange tragedies. Since Julie's story, desire to see the performance again, like a dynamic material, not like something dead and limp, to think about the responsibility of all those who accommodate it and bring it to life. Desire to reiterate that the performance "is not [...], as is often suggested, a congruent and gratuitous artistic game, but rather a resistance to societal traumas and the "limits of what can be rendered aesthetic" ⁵.



Soir de Paris, 2019, Independant, Bruseels
Performance, 20mn



Trouble, 2019, Jeu de Paume, Paris
Performance, 20 mn



Trouble, 2019, Jeu de Paume, Paris
Performance, 20 mn



Trouble, 2023, Musee Ungerer, Strasbourg, FR
Performance, 20 mn



Stories of Rivers, 2023, Steirisher herbst, Graz
Performance, 50mn



Daring to say, on the other hand, that its intrinsic, political violence can take very different forms: it's not just blood, scars and screaming, but sometimes the search for a kind of radical wellbeing (complicity, friendship, love) that leaves no room, in a moment or in a space, for anything other than this wellbeing (this complicity, this friendship, this love — yes, sometimes it also cries out, in joy and in cosmic fury).

Performance appears as a necessity, as an horizon to twist unbearable situations. It continues to raise questions about the ways in which intimate things are shared, their social function and what they might hope to change structurally at a societal scale. These points are inherently diffused, linked and questioned with the students: what's at play when we reproduce, sometimes through performance, experiences? How do you share anger, terror, pain, - in the hope of provoking a shift within the audience members - without yourself being affected even more? What are we looking for in a performance, which is not a diary confided posthumously to a reader? What distinguishes the performance from the living life of the artist? What is theater? What is reality?

La Chatte. 2024, Fondation Ricard, Paris
Performance, 20 mn

NOTES

¹ For six years, Julie Béna worked on different performances and exhibitions under the title “Have you seen Pantopon Rose?” in venues in London (2011 and 2017), Montreal (2012) and Los Angeles (2014). She also presented a solo exhibition, curated by Étienne Bernard, with the same title (combining sculpture, performance, film, text and music) in 2017 at the Passerelle contemporary art centre in Brest.

² Naked Lunch is a novel by the American writer William S. Burroughs, published for the first time in French in 1959 by Gallimard with a translation by Éric Kahane. The sixteenth chapter of the novel is entitled “Have you seen Pantopon Rose?” In 1964, Piotr Rawicz wrote in Le Monde: “It's not easy to describe, to categorise Naked Lunch. From what angle should we approach this disconcerting work, the poetic weight of which far exceeds anything produced to date by the famous “beat generation”? How do you reproduce the pulse, the unique vibration of this desperate hymn to drugs?”

³ This protagonist appears in 2022 in an installation and a film entitled STRAKATI, presented at the National Gallery Prague. An emanation of this character also appeared in the performance Stories of Rivers, presented at the festival steirischer herbst in Graz in 2023.

⁴ Performance presented at the festival steirischer herbst in Graz in 2023.

⁵ Olivier Lussac, Rituels et violences dans la performance, Paris, Eterotopia, 2020.



Jester on volcano, 2018, in the frame of Volcano Extravaganza, Stromboli
Performance 15mn