

Formative Assessment of Vocal Performance Samples of Acting Students: Why Analyse It From a Social-Behavioural Perspective?

Gala Fernandez-Fresard

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile

Universidad Metropolitana de Ciencias de la Educación de Chile, Chile

Luis Flores-Prado

Universidad Metropolitana de Ciencias de la Educación de Chile, Chile

María Duarte

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile

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Abstract

The present investigation demonstrates the relevance of cooperative components in teacher-student interaction during the assessment of students' vocal performance from a social-behavioural perspective. It is proposed that, during the assessment of this performance, a social-behavioural interaction with cooperative components between teacher and student with the common goal of the occurrence of the theatrical phenomenon is recognized. It is also suggested that they both collaborate in the resolution of the conflict that arises from the acting performance, sharing the emotional development that this produces, and co-constructing that phenomenon. This exploratory study was based on the intersection of conceptualization from relevant literature and significant elements of practical classroom experience in vocal performance. It is concluded that a social-behavioural perspective of analysis allows to critically evaluate the cooperative interaction between teacher and student. This

interaction could improve the teaching-learning process and the vocal expressiveness of students, by promoting a formative kind of assessment.

Introduction

This study proposes a new perspective of analysis of the assessment process of a vocal performance sample (VPS) that is currently applied in different university institutions. This perspective observes this process in an innovative manner: from a social-behavioural point of view, emphasising the components of cooperation.

A VPS is considered to be a practical acting demonstration that a student performs, individually or in a group, in which the voice is the main expressive tool. A VPS involves the acting performance of a text, in a given space and time, for expressive purposes. This occurs in the present moment in front of a teacher, within the framework of an assessment experience of a vocal performance workshop, in a university degree in theater. Always considering the voice as the main expressive tool, a VPS could be, for example, a simple staging of a monologue performed by one student, a scene performed by a pair of students, or a group scene performed by 3 or more students. A VPS could also be the staging of a narrative or poetic text. In any case, VPS always implies the occurrence of the theatrical phenomenon, since one or more students perform in front of a teacher. That implies that there is at least one actor/actress and one spectator who interact. This interaction will be analyzed in depth later in the article.

Formative Assessment in Educational Research

In educational research, assessment should be a process of formative action (López Pastor, 2008), which should be a collective effort among all the participants in this act (van der Vleuten et al., 2015). Assessment experiences are also a fundamental part of the teaching-learning process (Boston, 2002; Hamodi et al., 2015; Laveault & Allal, 2016; Padilla Carmona & Gil Flores, 2008; Taras, 2007). In addition to this, reviewing the assessment practices in the performing arts may be necessary (Amuah & Osei, 2018).

Notwithstanding the above, according to the searches carried out, it is possible to assert that assessment research in arts has a relatively low number of academic publications, and such publications are even scarcer in performing arts literature. Moreover, only a few of these publications refer to assessment in undergraduate education.

Some publications relating to arts assessment in undergraduate education were detected in performing arts (Alexander et al., 2021; Brown & Richerson, 2014; Huddy, 2017), in design

art (Eshun & Amoako-Agyeman, 2016; Eshun & de Graft-Johnson, 2012; Miller et al., 2020; Orr & Shreeve, 2017), and in visual arts (Groenendijk et al., 2018, 2020). Regarding the performing arts, Ryan (2014) published research regarding the use of a specific assessment task in the arts as a way to optimise learning in acting or drama students; and Groenendijk et al. (2016) published a review on assessment tools in the arts (dance, visual arts, music, and drama) in primary and secondary education.

In Chile, research on arts assessment in university and school education has also been published: Errázuriz (2002) published on the assessment of visual arts education; Cobos (2013) published on visual arts education with an emphasis on assessment; and Giralt and Varela (2018) published on the use of rubrics in assessment in university fine arts studies. The research in assessment on the performing arts in undergraduate education claims that reflecting on this topic from a social-behavioural perspective can help to identify elements of formative potential in assessment processes of acting practices associated with cooperation. However, beyond contributing to an apparently little-explored theoretical field, these proposals are necessary to strengthen the teaching-learning process of students. We consider that the VPS evaluation process could be formative when it is not reduced only to an act of grading but constitutes a means of improving the performance and expressiveness of the students. In this sense, the present study may be of interest not only for acting practices but also for the arts in general and for any discipline that requires assessing the expressive efficiency of vocal resource in the professional field (pedagogy, law, health careers, among others). It may also appeal to disciplines dealing with elements of social behaviour and characteristics of human sociability, given that the analysis of human social interaction in the assessment of the artistic experience is an unprecedented area of research in academia.

Formative Assessment and VPS

Considering that this study focuses on assessment processes, it is necessary to define several concepts selected from educational studies from which the assessment experiences of VPS will be comprehended. In this regard, “assessment means” is understood as a learning result from students’ production that the teacher can verify from an “assessment strategy.” It can also be defined as how information is collected regarding this production, using an “assessment tool,” or instrument that the teacher and/or student use to register the information collected in an orderly manner (Hamodi et al., 2015). Under this conceptualisation, in the present study the assessment means corresponds to VPS, the assessment strategy is formative, and the instruments vary (rubric, rating scale, among others).

“Formative assessment” or “assessment for learning” refers to an assessment strategy that aims to value the learning acquired, but also contributes to this acquisition by the student (Boston, 2002; Hamodi et al., 2015; Laveault & Allal, 2016; Padilla Carmona & Gil Flores,

2008; Taras, 2007). Formative assessment should involve both teacher and student, integrating their needs and achieving benefits for them (van der Vleuten et al., 2015). This aspect can be identified as the phenomenon of “collaborative learning,” which sees the teacher as a co-learner alongside the student (Lillo Zúñiga, 2013).

It is important to consider that VPS involves the student acting out a text that contains a theatrical conflict. We propose that in the development of the theatrical experience that constitutes the assessment of VPS, students and teachers share this conflict, because one interprets it and the other perceives it.

Considering the above, in the framework of a VPS assessment process, we propose that students and teachers collaborate in the resolution of the conflict that arises from the acting performance, sharing the emotional development that this produces and co-constructing the theatrical experience.

We propose that the student’s learning is the outcome of this co-building. In this sense, we raise the need to move from the learning assessment (associated with the objective of grading results in summative assessments) to the formative assessment or assessment for learning (associated to support learning, by co-constructing the assessment experience).

It is important to consider that the present study is specifically focused on the assessment of students’ performance. That is to observe the student’s ability to “know how to act in a relevant way in situations and contexts in which people face problems with a clear criterion of quality, for which internal resources are articulated and mobilised” (Morán-Barrios, 2016, p. 132). The assessment experience of vocal performance will be understood from what is called directly observed trainee performance. This is a type of assessment in which the student’s live performance is assessed in order to provide feedback and seek solutions together (teacher and student) to improve said performance (Norcini & Burch, 2007).

Regarding assessment instruments, in a general sense, they correspond to “external means used by individuals to interfere in nature, changing it, and consequently provoking changes in the individuals themselves” (Lucci, 2006, p. 4). The selection of instruments that includes the directly observed trainee performance, in real rather than simulated situations, is highly valued in undergraduate education (Morán-Barrios 2016). Assessment instruments are built on the basis of what is called “assessment criteria,” i.e., “principles, norms or ideas of valuation in relation to which an appreciative judgment is made about the evaluated object” (Hernández et al., 2017, p. 63). In this way, assessment criteria delimit the specific learning that is expected to be observed. Therefore, they allow the teacher to orient their guidance in the preparation of the student’s performance and help the student to focus their efforts within the framework of what is expected to be observed in them. The different levels of integration that

each assessment criterion may have on the learner are called “learning indicators.” A learning indicator is a central element of an assessment instrument, which describes the theoretical and practical knowledge the student must demonstrate and that is associated with the competency to be measured (Tknika, 2022). Each learning indicator can be associated with a numerical gradation (as in a rating scale type of instrument) and/or with a score indicating specifically which elements are achieved and which are not (as in a rubric type of instrument).

Methods

This exploratory study was based on conceptualization from relevant literature in the three areas involved in its theoretical approach: assessment research, theatre studies, and social-behavioural studies. For its discussion, a critical theoretical crossing of this conceptualization was carried out alongside significant elements of the practical classroom experience in vocal performance, considering 20 years of teaching experience by one of the researchers of this study.

To support the need for research in the area of assessment in undergraduate arts education, some of the most popular databases in the academic field (Scopus, Wos, Eric, Beic) were consulted in recent years (2012–2021).

The decision to carry out this exploratory study was based on the need to explore the three areas referred in an intertwined manner, in order to critically observe the human interaction during the assessment process and to obtain the theoretical basis for the future design of an experimental research on vocal performance assessment in acting students that may challenge current VPS assessment practices.

In the framework of this exploratory research, the teacher was considered as the viewer/spectator, i.e. as the audience. No thought was given to the effect that an audience external to the classroom learning process might have on the development of VPS and/or on the student’s performance. In this context of representation, the focus was on the teacher’s bodily correlate that his/her own emotional response could generate. This correlate might be perceptible by the student during his/her performance and could provide positive feedback as an indicator of the effect that this performance is having on the viewer/spectator. Therefore, student/teacher interaction was largely estimated from a perceptual point of view.

Discussion

VPS as a Theatrical Experience

It has been mentioned that a VPS is a practical acting demonstration that a student performs individually or in a group, in which the voice is the main expressive tool. A VPS also involves

the acting interpretation of a text in a given space and time for expressive purposes. Since this VPS is of an acting nature, it is proposed to consider it within the theatrical phenomenon. This concept will be discussed in the contextual framework of dramatic theatre, understood as a theatrical art in which what prevails is a fictional universe (Duarte, 2017). It can be said that in dramatic theatre the omnipresence of a common element can be recognised: conflict (Lavandier, 2019). In the same vein, reference will be made to the idea that “the explicit inclusion of ‘conflict’ is considered a dramatic condition” (Duarte, 2017, p. 59).

As a theatrical phenomenon, the VPS is constructed from the gaze of a spectator (Cornago, 2004). In the assessment context of a VPS, the teacher who assesses corresponds to the spectator. In this way, the interaction that takes place between the student and the teacher during the VPS is decisive for the theatrical phenomenon to take place in an integral and real way. According to Cornago (2004), every artistic work is constructed on the basis of its effect on the receiver, and the theatrical phenomenon “does not exist as a reality outside the moment in which someone is perceiving it; when they stop looking, hearing or feeling it, there will no longer be theatricality” (p. 249). It is important to mention that the development of a VPS may involve more than one student performing and more than one teacher assessing at a time. However, regardless of how many participants interact at the same time in this theatrical phenomenon, what we emphasize is the fact that there is at least one party performing (student/actor-actress) and one party perceiving that performance (teacher/spectator). This is so that the theatrical phenomenon can be fully realized. From this, we propose that the act of perception of the VPS that the teacher performs should not only be considered a relevant element, but also as a condition for the theatrical phenomenon to actually happen.

VPS Perception

In the field of the theatrical phenomenon, it is understood, based on Lehmann (2013), the aesthetic art in theatre (i.e. the performance) and the act of reception (i.e. the perception of the artistic art) take place at the same time. Regarding this perception, it is relevant to consider that, as Morin points out, “the real field of knowledge is not the pure object, but the object seen, perceived and co-produced by us” (1984, p. 108). This defines the uncertainty involved in the perception of vocal performance, which is in itself a complex act. Additionally, Morin (1984) stated that “complexity is not only thinking the one and the multiple together, it is also thinking together the uncertain and the certain, the logical and the contradictory, it is the inclusion of the observer in the observation” (p. 109).

As has already been said, in the perception of the theatrical experience, the observer (who is the spectator) is not only included but also a critical participant in co-building that experience. This implies considering the action of all its members in the analysis of the experience. In this respect, from the philosophy of theatre, Dubatti (2008) states that the starting point of

theatre is conviviality, understood as a practice of socialisation of present agents. The author defines the convivial event as the “non-transferable vital experience (not communicable to those who do not attend the convivium), territorial, ephemeral and necessarily minority (if compared to the capacity of convocation and technical reproducibility of cinema or television)” (Dubatti, 2008, p. 3).

Accordingly, actors and spectators are immersed in the fictional universe of the theatrical experience, due to the tacit agreement that determines the beginning and end of the experience and its convivial event. The spectator knows that they are confronted with artistic conventions but, even so, feel the effects that the play produces in them (Pavis, 2000). That is, the spectators act of perception affects them (Cornago, 2004). This is largely related to their emotional response to the unfolding of the drama (Dunn et al., 2020) or artistic act.

Emotion is constitutive of the theatrical experience, both actor and spectator feel emotions during the unfolding of this experience, and from the spectator’s point of view, the actor’s performance is the strongest source of triggering these emotions (Konijn, 1999). Due to the characteristics of the fictional universe of the theatrical experience, the perception that the spectator has of the performance provokes in them what we propose to call a “liminal emotional response.” We called it liminal since it is generated from fiction, but the experience of the emotion is real.

Said spectator’s response is related to the concept of threshold proposed by Fischer-Lichte (2010) under the perspective of performance studies. Fischer-Lichte (2010) identifies the aesthetic experience of theatre as a threshold or liminality since it not only affects the person who lives it but has the power as well to transform it. In addition, she places the origin of the concept of liminality in ritual studies, specifically in the rites of transition and boundaries, which she divides into three phases. The first phase of separation is where the participants (whom she calls “transformed”) are removed from their everyday life. A second phase within the threshold experience or phase of transformation, in which the participants are mutated to a state that allows them to live a whole new experience. A third phase of incorporation, in which the participants are reintegrated into everyday life, but with a new transformed status, where they accept this modified identity (Fischer-Lichte, 2010).

In line with the aforementioned, we argue that the liminal emotional response of the spectator is a stage in the transformation phase referred to by Fischer-Lichte (2010). The present occurs through a similar operation to that described in the theory of narrative transportation. This kind of transportation states that when a person is immersed in a story—namely, immersed in a fictional universe—the individual’s behaviour is modified to reflect the attitudes of that story (Green & Brock, 2002). In the case of the theatrical experience, this is visibly

manifested through the spectator's facial and body movements.

Consequently, the liminal emotional response of the spectator can be associated with a bodily correlation, since "the motor, expressive and external dimension of the emotional dynamics constitutes a central component in emotion" (Horenstein, 2021, p. 223). This implies that the teacher in their role as a spectator will generate an expressive reaction (facial and/or corporal) during the acting practice they perceive. We suggest that this reaction is not only visible to the student who conducts the VPS but can also provide feedback on their acting interpretation, giving them information about the effect it has on the spectator and stimulating vocal interpretation.

As part of an assessment experience of a VPS, the teacher tacitly agrees to share the conflict of the fictional universe, even when they are subjected to a seemingly unnecessary emotional burden (i.e. the liminal emotional response). The present occurs because conflict is part of the fiction interpreted in the student's performance, and it does not represent a real life conflict. We state that the teacher has access to face the conflict in the fictional space since they are able to go through it and share its resolution with the student.

In consideration of the above, we argue that the VPS perception obeys a mechanism that the spectators must develop during the theatrical experience. This is achieved when the spectator receives the creative proposal of the actor/actress and feeds back their interpretation through the physical correlation of spectator's emotional response. In this same line, we also state that the teacher participates in the theatrical phenomenon that they assess, since they co-produce it as a spectator, including themselves in the observation, and only it is perceived in this interwoven way.

Additionally, we suggest that if the teacher is abstracted or does not fully participate in the theatrical experience, they will be assessing a practice that is not entirely constituted: It will be a deficient assessing exercise. Very often in the assessment practices of acting performances samples, the assessing teacher, at the same time that they perceive the acting practice, must take into account the assessment criteria and the characteristics of the assessment tools, and oftentimes, they must even take notes during the development of the acting performance. In other words, the teacher must move in and out of the role of spectator to move in and out of the role of the evaluator. This seems nonsensical if we take into account that, up to this point, it has been argued that for the theatrical experience to occur in a complete way, the active and continuous participation of the spectator is necessary. On the other hand, for an evaluator to complete an accurate assessment, it is essential that they are familiar with the criteria and characteristics of the instruments that are to be used.

This is the reason we propose that the teacher must participate fully in the theatrical experience and must be willing to cooperate with the student, placing themselves entirely in the role of the spectator and co-constructing the experience. Thus, both student and teacher participation is action-oriented towards the achievement of the same objective: the acquisition of learning.

Considering this, we argue that the teacher develops this co-building from what we call a “spectator’s perspective of perception.” No matter what assessment instrument is used, the teacher should participate fully in the theatrical experience, its fictional universe, and the liminal emotional response it evokes. This participation implies cooperation. After the experience, the teacher should become aware of the instrument and apply it, with the help of the audio-visual record of the VPS.

We differentiate from this perspective what we propose as the “evaluator’s perspective of perception.” This is developed in the assessment practice in which the teacher participates in the VPS in accordance with their role as an evaluator and the use of the respective assessment instrument. This obliges them to renounce the fictional space, or to remain in it intermittently, making it difficult or impeding a liminal emotional response to the actor/actress’s interpretation, and does not encourage cooperation in the teacher-student interaction.

The Social-Behavioural Perspective in the Assessment of VPS

Cooperation consists of a variety of demeanours that vary based upon a given context (natural, social, cultural), which occurs in a social process through the achievement of two or more individuals about a shared objective or results in a benefit to both or the group (Novak, 2006). Cooperation by itself is not considered positive. From an educational viewpoint, its value depends on how the teaching strategies applied by teachers involve cooperation for the improvement of learning. In higher education, cooperative learning is related to theories of cognitive development (as a consequence of cooperative learning), behavioural learning, and social interdependence (since, in this context, learning occurs in and through the individual) (Attle & Baker, 2007). Based on this, it has been proven that students have better learning achievements through the application of cooperative methodologies (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), and in addition, a series of benefits in the social and affective domains (Lazarowitz et al., 1994; Nastasi & Clements, 1991) as well as in prosociality (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Complementarily, prosocial conduct has been associated positively with the improvement of academic performance (Jensen, 2016).

Cooperation in primates, including the human species, has been linked to a phenomenon known as prosociality (Burkart et al., 2014). According to Jensen (2016), prosocial behaviour corresponds to a diverse set of voluntary conduct, which aims to benefit others and establish

positive, empathic, and cooperative relationships. Therefore, empathy and cooperation are behavioural tendencies that characterise prosociality.

Empathy is an affective response that involves experiencing emotions that can be considered appropriate to the circumstances of another person (Jensen, 2016). In the framework of the assessment strategies of a vocal performance sample (VPS), the viewer's emotional response obeys what the social-behavioural approach identifies as empathy and motivates the viewer's prosocial response.

As stated by van de Vyver & Abrams (2018), the historical origin of empathy in a human cultural context can be located in the arts, alluding to an aesthetic process of engagement in the perception of the artistic event. In the context of this article, the reference to this origin proves particularly interesting since it supports the proposed link between theatrical experiences in the classroom and the social-behavioural perspective. Empathy-driven prosociality involves assuming the emotional perspective of another individual (Jensen, 2016; van de Vyver & Abrams, 2018). Furthermore, beyond the content of the artistic experience, what can contribute to the well-being of a viewer is the connection that he or she establishes with the event (Tay et al., 2017).

Additionally, the effects of theatre art on prosociality can be observed in different contexts and are based on the fact that these occurrences can motivate a substantial improvement in empathy (Rathje et al., 2021). Moreover, in the field of education, it is considered that greater participation in experiences related to art correlates to higher academic achievement (Jensen, 2016). Also, active participation in drama classes may be associated with increased empathy and specifically cognitive empathy, whereby people can infer other people's emotions (Kou et al., 2019). Consequently, we propose that artistic experiences, cooperative and prosocial behaviours, and empathy may be viewed as phenomena that are interconnected through a formative approach. Therefore, we present their integrated study, in order to analyse the assessment experience of VPS from a social-behavioural perspective.

The existence of cooperative behaviour on the part of the spectator during theatrical experiences can be elaborated from the perspective of direct reciprocity (Jensen, 2016). Direct reciprocity behaviour has a cost and a benefit for both parties (Trivers, 1971). Based on this argument and the theories related to the social-behavioural approach applied to human interaction, we argue that cooperation explained by direct reciprocity lies behind the phenomenon of the theatrical experience.

Our understanding of human cooperation is based on this theoretical perspective, which suggests that it is a complex phenomenon that has evolutionary roots and is related to

psychological and behavioural components, and which, according to elements of cultural evolution, has reached levels of functionality and variability that are evident in different contexts. One of these is the educational context, within which we focus on the formative assessment of learning in the field of theatrical experience. We propose that the analysis of the interaction between teacher and student, enclosed by the assessment process during the VPS, should target fundamentally the observation of cooperative behaviours, and the incidence of its presence or absence may have on the experience and its formative value.

Everything mentioned before leads us to the understanding that the interaction produced from the perception that the spectator has of the performance and their liminal emotional response (associated with its bodily correlation) is essential in relation to the interpretation of the actor. According to Fischer-Lichte and Roselt (2008), this interaction constitutes the specific mediality of the theatre, which implies a growing social community between actors.

Conclusion

The teacher must be willing to cooperate with the student, placing themselves fully in the role of spectator and jointly co-construct the VPS as a theatrical phenomenon. In this light, the teacher develops this co-construction from what we call the “spectator’s perspective of perception,” and we differentiate this viewpoint from the one we call the “evaluator’s perspective of perception.”

The analysis of the interaction between teacher and student within the frame of the assessment experience of VPS should focus fundamentally on the observation of cooperative behaviours and the incidence that this presence or absence may have on the assessment’s formative value. The artistic experiences, the cooperative and prosocial behaviours, and empathy are phenomena that can be represented and linked to a formative scope. Because of this, we conclude that it is relevant to consider them as a whole for the analysis of the theatricality. Additionally, centring the analysis of the assessment of vocal performance samples of acting students through a social-behavioural perspective would allow us to observe the relationship between the characteristics of the student-teacher interaction in a VPS. We could determine its cooperative, prosocial, and empathy components, and so forth, estimate the formative character of the assessment experience associated with this artistic experience.

Finally, we have discussed several points to demonstrate that cooperative components could influence the teacher-student interaction during the evaluation of vocal performance. From this we concluded that the social-behavioural perspective allows us to focus on cooperation and critically evaluate it within the framework of the theatrical experience. This seems especially relevant to us since we have established that a cooperative teacher-student interaction could improve the teaching-learning process by promoting a formative evaluation

environment and enhance the student's vocal expressiveness by allowing the co-construction of the theatrical phenomenon by the student and the teacher.

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About the Authors

Gala Fernandez-Fresard is Associate Professor at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (PUC), Faculty of Arts, Drama School. She is Ph.D. in Education UMCE, Master of Arts, Bachelor of Music and Actress PUC. She was recognized with the Teaching Excellence Award PUC in 2017. Since 2008 she has been general and musical director of the Chilean company Música-Teatro Veleta, dedicated to the staging of music-theater pieces with the rescue of stories, traditions, language, and music of native cultures. Her beginnings in theater stand out for her participation as an actress in the Gran Circo Teatro Company, directed by Andrés Pérez Araya. She has worked in academic management at the Faculty of Arts PUC, in various management positions. She is also a member of the Editorial Committee of the Center for the Study of Religion PUC. gala.f@uc.cl

Luis Flores-Prado is Titular Professor at Universidad Metropolitana de Ciencias de la Educación de Chile (UMCE), PHD in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, Universidad de Chile (UCH). He is Professor of Biology, Master of Science - Entomology, UMCE and Ph.D. in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology from the University of Chile (UCH). He works in teaching and research in the lines of: Evolution of Sociability in Insects, Sociobiological Bases of Cooperative and Competitive Behavior, Population Genetics and Evolution, Ecology and Evolution and Advanced Quantitative Research Methodology. He is a member of the academic faculty of the Doctoral Program in Education UMCE. He is currently director of the Institute of Entomology UMCE. luis.flores@umce.cl

María Duarte is Associate Professor at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (PUC), Faculty of Arts, Drama School. She is a playwright, director and theater researcher. Actress, Master in Theater from the City University of New York and Ph.D. in Philosophy, Aesthetics and Art Theory from the Universidad de Chile (UCH). From 2009 to 2013 she was editor of the journal *Apuntes de Teatro* at PUC. Nine of her theatrical texts have been staged, obtaining several awards. She is currently co-director of La Máquina Teatro, a Chilean company with more than 15 years of experience. She has also worked in academic management at the PUC in various management positions and is currently deputy academic director of Drama School PUC. He recently published a book on the process of dramaturgical creation, “Writing the Scene, Tracing the Present.” cocaduarte@uc.cl

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