

'I Am a Magician of Soap': Alchemical Transformations Affecting the Biomedical Politics of HIV-Infection in Jan Fabre's *Drugs Kept Me Alive*

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Abstract

Drugs Kept Me Alive is a solo performance choreographed by Jan Fabre, devoted to a 'magician of soap', the HIV-seropositive performer Antony Rizzi. In this performance, survival, thanks to prescribed medication and illegal substances, is staged by the performer's interaction with soapy water, which demonstrates the alchemical marriage of opposites. I once worked as a biologist at an HIV-laboratory and, here, I approach the intertwining of the ill body and the dancing body of a dancer-chemist as such an alchemical marriage and explore its transformative potential in disease politics through dancing alchemy around four objects: table, bubbles, hat, and pills. When Fabre's biography intertwines with Rizzi's on Fabre's worktable on stage, the politics of high-risk groups are transformed into inclusiveness. When Rizzi accepts his vulnerability, bubbles symbolising mortality are transformed into protective armour and the chronic temporality of illness is transformed into kairological temporality of opportunity. The dancer-mystic's hat turns Rizzi into an artist-warrior, who transforms the military metaphor for illness into an existential battle. Pills used by Fabre, partly reminiscent of Duchamp's readymades, become a pharmakon that *both* kills and cures, and transform submission of patients to medical chemistry into their agency. The essay concludes that the transformation of drugs into pharmakon corresponds to the 'philosopher's stone' of alchemy: not only does it keep Rizzi alive by 'saving' him from HIV morbidity, but it also becomes a source of corporeal knowledge that 'saves' seropositives and seronegatives from problematic aspects of HIV biomedical politics.

For A

A man wearing a large white hat, dressed in a black shirt and trousers, leans over a wooden table and makes a soap bubble in a bucket. The man sits at the front of the stage, behind glass bottles full of pills, and blows small soap bubbles. The man approaches soapy water and creates a huge bubble with a ring (Figure 1). The man hugs foam produced by a

machine. The man sits at the front of the stage again, while the stage is filled with pills and foam, and new bubbles are produced by machines. More than an hour later, he returns to the table and leans over it while his face is lit like a bubble. He speaks his last line: 'Homo bulla est' (Fabre, 'Drugs' 97).

The man, 'a magician of soap' (82), is the American performer



Fig. 1: Antony Rizzi performs *Drugs Kept Me Alive*. Photo by Wonge Bergmann. Used with permission.

Antony Rizzi. He performs the solo *Drugs Kept Me Alive* created by his long-time collaborator and friend, Belgian theatre director, choreographer, and visual artist Jan Fabre and dedicated to him. It premiered in Maribor, Slovenia, in 2012 (77). Rizzi himself is homosexual and has been HIV-seropositive since 1996 (ImPulsTanz). To write the text, Fabre asked for the inserts from Rizzi's medication, interviewed him about how he copes with side effects ('In Your Face'), and wrote a text they analysed and co-choreographed. In 1996, the introduction of successful anti-retroviral therapy changed the biomedical politics of HIV, by transforming the infection from a terrifying death

sentence into a chronic condition controlled by life-long dependence on prescribed medication (Delaney S1). Fabre's piece is about survival thanks to drugs—both prescribed medication and illegal substances.

An Alchemical Laboratory of Soap

A laboratory is created on stage, where the performer experiments with soapy water. It is the laboratory of an alchemist, since, for alchemy, water is one of the four main elements, a power to be transformed in physical processes and spiritual journeys (Fernando 13). For hermetic philosophers, 'everything has for its principal constituent a soapy water, meaning a compound with two substances' (Pernety qtd. in Moffitt 215). Alchemy is associated with magic and is concerned 'with understanding, as a means of healing a fractured cosmos' (Stratford xv), like the cosmos in which an ill body struggles to exist. Alchemy's *opus magnum* is the creation of the philosopher's stone—a substance capable of inducing transformation. The stone is used to purify 'whatever needs to be purified', and since it is a hydrolith, a waterstone, the aim of alchemy is to 'differentiate the opposites, express both sides in one breath and transform above the split' (Fernando 108, 127). This is the alchemical marriage of opposites, the idea of 'conjunctio' (Haeffner). This 'conjunctio' can be realised in soapy water. The question is whether it can also be realised in an ill and dancing body and in the use of drugs, both prescribed and illegal.

The alchemist in the piece trying to answer this question is a dancer. His art is alchemy because he interacts with soapy water and searches for a spiritual place by transforming his body in order to survive (Fabre, 'Drugs' 83). In the Flemish tradition to which Fabre connects, there is a strong relationship between oil painting and alchemy.¹ For alchemy, 'everything takes place within the body. The studio of the artist [and the laboratory of the alchemist] is not architecture but the inside of a body' (Elkins 1)—an alchemist's body, a painter's body, or a dancer's

¹ The connection between oil painting and alchemy is made both in the anecdotal narratives of Karel van Mander, who wrote biographies of artists in the 16th century (see Dupré viii), and in recent research (Dupré, Elkins).

body. It can even be a theatre director's body: *Troubleyn Laboratorium* is the name of Fabre's theatre studio in Antwerp. Having been influenced by alchemical texts (*Journal-II* 306), Fabre relates to alchemy through the concept of transformation as metamorphosis, which is central in his work ('In Your Face'). He has also organised his theatre company in 'three alchemical phases: doctrine, tradition, organization' (*Journal-II* 265). For Fabre, 'the body is an alchemist' (*Journal-II* 159) thanks to its transformative power. Since he choreographs on paper (see *Umbraculum* 84), his dance is directly related to drawing, his primary practice as a visual artist. As a result, his dance and theatre work also participates in the Flemish tradition of painting and alchemy, with his rehearsal room and stage being alchemical laboratories as well.

The stage, a place of artificiality and illusion, becomes the laboratory for an *opus magnum* carried out by Rizzi's alchemical body, attempting to reconcile illness and dance in the presence of an audience. By the time the stage and Rizzi's body are filled with pills and foam, the experiences of performer and audience will have been transformed into 'something else'. This is the aim Fabre sets to performers (see Roussel et al. 45). Instead of transforming himself into 'someone else', into a character, by using techniques of psychological acting, Rizzi explores this aim through transformations of his alchemical body. This essay seeks to discover this 'something else', which Fabre does not define but is in search of during his creative process. It follows the transformation through which Rizzi performs alchemy for survival and by adopting Fabre's concept of alchemical-theatrical transformation, it explores the effect of the 'something else', on the biomedical politics of illness, involving high-risk groups, the temporality of infection, the body invaded by a virus, and the virus control by medication. The essay departs from four key objects—Fabre's table, soap bubbles, Rizzi's hat, and pills—and draws from my own experience when I used to work as a biologist at an HIV-laboratory.

Table

When Rizzi was still a dance student practicing in front of a mirror, his body had already been alchemical, trying to reconcile the opposites, the subject and the object. His body was researching itself, as he saw its reflection in the mirror; his 'body became subject and object' (Fabre, 'Drugs' 82, Scene 2), a statement also used by Fabre for his experience as a performance artist (Adolphe et al. 365). This experience is offered to his performers through his training method of 'visceral physicality', which refers to using 'the complete body' for response to 'physical or imaginative impulses' (Cassiers et al. 275). Performers are trained to respond to external impulses (like low temperature) and internal impulses (like fatigue) not intellectually, but by feeling their effects on the organs of their bodies. The brain is included in this notion of the body, as the site of imagination, which triggers the performer's transformation into 'something else'. The aforementioned statement is one of the ways Fabre adds his own experience to Rizzi's biographical piece. He is even present on stage through a physical object, the wooden table, which is a replica of the table he made when he was eighteen years old and used as an experimentation bench for his art, as well as in the solo performance *Burglaries and Street Fights* (1978). Fabre also used to lie on the cool glass of the table's surface in order to get relief from the fever that was a symptom of a neurological illness (Fabre, *Journal-I* 81), which also caused insomnia treated with sleeping pills and panic attacks that made him feel as if he were on 'another planet where there is no oxygen' (Fabre, 'Drugs' 80). This table is the corpus of the artist, both his own body and his body of work (van den Dries, *Corpus*). It is Fabre's body that is offered to Rizzi's alchemical laboratory-stage both as a physical presence and in the form of his artistic principles: physical pain as a way to reach a 'spiritual place' (Fabre, 'Drugs' 82-3; *Journal-I* 45), sexuality as freedom and creativity (Fabre, 'Drugs' 86-7; *Journal-I* 8), and acceptance of failure (Fabre, 'Drugs' 94), since 'winning is secondary' and 'the main objective is ... to change the rules of the game' (Fabre, *Journal-II* 68).

Rizzi begins and ends his performance at the table-Fabre's corpus. His performance changes the rules of biography. He states that although the monologue is autobiographical, 'it is the way Fabre imagines I live my life and he is close' ('Las Drogas'). The result is a piece performed as an (auto)biography of/by a homosexual, HIV-seropositive performer, but written by a heterosexual, HIV-seronegative artist, who has included his own body of illness and art in the text, and his physical presence on stage in the form of his table. The table of the artist-chemist becomes the site of transformation of the (auto)biographical experience. The table is the core of the laboratory, where the alchemist studies and combines substances, as shown, for instance, in a painting from the Flemish tradition, Pieter Brueghel the Elder's *The Alchemist* from 1558 (Figure 2). On this table, biographies intertwine, their temporality is expressed by Fabre as 'real time real action' and this temporality invades the stage, which is a laboratory of illusion. Repetitive, demanding tasks performed in Fabre's theatre are staged. But they result in real exhaustion and pain, challenging the artificiality of the stage and transforming it into 'something beyond it' (van den Dries, 'Introduction' 8). The rules of the stage are changed. Rizzi is not an illusionist performing harmless tricks; rather, he experiments with 'real time real action', achieved through physical interaction with Fabre's own table-corpus and the pills present on stage as physical objects.

Neither the causes of Rizzi's infection nor his art are explained biographically. Rizzi's HIV-seropositivity and Fabre's insomnia are rather a kind of 'text which nature and history gave [them] to decipher' (Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt' 70), and therefore akin to how Maurice Merleau-Ponty approaches artists' biographies. These illnesses are the conditions that restrict and at the same time enable their freedom, since this 'situated freedom' (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 474) becomes a motive and not a cause, guiding their life and art by opening up to possibilities for transformation. Illnesses are conditions of existence. The 'something else', to which the transformation of the concept of (auto)biography leads, is an existential condition of inclusiveness that changes the rules of HIV-infection.



Fig. 2: *The Alchemist*, etching by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, 1558. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

On stage, then, there are two biographies, the one of the biographed and the one of the biographer, interacting as two bodies, the body of the dancer and the table/body/corpus of the choreographer, respectively. Another body also participates in the interaction: it is the body of the audience. Due to how the HIV virus is transmitted, health professionals analysing the body fluids of seropositives become members of the same high-risk group as their patients. So did I, when I worked at an HIV-laboratory. Fabre's table on stage and his ideas on art in the autobiographical text relate to my own biography, as a member of the audience, and invite me to 'see' this table as a body where biographies intertwine. The biomedical politics of stigmatised high-risk groups and their positioning in opposition to allegedly unaffected HIV-seronegatives are transformed, because this is not an HIV-biography, but an existential biography of both the seropositive and the seronegative.

Bubbles

In Scene 1, Rizzi has just received the diagnosis, he is on the planet of the ill where there is no oxygen and suddenly, 'an oval membrane' envelops him. Inside, there is oxygen, hope, acceptance of death as part of life: 'life is worth living even if that implies death' (Fabre, 'Drugs' 80), even if the HIV-infection is incurable. In Fabre's method, acceptance and exposure of physical vulnerability and mortality are crucial for performers' transformations into 'something else'. Liquids like sweat from exhaustion, blood (as in Fabre's theatre piece *I Am Blood* in 2001) and tears (as in Fabre's theatre piece *The History of Tears* in 2005), transform the physical body, since secretions are 'the energy of the body' (Fabre, *Journal-II* 290). Sweat, tears, sperm, and blood are abundant in *Drugs Kept Me Alive*, but Rizzi's 'liquid universe' (Fabre, 'Drugs' 93) consists mainly of soap bubbles, which feature as a 'symbol of being human' (96), and therefore mortal. The huge bubble that envelops his body like protective armour transforms his body into a 'dancing fountain' (79). The paradoxical transformation of the bubble into armour results from Fabre's approach to HIV as an opportunity for transformation, beginning with acceptance of vulnerability and mortality, which turns vulnerability into protective armour, made visible as a bubble.

This bubble is an armour of time. Biological time, directed from birth towards death, is linear and its inevitability makes the bubble a symbol of vanity. Performance artist and scholar Martin O'Brien, who is chronically ill, experiences the temporality of chronic illness as being related to the submission to a biomedical politics of the body's regulation; he refers to Chronos, the ancient Greek god of time. There is a distinction, though, between 'chronos', the measurable, successive time whose direction cannot be reversed, and 'kairos', the time that cannot be either measured or fixed (Honkanen 8). The temporal richness of 'kairos' is the 'time of opportunity'. By accepting illness as an opportunity for transformation, Rizzi's performance and life do not happen in chronological, but in kairological time, although he still obeys biomedical politics, for example by taking medication, in order

to survive. As the bubble is transformed into a vulnerable armour 'that may disappear in less than a second' (Fabre, 'Drugs' 93), vulnerability becomes armour, capable of influencing the biomedical politics of illness by changing its temporality into kairological time.

Bubbles could be the trick of a conjurer. The last scene of *Drugs Kept Me Alive* shows Rizzi's face lit like a perfect 'O'. It is the 'most perfect form of nature', that of a bubble (Fabre, 'Drugs' 84), which is also the alchemical symbol for perfection (Fernando 120). This bubble-armour is fecund, as it is transformed into a womb where temporal transformation as new life in kairos can take place. Indeed, the alchemist's symbol for water is the reversed triangle of the womb (Stratford 90) and the soapy water is the 'principle constituent of everything' (Pernety qtd. in Moffitt 215). Fabre's alchemical concept of the horizontal body, explored in his piece *I Am Blood*, refers to a body that cannot be injured because it is only liquid without flesh, and to liquids becoming armour and womb. The 'something else', the 'dancing fountain' into which Rizzi is transformed, expresses the transformation of the inevitability of mortality into a life worth living. My own experience of interaction with HIV-seropositives is awakened by the visual expression of vulnerability through the bubble. Fabre's piece makes me recall their stories and invites me to 'see' the temporal aspect of this bubble, which is at odds with the linear progress of the disease through the different stages recorded in their medical records. Thanks to vulnerability as protection, HIV-seropositives do not bear the stigma of the death sentenced, but live life not as a problem to be solved by medical causality, but as a fecund opportunity to be celebrated kairologically.

Hat

What does the diagnosis of an incurable disease mean? At the beginning of most scenes, Rizzi asks himself, 'am I sick?'. The answer always begins with: 'I am an incurable ...'. Having a bubble for armour, Rizzi struggles to transform the incurability of his illness into 'something else'. He does not feel sick, the virus does not cause symptoms, because

it is latent, also protected by an armour in the form of 'a small bubble' or 'cell' (Fabre, 'Drugs' 95). The two armoured fighters are on the battlefield.

In Fabre's oeuvre, one of the personae related to battle is the 'knight of despair', with despair being a fecund condition when nothing comes for free and the priority is survival ('Fabre: Chevalier du désespoir'). In this condition Rizzi, the dancer, realises he 'cannot live without dancing' (Fabre, 'Drugs' 82). He demonstrates this through his hat. It is reminiscent of the hat of a dervish, a dancer-mystic, who searches for a spiritual place like Rizzi (83). When the knight acquires the bubble-armour, he is ready to fight. But 'in which war?' (92) It seems that the first battle concerns the definition of incurability and Rizzi becomes an 'artist-warrior' (88), performing the answer as a dancer wearing the dervish's hat, who 'reinvents ancient dances ... and rituals of war' (81).

Rizzi refers to 'biological war in [his] body' (Fabre, 'Drugs' 94), while sounds of sirens and bombs are heard when he interacts with foam. In *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag shows how the military metaphor for AIDS, which identifies the body with a fortress under attack, leads to the stigmatisation of patients as members of high-risk groups, who threaten humanity's health. She attempts to counter this, arguing, 'we are not being invaded', 'the body is not a battlefield' (95). Fabre's notion that 'my body is a battlefield' (*Journal-I* 45), though, is the exact opposite. It is not the metaphor of a body under attack, but 'the body as a laboratory' of experimentation, a notion extended to the alchemical laboratory and Fabre's table which are both bodies (*Journal-I* 86). Fabre's metaphor enacts what Sontag asks for: the application of the 'strategy against interpretation ... to the body' (14). The alchemical marriage of opposites is such a strategy: the 'conjunctio' is not a metaphor for invasion. Moreover, Rizzi performs the 'conjunctio' of despair from incurability and hope for a life without symptoms by transforming himself into an artist-warrior, in a battle through which human vulnerability is creatively defended on the stage (Fabre, *Journal-I* 87; 'Drugs' 96).

Rizzi's way of coping with illness involves the creation of new definitions, which define the body not as fortress but as a sexual and spiritual being, similarly to how Fabre creatively defines his own neurological issues (see *Journal-I* 177-79). Rizzi, the artist-warrior, becomes 'something else' than an HIV-seropositive. The virus is never mentioned in the piece. Rizzi is an incurable lover of life, romantic, seducer, visionary, adventurer, lover of failure (Fabre, 'Drugs' 81, 83, 85, 88, 92, 94). Rizzi is a dancer. Rizzi is alive. The repeated 'am I sick?' awakens my experience of seropositives asking the same thing at the HIV-laboratory where I worked. The answer that contained war metaphors makes me 'hear' the sirens in the piece as alarms against prejudice: it is not a battle against an enemy, but a 'ritual of war' fought as a rite of passage towards an incurable love for life.



Fig. 3: Antony Rizzi performs *Drugs Kept Me Alive*. Photo by Wonge Bergmann. Used with permission.

Pills

Unsettling music is heard. Rizzi is on the floor with his shirt wet and open, grabbing and opening one glass bottle after the other and emptying the contents in his mouth. Pills fill his mouth and are stuck

on his body (Figure 3). Rizzi enacts the large number of pills required during the early years of anti-retroviral therapy, when the condensation of active ingredients was difficult. In scene 5, this ‘dancing pharmacy’ is incurably addicted to ‘movement and dance and all legal and illegal drugs’ (Fabre, ‘Drugs’ 89, 81). What is the meaning of ‘drugs’ and ‘pharmacy’ for this dancer-chemist?

In Fabre’s method, action begins from a physical impulse, which affects the performers’ physicality and triggers their active response (see Cassiers et al. 277). Fabre has experimented with his sleeping pills in solo performances by using drugs as a physical stimulus towards transformation into ‘something else’ (*Journal-I* 315). For Rizzi, the ‘something else’ is a dancing body. Pills are the ‘readymade of the twenty-first century’ (Fabre, ‘Drugs’ 88), HAART (Highly-Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy) transformed into ‘art’. This is a form of art partly reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp’s readymades, since it is a gesture: choosing, transforming, and giving a title to an object ultimately recontextualises it (Duchamp 209). It is also the art of alchemy. Duchamp has been called ‘the alchemist of the avant-garde’ (Moffitt), and has profoundly influenced Fabre, who even used his name by translating its French syllables (mar-cel-du-champ) into the English language as *Sea Salt of the Fields* for his 1980 performance.

In the art of alchemy, ‘the elixir of life ... is treated as ambivalent, as both healing and poisonous’ (Haeffner). In this ‘conjunctio’ of iatrochemistry² Rizzi ‘differentiates the opposites’, namely prescribed medication and illegal drugs, ‘expresses both sides in one breath’, by using the ambiguous word ‘drugs’, and ‘transforms above the split’ (Fernando 127).

Duchamp’s work involves medication. *Pharmacie*, for instance, is a painting readymade of 1914. It is a print of a winter landscape with a water pond and two added drops of red and green colour, which correspond to the colours of glass bottles in French pharmacies. The piece has been approached through alchemy as a way of signalling

² Iatrochemistry is a form of alchemy devoted to medicinal purposes.

with colours the beginning and the end of *opus magnum* (Moffitt 244-45). This is the bodily *work* carried out on Rizzi's stage-laboratory: a performance of pills and soapy water with a beginning and an end (Fabre, 'Drugs' 96).

By interacting with pills as physical objects, Rizzi negotiates legal and illegal chemistry through alchemy. Alchemy is not the opposite of chemistry, but it gave birth to it and is another way of coping with the world (Levere 13). Rizzi decides about the way he combines anti-retroviral treatment with other substances (Fabre, 'Drugs' 89). He is no longer unwillingly submitted to medical chemistry and transforms medication into 'something else', a 'dancing pharmacy'. My memory of a poster with printed anti-retroviral pills in the HIV-laboratory is awakened by the pills stuck on Rizzi's body, and gives way to another memory, that of Duchamp's *Pharmacie*. As a result, I 'see' Rizzi's movements as an attempt to choose, transform, and give a name to his pills, the same as Duchamp did with readymades, instead of just swallowing them, following pre-set instructions.

The transformation of anti-retroviral medication into art is also the art of theatre. For Fabre, 'becoming metamorphosed by self-poisoning' results in giving birth 'to a new life on stage' (*Journal-I* 186). This art is a 'pharmakon', a drug that is both poison and medicine, a medium that highlights their oppositional nature (see Derrida 97, 127). This is the kind of theatre that Fabre wishes to do: 'Art cures. Art poisons' (*Journal-II* 266). Rizzi's vulnerability, summarised in his attempt to 'save [him]self by poisoning [him]self' (Fabre, 'Drugs' 96), becomes the pharmakon offered to the audience. It is the 'philosopher's stone', the outcome of the *opus magnum* resulting from the alchemical 'conjunctio' of the opposites of poison and cure, as well as of the body of medicine and the body of desire, in Rizzi's body.

In the final scene, acceptance of mortality is related to 'intensity of existence' and to illness 'as a source of knowledge and pleasure' (Fabre, 'Drugs' 96). This is the way the 'stone' is used to whatever 'needs to be purified', in this case, the audience. The exploration of the intertwining of the ill and dancing body through the guidelines of

Fabre's method, weaved around his table, soap bubbles, Rizzi's hat and pills, has demonstrated that the transformation of drugs into pharmakon not only keeps Rizzi alive by 'saving' him from HIV morbidity, but becomes also a source of corporeal knowledge 'saving' seropositives and seronegatives from problematic aspects of HIV biomedical politics.

Postscript

On 19 March 2016, a former biologist who used to carry out blood tests for monitoring HIV-seropositives was in the audience of the performance at the Théâtre de la Bastille in Paris. The pharmakon of the dancer-chemist awakened latent memories of her laboratorium work that were protected by a bubble of time. Biological fluids were for her samples to analyse and patients corresponded to four-digit codes. Memories were transformed into the point of view on the piece offered in this essay. This is the craft of the 'magician of soap', who transforms alienating experience through the vulnerable power of the body. He is not a four-digit code. The magician's name is Tony. The magician's name is Jan. Their pharmakon keeps *us* alive.

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