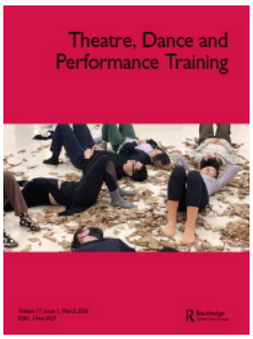

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Essai

Training in the shadows: autotheory, chronic illness, and performing against the politics of productivity

Molly Wilson

I. Beginning in the middle (of the bed)

The bed is not a studio.
But it has become mine.

Between the folds of the duvet and the hum of the fan, I rehearse. Words arrive in fragments – half-sentences typed into the Notes app between waves of nausea and overwhelming brain fog. 'Rehearsal' here is not repetition but survival. Training, in its traditional sense – daily practice, rigour, resilience – collapses under the weight of fatigue.

When I began to develop my solo performance, *Poems From My Pillow*, I was too unwell to leave my bed. My performance training – years of embodied discipline – met its contradiction. The very body I had trained to control now refused control. Yet from that refusal emerged something else: a *counter-training*, a politicised practice of making within constraint.

Lauren Fournier writes that 'autotheory is the integration of the self with philosophy or theory' (Fournier 2021, 6). My Notes app became both – a site of self and a site of theorising. My data, if I must call it that, was feeling. My illness, the method.

In this essai, I write in fragments. At present, I am unsure how else to write about my illness. I am learning to live in a body that feels 'broken' and through my writing (in all its myriad forms), I am attempting to reassemble something from the many fragments of the brokenness.

II. The art of being invisible

> The invisibility of ME[1] is not just an absence of visible physical ailments.
> The condition is invisible in conventional medical tests too.
> Bloods clean. Ultrasound fine – 'all clear' 'all clear' 'all clear'
> My body rendered illegible to medicine.
> My undergraduate training took place at a time when I was unwell but undiagnosed.
> Illegible to the medicine and invisible to those around me, I had no means of articulating my needs to my teachers.

1 Myalgic Encephalomyalitis.

The fight for a diagnosis became less about the hope of curative medicine, and more about gaining the language that would give validity to my pleas for more accessible training.

III. On training and its shadows

In performance training, 'discipline' is often a virtue word. Repetition, rigour, resilience – all framed as pathways to mastery. But what if repetition is replaced by rest? What if discipline becomes listening? What if resilience, that neoliberal badge of honour, is not available – or even desirable?

The ableist undercurrent of training assumes energy as a neutral resource. To be 'well-trained' is to be predictable, consistent, productive. The sick body refuses all of these. It stutters, flares, falters. It forgets choreography mid-sequence. It naps mid-sentence.

My training, now, is in the art of surrender. In the politics of pacing. I rehearse lying down, speaking softly, letting the work breathe when I cannot. I meet myself exactly where I am, and so when my body failed me as I prepared for a solo performance showcase, failure became the work. Already existing in the shadows of normative training practice, my only option was to use the shadows as my studio.

In *The Cancer Journals*, Audre Lorde writes, 'I must let this pain flow through me and pass on. If I resist or try to stop it, it will detonate inside me' (Lorde 1980, 4). Resistance, here, is not defiance but permission – allowing the body its own time. In this sense, my performance practice becomes not a resistance *to* illness but a resistance *within* it – a refusal to translate my pain into productivity.

IV. A practice of necessity

The week before *Poems From My Pillow* was due to premiere, I could barely stand. My partner said, 'You don't have to do it, but if you want to share something, we'll find a way'. The phrase *find a way* became a kind of rehearsal note. If I couldn't leave my bed, the bed would have to come with me.

I performed from within a makeshift bedroom: duvet, fairy lights, my childhood teddy. The audience entered this intimacy – blankets and pillows of their own – and for a short time, we shared the soft politics of stillness.

'This is far more pillow than party', I told them. 'Calm rather than chaos. And I'm as bored by that concept as you are – believe me.'

There, wrapped in softness, I began to understand that the aesthetic of illness is not absence, but proximity. The audience were close enough to see a cramp shake my leg. To feel the rhythm of breath-labour. Alyse Keller writes that, 'performance fosters relationality through vulnerable bodies in space' (Keller 2022). In the quiet exchange of glances and nods, I felt that relationality unfold – a mutual recognition between the ill and the empathic.

After the performance, an audience member said, 'I needed that'. I think they meant: I needed to *see* slowness honoured as art. Or perhaps: I needed *permission* to *make* slow art.

V. Wild horses and other myths

Writing performance autotheoretically means always writing in dialogue: between body and history, between trauma and tissue. When 90% of ME/CFS patients are women (ME Research UK 2024), and 54% report histories of (often gendered) trauma (Kempke et al. 2013), I cannot separate my diagnosis from patriarchy's long shadow. My body holds the archive of angry men. My nervous system, trained to anticipate threat, learned fatigue as its fluency.

To write autotheoretically is to name these intersections without dissection – to allow the messy coexistence of my love for swimming, my pain, and survival to speak for itself:

There's something about an environment ill-equipped for my survival
that makes me feel alive.
Despite conditions that threaten my existence,
for some sweet reason, I thrive.
Practice, I suppose.[2]

2 From *Poems From My Pillow.*

VI. Shrinking

Illness is not linear, and neither is writing. Some days I can only offer aphorisms, fragments, contradictions.

Autotheory, for me, is a way of making these fragments count – refusing to smooth over the incoherence that illness demands. Fournier reminds us that autotheory often emerges from feminist refusals of coherence (Fournier 2021). My performance and this writing both occupy that refusal.

To live with ME is to shrink one's world:

I know that it stresses him out when my side of the bed is a mess.
But there are times when that side of the bed is my entire world.[3]

3 From my journal.

From that small world, I make art.
From that art, I build theory.
From that theory, I reclaim legitimacy.

VII. Performing unproductivity

Neoliberal institutions love the myth of the tireless artist: the all-nighter, the grind, the constant 'output'. Universities, rehearsal studios, residencies – all shaped by the cult of *doing*.

My illness makes doing unreliable.
It forces me into being.

This is not to romanticise incapacity, but to recognise its epistemic gift. Chronic illness refuses the metric. It measures time in flares, not deadlines. It dismantles the binary between rest and work, forcing them into dialogue.

In my solo work, performance becomes research – not in the institutional sense, but in the sense of reaching into the dark and making sense of myself. When I perform from bed, I'm not simply adapting; I am insisting that slowness belongs on stage. That rest is not absence but presence.

As Lorde reminds us, 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare' (Lorde 1980: 130). My training now is warfare through softness.

VIII. Towards rest as methodology

If training relies on repetition, what happens when the only repetition available is pain?

A pedagogy of rest begins here – not as passivity but as practice. What if training curricula taught adaptation, pacing, and care as core methods? What if rehearsal rooms recognised fatigue as a collaborator rather than a hindrance?

Rest can be rigorous. It requires listening to the smallest signals, recalibrating constantly, enduring the guilt of doing less. It is a discipline of its own – one that resists the productivity imperative at the heart of both neoliberalism and performance culture.

My pillow, then, becomes both prop and manifesto. To train in the shadows is to insist that art made from bed is still art. That legitimacy is not earned through exertion but through showing up as we are.

IX. Coda: a soft manifesto

I am alive, but I feel like I am dying. Every system fails me daily.
And yet, I write. I perform. I rest.

To be chronically ill is to belong to something else.
I am no longer a patient of the NHS, but nobody else will have me.
To be chronically ill is to be other to Western medicine.[4]

From this otherness, I make knowledge.
From this fatigue, I make form.
From this bed, I make resistance.

4 From my journal.

Autotheory offers me a framework where my pain is not anecdote but evidence. Where my body is both subject and methodology. Where training, finally, becomes a practice of necessity – and necessity, a radical site of art.

'I used to think I was the strangest person in the world', Frida Kahlo wrote, 'but then I thought there must be someone just like me.'

If you are reading this from your bed, know that I am here,
writing from mine.
And that this, too, is training.

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