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The Body as Sign in Pantomime Performance: A Systematic Literature Review of Semiotics, Embodiment, and Visual Dramaturgy

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Abstract: This study aims to synthesize contemporary pantomime scholarship by positioning the body as a primary sign system within the contexts of semiotics, embodiment, and visual dramaturgy. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework was conducted, analyzing 25 peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2025. The findings identify five interconnected dimensions of pantomime performance: evolutionary communication, semiotic representation, embodied cognition, multimodal meaning-making, and visual dramaturgy. These dimensions highlight that pantomime extends beyond nonverbal communication by functioning as a performative system in which bodily action generates and organizes meaning. Based on this synthesis, the study proposes the Body as Sign Framework, which conceptualizes the body as a multidimensional system of signification operating across communicative, cognitive, semiotic, and performative processes. This framework offers an integrative theoretical model that connects previously fragmented perspectives in pantomime research. The study contributes to theatre and performance studies by providing a conceptual foundation for analyzing embodied meaning-making and body-based performance practices. It also offers directions for future research on visual dramaturgy and nonverbal communication in contemporary performance contexts.

Keywords: body as sign, embodied performance, pantomime, visual dramaturgy, performance studies

1. INTRODUCTION

The body has long occupied a central position in theatrical performance as a primary medium through which meaning, emotion, and narrative are constructed and communicated. Across diverse performance traditions, bodily movement, gesture, posture, facial expression, and spatial interaction function not merely as expressive tools but as systems of signs that enable performers to create symbolic and aesthetic experiences for audiences (Foster, 2013; Marsden, 2020). Contemporary performance studies increasingly recognize that meaning in performance emerges through embodied action, where the body actively participates in the production, negotiation, and interpretation of theatrical meaning rather than simply serving as a vehicle for verbal expression (Movsesian, 2025; Pan et al., 2024).

This perspective aligns with broader developments in semiotics, embodiment theory, and multimodal communication, which emphasize that meaning is produced not only through language but also through the interaction of visual, gestural, spatial, and performative modes (Goldin-Meadow & Alibali, 2013; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). Within this framework, the body functions as a dynamic sign system capable of representing actions, emotions, social



relationships, and cultural experiences. As a result, bodily performance becomes a significant site for examining how meaning is generated, communicated, and interpreted through embodied and visual forms of expression.

One of the most distinctive forms of embodied performance is pantomime. As a theatrical practice that relies primarily on gesture, movement, facial expression, and action representation without spoken language, pantomime provides a unique context for understanding how the body operates as a sign-producing system (Salal & Oda, 2022; Zlatev et al., 2020). Through bodily enactment and visual storytelling, performers are able to construct narrative, evoke emotional responses, and communicate complex meanings without verbal support. Consequently, pantomime occupies an important position at the intersection of semiotics, embodiment, and visual dramaturgy, making it a particularly valuable subject for investigating the role of the body in meaning-making processes within performance.

Despite the growing body of research on pantomime, existing scholarship remains fragmented across diverse disciplinary domains, including evolutionary linguistics, gesture studies, cognitive science, communication research, and semiotics (Osiurak et al., 2023; Sibierska et al., 2023; Żywicznyński et al., 2018). Most studies have focused on the origins of language, communicative functions, gesture systems, or cognitive mechanisms underlying pantomimic action (Gärdenfors, 2021; Zlatev et al., 2020; Żywicznyński, Wacewicz, et al., 2021). While these studies have significantly advanced the understanding of pantomime as a communicative phenomenon, they have rarely examined pantomime as an integrated performance practice in which bodily action simultaneously functions as representation, signification, cognition, and artistic expression.

Although several scholars have investigated pantomime within theatrical and performance contexts (Ekardo, 2018; Movsesian, 2025; Salal & Oda, 2022), existing studies tend to focus on performance techniques, actor skills, artistic expression, or descriptive analyses of stage practice. Consequently, there remains limited theoretical integration explaining how the body operates as an autonomous sign-producing system within pantomime performance. Likewise, performance-oriented studies have not yet systematically connected bodily expression with broader discussions of semiotics, embodiment, and visual meaning-making in theatre and performance studies (Foster, 2013; Marsden, 2020).

Furthermore, research explicitly addressing the relationship between embodiment, semiotics, and visual dramaturgy in pantomime remains relatively scarce. Existing studies frequently examine gesture, movement, communication, and performance as separate analytical categories rather than as interconnected dimensions of embodied theatrical practice (Gillespie-Lynch, 2021; Goldin-Meadow & Alibali, 2013; Żywicznyński & Wacewicz, 2022). This fragmentation has limited the development of a comprehensive conceptual framework capable of explaining how bodily action, visual representation, spatial interaction, and performative context collectively generate meaning in pantomime performance.

The need for such a framework has become increasingly relevant in contemporary performing arts, where bodily presence, visual expression, and multimodal performance play central roles in the construction of theatrical experience and audience engagement

(MacNeil & Enns, 2024; Movsesian, 2025; Pan et al., 2024). Understanding the body as a dynamic sign system is therefore important not only for pantomime studies but also for broader discussions of physical theatre, embodied performance, and visual dramaturgy.

To the best of the authors' knowledge, no previous systematic literature review has specifically synthesized pantomime scholarship through the combined lenses of semiotics, embodiment, and visual dramaturgy. Existing reviews and theoretical discussions have generally focused on communication, language evolution, gesture studies, or cognitive perspectives without developing an integrative framework for understanding bodily meaning-making in pantomime performance.

Based on these considerations, this study offers a novel contribution by systematically synthesizing interdisciplinary scholarship on pantomime and proposing the Body as Sign Framework as an integrative theoretical model. Unlike previous studies that have examined pantomime from isolated disciplinary perspectives, this research brings together insights from semiotics, embodiment theory, cognitive studies, and performance scholarship to explain how bodily performance functions as a multidimensional system of meaning production. Through this framework, the study positions the body not merely as a medium of expression or communication but as an autonomous sign system operating within pantomime performance and visual dramaturgy.

Thus, this study seeks to address this gap by conducting a systematic literature review of contemporary pantomime scholarship and examining how the body functions as an autonomous sign system within pantomime performance. By synthesizing perspectives from semiotics, embodiment theory, cognitive studies, and performance scholarship, this study aims to identify the key dimensions through which bodily performance generates and communicates meaning. Furthermore, the study seeks to develop the Body as Sign Framework as an integrative conceptual model for understanding embodied meaning-making and visual dramaturgy in pantomime performance. Through this contribution, the research is expected to advance discussions in theatre and performance studies while providing a foundation for future investigations into body-based performance practices and nonverbal meaning-making.

Based on this background, the research questions are (1) how has pantomime performance been conceptualized in contemporary scholarly literature between 2010 and 2025? (2) what major themes and theoretical dimensions emerge from the literature regarding semiotics, embodiment, and visual dramaturgy in pantomime performance? (3) how do these dimensions contribute to understanding the body as a sign-producing system in pantomime performance? (4) how can the relationships among these dimensions be synthesized into a conceptual framework for embodied meaning-making in pantomime performance?

The objectives of this research are (1) to analyze and map conceptualizations of pantomime performance in contemporary scholarly literature published between 2010 and 2025., (2) to identify and explore key themes and theoretical dimensions emerging from the literature on semiotics, embodiment, and visual dramaturgy in pantomime performance (3) to explain the contribution of these

dimensions to an understanding of the body as a sign-producing system in pantomime performance, and (4) to Develop and synthesize the relationships between these dimensions into a conceptual framework for embodied meaning-making in pantomime performance.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Approach

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize contemporary scholarship on pantomime performance, particularly in relation to semiotics, embodiment, and visual dramaturgy. The SLR approach was selected because research on pantomime remains fragmented across multiple disciplinary fields, including theatre and performance studies, semiotics, gesture studies, cognitive science, and communication research. By integrating findings from these diverse perspectives, the review seeks to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how the body functions as a sign-producing and meaning-making system in pantomime performance (Kitchenham et al., 2009; Tranfield et al., 2003).

To ensure methodological rigor, this review followed the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Page et al., 2021), which provide a standardized framework for reporting the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of literature.

2.2 Literature Search Strategy

A systematic literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including Scopus, Copernicus, and Web of Science, with Google Scholar as a supplementary source. To broaden coverage, national repositories such as Garuda and SINTA were also included. The search strategy was designed to capture interdisciplinary studies on pantomime performance from the perspectives of semiotics, embodiment, visual dramaturgy, communication, cognition, and performance studies.

Structured keywords and Boolean operators (AND, OR) were applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords. The search terms included "pantomime," "pantomime performance," "gesture communication," "nonverbal communication," "body as sign," "embodiment," "embodied communication," "visual dramaturgy," "performance studies," and "semiotics." The search was limited to peer-reviewed publications from 2010 to 2025, with retrieval conducted between January and March 2026. Only accessible full-text articles were included, ensuring transparency, consistency, and replicability in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines.

Table 1. Search Strategy

No.	Concept	Keywords
1	Pantomime	pantomime, pantomime performance
2	Semiotics	semiotics, body as sign
3	Embodiment	embodiment, embodied communication
4	Performance	visual dramaturgy, performance studies
5	Communication	gesture communication, nonverbal communication

Table 2 summarizes the search strategy applied in this study, detailing the main concepts and keywords used to identify relevant studies across selected academic databases.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to ensure the relevance, credibility, and methodological quality of the selected literature (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Studies were included if they met the following criteria: (1) published as peer-reviewed journal articles; (2) published between 2010 and 2025; (3) written in English or Indonesian; (4) focused on pantomime, bodily performance, gesture, semiotics, embodiment, visual dramaturgy, or related themes relevant to the research objectives; and (5) available in full-text form for detailed analysis. Articles indexed in Scopus, SINTA, or published in reputable scholarly journals and academic databases were prioritized.

Studies were excluded if they: (1) were not relevant to the focus of pantomime performance and bodily meaning-making; (2) consisted primarily of clinical, medical, or experimental investigations without a clear connection to communication, semiotics, or performance studies; (3) were duplicate records retrieved from multiple databases; (4) originated from non-peer-reviewed or non-scholarly sources; or (5) were published in formats such as editorials, opinion pieces, blog posts, book reviews, or other non-research publications.

To ensure comprehensive coverage of the field, studies were selected based on their thematic relevance, scholarly quality, and contribution to pantomime scholarship rather than solely on database indexing status. This approach allowed the inclusion of influential studies from theatre, performance, communication, and interdisciplinary research contexts that were directly relevant to the objectives of the review.

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

No.	Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
1	Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Editorials, blogs, opinion articles
2	Publication year	2010–2025	Before 2010
3	Language	English, Indonesian	Other languages
4	Topic relevance	Pantomime, embodiment, semiotics, visual dramaturgy	Unrelated topics
5	Accessibility	Full-text available	Full-text unavailable

Table 2 summarizes the inclusion and exclusion criteria employed in this study. These criteria guided the selection process to ensure the relevance, quality, and methodological consistency of the studies included in the review..

2.4 Literature Selection Process (PRISMA)

The literature selection process followed the four stages of the PRISMA 2020 framework: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (Page et al., 2021). During the identification stage, an initial search across the selected databases yielded 83 records. In the screening stage, titles and abstracts were reviewed to remove duplicate records and studies that were not relevant to the objectives

of the review. Subsequently, the remaining full-text articles were assessed during the eligibility stage according to the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Following this evaluation process, 25 studies were considered relevant and were included in the final synthesis.

The PRISMA-guided selection procedure ensured a transparent, systematic, and reproducible review process. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram, illustrating the number of records identified, screened, excluded, and ultimately included in the review.

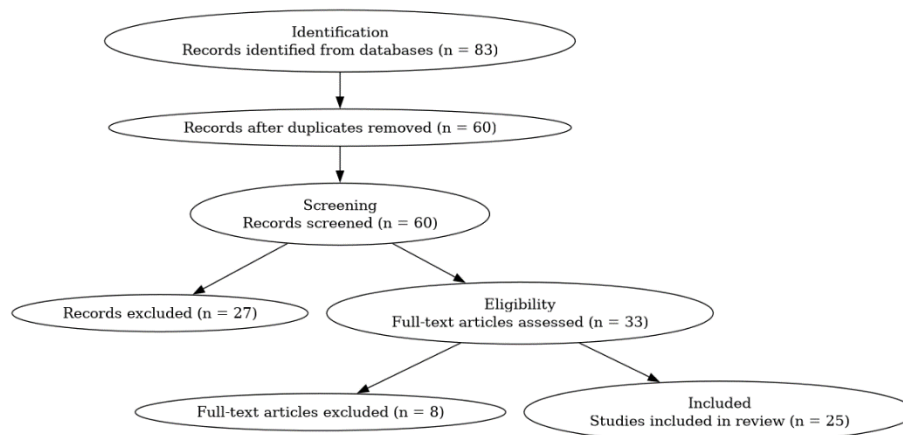


Figure 1. Literature Selection Flowchart (PRISMA)

2.5 Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data from the selected studies were extracted using a structured coding format that included the author(s), publication year, research objectives, methodological approach, theoretical perspectives, and principal findings relevant to pantomime performance, semiotics, embodiment, and visual dramaturgy. This procedure facilitated the systematic organization and comparison of findings across the selected literature.

The analytical process involved data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, and theme definition (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through this process, recurring patterns and conceptual relationships were identified and synthesized into broader thematic dimensions. The resulting themes were subsequently integrated to develop the Body as Sign Framework, which serves as an interpretive model for understanding embodied meaning-making and the operation of the body as an autonomous sign system in pantomime performance.

2.6 Quality Assessment, Validity, and Reliability

To ensure the quality of the reviewed literature, a quality assessment procedure was conducted for all selected studies. The assessment considered several criteria, including thematic relevance to the research objectives, clarity of the research methodology, theoretical contribution, and publication in peer-reviewed scholarly journals. These criteria were used to ensure that only studies with sufficient academic rigor and relevance were included in the final synthesis (Kitchenham et al., 2009).

The validity of the review was strengthened through the use of multiple academic databases, clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, and a PRISMA-based selection procedure (Page et al., 2021). Reliability was enhanced by maintaining transparency throughout the review process, including the documentation of search strategies, screening procedures, selection decisions, and data extraction protocols. Such systematic documentation improves the consistency, traceability, and replicability of the review, enabling future researchers to reproduce or extend the study (Tranfield et al., 2003).

Table 3. Quality Assessment Criteria

No.	Criteria	Description
1	Relevance	Alignment with pantomime performance, semiotics, embodiment, or visual dramaturgy
2	Methodological Clarity	Clear research design and procedures
3	Theoretical Contribution	Contribution to conceptual or theoretical understanding
4	Scholarly Quality	Publication in peer-reviewed academic journals

Table 3 summarizes the criteria applied in the quality assessment process, which were used to ensure the relevance, methodological clarity, and scholarly rigor of the selected studies included in the review.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

The literature identification process was conducted through a systematic search of the Scopus, Google Scholar, Garuda, and SINTA databases using predefined keywords related to pantomime, embodiment, semiotics, gesture communication, and nonverbal communication. Following the PRISMA 2020 procedure, records were screened based on titles, abstracts, and full-text eligibility criteria. After removing irrelevant studies, duplicate records, and non-scholarly publications, 25 studies were retained for the final analysis.

The thematic analysis identified five recurring dimensions that consistently appeared across the selected studies: (1) pantomime as an evolutionary communication system, (2) the body as a sign system, (3) pantomime and embodied cognition, (4) pantomime as multimodal meaning-making, and (5) pantomime as a performative practice and visual dramaturgy. The five dimensions identified across the literature include evolutionary communication, semiotic representation, embodied cognition, multimodal meaning-making, and visual dramaturgy.

3.1.1 Pantomime as an Evolutionary Communication System

This theme frequently appears in the reviewed literature. Most research in the field of evolutionary linguistics views pantomime as an early human communication system that predated the development of modern verbal language.

Pantomime enables humans to convey information through body-based representations of actions. Several studies describe communication in pantomime as iconic, where the relationship between the sign and the object is established through visual resemblance (Adornetti et al., 2023; Zlatev et al., 2020; Żywicznyński, Waciewicz, et al., 2021).

Research in Language and Communication indicates that gestures and action simulations possess representational capacities that enabled early humans to establish collective communication before the development of abstract linguistic systems (Gärdenfors, 2021; Żywicznyński, Sibierska, et al., 2021).

Other studies describe pantomime as a form of communication that can be understood across cultures without reliance on verbal language (Sibierska et al., 2022). The reviewed studies describe early human communication as involving embodied and multimodal forms of representation, particularly through pantomimic action and gesture.

Table 4. Pantomime Themes as an Evolutionary Communication System

Articles	Focus	Main Findings	Implication
Żywicznyński et al. (2021)	Proto-language	Pantomime precedes verbal language	The body as an early communication system
Zlatev et al. (2020)	Iconicity	Gestures are representational	The body as a visual icon
Adornetti et al. (2023)	Evolution of communication	Body communication is embodied	The body as the basis of human communication
Gärdenfors (2021)	Gesture experiments	Pantomime effectively conveys action	The body as a medium of representation
Żywicznyński et al. (2021)	Iconic gesture	Gestures construct visual meaning	The body as visual communication

The reviewed studies consistently highlight the representational function of the body in pantomime.

3.1.2 The Body as a Sign System

The second theme describes the body in pantomime as both a means of communication and a visual sign system. Gesture semiotic research shows that body movements possess a representational structure that enables the formation of visual meaning (Zlatev et al., 2017; Żywicznyński et al., 2018). Several studies describe gestures as iconic signs in which the body visually represents objects, actions, or emotions.

Gesture studies also show that gestures have independent semiotic capacity without the support of verbal language (Goldin-Meadow & Alibali, 2013). The reviewed studies describe the body in pantomime as functioning as a primary medium of communication, in addition to complementing verbal communication. In addition, research on embodied semiotics shows that the process of semiosis takes place through bodily actions and visual-spatial interactions (Gillespie-Lynch, 2021; Żywicznyński & Waciewicz, 2022).

Table 5. Body Themes as a Sign System

Articles	Focus	Main Findings	Implication
Żywicznyński et al (2018)	Semiotics of gesture	Gesture has a semiotic structure	The body as a sign system
Zlatev et al (2017)	Iconicity	Gestures are representational	The body as a visual icon
Goldin-Meadow & Alibali (2013)	Gesture review	Gestures can stand independently	The body as a medium of communication

Articles	Focus	Main Findings	Implication
Gillespie-Lynch (2021)	Embodied semiotics	Meaning is produced through the body	The body as a locus of semiosis
Żywicznyński & Waciewicz (2022)	Semiotic embodiment	Gestures construct visual meaning	The body as visual semiotics

The studies describe the body as a semiotic system associated with gesture, expression, and spatial interaction.

3.1.3 *Pantomime and Embodied Cognition*

The next theme describes the relationship between pantomime and embodied cognition. Neurocognitive research indicates that the production and interpretation of pantomime involve sensorimotor systems and action simulation (Finkel et al., 2018; Osiurak et al., 2023). Studies in embodied cognition describe meaning as emerging from interactions between bodily experience, the visual environment, and sensorimotor processes.

Other research indicates that gestures aid in the formation of mental representations and the construction of visual meaning (Marentette et al., 2020; van Nispen et al., 2017).. The reviewed studies describe the body as being closely associated with processes of thought and communication, in addition to its role in external expression.

Table 6. Pantomime and Embodied Cognition Themes

Articles	Focus	Main Findings	Implication
Finkel et al. (2018)	Neural pantomime	Motor activation in pantomime	The body as a sensorimotor system
Osiurak et al. (2023)	Body cognition	Body movements construct representations of actions	The body as a simulation of action
van Nispen et al. (2017)	Gesture cognition	Gestures support the construction of meaning	The body as a cognitive tool
Marentette et al. (2020)	Embodied meaning	Meaning is constructed through bodily experience	The body as a construction of meaning

Several studies identify a strong relationship between pantomime and embodied cognition.

3.1.4 *Pantomime as Multimodal Meaning-Making*

The fourth theme describes pantomime as a multimodal process of meaning-making in which communication emerges through the interaction of gesture, facial expression, bodily movement, spatial orientation, rhythm, and performative context. Pantomime integrates multiple expressive modes, including gesture, facial expression, bodily movement, spatial orientation, rhythm, and performative context.

Studies in embodiment and multimodality describe bodily actions as representational resources through which performers create narrative, emotion, and symbolic meaning (Goldin-Meadow & Alibali, 2013; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). Studies on pantomime demonstrate that meaning is generated through the coordination of visual, kinetic, and spatial elements, allowing audiences to interpret actions and intentions through embodied performance (Sibierska et al., 2023; Zlatev et al., 2020).

Within performance contexts, several studies describe that multimodal processes in pantomime are associated with visual storytelling and audience engagement through the transformation of bodily action into systems of representation (Movsesian, 2025; Salal & Oda, 2022). The reviewed literature identifies that pantomime involves multiple signifying resources that operate simultaneously, including gesture, movement, facial expression, and spatial interaction, to produce theatrical and communicative meaning.

Table 7 summarizes representative studies that conceptualize pantomime as a multimodal process of meaning-making, highlighting how gesture, movement, facial expression, spatial orientation, and visual representation interact to generate meaning within performance contexts.

Table 7. Themes of Pantomime as Multimodal Meaning-Making

Articles	Focus	Main Findings	Implication
Goldin-Meadow & Alibali (2013)	Gesture and nonverbal meaning-making	Gestures convey information independently of spoken language and contribute to the construction of meaning.	Meaning is generated through multiple communicative modes, not solely through verbal expression.
Kress & van Leeuwen (2020)	Multimodality and visual meaning	Communication emerges from the interaction of visual, spatial, gestural, and representational resources.	Pantomime can be understood as a multimodal signifying practice that integrates multiple semiotic resources.
Sibierska et al. (2023)	Pantomime as multimodal communication	Pantomimic actions combine bodily movement, gesture, and contextual cues to communicate intentions and meanings.	Meaning in pantomime is produced through the coordination of several embodied modes simultaneously.
Zlatev et al. (2020)	Pantomime and bodily representation	Pantomime relies on iconic bodily representation that enables audiences to infer actions, objects, and events.	Bodily performance functions as a multimodal representational system.
Salal & Oda (2022)	Pantomime performance and acting skills	Effective pantomime performance depends on the integration of gesture, facial expression, movement, and spatial awareness.	Theatrical meaning emerges through the interaction of multiple embodied and performative elements.
Movsesian (2025)	Visual storytelling in pantomime	Gestures convey information independently of spoken language and contribute to the construction of meaning.	Pantomime operates as a multimodal meaning-making process that supports visual storytelling and audience engagement.

The studies summarized in Table 7 consistently identify pantomime as a multimodal process involving the interaction of multiple expressive elements, particularly gesture, movement, facial expression, and spatial representation.

3.1.5 Pantomime as a Performative Practice and Visual Dramaturgy

The fifth theme describes pantomime as a performative practice associated with embodied action, theatrical presence, and visual dramaturgy. Studies in theatre and performance scholarship suggest that pantomime operates through performativity, in which bodily

actions are involved in the production of meaning within performance contexts (Foster, 2013; Marsden, 2020).

Through gesture, posture, movement, rhythm, and spatial interaction, performers create visual narratives that enable audiences to interpret actions, relationships, and symbolic meanings without reliance on verbal language.

Studies in performance research describe visual dramaturgy as a framework for organizing meaning within pantomime. Research indicates that pantomime structures narrative progression through visual composition, bodily movement, spatial arrangement, and performative timing (Movsesian, 2025; Salal & Oda, 2022). These elements are associated with the organization of theatrical experience through visual and embodied forms of representation.

Table 8. Themes of Pantomime as a Performative Practice and Visual Dramaturgy

Articles	Focus	Main Findings	Implication
Foster (2013)	Embodied performance and performativity	Bodily action functions as a central component of meaning production in performance.	Meaning emerges through embodied performance rather than verbal representation alone.
Marsden (2020)	Pantomime as theatrical practice	Pantomime employs bodily expression, movement, and visual representation to construct narrative.	The body acts as a performative medium for storytelling.
Salal & Oda (2022)	Acting skills in pantomime theatre	Effective pantomime performance depends on gesture, facial expression, timing, and spatial awareness.	Meaning is produced through coordinated performative elements.
Movsesian (2025)	Visual storytelling and performance	Pantomime communicates narrative and emotion through bodily performativity and visual expression.	Visual dramaturgy plays a crucial role in audience interpretation.
Pan et al. (2024)	Nonverbal performance and audience engagement	Visual and bodily cues shape audience understanding and emotional response.	Performance meaning is co-constructed through performer–audience interaction.
MacNeil & Enns (2024)	Pantomime actions and representation	Bodily representation functions as a dynamic visual system within performance contexts.	The body operates as both signifier and performative agent.

Table 8 indicates that the reviewed studies consistently describe pantomime as a performative practice linked to embodied action and visual dramaturgy, particularly through the coordination of gesture, movement, spatial interaction, and performative timing in theatrical contexts.

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 The Body as a Multidimensional Sign System in Pantomime Performance

The findings reveal that pantomime cannot be adequately understood through a single disciplinary perspective. Across the reviewed studies, the body consistently emerges as a multidimensional sign system operating simultaneously at semiotic, cognitive, communicative, and performative levels. This observation extends traditional understandings of pantomime as merely a form of

nonverbal communication and positions bodily performance as a complex mechanism of meaning production.

From a semiotic perspective, bodily actions function as signs that represent objects, actions, emotions, and social relationships through iconic and symbolic processes (Zlatev et al., 2020; Żywiczyński et al., 2021). At the same time, embodiment research demonstrates that meaning is not simply encoded in bodily movements but emerges through the interaction between bodily experience, cognition, and environmental context (Gillespie-Lynch, 2021; Osiurak et al., 2023). Consequently, the body in pantomime should be understood not merely as a medium of expression but as an active site of signification.

The findings further indicate that meaning-making in pantomime occurs through the integration of multiple representational modes, including gesture, movement, facial expression, spatial orientation, rhythm, and visual composition. This multimodal process enables performers to construct narrative and emotional meaning without verbal language, reinforcing the role of the body as a dynamic and autonomous sign-producing system.

3.2.2 Integrating Semiotics, Embodiment, and Visual Dramaturgy

The thematic synthesis suggests that pantomime performance can be most effectively understood through the integration of semiotics, embodiment, and visual dramaturgy. Although these perspectives originate from different disciplinary traditions, the reviewed studies demonstrate that they collectively explain how meaning is generated, experienced, and interpreted through bodily performance.

From a semiotic perspective, pantomime functions as a system of signs in which bodily actions represent objects, events, intentions, and emotions. This finding is consistent with Peircean semiotics, particularly the concept of iconic signs, where meaning is established through resemblance between sign and referent (Zlatev et al., 2020; Żywiczyński et al., 2021). In pantomime, bodily movements visually imitate actions and experiences, allowing audiences to infer meaning without verbal language. The findings therefore support the view that the body serves not merely as a communicative channel but as a primary site of signification.

However, semiotics alone cannot fully explain how such meanings are produced and understood. The reviewed studies indicate that meaning in pantomime emerges through embodied action, where cognition, perception, and bodily experience operate as interconnected processes (Gillespie-Lynch, 2021; Osiurak et al., 2023). This observation aligns with embodiment theory, which argues that meaning is grounded in bodily engagement with the world rather than in abstract symbolic systems alone. Through embodied cognition, bodily movement becomes both a representational and experiential process, enabling performers and audiences to construct meaning through action.

The findings further demonstrate that semiotic representation and embodied experience become meaningful within specific performative contexts. This is where visual dramaturgy provides an essential interpretive dimension. Studies in performance scholarship emphasize that meaning in pantomime is shaped through the organization of gesture, movement, rhythm, spatial arrangement, and visual composition within theatrical performance (Foster, 2013;

Marsden, 2020; Movsesian, 2025). Visual dramaturgy therefore functions as the structural mechanism that coordinates embodied signs into coherent narrative and symbolic experiences.

Taken together, these findings indicate that semiotics, embodiment, and visual dramaturgy function as complementary dimensions of bodily meaning-making. Semiotics explains how bodily actions operate as signs, embodiment accounts for how these signs are grounded in sensorimotor experience, and visual dramaturgy structures them within performative contexts. Their integration provides a more comprehensive account of pantomime than any single theoretical perspective, forming the conceptual basis for the proposed Body as Sign Framework.

3.2.3 The Body as Sign Framework

Based on the thematic synthesis of the reviewed literature, this study proposes the Body as Sign Framework as an integrative model for understanding meaning-making in pantomime performance. The framework is derived from the convergence of five recurring dimensions identified across the selected studies: evolutionary communication, semiotic representation, embodied cognition, multimodal meaning-making, and visual dramaturgy. These dimensions collectively explain how bodily performance operates as a system of generating, organizing, and communicating meaning within pantomime.

The first dimension, evolutionary communication, situates pantomime within broader discussions on the origins of human communication and symbolic behavior. Studies in evolutionary linguistics describe pantomime as an early form of intentional meaning-making that enables the communication of actions, objects, and events through bodily representation (Gärdenfors, 2021; Zlatev et al., 2020; Żywicznyński et al., 2018). This dimension establishes the communicative foundations of bodily signification.

The second dimension, semiotic representation, conceptualizes pantomimic action as a system of signification. Drawing on semiotic theories of iconicity, bodily movements function as signs that represent and resemble particular referents (Zlatev et al., 2020; Żywicznyński, Sibierska, et al., 2021). In this context, the body operates as a sign-producing system capable of generating symbolic and representational meaning.

The third dimension, embodied cognition, explains how meaning emerges through bodily experience and sensorimotor processes. Embodiment theory emphasizes that cognition is grounded in the interaction between bodily action and environmental perception (Gillespie-Lynch, 2021; Osieurak et al., 2023). In pantomime, meaning is constructed through embodied simulation, enabling both performers and audiences to engage in experiential processes of interpretation.

The fourth dimension, multimodal meaning-making, highlights the integration of multiple semiotic resources in performance. Meaning is produced through the coordinated interaction of gesture, movement, facial expression, spatial orientation, and visual representation (Goldin-Meadow & Alibali, 2013; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020; Sibierska et al., 2023). This dimension underscores that bodily meaning-making in pantomime is inherently multimodal and relational.

The fifth dimension, visual dramaturgy, situates bodily signification within performative contexts. Research in performance

4. CONCLUSION

This study systematically reviewed contemporary pantomime scholarship published between 2010 and 2025 to examine how pantomime performance has been conceptualized in relation to semiotics, embodiment, and visual dramaturgy. The analysis demonstrates that pantomime has been understood through diverse disciplinary perspectives, reflecting its evolution from a form of nonverbal communication toward a multidimensional system of meaning-making.

The findings identify five interconnected dimensions (evolutionary communication, semiotic representation, embodied cognition, multimodal meaning-making, and visual dramaturgy) that structure the conceptualization of pantomime performance in the literature. These dimensions explain how bodily action represents, experiences, communicates, and organizes meaning within performance contexts.

Based on this synthesis, the study develops the Body as Sign Framework, which integrates these dimensions into a unified conceptual model. The framework positions the body as a dynamic and autonomous site of signification, where semiotic, cognitive, communicative, and performative processes converge. This integrative model addresses the fragmentation identified in previous studies and provides a coherent foundation for understanding embodied meaning-making in pantomime performance.

This study contributes to theatre and performance studies by offering a theoretical framework that connects previously isolated perspectives into an integrated approach. It also provides a foundation for future research to further explore body-based performance practices, multimodal communication, and visual dramaturgy across diverse cultural and artistic contexts.

This finding reinforces the importance of understanding the body as a central mechanism of meaning-making in contemporary performance practices. However, the study is limited by its reliance on published literature and may not capture emerging practices outside academic discourse.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Samsul Alam was responsible for the conceptualization and original draft preparation of the study. Tri Haryotedjo contributed equally to the data collection process, systematic screening, and the subsequent editing and reviewing of the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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