

## BodyWeather in the Central Desert of Australia: towards an ecology of performance

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If the central fact of theatre is the live presence of both performers and spectators, then space necessarily becomes the vital third element, for it is the space that permits performers and spectators to be present together. In the second half of the twentieth century, the performance space itself has been the focus of intensive exploration and experimentation by theatre practitioners, and this exploration reflects dominant ideas about representation and about the nature of theatre as a social event in the community in question. It could be argued that this half century of continually renewed exploration and experimentation reveals a profound uncertainty about both philosophy of representation and the social event constituted by theatre, and we may conclude with Ariane Mnouchkine who said "we just have to face it, the twentieth century does not know how to build theatres"<sup>1</sup>. Notwithstanding the absence of consensus around some distinctively twentieth century style of theatre design, I think we have to acknowledge the energy and ingenuity that successive generations of theatre practitioners, including Ariane Mnouchkine, have over the last 50 years brought to the task of rethinking the theatre space, their refusal to accept the buildings of the past without problematising the relations they impose, and their skill at finding spatial solutions in the present for works devised for very different theatre spaces, thereby revitalising the works and giving them new and unexpected relevance to contemporary life. I would argue that all this constitutes one of the outstanding achievements of the theatre in the second half of the twentieth century.

The centrality of space in the theatre experience is increasingly also becoming the focus of academic discourse, as is evident in the theme chosen for this conference, and it has been the focus of my own research for many years<sup>2</sup>. My concern in this paper, however, is place rather than space, which I see as a logical extension of my earlier research to which I have been led as much by the move by many contemporary groups towards performing in non-traditional spaces as by what might be called the 'ecological turn' increasingly being taken by critical theory. I use the term "space", in the context of theatre and performance, to refer to the physical arrangement of the performance venue, the nature of the presentational space, the relationship that this creates between performers and spectators, set design, blocking, etc., while "place" refers to the location of the performance venue within the social space of the community and the historical and cultural resonance of this locale for the community in question. The two concepts are, thus, closely interrelated, the one frequently underpinning or embedded in the other, but it is through place that we are led insistently to consider the social inscription of the performance work.

Edward Casey uses a phenomenological framework to argue for the primacy of place over space, thus reversing the received wisdom of two centuries of philosophical and scientific thought which has conceptualised space as infinite and empty, and place as a compartmentalisation of this featureless infinitude. But as Casey sees it:

We come to the world - we come into it and keep returning to it - as already placed there. Places are not added to sensations any more than they are imposed on spaces. Both sensations and spaces are themselves emplaced from the very first moment, and at every subsequent moment as well<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Luc Boucris, *L'espace en scène*, Paris, Librairie Théâtrale, 1993, p.195.

<sup>2</sup> See Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1999. This paper was delivered at the International Federation for Theatre Research conference in 2000; the conference theme was Theatre: Sound Space, Visual Space.

<sup>3</sup> In Steven Feld and Keith Basso (Eds), *Senses of Place*, Santa Fe, School of American Research Press, 1996, p.18.

This is certainly true of the theatre experience which, for the spectator, must necessarily begin with the journey to the place where the performance will occur; in any theatrical performance both the performance space and the spectator's sensations are necessarily "emplaced", to repeat Casey's word, and the emplacement is a dynamic part of the meaning making process.

It seems that place is increasingly becoming a central concept in disciplines as varied as cultural geography, social history, politics, sociology and anthropology as scholars and theorists attempt to come to terms with the realities of the postcolonial world, with contested places, expropriation, migration, tourism and the looming fear of ecological disaster. Theatre and performance are art forms that are necessarily and unavoidably enmeshed in both space and place, and thus have their own contribution to make to the growing discourse about place, especially through the practices that have come to be known as site specific performance.

A focus on place seems to lead almost inevitably to political engagement, perhaps because places bring with them the politically charged realities of access, ownership and usage. Performance in non-traditional spaces often brings practitioners and spectators rather brutally into contact with issues of authority and power, but of course this is not new: theatre practitioners over many centuries have experienced at first hand how ownership or control of the performance venue can be used to control who is permitted to perform and what kinds of performance are authorised. The municipal authorities in the 20th century are no more benign than their counterparts in earlier times, and many examples could be given of avant garde or politically radical or sexually explicit performance groups being closed down, not through overt censorship, but through application of building regulations or safety codes.

What is it about theatre that is so disruptive and that has been so feared by the civic authorities through the ages? In part at least this disruption comes from the way the dramatic fiction impacts on the reality of the performance space, destabilising the social reality, creating a dangerous mix of fiction and reality. This is perhaps why theatrical performance has had to be enclosed within specially designated buildings. The heady interplay of fiction and reality becomes unremarkable when it occurs in a theatre, for theatre buildings are places set aside by society to permit a limited indulgence in such transformations without risk of disruption to other public places and the activities they house. Groups who are funded to perform (in the 20th century it is funding that has replaced the royal warrant or official licence of earlier times) work within a framework that virtually ensures that there will be no untoward contamination of the social reality by the performance. Baz Kershaw, meditating on the possibilities of an ecology of performance in a recent issue of *New Theatre Quarterly*, claims that theatre "is becoming increasingly commodified as part of the so-called 'cultural industries' of the globalised economy" and he sees this commodification as "just the latest stage in a long historical process which has severed theatre from a responsive and responsible relation to nature"<sup>4</sup>.

Site specific performance, in its rejection of the traditional theatre spaces provided by our culture, is usually both engaging in a critique of the constraints these impose on practitioners and audiences, and attempting to forge new relationships and ways of seeing. More importantly in terms of the ecological turn of thought that is increasingly coming to the fore, the venue ceases to be simply that which contains the performance but is the pretext for, and often the subject matter of, the performance. As Mike Pearson, director of Brith Gof, says, "site specific performance ... is inseparable from its site, the only context within which it is intelligible"<sup>5</sup>. When performance engages deeply with its chosen site, it brings up ideas of place, history and memory, and it has the potential to disrupt, disturb, and even to change the way people see the familiar surroundings of their daily lives.

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<sup>4</sup> Baz Kershaw, "The theatrical biosphere and ecologies of performance", *New Theatre Quarterly*, May 2000, p.124.

<sup>5</sup> Paper read at Nederlands Theater Instituut, June 1997.

In reflecting on site specific performances I have seen in recent years, I have been struck by the way they frequently shift the emphasis away from the organisation of the performance space (a major signifier in conventional theatre) to the location of this within the social space of the community (usually glossed over or ignored in conventional theatre), and how they can transform the spectators' experience of even the most familiar places, and how the place can transform the spectators' experience of the performance, sometimes in ways that exceed the practitioners' expectations. The analyses required to illustrate these characteristic functions would exceed the scope of a short paper such as this so I have decided to concentrate here on a single example of site specific performance, the BodyWeather Laboratory conducted by Tess de Quincey in the Central Desert near Alice Springs, Australia in 1999. This is the most problematical of the performances I have witnessed and the most challenging in theoretical and methodological terms, but it is also the one that engages most powerfully with the contemporary interest in the nexus between ecology and performance.

Tess de Quincey is a BodyWeather practitioner who trained and performed with Min Tanaka in Japan and who has been working in Australia for a number of years to develop the Butoh and BodyWeather concepts within a contemporary western performance perspective. The laboratory was the first of three, planned to occur over a period of three years, although the future of the work is currently uncertain due to the Australia Council's decision to reject the funding application for the laboratory planned for October 2000. The 1999 project involved a group of about 40 participants living and working in the desert for a period of three weeks; some slept on "swags" in a dry creek bed, some pitched tents, others slept in a disused homestead building. All came with dance or some physical performance discipline, some already had experience of Butoh training, and the daily pattern of the laboratory involved a strict routine of two hours of extremely arduous "muscle and bone" work early in the morning outdoors in the open air, followed by a further two hours of concentrated work in couples exploring and manipulating every joint and ligament in the body.



Figure 1: Muscle and bone work, BodyWeather Laboratory, Hamilton Downs, 1999

In the fiercest heat of the day, participants rested or wrote their diaries, recording the "weather" of their own bodies, and in the cooler part of the late afternoon they did what de Quincey called "groundwork". Here the task was to explore the immediate environs of the camp through the mental and physical disciplines of BodyWeather: blindfold work to

bring senses other than sight to the experience of place, and speed work which involves radically slowing down normal motion, functioning in de Quincey's words "to break open the moment" and enable the performer to forge a new relationship between body and space, body and place.



Figure 2: Blindfold work, BodyWeather Laboratory,  
Hamilton Downs, 1999



Figure 3: Slow motion work, BodyWeather Laboratory,  
Hamilton Downs, 1999

The most powerful of all, from the perspective of performers and observers, were the exercises in which the performers observed intensively an element of the natural world

around them (a cloud, a rock, even a blade of grass) and, through this concentrated attention, attempted (as de Quincey described it later) to empathise on a cellular level with the chosen element.



Figure 4: Groundwork, BodyWeather Laboratory,  
Hamilton Downs, 1999

Locally based artists working in visual media such as photography, installation and painting came to talk about their own work, and some stayed for days and began to create work in relation to the performance activities they saw, and in the evenings there was a programme of talks by historians, meteorologists and botanists. On one occasion members of a local Aboriginal community visited and demonstrated the famous dot painting technique developed by the desert people of central Australia. Alongside the "performance laboratory" was what Tess called the "writers' laboratory", a shifting population of writers, performance analysts and documentors, some of whom stayed for a few days, some for the full three weeks, attempting to gain insight into what it was that was going on there.

This bland description gives no inkling of the power of the experience, nor of the way it interacted with the place, nor of the emotions it unleashed in participants (a number departed in anger and despair, defeated as much by the rigours of the place as the demanding discipline of the BodyWeather programme), nor of the contested nature of the place itself. In Australia, the centre is a profoundly problematical place, and European migrants (or invaders, if we take the perspective of the indigenous population) have from the beginning settled massively on the coastal fringes: two thirds of the population of the whole continent live on a narrow coastal strip, about 60 miles wide, running from

Newcastle to Geelong (approximately one twentieth of the total coastline). During the early decades of European settlement there was great optimism that a vast inland sea would be found, but as the explorers gradually mapped the continent it became apparent that they were dealing with the most arid inhabited land on the planet. The arid zone covers more than 70% of the country, there is no inland sea and many lakes and rivers have a kind of fitful existence in that they might contain water only for a year or so every decade. The inland has been regarded with great ambivalence by European settlers, feared as the "dead heart", later reborn as the "red centre", perceived as empty, featureless and ugly because of the contrast it posed to the lushness and incidence of European landscapes, seen as somehow hostile and treacherous (the early map makers left a record of their attitudes in the names they gave to any elevation: there are a good many places with names like Mount Disappointment and Mount Despair).

In establishing her performance laboratory in the Central Desert, Tess de Quincey is tapping into powerful forces that raise questions about Australian attitudes to their national identity: if the centre of the continent symbolises the "nation's innermost self", as Roslynn Haynes puts it in her book, *Seeking the Centre: the Australian Desert in Literature Art and Film*, (1998, p.140) then what can be said when this innermost self has been seen by most of the inhabitants of the nation as a void, an absence, an emptiness? Even more troubling is the relationship between the original inhabitants and the incoming waves of colonisers, settlers, and immigrants, still unresolved after two hundred years of cohabitation. Judith Wright, one of Australia's greatest poets, has expressed the anguish of European Australians for whom the sense of place must always raise questions about legitimacy and dispossession, and will doubtless do so until effective reconciliation is achieved with the Aboriginal people of Australia. She said:

These two strands - the love of the land we have invaded, and the guilt of the invasion - have become part of me. It is a haunted country.<sup>6</sup>

De Quincey says that, although she is of course intellectually aware of the history of that part of Australia and the issues arising from it for Australians at the end of the twentieth century, her desire to locate the performance laboratory in the Central Desert predates this awareness. She first visited Central Australia in 1983 and felt immediately that it was, in her terms, "a burning point", an impression she cannot explain but which she has experienced on rare occasions in her travels, in places as different as New York and Benares. History and politics have been, as it were, grafted onto her immediate intuitive sense of the place as burning point, but it is the latter which has motivated her long struggle to undertake such a performance laboratory there.

The 1999 laboratory was not site specific performance in any of the ways that this term is normally understood although it was most powerfully site specific and, in Mike Pearson's terms, became intelligible only within the context of that place. It was not a rehearsal for a performance, nor was it research and development towards a performance (although some members of the group have developed a performance since their return to Sydney), and yet it was profoundly performative. What was produced was not a body of work, but a body of experience, an exploration of that place through the performers' bodies, through the performative means offered by BodyWeather. This means that the exploration took place in ways that only the performers themselves could experience and the further corollary is that their activity did not provide a comfortable position of spectatorship, indeed the spectators' presence was somewhat contested and felt as an intrusion.

Reflecting now on this laboratory, on the difficulties involved in describing the work I experienced, on the way it resists the semiotic framework that I have brought to performance analysis and indeed reveals the extent to which that framework is biased towards the visual and the narrative, reflecting also on the participants' discomfort in the presence of spectators (another indication of how far removed this experience was from

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<sup>6</sup> Judith Wright, quoted in George Seddon, *Landprints: reflections on place and landscape*, 1997, p.243.

any traditional kind of performance), and on the way the work problematised everything the practitioners, documentors, analysts and theorists brought with them, I am increasingly convinced that something of great potential significance was involved. Funding authorities and festival directors looking for performance “product”, spectators expecting to be entertained or thrilled, even practitioners seeking to express themselves would all have been disappointed in this laboratory. The list of negatives is in itself an indication of the extent to which the laboratory was breaking new ground.

Artists in Australia have played an important part in reflecting changing attitudes to the land and to our place in it, and the art forms that have to date been dominant are literature and the visual arts (amongst which I would include film). Tess de Quincey's laboratory raises questions about the ways in which performers experience place and what they do with that experience, and these questions are profoundly important at a time when the impact of human beings on the environment is subjecting the entire planet to massive stress. The laboratory made me think about what it is that performance does or can do that other forms of artistic practice or ways of understanding do not do and, most importantly, it demonstrated a vital difference between the visual arts and performance. The performative experience of place necessarily involves being there, performers must be *in* the place rather than looking *at* it, theirs is a lived experience, and the power of performance as an expressive practice, for both performers and spectators, is that it produces more lived experience rather than images or artefacts.

The shift of emphasis from visual image to lived experience ties in with other profound shifts that are occurring in Australian attitudes to the land and to the history of its occupation by European settlers. More and more the objective truths so beloved of the colonial explorers are being problematised and shown as products of a particular time and cultural moment. Paul Carter, re-reading the texts produced by the early explorers and map makers, argues that through their writings they created rather than discovered the country:

...historically speaking, the country did not precede the traveller: it was the offspring of his intention<sup>7</sup>.

Judith Wright takes issue with the very notion of landscape, arguing that it is a European concept, implying distance, separation and a position of viewing, and asserting the superiority of the

reality of the earth-sky-water-tree-spirit-human complex existing in space-time, which is the Aboriginal world<sup>8</sup>.

It seems to me that the embodied experience of place that was central to the BodyWeather Laboratory feeds into these alternative discourses and, in its privileging of the experiential over the visual, it moves site specific performance into interesting territory. Performance art which sets out to critique the commodification of the art object all too often succumbs to the lure of the artefact and turns itself into a video, a set of photographs or a coffee table book. The Laboratory participants' resistance to the spectators is evidence of how far they were from producing a piece of performance or even anything that could be photographed. Photographers Garry Seabrook and Russell Emerson were present throughout the project, matching the performers in their endurance, and it is evident from the images published with this paper that they took some wonderfully evocative photographs and yet Tess de Quincey has expressed disappointment with the visual record. It seems that this is yet another aspect of the way this project threw into question all the skills participants brought to it, but I suggest that this is manifestly not due to any shortcomings in the photographs as pictorial compositions, but rather that there is such a gulf between what the performers experienced and what has been recorded by the photographs. The photographs reveal figures in a landscape, while the performers were engaged in an experience that took them to the edge of their endurance.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, London, Faber & Faber, 1987, p.349.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Wright, “Landscape and dreaming”, in Stephen Graubard (Ed), *Australia: the Daedalus Symposium*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1985, p.32.

Henri Lefebvre talks about the difference between dominated and appropriated space and in *The Production of Space*, published in 1974 but not translated into English until 1991, he claims that

Any revolutionary project today, whether utopian or realistic, must, if it is to avoid hopeless banality, make the reappropriation of the body, in association with the reappropriation of space, into a non-negotiable part of its agenda<sup>9</sup>.

It is through this important observation that I have begun to explore the impact of the BodyWeather performance laboratory, with its accompanying writers' laboratory and parallel involvement of visual artists. The experience was confronting for nearly all concerned, not least because it brought to so many of us a realisation of the limits of our current practice (and this is true of the performers, but also of performance analysts like myself, the documentors, and Tess de Quincey herself, in respect of the teaching of BodyWeather techniques). In all these domains, the techniques and theories we took to the desert with us were tested and found inadequate. Whether or not the performers were comfortable with the new relationships imposed by the laboratory, my feeling about the event is that it did function most powerfully to transform the spectators into participants of a sort, and what we experienced was not a performance but a place, the performative opening up of a sense of that place. And this is at least a move towards the reappropriation of body and space that Lefebvre dreamt of, and the ecologically responsive performance for which Baz Kershaw is calling.

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<sup>9</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, translated D. Nicholson-Smith, Oxford, Blackwell, 1991, pp.166-7.