

## ***FULL HOUSES***

### **Staging Drama in an Historic Mansion**

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#### **Abstract**

One popular form of site-specific theatre as it developed through the 1980s involved the production of plays inside existing houses. This article examines *Living Rooms* which was first produced in 1986 by TheatreWorks – one of a number of small, alternative companies described as Australia’s Next Wave movement. The play divided its audiences into three groups and rotated them through several rooms in a ‘fictional’ colonial mansion where discrete scenes, each depicting an episode in the building’s history, were enacted simultaneously. Like many of TheatreWorks’ ‘location plays’, *Living Rooms* enjoyed full houses through a number of extended seasons and this success derives largely, I would argue, from the interplay of diegetic and real spaces inherent in the production design.

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#### **Background**

TheatreWorks was formed in 1980 by a group of students graduating from the Victorian College of the Arts’ Drama School and in its first iteration as a ‘Next Wave’ company (1980-1990),<sup>1</sup> operated as a ensemble of actors, writers and directors concerned with producing work that both ‘celebrated and disturbed’ their suburban audiences.<sup>2</sup> The idea was to take live performance out of dedicated theatre buildings and produce it closer to the places where people lived and worked. Like its contemporaries (West, Murray River Performing Group, The

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<sup>1</sup> For a definition of the various ‘waves’ of Australian theatre practice I refer to Geoffrey Milne's *Theatre Australia (Un)limited: Australian theatre since the 1950s*. Edited by Veronica Kelly. (New York: Rodopi B.V., 2004), see especially pages 5-6 "Australian Theatre Chronology".

<sup>2</sup> TheatreWorks Archive (Fryer Library, University of Queensland, Brisbane: Company Papers Box, Artistic Policy Folder)

Mill, Crosswinds) TheatreWorks was one of a number of small, professional theatre companies active in Australia in the wake of the 'New Wave': an earlier movement generally associated with the Pram Factory (in Melbourne) and the Nimrod (in Sydney). Throughout the 1970s these two ground breaking companies had provided a platform for the plays of David Williamson, Jack Hibberd, John Romeril, Alex Buzo and Stephen Sewell. Lacking a theatre of its own, TheatreWorks sought to continue this tradition of new Australian work by staging plays 'on location' as early as 1981,<sup>3</sup> and despite their experimental nature, these site-specific works soon found an immediate and popular response among the target audience.

Prior to *Living Rooms* (which I authored),<sup>4</sup> TheatreWorks had successfully produced plays on trams and riverboats. *Storming Mont Albert By Tram* for example, was staged on a Melbourne tram where the narrative unfolded as characters arrived, interacted, and exited the vehicle at various stops.<sup>5</sup> Posing as an ordinary public transport journey, the scripted events on board the tram soon became bound up with the random reality of the streetscape going past (including ordinary commuters who would attempt to board the tram not realizing a play was taking place). This synergy between the spaces of the story, the tram, and its location in the real world, resulted in a collision of real and fictional elements, constructed and unconstructed moments, that took theatre practice into literally new 'territory'. The '*Tram Show*' as it became known, was reproduced half a dozen times on a number of routes in both Melbourne and Adelaide, extending to around 300 performances, carrying approximately 15,000 passengers, and

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'location theatre' derives from TheatreWorks' members experience in low budget film production - a practice where screen actors frequently performed both exterior and interior scenes 'on location'. The term 'site-specific' is now more commonly used in scholarly discourse to describe such plays. See Fiona Wilkie's *Out of Place. The Negotiation of Space In Site-specific Performance*. (Ph.D Thesis, University of Surrey, School of Arts, 2004) and Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Paul Davies, *Living Rooms* (TS. TheatreWorks Archive. Brisbane: Fryer Library, 1986) was produced by TheatreWorks in 'Linden' at 26 Acland Street St. Kilda. It was directed by Andrea Lemon, Caz Howard, Peter Sommerfeld and Paul Davies and developed with the original cast of Cliff Ellen, Rosie Tonkin, Kevin Cotter, Leonie Hurry, Caz Howard, Peter Sommerfeld and Paul Davies.

<sup>5</sup> The play was published on its second outing six years later. Paul Davies, *Storming St. Kilda by Tram*. (Paddington, NSW: Currency Press, 1988).

travelling a cumulative distance that would have taken the show almost half way round the world.

On the back of this success, *Breaking Up In Balwyn* was staged the following year (1983) as a 'divorce celebration' (a kind of inverted wedding ceremony) on board a Melbourne riverboat, using the same strategy of a play set and performed on a moving vehicle whose characters interacted with an outside reality as it goes past.<sup>6</sup> This imbrication of the diegetic space of a play with the real place in which it was staged, became the trademark style of TheatreWorks and helped spark a wave of site-specific theatre in Melbourne that flourished throughout the 1980s. The result was a series plays and entertainments produced on buses (Rod Quantok's *Bus, Son of Tram*, 1982), in jails (West's *Hard Labour, Mate*, 1983), private homes (Home Cooking Company's *Looking In/Looking Out*, 1987), pubs (TheatreWorks' *Pub Show*, 1985), courthouses (Melbourne Comedy Festival's *A Royal Commission...*, 1986), and botanical gardens (Glen Elston's, *Wind In The Willows, A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1984-2011).

### **Real Space: The world of 'Linden', 1900 – 1988.**

In 1985 TheatreWorks shifted its base of operations from Melbourne's eastern suburbs to the bayside precinct of St. Kilda, a far less genteel part of the city. However, St. Kilda had a fascinating past and like the suburb itself, 'Linden' at 26 Acland Street, had gone through a number of dramatic changes. What had started 'life' as a family mansion, became a down-market boarding house in the 1960s, and at the time of making *Living Rooms* was being extensively renovated and restored to its former glory in the form of a stylish art gallery.

Moritz Michaelis, who built Linden in the 1880s was a prosperous German/Jewish leather goods merchant who had made his fortune in the wake of the great Victorian gold rush. Because of an upper class British faith in the efficaciousness of sea air, St. Kilda in the late Nineteenth Century had become the wealthiest suburb in Melbourne and home to a burgeoning 'squattocracy' – a colonial elite whose wealth derived principally from the occupation of prime agricultural land, often with questionable legitimacy.

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Davies, *Breaking Up In Balwyn* (TS. TheatreWorks Archive. Brisbane: Fryer Library, 1983).



Figure 1. Members of the Michaelis family, pose for a photograph outside the building circa 1900. (Photographer unknown.)

This emerging upper class built the splendid hotels, coffee palaces, and grand mansions (like ‘Linden’) that came to line the wide boulevards of St. Kilda – streets that were themselves designed by the Italian architect Carlo Catani in imitation of the grand public thoroughfares of Paris and Nice. The impression sought was of elegance and spaciousness. However, with the coming of the Melbourne-St Kilda railway line, Australia’s first passenger train, people from the working class suburbs of Fitzroy, Collingwood and Richmond suddenly had easy access to St. Kilda’s seaside distractions including its pubs, visiting circuses and foreshore entertainments such as the iconic Luna Park. Eventually, the gentry abandoned St. Kilda and escaped east to Toorak hill and the exclusive suburbs of South Yarra, Hawthorn and Kew, leaving behind a seedy, red-light district that became home to a criminal under class sustained by a world of prostitution, illegal gambling and drug dealing. This new, increasingly itinerant and downwardly mobile population, now usurped the once grand mansions and saw them turned into cheap, multi-room boarding houses.

In 1985 ‘Linden’, by then a dilapidated boarding house, was purchased by St. Kilda Council with the intention of restoring it to its former architectural glory as a gallery and arts centre. Having just arrived in the area, TheatreWorks saw an opportunity to extend their ‘location’ theatre project from items of public transport to an actual building. The ‘community theatre’ agenda of *Living Rooms* therefore, was to portray a sense of the building’s demographic roller coaster ride by situating the three major acts of a drama at these key moments of change: aristocratic seaside suburb, red light district, and up-market gallery. In contrast to the plays on public transport, the *Living Rooms*’ ‘stage’ remained static while here it was the spectators that moved.

### **Entering the world of the play.**

As audience members came through the front door into Linden's wide central hallway, they were handed a coloured floor plan of the building (one of three) which indicated the rooms where each scene would take place. These different coloured plans effectively divided them into three separate groups.

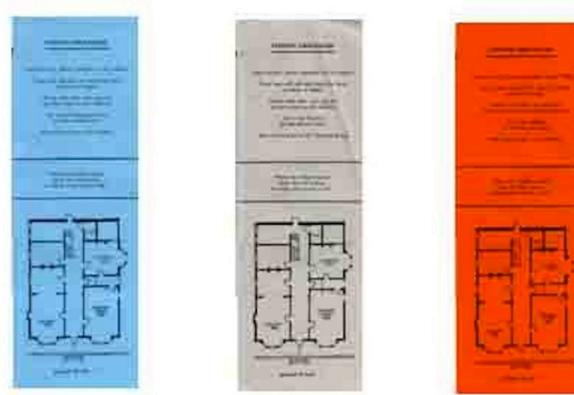


Figure 2. *Living Rooms*.

Viewing orders for the three audience groups.

This division enabled each thirty minute scene to be staged simultaneously (and repeated three times) until everyone had witnessed the complete story, albeit in different running orders. If only by virtue of remaining silent witnesses, the audience thus became essentially voyeurs listening in on otherwise private conversations from a position of some intimacy.<sup>7</sup> Finally, a short, concluding

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<sup>7</sup> *Living Rooms*, however, was not the first example of this tactic. The Women's Theatre Group at the Victorian College of the Arts, which included two founding members of TheatreWorks, Caz Howard and Hannie Rayson, staged *Fefu and Her Friends* (Marie Irene Fornés, 1977) in a two-storey art deco mansion in Elwood, Melbourne. Directed by Ros Horin, the audience met the cast in an initial, combined scene where they shared drinks and were then divided into four sub-groups to witness scenes produced simultaneously in four different rooms; so that again the story was accessed by each group in a unique order. Other plays have used a similar formula. John Krizanc's *Tamara* (1981) premiered in Toronto and subsequently ran for nine years in a Hollywood mansion. The play is the story of a visit by the artist Tamara de Lempicka to the country home of the Italian poet d'Annunzio in order to paint his portrait. It was staged in a large mansion (allegedly d'Annunzio's) and members of the audience were invited to either follow the progress of a favorite character from room to room or alternatively, stay in the one room and witness the scenes of the play that occur there as those fragments of the narrative flow through it. Later, the Welsh group Brith Gof, applying a different formula, staged *Tri Bywyd (Three Lives)*, 1995) in a purpose-built, scaffolding structure inspired by the designs of Bernard Tschumi – essentially a 'house' where the walls and furniture were transparent.

scene was staged in the Hallway which drew together all characters from the different time periods and all audience groups in a chronologically neutral space.

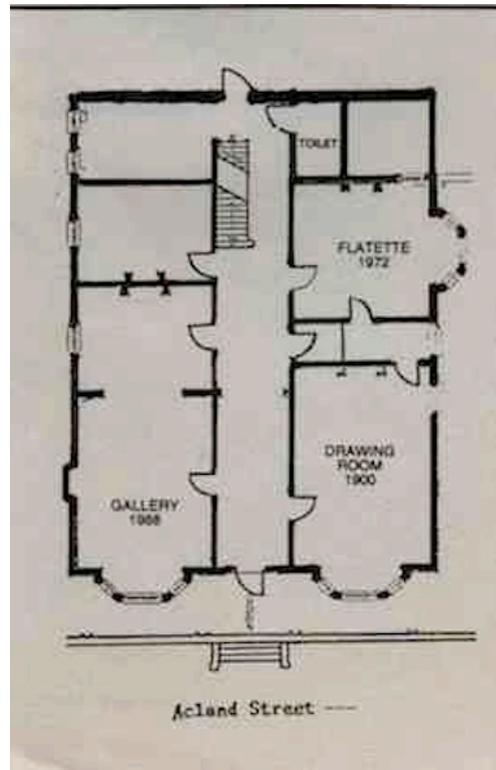


Figure 3. Linden floor plan showing the three main sites of performance.

### Meeting the characters



Figure 4. TheatreWorks actors prepare for a cultural re-occupation of the building in 1986.

In the Drawing Room scene set in 1900, a large seascape by the salon painter Rupert Bunny (naked bacchanalian figures riding streaming white horses) dominates the room and signifies considerable personal wealth.<sup>8</sup> As this room ‘comes to life’ the story unfolds of a triangular relationship between the building’s owner, Cuthbert Beaumgardiner, his mistress Estelle Lawson and Lt. Michael Deegan, a young artillery officer about to depart for the Boer War with the Victorian contingent.<sup>9</sup> Initially Deegan regards the war as a morally necessary project in order to liberate the native South Africans from virtual serfdom to their Boer masters. Only later, through the discovery of a letter from the battlefield in another room and another time (by Paul Bugden in the Flatette scene), do we discover the full extent of Deegan’s eventual disillusionment with the war. Through this letter he reminds us that just as Boer tactics led to the creation of asymmetric ‘guerilla warfare’, so too did British counter measures lead to the creation of ‘concentration camps’ – both terms carrying a heightened sense of anxiety as the new century progressed.




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<sup>8</sup> Rupert Bunny was a Melbourne artist, born in St. Kilda in 1864 who became famous for his 'salon paintings' especially among the belle époque elite of Paris at the end of the Nineteenth century . The painting used in *Living Rooms* was owned by St. Kilda Council and showed a mythologized beach scene.

<sup>9</sup> Prior to federation, the Australian colonies all had their separate armies and navies. Deegan is a shearer whose ideals of mateship and social equality were forged in the great strikes of the 1890s in Queensland, and he obviously migrated to Victoria after that. These strikes in turn gave birth to the Australian Labour Party which eventually saw the first socialist government in the world come to power in Queensland in 1899 (albeit only for a week).

Figure 5. *Living Rooms* – The Drawing Room, 1900.  
Cuthbert toasts Michael’s embarkation for the Boer War.  
Photo © Ruth Maddison

Figure 4 shows the spatial arrangement of the audience in the Drawing Room scene where the spectators are silent, but ‘semi-present’ witnesses seated around the walls. They could be guests at Lt. Michael Deegan’s farewell party, or they might be intruders from another century – present, but curiously ‘absent’ at the same time, pretending to be not there. The characters in this scene acknowledge that a party is going on throughout the house, but do not refer to the audience directly, whose ‘role’ thus remains uncertain, ambiguous. Nevertheless, the proximity of performers and spectators is so intimate that other senses beyond those of sight and hearing can now be engaged. A form of olfactory space arrives with the smell of Estelle’s or Monika’s perfumes (old and modern) as they enter or exit their respective rooms and time zones. Similarly, there is the stench of the dog food (“wallaby bolognaise”) that Paul Bugden tries to heat up on the frypan in his Flatette (to save money)<sup>10</sup>.

As Figure 5 indicates, the characters in the Gallery scene are already present within the audience. ‘Monika’ and ‘Leon’, are a well dressed, culturally articulate couple who carry on as if they are ‘real’ people who have come to see (according to their program) an ‘exhibition of location theatre’ – which, in their particular room, doesn’t seem to be happening. They dutifully press their buzzer, as instructed, but no actors turn up – because of course, Monika and Leon *are* the play in this room. And so a ‘location theatre piece’ is happening, although as ‘characters’ the couple seem not to recognize this.

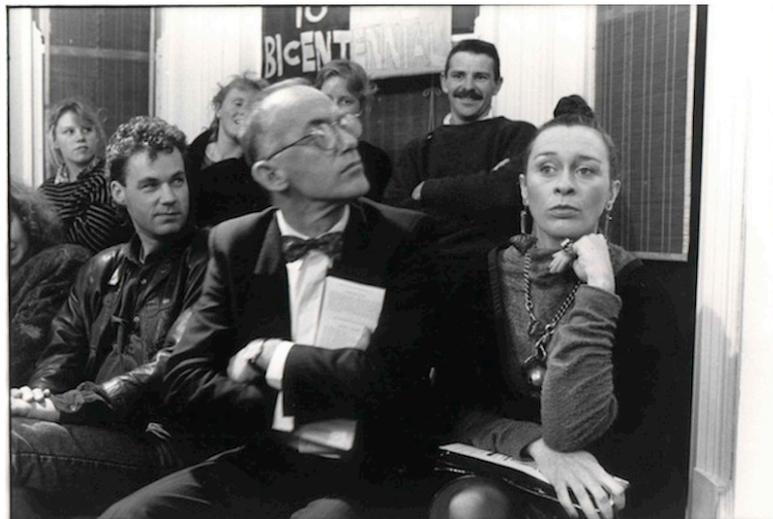


Figure 6. *Living Rooms* – The Gallery, 1988.

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<sup>10</sup> *Living Rooms*, 60-61.

Monika and Leon seated within the audience,  
waiting impatiently for something to happen.

Photo © Ruth Maddison

In a third scene, set in a 'Flatette' during Linden's boarding house era, the audience are positioned behind a light scrim and thus rendered invisible to the actors. In this way their view of the action is impeded. So again, they are present as witnesses, but now in an even more distanced manner – as if looking in on some form of social experiment, like trainee medicos observing an operation, or a team of detectives scrutinizing an interrogation.

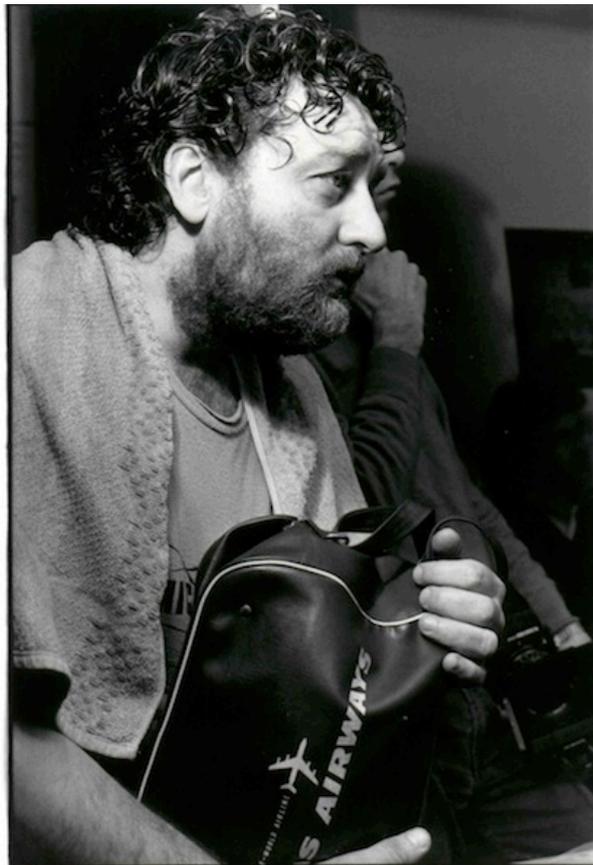


Figure 7. *Living Rooms* – the Flatette, 1972.

A traveler frozen in time, Paul Bugden waits for the buzzer that will summon him to life. Here the audience are 'hidden' out of sight.

Photo © Ruth Maddison

Here we meet a draft dodger Paul Bugden, and the night of 26th November 1972 on which the Flatette scene is set, is one of great hope for him. A few blocks away, a large political rally is about to be held in the St. Kilda town hall. Bugden plans to risk arrest and cheer on the dawning of a new era in local politics, one in which his current illegal status will shortly be overturned by a new government

promising to end Australia's involvement in the Vietnam war. In a sense, like Deegan, Bugden is a 'moral soldier', a hippie outcast fighting to reclaim his legitimate place in society. For young men of Bugden's age, in a century that started with the Boer War and included two horrific global conflicts, the outcome of the federal election in a week's time could not have higher stakes. Similarly, Lt. Deegan believes he is bringing an enlightened society, characterized by principles of Westminster democracy and British ideals of freedom to an oppressed, indigenous black majority on a continent half a world away. Both of course, will be cruelly disillusioned by such high hopes and their current (contemporary 1986) audience, will know this, allowing for a sense of historical irony to enter the equation.

### **The audience contract**

These different modes of witnessing (voyeurs, fellow travelers, scrutineers) allowed the *Living Rooms*' audience to become conscious of itself as an audience (albeit one composed of three sub-sets). They were engaging with and being engaged by the play in different ways. Their 'occupation' of Linden (a real and imagined place) therefore comes with a sense of trespass, of intruding upon the histories and living spaces of others; of being in a private place where the legitimacy of their presence is at best questionable. On one level they are all ghosts, spirits 'inhabiting' a troubled site. Despite being made complicit through their voyeurism, the audience are thus offered a shared experience, a sense of moving around as a group, of accessing the narrative sequence with distinct and separate plans – something which helped engender the idea of a community of the audience *within* the play. They are on a journey together, through time and through a set of re-enactments. These reconfigurations of the theatre-going experience engender a heightened sense of three-dimensionality that, despite its apparent experimental nature, found an immediate rapport with audiences.

In this way, and by these means, TheatreWorks was able to experiment with increasingly subtle and complex actor-audience relationships. In the Gallery scene, for example, Monika and Leon's argument sees them eventually hire an audio guide for a 'tour' of the room: a "pleasant stroll through the city's years from the Boer War to the Bicentennial"<sup>11</sup> - a time span that matches the historical investigation of the play itself. This voice over explanation of the art works in the room, ends with Monika and Leon occupying a site-specific 'installation' at the far end called "St. Kilda Breakfast": basically a messy kitchen table covered in food, plates, cups etc. This is an 'artwork' that is part of the exhibition they have allegedly come to see. In this 'kitchen', which itself has been 'assembled' by a fictional, off-stage artist, two characters in a scripted play enact a typical breakfast

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 80

scene in contemporary (1988) St. Kilda, surveying along the way their deteriorating relationship. Again the audience, by virtue of remaining proximate but passive, are complicit in Monika and Leon's invasion of 'St. Kilda Breakfast'. In this sense, the Gallery scene plays with 'layers' of social and cultural space within the same room and I argue that it is through this manipulation of theatrical space, the collision of found and invented spaces (and the experiences they offer and embody), that the chief attraction of this kind of 'embedded' site-specific theatre lies.

### **Spatial Interplay<sup>12</sup>**

One way of understanding the generation of spatial energies involved here is to read the play's basic production strategy as a collision of heterotopia in the Foucauldian sense.<sup>13</sup>

Henri Lefebvre, applying the physical theories of Fred Hoyle (who "looked on space as the product of energy"), argued in 1974 that social space, in its various forms, could be produced by the energy deployed within it.<sup>14</sup> This is an idea that echoes in part, Peter Brook's 1967 claim that an act of theatre in its simplest form was an indissoluble triad of actor, witness and stage.<sup>15</sup> In the same year Michel Foucault adopted the term 'heterotopia', which he defined as "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which...all the other real sites that can be found within a culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted."<sup>16</sup> As Foucault expressed it, the twentieth century was above all "the epoch of space" of "simultaneity" and "juxtaposition".<sup>17</sup> And with notions of space, as so often in the

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<sup>12</sup> In the wake of the various occupations of public spaces that took place in the 1960s – what have been called "les événements du Mai 1968" – ('events' that resemble what is still occurring in the middle east today), public spaces and public buildings, parks, squares and monuments came to be regarded as not only accessible and available to all, but iconically useful. Out of this turmoil and experiment, the idea of a social space that could be 'produced' was born. And once it was 'produced' it was available to be deployed both culturally and politically. Foucault's idea of the 'heterotopia' offers one way of reading this.

<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 22-27.

<sup>14</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *La Production de l'Espace*. Translated by D. Nicholson-Smith. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 13.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*. (Ringwood, Victoria: Pelican, 1968), 11.

<sup>16</sup> Foucault, 24.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

human story, come the anxieties of occupation, of moving in on someone else's patch. The key here therefore, is to interrogate how *Living Rooms* was able to deploy the space of its story inside the space of a real building and to do it in a number of different ways (for each particular scene). Not only is the 'fourth wall' put solidly back in place around the audience, but they become, to a certain extent, 'engulfed' in the performance in ways that Artaud called for in *The Theatre And It's Double*.

We abolish the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind, which will become the theatre of the action. A direct communication will be re-established between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator, from the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by it. This envelopment results, in part, *from the very configuration of the room itself* (emphasis added).<sup>18</sup>

It remains to look at how each room was configured within the overarching narrative of the play itself.

### **Diegetic Space: heterotopia of the narrative.**

The action in each room is set on one of three significant 'eves' in Australian history. Events in the Drawing Room take place on the eve of Federation in 1901, the Flatette scene occurs on the eve of a swing to the left in the federal election of 1972, and the Gallery scene takes place on the eve of the Bicentennial in 1988 – a national celebration of two centuries of European occupation. Consequently, all three scenes unfold in their separate slices of time, what Foucault would call their 'heterochronies'.

Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time – which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies...From a general standpoint, in a society like ours heterotopias and heterochronies are structured and distributed in a relatively complex fashion. First of all there are heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time, for example museums and libraries.<sup>19</sup>

To which one might add: the accumulating time of historic houses – especially ones that have gone through such 'dramatic' demographic changes. However, as the heterochronies instituted by the different sub-narratives in *Living Rooms* play

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<sup>18</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Le Theatre Et Son Double* Trans. by Mary Caroline Richards. (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 96.

<sup>19</sup> Foucault, 26.

out, their strict separation in time and space starts to break down; and thus the rooms, operating as historical and dramatic containers, become unstable. Sounds, objects, narrative co-incidences, and even characters, bleed from one room to another. For example, a blackout caused by Paul Bugden's failure to pay his electricity bill in the Flatette scene in 1972 allows Cuthbert Beaumgardiner to wander from his Drawing Room scene in 1900 into a suddenly darkened Gallery in 1988, where he mistakes Monika for his mistress, Estelle. After Beaumgardiner has left and the lights come on again, Leon (instituting another actor-spectator confusion and unaware of what has actually happened), blames a member of the audience for taking advantage of Monika. Hence, in an intercalation of heterochronies that results from these spatial and temporal instabilities, one room's past effectively becomes another's future and vice versa. The prosperity looked for at the turn of the century by the likes of capitalist entrepreneurs such as Beaumgardiner, is realized in the vacuous personalities of St. Kilda's new possessors: the rising inner-urban professional class of Monika and Leon. They exemplify the cultural re-appropriation of the former red-like district that St. Kilda had become in the wake of Beaumgardiner's well heeled cohort. This new, contemporary 're-invasion' followed on from, and in a sense was made possible by, the cultural and political tumult of the late 1960s and 70s: the era of draft dodgers like Paul Bugden. Such demographic changes and contestations, and their interplay would not be unfamiliar in the inner-urban histories of many western cities.

**The Drawing Room Scene: heterotopia of a late Victorian mansion, heterochrony of 1900.**

In the 'present' of 1900, on the eve of his departure for Capetown, Lt. Deegan struggles to declare his real feelings for Estelle, an equally idealistic and politically savvy young woman who survives as the kept mistress of Beaumgardiner. Estelle maintains what was euphemistically referred to as a 'Bachelor's Hall' for Beaumgardiner who epitomizes the nouveau riche, 'greed-is-good' attitude of the 1880s Australian 'squattocracy'. In fact, with Boer farms burning across the South African veld, Beaumgardiner's sheep station in Bacchus Marsh is now rocketing up in value. He connects back to a time when it wasn't safe to ride a pony from central Melbourne to St. Kilda (5 miles south of the city) for fear of being attacked by rogue convicts or parties of dispossessed aborigines. But the anxiety that substrates Michael and Estelle's relationship relates to larger concerns in the Australian imaginary that Joanne Tompkins identifies in *Unsettling Space* as an 'uncanny' – something which "is experienced when the repressed threatens to return":

Freud connects anxiety with the return of a dreaded commodity thought to have been safely absent ...In Australia, the repressed usually signals knowledge of what was done to places and the people in them; a key theatrical response to this

knowledge is the staging of issues of presence and absence particularly locating Aboriginal people in Australian history... But the anxiety that is expressed in terms of spatiality on Australian stages extends well beyond this absence (significant though it might be), reinforcing a fundamental discomfort with the process of settlement and the establishment of nationhood.<sup>20</sup>

An embryonic suffragette, Estelle can't fathom why an avowed republican and socialist like Deegan could participate in a colonial mis-adventure in a foreign country thousands of miles away (an enterprise obviously designed to ensure that the sun never sets on the British Empire). Deegan retorts that "[i]n Johannesburg the native people aren't even allowed to walk on the footpath. The president of Transvaal himself has said they have no more soul than a monkey."<sup>21</sup> However, Estelle maintains her pacifist position, and in the end Deegan comes to realize her anti-imperial take on the war is valid.

Throughout *Living Rooms* there is a sense of unease derived largely from the questionable legitimacy with which the characters occupy their individual rooms (and by implication, their audiences with them). Deegan clearly has a hidden agenda in relation to Estelle, desperate to drag her away from this 'Bachelor's Hall' which Beaumgardiner has acquired through a process of ruthless property speculation, and whose possession of it thereby remains contested in itself. In the Flatette scene, Paul Bugden's unease relates to his outlaw/refugee status. He arrives in Linden during its boarding house era, on the run from the Commonwealth Police as a conscientious objector – one of many hundreds who chose to go 'underground' rather than be conscripted for service in Vietnam. Leon, in the Gallery, is a town planner and architect, one of a cohort responsible for designing the new (re-gentrified) St. Kilda, plans that his wife Monika also has grave doubts about. Like Estelle, Monika constantly questions Leon's vision of the future and finds it wanting. Her unease relates to the lack of heart or the sense of any real community in his plans.

### **The Flatette Scene: heterotopia of a tiny flat in a boarding house, heterochrony of 1972.**

Lt. Michael Deegan will be comprehensively brought back to reality by his experience on the battlefields of southern Africa (something we discover in the Flatette Scene) where, 72 years later, Paul Bugden lives in constant fear of arrest, his predicament an outcome of the slow erosion of principles Deegan thinks he is

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<sup>20</sup> Joanne Tompkins, *Unsettling Space: Contestations in Contemporary Australian Theatre* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Living Rooms*, 6-7.

. fighting for, in his room, 72 years earlier. As the separate heterochronies start to overlap for the audience, they discover that Deegan's misplaced idealism has morphed into Bugden's equally misplaced faith in an imminent Labour victory – itself another disillusionment-in-waiting. And yet, the occupations, disruptions, anxieties and contestations of this exterior political space (contemporary and historical) proceeds on one level in the world outside Linden, just as the occupations, movements and disruptions of the play itself unfold internally within the building's own chronology and its own separate spaces. And as Foucault predicted, it is in the *relationship* between heterotopia that their real power and usefulness lies, the inversion/subversion factor.

In an example of heterochronic permeability, Bugden hears the barely audible argument going on in the Drawing Room next door (between Estelle, Deegan and Beaumgardiner), as if he is party to it in his own time. Similarly, the raised voices of Monika and Leon in the Gallery across the hallway can also be occasionally heard from the Flatette, however indistinctly. If an audience group has already been in the Gallery (or the Drawing Room) they will know roughly what the shouting is all about and can now view the current scene before them from a position of narrative privilege, becoming more aware of the relationships, overlaps and ironies in play. Again they become engulfed in the story to the extent of becoming aware of it as 'meta-event', something happening both in front of them (in that room at that moment), as well as 'proceeding' all around them in the house generally.

For Bugden these noisy distractions are just more evidence of how low his circumstances have sunk: to be in lodgings this unsavory, full of shouting losers. Eventually, in attempting to kick-start an electric heater into life, he discovers a letter hidden behind the Flatette's fire place – effectively a post-script to the Drawing Room scene, a letter in which Deegan reveals to Estelle the extent of his disillusionment with what is going on in South Africa. Captivated by the discovery of this letter, Bugden imagines a story that connects his image of the writer of the letter (Deegan) with its addressee (Estelle). When Bugden finally meets these characters in the hallway in the climactic fourth scene, the different time zones in the play effectively collapse into the one space.

**The Gallery Scene 1988: heterotopia of an 'historical exhibition', heterochrony of 1988.**

As audience members enter the Gallery, the largest of Linden's downstairs rooms (originally the ballroom), they undergo another heterochronic shift, and now find themselves a couple of years into the future, at an 'historical exhibition' of artifacts, artworks, banners, photographs and posters, that trace a history of St. Kilda from the Boer War to the Bi-centennial, the same time line as the play. Indeed, some of the photographs contain images of characters that the audience

might (or might not) have seen in other rooms: Baumgardiner, Deegan and Estelle in formal studio portraits, and Paul Bugden at the tram stop in front of Luna Park. Yet here, in the Gallery space, there are no frozen characters waiting to be brought to life, only a well dressed couple (Monika and Leon) unselfconsciously involved in an argument about what is actually going on in their room and what they are meant to expect from this ‘exhibition’. Monika is a social worker and her partner Leon a town planner and architect, someone who works with ‘representations of space’ in the Lefebvrian sense: the plans, drawings, and various projects with which he hopes to do his bit to shape St. Kilda through its third demographic transition: the era of an educated, urban middle class who were currently finding the suburb’s quaint old buildings with their proximity to jobs in the city, all win-win situations.

The war at issue in this scene is the Cold War in its penultimate phase (a year before the fall of the Berlin wall) – almost over, yet still capable of bringing about global Armageddon. Leon, in fact, wants to build a nuclear fallout shelter under their new apartment which Monika vehemently opposes, just as she objects to all of Leon’s plans to transform St. Kilda into some kind of sanitized yuppie paradise. Irritated and waiting for something to happen, Monika and Leon decide to pass the time by hiring an audio guide to take them (and fellow audience members) through a walking tour of the ‘exhibition’, and thereby a potted cultural history of the last century in St. Kilda.

This includes the installation “St Kilda Breakfast”: a laminex table at one end of the room covered in the detritus of a very messy meal. Monika and Leon’s painful argument about the artistic merit of this piece becomes a metaphor for their disintegrating relationship. As they try to make sense of the exhibition (and increasingly fail to do so), other characters from other rooms intrude into their space. Baumgardiner does so in the blackout, and ‘Martha’, the maid from the Drawing Room, enters to change into her costume for her role as ‘Miriam’ in the Flatette. While Leon feels it almost demeaning to be parked in what appears to be the dressing room of some play going on elsewhere, Monika takes the opportunity to confront ‘Martha’ about their room not working, but ‘Miriam/Martha’ assures Monika that she will understand it all eventually. “It will come to you – or you’ll come to it”.<sup>22</sup>

Unfortunately, this doesn’t seem to happen so, as Monika and Leon’s bickering continues, the audio guide (another ghost in the machine) becomes annoyed by their argument and starts talking back – which doesn’t seem quite right! At which point Monika discovers that the roses Leon gave her upon arrival (to celebrate

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 81.

their 10th anniversary as a couple) are in fact plastic – much like the props one would expect to find on a stage. As it slowly sinks in that they themselves might be the victims of some kind of hoax, Monika and Leon come to occupy the breakfast ‘installation’ at the far end of the room with a practiced familiarity, as if it was now the kitchen of their own St. Kilda apartment: a sub-heterotopia within the heterotopia of the Gallery itself – effectively now a ‘set’ within a room proposing to represent a particular place at a particular time – or, in this case (because the Gallery encapsulates an historical exhibition), the one place over many times.

The anxieties and instabilities that now suffuse an increasingly chaotic set of spaces and times begins to reach a point of crisis. The Gallery scene ends with Leon believing that there are illegal drugs on their ‘kitchen table’ and, in an era before mobile phones, exits the room to find a public one, something that might summon the police and hopefully restore some semblance of normality to the proceedings...

**The Hallway Scene: mixed heterotopia of three spaces in collision, heterochronies of 1900, 1972 and 1988.**



Figure 8 Monika rips into Leon in the Hallway as all three audience groups coalesce around her.

Photo © Ruth Maddison

Throughout *Living Rooms* the space of Linden’s grand Hallway with its impressive front door and commanding staircase, operates as a very permeable portal through which the audience sub-groups and the characters from different rooms and periods merge, cross over, have interval and swap notes. The climactic Hallway scene begins where the scene in each room ended, as if the heterochronic

clock of the narrative has been wound back and reset. This allows the characters from all three periods to formally and finally come together in the same space.

Deegan and Estelle are initially frozen (again) in the act of exiting the Drawing Room with a frozen Cuthbert in hot pursuit. Observing this tableau, Monika and Leon think they've finally found the play they've been expecting to see, enough for Leon to postpone his phone call. Monika presses a buzzer and is thrilled to see the three characters come 'to life'. The combined audience now hear that Cuthbert is still reeling from the discovery that Estelle is fact pregnant to Deegan – who in turn assumes she will have the child, stay with his cousin, and await his return from the war. However, Estelle, the 'new woman', the Nora of this particular *Doll's House*, has other ideas and is determined to make her own way, separate from dependence on any man. Into this tableau stumbles Paul Bugden, beating a hasty retreat from the boarding house, concerned that the police have been alerted by the landlord and are about to arrest him. Bugden is being pursued down the steps by Miriam, eager to collect his rent before he disappears. In his rush to escape however, Bugden accidentally hits another buzzer and the 1900 scene continues. In this moment, Paul Bugden finally confronts in Cuthbert, Deegan and Estelle, what he assumes to be the figures of his own creation, all inspired by the 'real' characters glimpsed in the letter he found. Dazzled by Estelle's beauty, Bugden naturally falls in love with her. But confronted by an ending he didn't expect and can't accept, he 'intervenes' in the 1900 *ménage à trois*, and 'gives' Cuthbert a heart attack – which now starts to occur, on the steps, in real time – whenever that may be. At which point, the ghost of the house itself, Linden's own 'uncanny', intervenes in the action once more via the Gallery's audio guide, and institutes itself as an effective über-author, thus bringing on the play's final denouement.

As a slide of the house in 1900 (Figure 1) is projected on the back wall halfway up the staircase, the 'voice' of Linden, the uncanny at the heart of the play, reflects on the folly of all its prior inhabitants, indulging in a gentle but sharply focused put-down of humanity generally. Leon, always the architect/developer, threatens to end this nonsense by tearing the house down and replacing it with a block of Bauhaus-style apartments. However, as he goes to switch off the audio guide (and despite being warned), he and Monika become instantly frozen on the steps.<sup>23</sup> With the other characters all gone out the front door (trailed by Cuthbert, clutching his failing heart), Monika and Leon are returned to the state they were meant to have started from...had their room been 'working'. By which point all the heterochronies and heterotopias of *Living Rooms* have met and melded, and the ghost of the house enjoys a last laugh, as the lights slowly fade to black...

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 118

## Conclusion

Placing dramatic stories inside real buildings (which those stories purport to be notionally about) creates a ‘poly-dimensional’ experience of live performance. This is something more than a simply a ‘three-dimensional’ or ‘multi-dimensional’ engagement – in the sense that the action of the drama takes place both in front of and all around an audience. It can also engage senses available in such proximate relationships (smell, touch, taste). By harnessing the energy of an enacted narrative, it can effectively occupy and manipulate found spaces, revealing a new resonance between text and stage. These levels of engagement effectively immerse an audience in the action of a play to an extent not possible in the more formal arrangements of purpose-built theatres. Site-specific plays in houses, despite their risky nature can, with reasonably effective scripts, direction and acting, prove to be very popular undertakings indeed.

*Living Rooms* enjoyed extended seasons, playing to full ‘houses’ for several months; and with twice the capacity of a tram (90 seats as against 50), proved a profitable exercise for TheatreWorks. Unlike the more widely produced *Tram Show*, however, *Living Rooms*’ historically focused subject matter made it less readily ‘transportable’ than its more ubiquitous trambulating predecessor. Although in a later play, *Full House/No Vacancies*<sup>24</sup>, the company used the same building and the same staging strategies to tell another story set entirely in Linden’s boarding house era.

The critical reception for *Living Rooms* was generally positive. Clark Forbes writing in *The Herald* (July 24, 1986) felt that “What could so easily end in mayhem works surprisingly smoothly. The result is a hugely enjoyable ramble round an inventive mind and a delightful extension of the normal theatrical boundaries”. Helen Thomson in *The Australian* (July 22, 1986) found that the play was “inventive and intriguing,” “ingeniously constructed” and “community theatre at its best, socially relevant, artistically challenging, thought provoking in the contemporary issues it raises,” something that “breaks down the normal constraints of place and time in the theatre.” Finally, Leonard Radic, who noted in *The Age* (22 July, 1986) that TheatreWorks had “made something of a specialty of environmental or location theatre,” found that *Living Rooms* “consciously sets out to extend the boundaries of theatre to give audiences a new and interesting experience. At that level it succeeds admirably. Who knows? It may even inspire one or two theatergoers to think about the environmental issues which the play raises.”

Two and a half decades later it also inspires us to think, perhaps, about the potential for such work to engage audiences in ways that are all encompassing as

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<sup>24</sup> Paul Davies, *Full House/No Vacancies*. (Paddington, NSW: Currency Press, 1989).

well as popular. Such stagings permitted spectators to be moved (literally) and implicated in the dramas they were witnessing in ways that were challenging and adventurous and effectively helped encourage theatre practice to regard all the world as a (potential) stage.

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