

Theatre In the Space Age

Between Sight- and Site-Specific Futures

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Storming St. Kilda By Tram TheatreWorks 1988

Photo © Ruth Maddison

Figure 1 A case of the blind leading the myopic?
(Ticket) Inspector, 'Morris Stanley', ignorant of the real situation,
makes a charitable donation into a stolen guide dog.

Since this is primarily a story of space and place its especially important that I acknowledge the Turrbal people as the traditional owners of Meanjin, the country where we gather today. And also to acknowledge my personal elders, Joanne and Stephen, for the guidance and opportunity to undertake this research and whose own work in the areas of theatre and spatiality gave me the frame for what follows.

It seemed almost too serendipitous that a world renowned theatre scholar and a working playwright were available as mentors in the place where my career in letters started as an English Honours student. And so here I am again, hopefully to know the place for the first time.

I should also declare that I was a participant in some of the plays discussed here both as an author and actor; and in a way this thesis could be read as an exegesis for work performed 30 odd years ago. I basically wanted to understand what gave rise to the kind of exhilaration that I'd felt standing in the middle of *Storming Mont Albert By Tram*, on one of its more boisterous nights, playing the over zealous ticket inspector, my hands covered in tomato sauce which I'm pretending to think is someone's blood and the audience, hooting with laughter all around me at my mock shock (more about that scene in a minute). I wanted to examine what forces were at work in a play that could cause an entire audience to sometimes react like over excited fans at a footy match, cheering on certain characters and shouting others down. I felt with TheatreWorks' location plays we had stumbled on something that galvanized spectators like no other theatrical event I'd experienced. The empowerment of an audience who is in on the joke, and complicit with the actors in an occupation of space made possible by their shared disbelief that what they're watching isn't scripted is truly a wonderful thing to behold. And it was not only fun to witness and be in, it was genuinely popular: such that *The Tram Show* in its final iterations ultimately became self supporting, playing over a dozen years to some 20,000 passengers, in both Melbourne and Adelaide, and generating in today's figures around a million dollars at the box office while travelling a distance that would have taken it almost halfway around the world.

These were plays that now comfortably sit under the rubric of "site-specific theatre" although the term itself has become problematic – other descriptors such as site-generic, site-responsive, site-sensitive, location, space-specific, environmental, and even promenade theatre also compete to describe what are essentially spoken word dramas produced in real places, found or otherwise. Space, appropriately enough, prevents me going into the fine distinctions here between works appropriate to only one site and others that could be staged in a number of generic places, or plays that are simply given a funky setting, outside somewhere, like a quarry or a botanical gardens.

And far be it for me to stoop to such unscholarly behaviour as google-ing something, but when I typed in "sight and site specific theatre" recently I was surprised find close to 16 million hits, and then to my utter astonishment the fourth item in the list read

EMSAH Seminar: Friday 19 October Room 601 Michie Building. Theatre in the Space Age: Between sight and site-specific futures. Contact Stormy Wehi. With the abstract attached.

I thought gee- that EMSAH office team – they really are Miracle Workers, that award last year was no fluke, because thanks to Stormy 4th in 16 million means we

must now be rating in the top 0.000,000,25 percentile. Without even paying google to be there.

The other point being that with 16 million hits there can be little doubt that the Site-geist as its been dubbed...in theatre practice has finally arrived, and is now happening anywhere and everywhere as Brisbane's recent "Anywhere" Theatre Festival literally attests. It seemed to me, standing in the middle of *Storming Mont Albert By Tram* 30 years ago as if Shakespeare's prediction voiced by Monsieur Jacques in *As You Like It* that "all the world's a stage" had finally been realized.

Yet if we do a proper scholarly search and go through something like the MLA data base it appears that there are only 75 available items on the topic of site specific theatre. The first two of which were articles by Joanne. Gold and Silver medals to EMSAH again! I rest my case. But the point is also that theory still runs a distant second to what appears to be an exponentially expanding practice.

It is perhaps no accident that just as the discovery and occupation of the New World furnished the imaginary of the Enlightenment, the conquest and occupation of extra terrestrial space fuels the theatrical imaginary of the second Elizabethan period, because space is theatre's foundational building block. And as Foucault expressed it over 40 years ago (in 1967), in perhaps a prediction of the internet, that we live in the epoch of space

"in the epoch of simultaneity ... the epoch of juxtaposition...of the near and the far, of the side by side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, he believed, "when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein."

Michel Foucault ("Of Other Spaces" 22)

To which one might infer that also that we live in the epoch of space travel, of cyberspace, of all forms of social and physical spaces and the associated anxieties of their occupation, something Joanne deals with in the Australian context in *Unsettling Space*.

The goal of my research therefore has been to draw out the lessons learnt from a range of TheatreWorks shows in tents, trams, boats and houses throughout the 1980s, works that appeared at around the same time as early site specific groups such as Brith Gof in Wales and Necessary Angel in Canada. I wanted to not only document an overlooked chapter in the Australian theatre story, but also to propose a set of critical tools with which we might more appropriately evaluate this new form of theatre. In addition to the usual critical issues surrounding script, performance and direction, matters of authenticity (spatial relations) and complicity (audience relations) also need to be addressed. In other words, we now

need to ask, I believe, not only were the script and performances any good, but how convincingly does a particular story inhabit its place of performance, and almost as a consequence, how readily does an audience go along for the ride. Because, within the frisson that occurs when various social and narrative spaces collide, these qualities of authenticity and complicity shape a whole new set of interconnectivities that open up not only between the actors and their audience, but within the audience themselves and between both parties and outside reality sometimes looking back in. So in addition to sight and hearing, such new engagements can theoretically embrace all the senses, adding touch, taste and smell to sight and hearing– and even a kind of sixth sense in what we might call the pheromone effect. (see Alice Miller “Pheromones and Human Behaviour” Ph D Thesis. Sterling University, Scotland)

The ‘art of theatre’ to use Adolphe Appia’s descriptor, is one cultural activity where space is the basic canvas, primarily involving the placement and interaction of bodies in space for the purposes of storytelling. In director parlance this is called “blocking.” It goes without saying, that the ‘art of theatre’ is itself a living thing, and as with any vibrant organism, its processes function in a state of constant evolution, all in response to the narratives, technologies and socio-political zeit or this case site-geist in which it unfolds. (end of puns, I promise)

If we step back a moment and ask ourselves “[W]here does this nightly practice of large groups of people sitting down in darkened auditoria to watch mimetic displays of human behaviour on illuminated stages come from?” what has been somewhat disparagingly described as a bunch of voyeurs watching a pack of extroverts, we may trace a genealogy, at least for western performance traditions, back through the high point of the dedicated Elizabethan theatre buildings, to biblical stories enacted centuries earlier on the backs of wagons to a basically illiterate audience gathered in town squares; or even to that critical moment a millennium before that, when the first Greek actor emerged as an individual from the chorus around him and began the process of dialogue. Indeed, the practice of theatre might just as easily have originated in the nocturnal storytelling of our pre-historic ancestors sitting around the primeval campfire, recounting a no doubt exaggerated version of that day’s quest for food. What remains common through all these iterations of the form is the dynamic interplay between narrative, character, witness and place of performance.

Appia, who wanted to develop actor-audience relationships in order to create a ‘people’s theatre’ away from the ‘gilded frame’ of the proscenium arch (qtd Wiles 236-237) also argued that “[e]very work of art must contain a harmonious relationship between feeling and form, an ideal balance between the *ideas* which the artist desires to express, and the *means* he has for expressing them...” (29). Underpinning everything else, theatre is always the art of the possible and its means of expression necessarily arrive out of the technologies available.

Now, in the face of the challenges posed to theatre by cinema in the early part of the 20th Century, various theorists and practitioners have tried to distinguish live performance from its mechanically reproduced cousin. To characterize theatre's effect and ensure its relevance, they naturally sought to emphasise its essential 'liveness', what might be called the Benjaminian 'aura' of each unique performance.

The Dadaist project, in one sense a reaction to the catastrophe of the First World War, saw a kind of anarchic counter-performance taken out of theatres into art galleries and once again out into the streets. At around the same time and in the wake of the Russian revolution, agit-prop ensembles like gangs of theatre commandos staged impromptu performances on trams in Leningrad and Moscow, short playlets that highlighted the need for personal hygiene or the evils of religion. Just over a decade later in France in the 1930s and 40s Antonin Artaud began calling for audiences to be 'engulfed' by his theatre of 'cruelty'. While Bertolt Brecht wanted them to be conscious of their participation in an essentially fabricated process, to stand back and think for themselves. By the 1960s Peter Brook had cleared the traditional, purpose-built stage of all unnecessary clutter in order to reduce theatre back to its essential 'empty stage', a triad of actor, watcher and performance space: this soon became the pared back place that Grotowski and Scheckner were beginning to occupy by mixing audiences and actors on the same common playing ground – albeit in a self-styled theatre 'laboratory'. These were still dedicated theatre spaces, studios and the like, but they were much more flexible than the proscenium binary of stage and auditorium which had persisted since the Elizabethans and on through its canonization in the Enlightenment with Diderot's formulation of the idea of the fourth wall in his quest for a kind of ultimate naturalism. Naturalism still provides the basic game plan here but it is of an entirely different order.

Meanwhile, the visual arts themselves exploded out of the gallery and gave birth to the hybrid 'performance art' tradition – or live art as it is now described. Such a breakout challenged theatre practitioners to do the same. So that finally, by the 1980s, in the wake of the 'happenings' and the agit-prop occupations of public space in the political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of producing plays in 'real' spaces saw Grotowsky and Schechner's laboratory experiment finally taken out into the real world.

In Australia, in the 1980s, this early site-specific movement was centered on Melbourne, and grew from the success of plays on busses, trams, boats, in goals, pubs, gardens, courts of law and houses, public and private. A decade later it also flourished in the United Kingdom where site-specific performances continues to expand across a number of dedicated companies including now both the National theatres of Scotland and Wales.

Towards a Site-Geist

Prominent Site Specific Theater companies as at 2012 - from a growing list (in no particular order):

United Kingdom

National Theatre of Wales, National Theatre of Scotland, Brith Gof (Wales), Wrights and Sites, London Bubble, Out of the Blue (Dance), Red Earth, GridIron (Edinburgh) Forced Entertainment (Sheffield), Shunt, The Whalley Range Allstars, Dream Think Speak Poor Boy (Scotland), Station House Opera (London), Art Angel, Welfare State, International (Cumbria), Cotton Grass (Peak District), Storm (Coventry), Blast Theory (integrating web technology) IOU, Impossible Theatre, Creation Theatre Company (Oxford), Test Department, Hide and Seek, Theatre Absolute, Frantic Assembly, Punchdrunk, Wildworks, Poorboy, dreamthinkspeak, Lone Twin, Test Department, Kneehigh (Cornwall) Moving Being, Walk the Plank, Pickle Herring Theatre, Pentabus Theatre, Theatre Nomad, The Lion's Part (London), The Olimpias, Emergency Exit Arts, Sirens Crossing (Dance), Boilerhouse, Cerberus, The Common Players, Horse+ Bamboo, Kunstwerk-Blend, Riptide, Rotozaza, Foster and Heighes, in situ, Invisible Circus, Slung Low, Wilson+Wilson, Scarabeus Theatre,

Ireland

Corcadorca (Cork) Semper Fi, Papan Theatre

Netherlands

Dogtroep

USA

[Lucia Neare's Theatrical Wonders](#) (Seattle, USA)

[Nu Dance Theater](#) (New York, USA)

[Peculiar Works Project](#) (New York, NY, USA)

[Play Grounds - Wood Stove House](#) (Lancaster, PA, USA)

[Scrap and Salvage](#) (San Francisco, USA)

[Skewed Visions](#) (Minnesota, USA)

[St. David High School](#) (Arizona, USA)

[Supernatural Chicago](#) (Chicago, USA) [Supernatural Chicago's website](#)

[Theater Anew - Established plays in unique performance venues](#) (San Francisco, CA)

[Third Rail Projects](#) (USA)

[Walkabout Theater](#) (Chicago, USA)

Canada

Necessary Angel, Dummies Theatre (Montreal), FIXT POINT (Toronto)
Swallow-a-Bicycle Calgary, Electric Company Theatre (Vancouver) Litmus Theatre (Toronto)

Australia

Urban Dream Capsule (Melbourne- Myers Windows) Back to Back (Geelong)
Legs On the Wall (Australia) TheatreWorks (Melbourne) Gilgul (Melbourne)
West (Melbourne) The Mill (Geelong) Home Cooking Company (Melbourne)
Australian Shakespeare Company (Melbourne)

Festivals

Anywhere Festival (Brisbane)
Acco Festival (Israel/Palestine)
LIFT (London International Festival of Theatre)

As for the Australian context, Julian Meyrick, in an overview of Melbourne Fringe Festival productions from 1988 to 1995, cites a total of 47 works produced outside purpose-built theatres, and finds that after 1990 the selection of sites becomes to include “a fabric warehouse, a textile factory, a deserted brewery, Luna Park funfair, and even a shopping mall. He adds that it is “a rare international festival now which does not have its quota of site-specific work,” although the values behind the investment of such venues are “more conventional” and that they are often ‘read’ as theatres even when they do not resemble them (2000: 170-171).” Rachel Fensham, in her 1991 article “Location, Location Location: Australian Theatre on Safari” observes that from the early 1970s the Australian Performing Group (the Pram Factory) took to the streets and mounted performances at pop festivals, political rallies and work sites, enacting a belief that “[s]hifting theatre out of doors was a political act because theatres were thought to be ‘politically bankrupt and impotent.’” (245). Surely, there can be no greater confirmation of a movement’s success than to find newspaper articles already announcing its demise.¹ In a post *News of the World* world, it may well be the newspapers themselves who should be worried about longevity.

All this in an age which has coined the term “dramality” to describe that strange hybrid of performative behaviours, conscious or otherwise, that now occurs under the panoptic gaze of television’s ‘reality’ shows.

So this paper proposes that the ‘art of theatre’ stands today at a kind of cross roads, offering several ways forward. It can take a right turn as it were into ever more spectacular (*s-i-g-h-t*-specific) large budget, mostly franchised musicals

¹ Honour, Philip. "Is It Really Curtains for Site-Specific Theatre?" Opinion. *Guardian* 24 August 2007. Print.

(whose narratives are now routinely plundered from successful feature films– the final surrender to cinema). Or it can continue straight ahead, unfolding in large, state subsidized theatre buildings, another form of (*s-i-g-h-t*-specific) practice where no matter how marvellous the text, performance or direction, any extended creative possibility will always be hostage to real estate and external funding.

Both these options, right turn or steady as she goes, privilege *s-i-g-h-t* (and hearing) as the primary sense organs, an approach David Wiles finds inherent in the Western dramatic tradition.

The Italian Renaissance prioritized vision...The dichotomy of soul and imprisoning body implies, as in Plato's simile [of the cave], a system of representation which invites the viewer to penetrate an interior. Plato and the idealist tradition in antiquity held that vision was an additive process, with the eyes emitting rays or spirit, and this theory of optics supported the notion that the eye was a privileged instrument, allowing the soul to probe where the body could not follow. (216)

Fair enough. And no doubt visually accented theatre will continue to find an audience, even if the accompanying husbands are mostly snoring by interval.

Alternatively, theatre practitioners can take a left turn, as it were, into the ever burgeoning world of performance in real places where the potential for engagement with an audience and with the place of performance is greatly enhanced, where spectators become complicit with the actors, not only in the events unfolding all around them, but also in a transgressive occupation of public or found space – if only via their passive presence at the event.



Figure 2. *Storming Mont Albert By Tram* (Paul Davies) 1982
The penultimate 'bomb scare' scene.

Thus audiences and characters in TheatreWorks *Tram Show* were to all intents and purposes fellow passengers on a # 42 Tram so that at first glance it would be impossible to tell looking at figure 7.3 who is an audience member and who an actor – except of course here the actors are pretending, while the audience are reacting with genuine emotion.

LeFebvre, Foucault and later Heatherington and others give us the means to unpack what is going on here as various social spaces collide. Borrowing from Physics and Hoyle's theories, LeFebvre argued that such spaces can be created by the energy deployed within them. Therefore, we might usefully read what is occurring in a site-specific play as a process whereby the imaginary space of the text as enacted by the performers makes symbolic use of its location, a real tram, in order to produce a coherent system of meaning (a story about tram travellers); both by using language (dialogue) and by means outside of words (larger than life gestures, physical interaction, smell, touch etc.).

While warning of the hyper-complexity involved, what differentiates social spaces from those of “natural space” for Lefebvre, is the fact that they can not only be juxtaposed (as Foucault would have it) but they can, continuing the astro/physical metaphor, be “intercalated, combined, superimposed, they may even sometimes collide” (88). Such a collision for Kevin Heatherington relates to the ‘shock effect’ of heterotopia, something that derives from their different mode of ordering (*Badlands* 42). For Heatherington, heterotopia “are established through the juxtaposition of things not usually found together and the confusion that the resulting representations creates” (*Identity, Space, Performance* 131). Interestingly for this study and the influence of agit-prop street theatre in the formation of site-specific performance, Heatherington also finds that Lefebvre's analysis of everyday life “provided some sort of theory” for *les evenements de Mai 1968* “before they actually happened” (*Identity, Space, Performance* 66). It is worth noting that Foucault's lecture “Of Other Spaces”, Brooks' *The Empty Space*, and Grotowski's *Towards A Poor Theatre* are all published in roughly the same 18 month time frame as both the Paris occupations of 1968 and the first moon landing.

What is clear is that audiences in a site-specific play therefore can be engaged across all five, possibly even six senses. In a TheatreWorks location play you literally get to *feel* the actors.

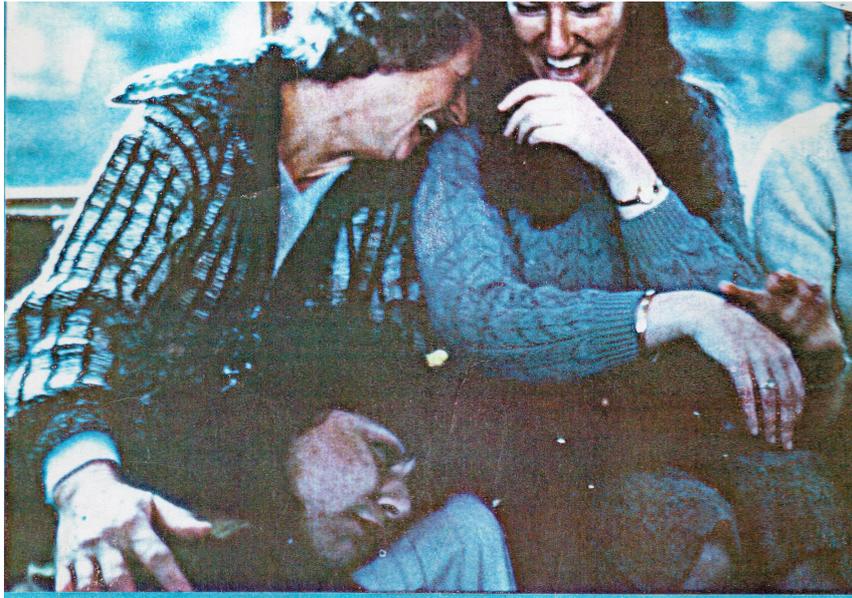


Figure 3. *Storming Mont Albert By Tram* (Davies 1982)

‘Feelie’ theatre or the pheromone effect?

Conductress Alice Katransky seeks comfort from a passenger
on news of her sacking.

This image depicts a moment in the original *Tram Show* where the ticket inspector Morris Stanley, has just dismissed the conductress, Alice, for dereliction of duty. In her grief Alice literally throws herself sobbing onto the nearest passenger and that person responds with what looks like sympathy tempered by shock and hysterical disbelief that this could actually be happening to her. In fact the audience member mirrors Alice turning her own check onto the ‘passenger’ next to her. If Diderot’s fourth wall in theatre is what separates an audience from the stage, then this moment in *The Tram Show* effectively breaks through the ‘fifth wall’ that obtains between audience members themselves. In this example therefore, the architecture of the inter-personal correspondence between performer and spectator, and between the spectators themselves, has shifted some distance from that which is normally available in a theatre that privileges vision.

Now there have been prior attempts to imagine how the experience of drama might become more all engaging.

About half way through Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* the ‘savage’ character, ironically one of the last few real human beings left on the planet, is taken to a ‘feelie’, to what the ‘movie’ has effectively become in Huxley’s dystopian future. Here sunk in his pneumatic stall the savage witnesses characters in a kind of three dimensional projection, a ‘synthetic talking, stereoscopic feely with scent organ accompaniment’. The characters in the feelie are “incomparably more solid-looking than they would have seemed in actual flesh and blood, *far*

more real than reality,” At one point it depicts a, quote “gigantic Negro locked in the arms of a golden-haired, young brachy-cephalic Beta-Plus female.”

The savage started. That sensation on his lips! He lifted a hand to his mouth: the titillation ceased; let his hand fall back on the metal knob; it began again. The scent organ meanwhile breathed pure musk. Expiringly a sound track super-dove cooed ‘Oo-oooh’; and vibrating only thirty two times a second, a deeper than African bass made answer: Aa-aah.’ ‘Ooh-ah! Oo-ah!’ the stereoscopic lips came together again, and once more the facial erogenous zones of the six thousand spectators in the Alhambra tingled with almost intolerable galvanic pleasure. ‘Ooh...’

(Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* 135)

Now, I’m not suggesting that going to a TheatreWorks location play was anything quite like that. For a start we rarely had the space available to play to houses of more than a 100 people, and certainly there weren’t too many erogenous zones involved so far as I can discover or recall, but the total experience of a location play *did* involve senses of feeling, taste and smell.



Figure 4. Storming Mont Albert By Tram (Davies 1982)

‘Blood’ on his hands.

Ticket inspector Morris Stanley (Johnnie Walker) stares horrified at what he thinks is the derro’s blood.

To return to that moment in *the Tram Show* where the ticket inspector who has sacked Alice earlier, now accidentally stabs the derro character in an inept tussle between them over a plastic toy knife. The Ticket Inspector emerges from the altercation with his hands covered in a red viscous substance. He immediately, assumes this is the derro’s blood and that he has seriously wounded, if not

actually killed the man. Morris wallows in a Macbeth-style shock/horror exit, staring incredulously at the ‘blood’ on his hands, displaying them both to the audience and to nonplussed motorists waiting for him to cross the road as he flees in despair from the tram.

However, the substance is in fact, merely tomato sauce from the derro’s pie (put under his coat to keep it warm). But the fact that the audience can already *smell* that it is tomato sauce amplifies their enjoyment of Morris’s discomfiture. They know he’s acting, they know the blood is fake, but they also accept that his *character* is *not* pretending. In this example *The Tram Show* plays with an inherited stage tradition regarding the depiction of blood in performance, something identified by Lucy Nevitt who found that it could

“easily it can fail to achieve its intended effect through a failure of credibility” because “spectators know it is not real and so always judge it against that knowledge: stage blood effects need to overcome the fact of their unreality, not by genuinely seeming to be real, but by meeting an expected standard of generic credibility – by seeming to *try* to look like blood. (87; original emphasis)

Nevitt goes on to note that “[b]lood effects in theatre tend to be reserved for moments of high narrative tension” (88). The result of this moment in *The Tram Show* is to drive the annoying ticket inspector off the tram, apparently guilty of manslaughter, never to be seen again. Thus *The Tram Show*’s Macbeth moment co-opts the convention of ‘fake’ bleeding and takes it to a point of comic absurdity. It is altogether another order of suspended disbelief. In this way the comedic potential of the Ticket Inspector’s delusion is enhanced and extended, and eventually capped by the derro himself, left behind on the tram and angry that his ‘lunch’ is now ruined and demanding to know who’s going to replace it, but Morris Stanley is no longer there to blame.

David Wiles makes the point

Neither Appia nor anyone else in the twentieth century had an easy answer to the question of how to make the actor-audience relationship closer, once the proscenium arch had gone. What sort of activity was now expected of the spectator? How should the seats be arranged? What degree of merging between actor and spectator was possible? How was interaction to be reconciled with aesthetic distance (236 – 237)

Yet tantalizingly, Wiles history of Western performance space stops short of the outbreak of site-specific practice that takes place in the UK, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Tim Etchells, of Forced Entertainment, echoing Foucault's description of the present epoch as belonging to the 'near and the far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed' (Open Spaces 22), hits a note of warning, however.

Theatre must take account of how technology...has rewritten and is rewriting bodies, changing our understandings of narratives and places, changing our relationships to culture, changing our understandings of presence. Because to fall back on theatre's oldest rubric—an actor in front of an audience—is not something one can do lightly, not something one can do without understanding the complexities of what we might mean when we say 'actor' and what we mean when we say 'in front of'...presence is now always complicated and layered, a thing of degrees, and in these strange times one can feel closer to a person, sometimes when they are further away than when they are fully and simply before us. (*Certain Fragments* 97)

Here's Foucault's prediction of the near and the far again. The sense of 'engulfment' in a theatre experience that Artaud was calling for (also curiously around the same time as the sensual immersion of Huxley's 'feelies'), was something that TheatreWorks aimed for – or perhaps more accurately, stumbled upon – in their determination as a community theatre company to take theatre out to people and explore all sorts of potential new interconnectivities– not just in subject matter, holding the suburban stories up to the people who lived them, but also in an exploration of site-specific performance across a progressive staging of plays in tents, trams, boats, pubs, houses and gardens. This is a progression in itself reveals a certain systematic intention to explore and innovate. The end result in the more successful versions, was an immersion of the audience in the dramatic experience which I would argue pushed out the boundaries of what was theatrically possible. Here presence and space were tangible things.

If we look at the TheatreWorks location *oeuvre* as a coherent and evolving body of work therefore what it gives back to Foucault's hypothesis of the heterotopia are concrete examples of how such spaces CAN be created and managed as places of alternate ordering. Above all the key lies I would argue in notions of "containerization" and "authenticity": how best to define the 'borders' of the narrative space so that it is both permeable and safely cocooned from the risks involved when engaging with an outside reality. The process always involves a suspension of disbelief. How successfully the narrative space 'authentically' inhabits its place of performance, clearly enhances an audience's experience of the event. It is not so much a question noted by Miwon Kwon and first asserted by US site-specific artist ???? that to move the work is to destroy the work, but rather, the question in the theatrical context might be more "could this story conceivably happen here?"

The result in TheatreWorks case was a succession of plays that started with scaffolding on portable stage, lead to the insertion of tents into shopping centres, leapt onto trams, then across onto boats and finally into houses both public and private.

What they offer the concept of the heterotopia is their demonstration of the ease and multiple inventiveness with which such spaces can be created and managed inside real places for dramatic purposes. The key lies in containerization: how to make space of performance permeable but “safe” at the same time. Here the audience is absent and present at the same time. It is present in an embodied form inside a real moment. It is also invisible as an audience to any outside reality looking back in. Thus the tension between presence and absence (embodiment and the imagination) can be the energy flow that conditions the audience experience of the play.

What follows therefore is a brief history of the plays and various audience roles and methods of containerization: managed not only to extract money and make the exercise financially viable but to also to minimise risk...

Miwon Kwon, Nick Kaye and others source the origins of site-specific performance overseas in minimalism and site-specificity the visual arts but they derive in Australia I would also argue from the practices of independent film making where dramatic scenes were performed in real places out of budgetary necessity as much as from a desire to appropriate public space for dramatic purposes. In TheatreWorks case both Caz Howard and I had previously worked on a film about the dismissal of the Whitlam Government in 1975.



Figure 5. *Exits* (Davies, Laughren, Howard 1980)
Appropriating public space in independent film.

Exits mixed dramatically reconstructed scenes inside a semi-real time documentary account of *les événements* of November 11, 1975.

Another influence in TheatreWorks drive towards site-specific practice was its agenda as a community theatre company to reach out and produce plays in the suburban heartland it chosen to occupy.

One of TheatreWorks' early community projects, *Couch 22* (1983) involved engaging with some of the (largely hidden) community of unemployed young people in the otherwise affluent eastern suburbs. It took the form of a documentary film based on interviews performed *alfresco* in places like Camberwell Junction. Here props such as a couch and carpet were used to literally occupy public space for performance purposes



(photo Liz Honybun)

Figure 6. *Couch 22* (1983) Occupying suburban space
Paul Davies directs CUSH members from behind the camera

Figure 6 shows members of C.U.S.H. (Camberwell Unemployed Self Help group) filming on location in busy Camberwell Junction. Here the TheatreWorks cast and crew have taken 'the couch' of the title and used it to occupy a corner of public space, deploying or assuming the licence of a film crew to re-position what is usually a private space (a living room) on public land.

Even before company officially existed, while still students at the VCA, the prospective TheatreWorks ensemble used a purpose built scaffolding set for Hannie Rayson's first play *Please Return to Sender* (1980).

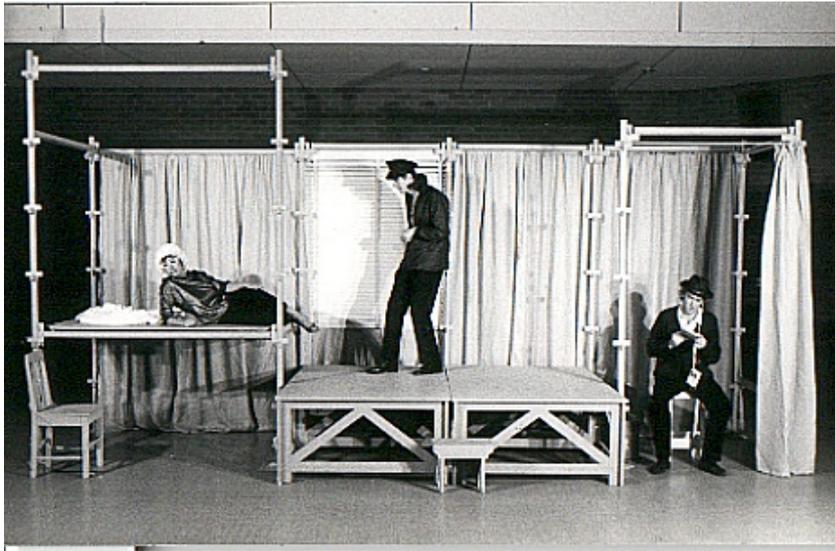


Figure 7. *Please Return to Sender* Hannie Rayson 1980
Scaffolding as spatial container

This was a gender-reversal story where a male postman becomes pregnant and is forced to consider an abortion. It was designed tour the company through the eastern suburbs, its chosen community of operations. While the demountable set not un-reminiscent of Brith Gof's 19?? production of *Twi Bydwyd*, which used a scaffolding set based on a design by Bernard Tscumi to stage simultaneous performances of three separate scenes in three transparent rooms.

Please Return to Sender may have been an idea for portable theatre space but it was clearly structured along the lines of the traditional proscenium arch and in practice wasn't all that mobile. So this was not a site-specific play according to Fiona Wilkie's definition, because while it might have satisfied the criteria of "performance occurring in a non-theatre venue" (1) it was not a play in which "site was a vital element, instrumental in developing the theme or form of the work" (2). However Wilkie herself concedes that such a definition omits the potential for "movement" "transience" and "playfulness".

Transience and playfulness and movement were much better organized in TW's next production *The Go Anywhere (within reason) Show* which ditched the clunky scaffolding approach in favour of a more portable certainly much more lightweight tent.



Figure 8. Tents as spatial containers

The Go Anywhere (within reason) Show (Group Devised 1981)

Here the play, about a homeless middle class family, was more thematically aligned with the place of performance in so far as the Dickens: Dick, Dolly, Darryl, Deidre and Desdemona were allegedly on an extended camping holiday to cover over their desperate financial plight in Malcolm Fraser's recession of the early 1980s. From day one TheatreWorks' mission was to celebrate and disturb. Thus the shopping centre, or church hall or school in which their tent was pitched and around which the performance took place, was potentially their place of abode for the night. Although the strict convention of authenticity to site was broken by certain pantomimed interventions such as a television news broadcast, the play demonstrated the potential for this kind of theatre to be mobile and reasonably popular. However because of the dispersed nature of audiences in public places such as shopping centres, the element of containerization in *The Go Anywhere (within reason) Show* became a work in progress. The audiences were still essentially separate from the action, looking on from outside a performative circle centered in and around the tent.

The breakthrough step was to make them complicit in the action with the performers: Wilkie's notion of 'playfulness'. *Authenticity* (spatial relations) and *complicity* (audience relations) collided for the first time in *Storming Mont Albert By Tram*. Here a form of Boal's invisible theatre colonized the street.

Apart from the aforementioned biblical scenes enacted on the backs of medieval wagons and certain agit-prop raids on trams in Leningrad and Moscow after the Russian Revolution, the world's first truly moving, spoken word drama on a wheeled vehicle was arguably TheatreWorks' second site-specific piece *Storming Mont Albert By Tram*. It was in many ways the par excellence example of the emerging form, a perfect container that was safe, familiar and permeable. It

combined authenticity with mobility in a package was easy to understand and relate to.

The tram was not only a perfect container it immediately implicated its audience in the events of the play as passengers who could follow the action as it happened all around them and as it frequently left the tram to invade the space of the street when characters got on and off.

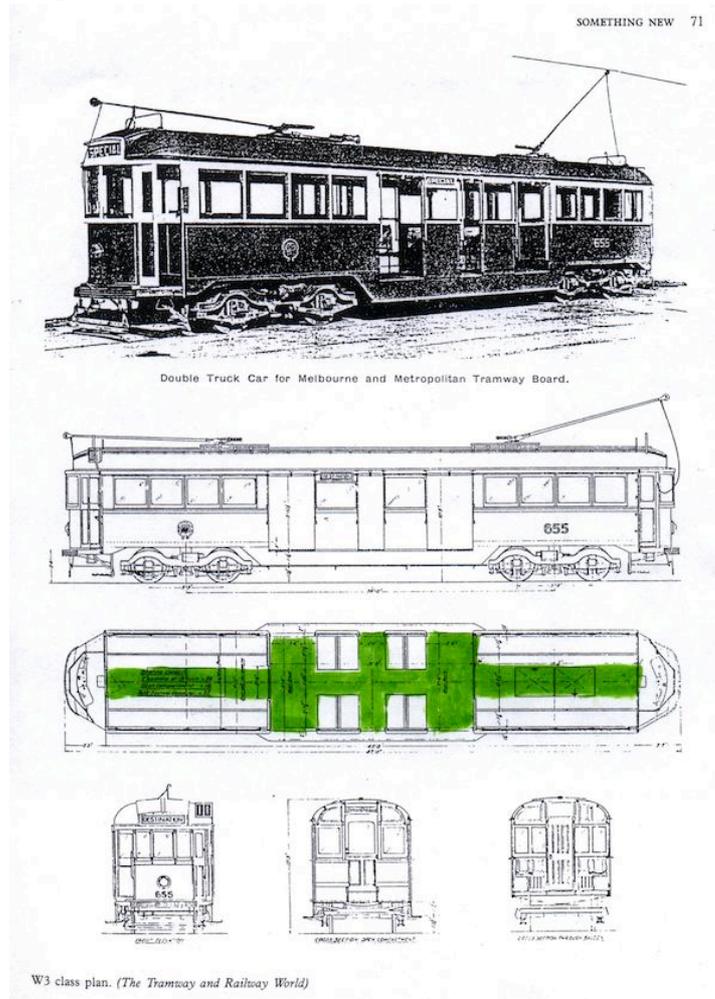


Figure 9. Floor plan and elevations of a W class tram
Green areas denote available performance spaces between seats

Unlike a traditional theatre set a tram did not have to pretend to be a tram. Here the element of disbelief was reserved for the second tier audience, the people outside the tram who are randomly caught up in its events as it passed them by.



Figure 10.

Scenes from *Storming Mont Albert by Tram*

The company experiment that had begun for TheatreWorks with a play performed around a moveable canvas tent made a quantum leap here – a spatial trajectory as it were onto a moving vehicle. Certainly, *The Tram Show* helped put TheatreWorks on the map both critically and financially, and its immediate success gave rise to an outbreak of site-specificity in Melbourne theatre practice that flourished for well over a decade.

The Tram Show was produced over a dozen years from 1982 to 1994 on various tram routes in both Melbourne and Adelaide, trambulating a distance that would have taken the play and its combined audience of some 20,000 people virtually half way around the world!

However, its sequel set on a Melbourne river boat was, while still popular with audiences less critically successful.



Figure 10. River Theatre *Breaking Up In Balwyn* (Paul Davies 1983)
An uninvited ‘passenger’ waits to board the MV Yarra Princess.

Part of the problem of *Breaking Up In Balwyn* derives from the play being, in a sense, too “closed in on itself”: an island both aesthetically and spatially – without Foucault’s call for it to be simultaneously “open to the infinity of the sea”. The premise of the play was a divorce celebration set aboard a party boat hired for the occasion at which the audience were invited friends and family (in the style of Jack Hibberd’s earlier wedding play *Dimboola 1969*).



Figure 11 Re enter Greek Frenchmaid, Lurlene
after being left behind at Interval

This third example of TheatreWorks’ location theatre experiment had a more artificial quality than its trambulating predecessor and was in less vibrant contact with the outside world.



Figure 12.

Nigel engages member of the audience (party guest) in a dance

It had site-specific virtues of *mobility* and took place in *real time*, it also involved senses of touch, taste and smell (haptic and olfactory spaces). Here you could dance with the actors and share in toasts and divorce cake, but the play lacked a certain *authenticity* in its thematic premise: the idea of inverting the social ritual of the wedding reception and essentially turning it into a celebration of divorce and a privileged woman's search for freedom. As a result, *The Boat Show* was less successful in making its audience *complicit* as 'friends and family' of the gay divorcee, in the events that unfold during her floating party.

The final set of plays in the TW canon are the ones that took place in existing houses.



Figure 13. 'Linden' St. Kilda, circa 1900.

Members of the Michaelis family pose in their front garden.
Location for *Living Rooms* (1986) and *Full House/No Vacancies* (1989).

In the winter of 1986, *Living Rooms* was staged in 'Linden', a grand Victorian mansion built a hundred years earlier. The three Acts of *Living Rooms* are each set in one of Linden's large, downstairs rooms, and evoke a key moment in the building's (and the nation's) history. These three periods and the characters that embody them, eventually collide in a surreal denouement (literally a collision of time and space) in the hallway. In this way the house itself becomes a palimpsest for distinctive historical formations: Linden's bunyip-aristocratic heyday in 1900,



(Photo © Ruth Maddison)

Figure 14. *Living Rooms* – The Drawing Room Act, 1900.

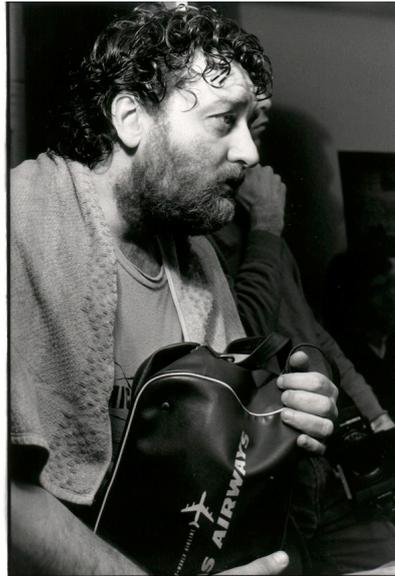
Cuthbert toasts Michael's embarkation for the Boer War.

Audience present as unacknowledged 'guests' at a farewell party.

Here spectators are arranged around four sides of an open playing area. Here they sat as largely unacknowledged 'guests' at a farewell party for Lt. Michael Deegan who is about to sail with the second Victorian contingent to the Boer War.

A second scene is set in 1972 takes place in a 'Flatette' during Linden's boarding house decline. Here the audience are positioned behind a light scrim and thus rendered invisible to the actors. In this way their mode of viewing is impeded or filtered, literally. Here they are also present as witnesses, but now in an even more extreme and 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 through a one way mirror.

In this sense, Paul Bugden, whose rooms this is, resides in a place of secretive examination, a metaphorical prison. Indeed, issues of 'legality' and suppressed identity drive the Flatette Act given that Bugden as a conscientious objector is on the run from the Federal Police – signifying conscription and Vietnam, and yet another 'unsettling' moment in Australia's ongoing formation of nationhood.



(Photo © Ruth Maddison)

Figure 15. *Living Rooms* – the Flatette Act (1972)

A traveler frozen in time, Paul Bugden (Paul Davies) awaits the buzzer that will summon him to ‘life’. Here the audience are ‘hidden’ out of sight, cast as agents of a panoptic gaze.

Finally projected slightly into the future (1988) where Linden has been transformed into an art gallery (as it currently remains).



(Photo © Ruth Maddison)

Figure 16. *Living Rooms* – The Gallery Act, 1988.

Monika (Caz Howard) and Leon (Peter Sommerfeld)
waiting impatiently for something to happen.

Audience mixed with actors as fellow witnesses to a ‘performance art event’.

This late Twentieth Century renovation was emblematic of the re-gentrification that the suburb surrounding Linden was then going through. Therefore the building itself already contained an embedded history with which the fiction of the play could resonate.

As Figure 16 indicates, the characters in the Gallery Act (Monika and Leon), were present within the audience (to begin with) but as their own conversation becomes more heated this well dressed, culturally articulate couple, seem to emerge from the audience as if they are ‘real’ people who have come to see (according to the program) an ‘exhibition of location theatre’ – which, in their particular room, doesn’t seem to be working. They dutifully press their buzzer but no actors turn up – because of course, Monika and Leon *are* the play in this room. And so a ‘performance art piece’ *is* happening, although as ‘characters’, Monika and Leon never acknowledge this.

Thus while each House play managed the creation of its counter-site of performance in slightly different ways, common elements (of simultaneity, mobility and juxtaposition) across all these works are evident.

In contrast to TheatreWorks’ earlier plays on public transport, the *Living Rooms*’ ‘stage’ remained static while here it was the spectators who moved. Mobility therefore remains a key site-specific element. In order to locate the story inside the building it was notionally about, the performative strategy was to divide the arriving audience into three groups (of roughly 30 people each) by handing them different coloured floor plans of the house.

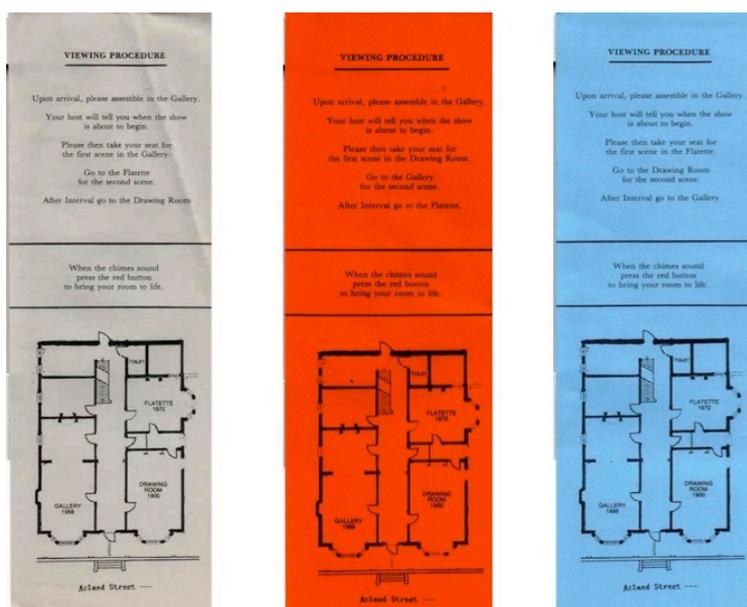


Figure 17. *Living Rooms* (1986)

‘Viewing procedure’ for the three audience groups: grey, orange blue.

These pamphlets explained how to ‘animate’ each room by pressing a buzzer located on the wall, and invited the various audience groups to view the play in one of three possible orders (Figure 17). This division enabled each thirty minute scene to be staged simultaneously (and repeated three times).

Finally, a short, concluding scene was staged on Linden’s grand central staircase which drew all characters and all audience groups to a denouement in the hallway.



Figure 18. The Hallway Finale

These different modes of witnessing (voyeurs, detached scrutineers, fellow visitors to a gallery) 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 being complicit with the actors in an intrusion upon the histories and living spaces of others; of being in a private space where the legitimacy of their presence is at best questionable.

On one level they are all ghosts ‘inhabiting’ a troubled site and thereby constitute a collective uncanny, a post-colonial presence in a colonialised world. While complicit with the events taking place through their silent witnessing, the audience are also offered a shared experience, a sense of moving around as a group, of accessing the narrative sequence with different itineraries – something which again engenders the ‘community of the audience’ within the play. In *Living Rooms* they are on a journey together, through time and space. Such reconfigurations of the theatre-going experience engendered a sense of being

present in a way that was greater than the sum of its parts. The result was the staging of a kind of meta- event, with sounds bleeding from one room/time/space into another and which, despite its experimental nature, again found a rapport with people not normally drawn to live theatre.

Which brings us back to the future and hopefully to know the place for the first time. To the third way...

More than two decades after the TheatreWorks location experiment ended, I find it encouraging even quite remarkable, that only few weeks ago I was able to a TheatreWorks supported play called *Hullo My Name Is* written and performed by Nicola Dunn, where I'm given my own name tag:



Figure 19.
Audience identification tag

...and invested in the role of someone attending a Community Centre (which is what the TheatreWorks space as Parish Hall essentially is). Here Nicola Gunn, cast as an all purpose community worker starts organising activities, inviting us to play ping pong and other board games, or to plant seedlings in pots.



Figure 20. Nicola Gunn as a community worker (photo Joe Armao)
Hullo My Name Is TheatreWorks September 2012

At one point, armed only with a megaphone, Nicola leads us out of the building into the random reality of Acland Street for a short street promenade where she reflects out loud to all and sundry on the pain of being an artist, going down on one knee while standing on a traffic pedestal. Back at the community centre she lies on top of an audience, engaging haptic space to the maximum, enacting what she calls the ‘body blanket’ maneuver. Then she hands out art materials for a life drawing class and poses for us clad only in her radio microphone, all the while continuing a monologue that relates an unfolding story of love, identity, longing and the pain of loneliness.

Now I fully accept that this might not be everybody’s idea of a great night out in the theatre. But I can assure you I was amused, intrigued, a little bit shocked, I also saw my image of a few minutes ago projected on a large screen at the back of the space, creating a slight temporal distortion. I knew I didn’t have to take part in any of this unless I really wanted to, and in any case I readily enough found myself holding hands with a stranger in a big circle with our eyes closed. (But I’m from Byron Bay). *Hullo My Name Is* is a play about personal isolation that nevertheless created connections not only between Nicola and her audience (at times quite intensely so) but also within the audience themselves, again smashing through the fifth wall. In the best TheatreWorks tradition I became part of the community of the audience, something not available to the individual recipient of a **s-i-g-h-t** specific experience – whether screen based or live.

The point about all the plays under discussion here is

The do work

They establish new bonds with audiences

They don’t cost much to put on.

They can be great fun to put on.

They restore a certain Benjaminian aura to the business of entertainment in an age where the sight based/screen dominated digital revolution produces only virtual audiences for virtual spaces.

And if the art of theatre is to find new expressivities, if it is going to be more than just a bunch of voyeurs gawking at a mob of exhibitionists, it has to embrace the site-specific experience, to negotiate the infinite number of ways in which fiction can be invisibly and playfully inserted into real places.

Julian Beck, of New York’s *Living Theatre* spoke in the 1960s of his dream of a company of actors that could “stop imitating”, and “move their audiences” so as to imbue them with “ideas and feelings that allow transformation and genuine transcendence to be achieved”. Sadly Beck concluded however that “None of the actors” knew what he was talking about. (qtd Tytell *The Living Theatre Art Exile and Outrage* 161) Julian Beck’s greatest misfortune well may be that he was ahead of his time. In an increasingly digitized world which has vastly upscaled our basic

interconnectivity, and where people now spend so much of their working and personal lives alone and in front of a screen we find that all too sadly despite this enhanced ability to communicate we still don't have all that much to say. The cost has been a loss of physical contact, something that, despite the constant shape shifting is at the heart of its practice is essentially what the Art of Theatre has to offer.

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