

LIKE RIDING A BICYCLE...  
Achieving balance through mobility  
in site-specific performance.

A comparative study of NORPA's *Railway Wonderland* (2015)  
and GST's *Sir Don v The Ratpack* (2009)

Australasian Drama Studies # 69 October 2016

Paul Davies

**Abstract:**

According to Peter Brook's famous dictum, it requires more than just an empty space, an actor and someone watching to constitute an 'act of theatre' (*The Empty Space* 1). The actor must also *walk across* the space. Setting aside questions of why she is walking or where (the narrative factor), it is *motion* in theatre practice that remains the connecting spark. And that for site-specific theatre especially, it is mobility - either of audience, performers or stage - that 'ignites' into being the dramatic space in which events may occur.

De Certeau also finds that space is "composed of intersections of mobile elements" and is "in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements within it". Space is "like a word when it is spoken" (*Everyday Life* 117). Lefebvre, taking his cue from the astrophysics of Fred Hoyle, similarly argues that space may be created "by the energy deployed within it" (*Production of Space* 13).

This article examines two recent productions in real places where the performance space is created and maintained by the movement of actors and/or audience through it. I argue that both Gorilla Street Theatre's *Sir Don v The Ratpack* (November 2009) enacted outside BHP Billiton's annual general meeting, and NORPA's *Railway Wonderland* (November 2015) sited on the platform of Lismore's now disused railway station, institute different practices of mobility which not only facilitate the intrusion of space into place, but also enhance an audience's complicity in the occupation that invariably follows; both vital to the site-specific agenda.

As with riding a bicycle, balance becomes feasible through forward movement. Opposites are reconciled, suspension of disbelief (between place and space) suspended, arrest avoided (mostly), progression of story achieved. Through these strategies, and by these means, the practice of site-specific performance continues to thrive outside dedicated theatre buildings and does so in ways that *move* the 'art of theatre' (Appia) into literally *new territory*.

Richard Serra's assertion that "to move the work is to destroy the work" (qtd Kwon, *One Place After Another* 73) may well apply to site-specific sculpture (one need only look to the peripatetic travails of Ron Robertson Swann's (in)famous *Vault* aka *The Yellow Peril*). However, drawing on my study of TheatreWorks plays in trams, boats and houses (*Really Moving Drama*, 2013)<sup>1</sup> I would argue that quite the reverse applies to site-specific performance - where, *not* to move the work, risks potential failure.

---

<sup>1</sup> Available as a free download at <http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:313649>



(photo Suzi Rosedale)

Figure 1.

The author demonstrating an experimental 'railcycle' with its unique magnetic wheels designed to reopen the currently disused Casino-Murwillumbah line to local pedal traffic.

As anyone who has made the attempt can attest, remaining upright and unsupported on a stationary bicycle is virtually impossible (skilled circus performers excepted). However, as soon as motion forward is achieved, and peddling begins, a process of equilibrium occurs in which the tendency to fall sideways, suddenly - even mysteriously - evaporates. The phenomenon is in fact a confluence of dynamic, mathematical and gravitational factors designed to keep the centre of gravity of rider and vehicle over the bike's tyres.<sup>2</sup>

This article proposes that the process of staging site-specific theatre involves a similar and equally critical balancing act: between the *place* of performance and the *space* of the production, between the location and the text, the geographical and the metaphorical, "the host and the ghost",<sup>3</sup> the reality - and the fiction brought into it. I argue that in both cases (cycling and theatre) balance can be achieved through motion (of either time or space).

In *Really Moving Drama*<sup>4</sup> I proposed that these new relationships (text and location, space and place, reality and fiction) required an altogether new order of

---

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller explanation of this phenomenon see:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bicycle\\_and\\_motorcycle\\_dynamics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bicycle_and_motorcycle_dynamics) (Viewed 15 April 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Pearson, Mike, and Michael Shanks. *Theatre/Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2001) 23.

"The 'ghost' and 'host'; that 'which is of the site...and that which is brought to the site.'"

<sup>4</sup> The Author, *Really Moving Drama* (PhD dissertation University of Queensland, 2013). Available online at

suspended disbelief. As a result, the more *authentically* a site-specific play inhabited its chosen location, the more successful (or otherwise) the enterprise and the immersion of space of text into place of performance tended to be. This 'creative occupation' could involve many different kinds of resonances, including: architectural, cultural, literary, and historical elements. One outcome was to *move* the practice of theatre into literally new territory and to engage audiences in ways that extended beyond mere sight and hearing: to potentially bring into play all the senses<sup>5</sup> (particularly in the more 'immersive' examples).

Here I extend that argument by proposing that one way of achieving and maintaining an authentic resonance (balance) between space and place is through mobility: either of time, stage, actors, audience - or all four. To invoke Peter Brook's famous dictum, a moment of theatre can occur simply by virtue of an "actor *moving* across an empty stage with someone watching".<sup>6</sup> This implies another, equally vital binary: between the *actor* performing and the *spectator* watching. Setting aside the question of *why* the actor is walking and where she is going (the narrative element), in Brook's analysis it is, above all, *movement across* the stage that draws in the two key components (viewer and actor), linking both to a coherent theatrical event.

In considering recent productions by Northern Rivers' companies (Lismore's NORPA and Mullumbimby's GST) this article seeks to show how these key relationships of space-place, audience-performer, reality-fiction were managed and maintained through the introduction of the element of transportation (movement) either in time and/or space.

NORPA (Northern Rivers Performing Arts) is a medium sized, professional, regional company which operates very much according to the classical community mould; defined by Geoffrey Milne (echoing Abraham Lincoln) as "theatre by the people, of the people, for the people"<sup>7</sup>. NORPA basically runs the Lismore City Hall as a venue for all kinds of visiting entertainments (including theatre, dance, comedy and music). In addition the company creates original work of its own - productions that are sourced from, and reflect back on their local community. Under founding Artistic Director, Lyndon Terrancini (who has since gone on to mounting Australian Opera productions on and around Sydney Harbour), the company established its site-specific credentials right from its

---

<http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:313649>. Viewed 14 March 2016.

<sup>5</sup> These may include sight, touch, taste, smell, sound, proprioception (or kinaesthesia), pain, balance, thirst, hunger, time, direction (magnetoception) and synaesthesia ('seeing' sounds as colours).

<sup>6</sup> Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space* (Ringwood, Victoria: Pelican, 1968) 1.

<sup>7</sup> This was a portmanteau definition proposed by Geoffrey Milne, in a personal interview with the author for *Really Moving Drama* (22 Feb. 2010). The full interview is available online at the TheatreWorks Archive: <http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:306259> (Viewed 18 April 2016)

inauguration in the early 1990s with such large scale al fresco events as *The Cars That Ate Paris* (which included cars doing 'wheelies' on the streets outside the City Hall) and *Flood*, a processional event involving hundreds of local people parading through the centre of town. NORPA's current Artistic Director, Julian Louis, arrived in 2007 with similar interests, having previously staged an event involving 30 double decker busses and a circus performance in Circular Quay.

His recent collaboration with Janus Balodis on *Railway Wonderland* (November 2015) was described by the ABC's Michael Cathcart as "one of the great plays of the year" and Cathcart acknowledged NORPA's indelible regional fundamentals by observing that "only these people could tell this story in this way"<sup>8</sup> *Railway Wonderland* takes place entirely in and around Lismore's now disused Railway Station, with the audience sitting on a temporary scaffolding structure built over the railway line itself - effectively providing them with the point of view of passengers on a (disembodied) train.



photo Evan Malcolm

Figure 2.  
Audience seating for *Railway Wonderland*

Thus, while the audience remains static, the action of the play itself takes place both on the platform (extending out beyond the audience emplacement to either end of the station complex) as well as inside a bus waiting room, visible to the audience through a large glass wall (Figure 3). It is an emphatic reminder that Lismore station, no longer needed for trains, has instead been repurposed as a bus terminal.

---

<sup>8</sup> Available on line at:

[http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rn/podcast/2015/10/bay\\_20151028\\_1045.mp3](http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rn/podcast/2015/10/bay_20151028_1045.mp3) (19 minutes). (Monitored 16 March 2016).



photo K Holmes

Figure 3.  
Lismore station with the bus terminal visible  
through the platform's glass windows.

These two principal loci (platform and terminal) became the means by which a certain chronological mobility was achieved in the play - linking the two main narrative threads: a contemporary story about passengers waiting for a bus (on the other side of the glass) and historical re-enactments in the life journey of Ana (Katia Molino), a 'proxy bride' brought from Italy to Australia in the early 1950s in order to marry a local farmer, whom she had never previously met. Incidents from Ana's past which might credibly have taken place on the platform (arriving in Lismore the first time, fare-welling her son off the Vietnam war in the 1960s, imagining encounters there with her husband etc.) are neatly juxtaposed and interwoven with the various backstories of the contemporary bus travelers located inside the old station building proper. In this way the present is in effect *framed* by the past.



photo K Holmes

Figure 4.

Past tense. Ana "imagines" meeting her husband for the first time.

A spectator's gaze is drawn alternately from the platform/past through into the terminal/present and beyond that through a second glass wall to South Lismore's random traffic flow going about its regular, nightly business: fiction framing fiction framing reality (see Figure 5).

Here the fluctuating mobility both of time and place 'balances' an audience's reception of the play by allowing for an almost seamless segueing from one to the other: place and space, fiction and reality, past and present. This mobility of gaze and fluidity of chronological and spatial emplacement is further enhanced by having actors playing characters from both time periods, moving (with a quick change of costume), from past to present and back again - 'going with the flow'. The combined dramatic and theatrical effects, when mixed with historical film projection, live music, a local choir and sometimes sub-titles in the manner of a silent movie - further enhancing the overall melodramatic effect - were quite mesmerizing in *Railway Wonderland*. This reworking of indicative local stories (gathered from a community outreach project)<sup>9</sup> and presented in a real site, redolent with its own history, was undoubtedly a major contributor to the play's sold-out success and its ability to attract audiences from outside Lismore itself.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> A call went out for local stories relating to the Lismore Station to be submitted to NORPA which were curated and read out at the Byron Writer's Festival in 2009. An earlier production of the play (with a different cast) was based on these stories and given a dramatic treatment through a collaboration between Julian Louis and playwright Janus Balodis. This earlier version was staged by NORPA for a week only in 2012 to an enthusiastic reception.

<sup>10</sup> According to NORPA's own research about 60% of its audience came from postcodes outside Lismore.

Director, Julian Louis makes it clear:

The building of the audience opposite the platform is a really neat fit. Suddenly you're reminded you're in a real space. When we elongated that perspective and widened that sense of realness, real place, that was very exciting. [It was the] same with hearing busses and cars; seeing the traffic through the waiting room [added] another layer again. There's a real world out there.<sup>11</sup>

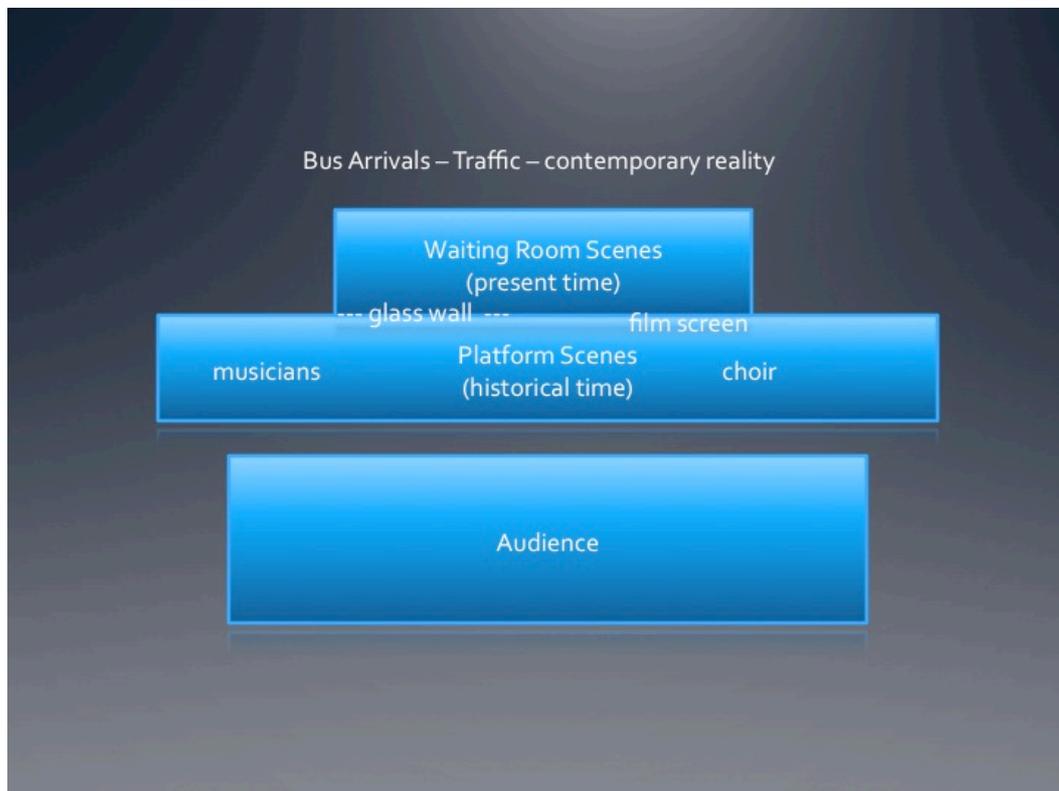


Figure 5.

Diagram of audience and stage relationships in *Railway Wonderland*.

This spatial arrangement draws an audience's attention into a fluid and constant transitioning between periods, stories, and spaces. As if riding a visual bicycle, their gaze was able to readily travel from the exterior of the platform to the interior of the terminal, from the larger, historical canvas to the inward looking, internalized, selfie-obsessed present. There is no need to suspend any disbelief that this might not now be a bus terminal or that it was once a working railway station. The place begins to speak for itself. There is even a third narrative strand linking would-be lovers in an even earlier time frame: the 1940s. These characters, including the woman's husband, enact a *commedia*-styled take-off of David's Lean's 1945 feature *Brief Encounter* in which two strangers fall in love while making regular trips on the same commuter train. This story of strangers and travelers and the consequences that flow from such a potentially incendiary liaison, playfully counter-point Ana's personal narrative from bespoke bride to fully entrenched local: a story that reflects and celebrates the extensive Italian community found in Lismore and its surrounds today. *Brief Encounter* was

<sup>11</sup> Personal interview with the author 21 March 2016.

based on Noel Coward's 1936 play *Still Lives* - the title itself could be read perhaps as an ironic oxymoron for the idea of an adulterous couple caught up in a constant process of transiting from place to place, from home to fraught liaison.



photo NORPA Archive

Figure 6.  
Strangers waiting for a train.  
Husband and would-be lover on location at Lismore Station.

For Julian Louis, 'movement' - specifically the choreographing of characters' actions in *Railway Wonderland* was a key initiating element in the design of the production.

The whole show started with movement. I worked with four performers to start with. The four from the waiting room [bus terminal] scenes are the original devising characters. So we started with character and movement. It was about exploring the waiting room as a place of mundanity and melodrama. Boredom and heightened experiences. A place of transition. It was like physical clowning. It is observational and subtle.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Personal interview with the author 21 March 2016.



photo K Holmes

Figure 7.

Strangers waiting for a bus. The terminal scenes.

"A place of mundanity and melodrama. Boredom and heightened experiences."

At this point in the play's development there were two separate narrative streams in play.

Julian Louis continues:

I grappled with how this was going to transition to a big site for six months. I thought I might just focus this [the waiting room scenes] into a studio piece and make that work as an extended dance sequence. The railway station was always going to be part of it, but I wanted initially just to follow this movement sequence. Then I realized with the glass wall (Figure 8) the stylized movement could go on inside (to complement the platform scenes). But we needed something to counter that and it would have to be a connection to the audience. And that's where the idea of the Italian migrant story came from. Here I wanted

a character singing. To bring in music so we could merge the dance with the melodrama of the song.<sup>13</sup>



photo K Holmes

Figure 8.

Ana framed by the Vox Caldera choir singing through a glass wall.

In *Railway Wonderland* the transitioning of the audience gaze from past to present to real time beyond, echoes Foucault's meditation on the unique, mobile elements available in any rail journey:

[A] train is an extraordinary bundle of relations because it is something through which one goes, it is also something by means of which one can go from one point to another, and then it is also something that goes by.<sup>14</sup>

Michel De Certeau makes a similar point, with a slightly different inflection equating transport to narrative function.

In modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transit are called *metaphori*... Stories could also take this noble name: every day, they traverse and organize places; they select and line them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories. In this respect narrative structures have the status of spatial syntaxes.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Personal interview with the author 21 March 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." Trans. Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics* 16 Spring (1986): 23-24.

<sup>15</sup> De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steve Rendall. Berkley (U California P, 1988) 115.

Foucault and De Certeau imbue items of public transport with a kind of spatially charged narrative potential. As befitting its community ethos, NORPA's *Railway Wonderland* enacts its own unique 'spatial syntax' by embracing and celebrating a public resource that had been taken away from its local community through the agency of a cost-cutting state government. This is the larger story at work here. The ordering of scenes in the play and their deployment across the key places of performance combine to convey a meaning that connects and relates part of a town's common history through one of its most iconic, public buildings - and one which is intrinsically bound up with movement as transport. While 'Station' implies 'stationary' it functions as a place designed specifically to facilitate movement - of goods and people.

Against much local protest (which still continues) the Casino-Murwillumbah rail line was closed down after the last train left Lismore Station in 2004. It had been opened with much pomp and ceremony 110 years earlier in 1894 when it was used extensively to move freight: including cattle, timber, sugar cane, general goods and cream - causing most commuter journeys to be quite slow affairs. Yet a constant political battle has been waged since 2004 to keep the rail corridor in public hands; including a proposal to convert the line to a rail-trail for walkers and cyclists. Others simply want the trains (or at least a light rail) to be restored. Depending on the (constantly deteriorating) condition of the track railcycles may still have their place.



Figure 9.  
Train to nowhere.  
Lismore Station, March 2016.

NORPA is one of Australia's most successful and theatrically articulate regional companies. Their entrepreneurship of the Lismore City Hall and their signature, locally-devised productions (often evolving from NORPA's 'Generator Programme') have given the company a significant local profile and well deserved (if often perilous) government funding. It is a testament to the company's endurance and underlying strength that it has been operating now for more than 20 years and continues to manage a full time, professional slate of

productions with more site-specific productions on the drawing board, including one set in the historic Eureka Hall (*Dreamland* November 2016).

On the other hand, Mullumbimby's *Gorilla Street Theatre* (GST) received no government funding, was specifically formed with the intention of producing a single performance, and consequently existed for only a few weeks in November 2009. A number of Byron Shire actors and activists were drawn together by Oscar nominated director David Bradbury (another local) to produce an item of filmable public protest outside BHP Billiton's annual general meeting in Brisbane on November 26 that year.<sup>16</sup>

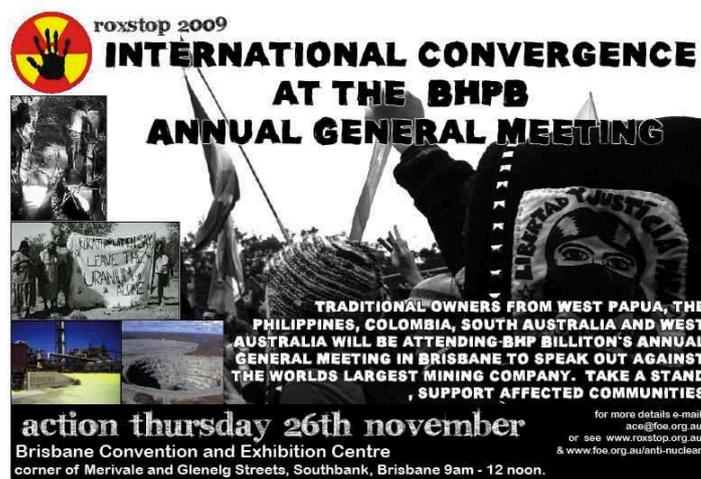


Figure 10.

Poster advertising the “International Convergence” on 26 Nov. 2009.

This larger demonstration provided the framework in which  
GST’s agit-prop performance took place.  
(image Roxstop Collective)

Created out of mines in remote Broken Hill, and now owned by shareholders across the globe, what used to be called “The Big Australian,” is currently the largest mining conglomerate in the world. Aware of a forthcoming “International Convergence” (Figure 10). Bradbury,<sup>17</sup> along with a number of people active in the environmental movement, were keen to promote their concerns about the impacts of BHP Billiton’s imminent expansion of uranium mining at Roxby Downs. GST’s plan was to re-invoke the idea of political street theatre - where mobility of performance became necessary not only to keep up with the associated procession/demonstration, but was also often necessary simply to avoid arrest. Political street theatre was above all shaped by the underlying fundamentals of mobility (flight or fight).

<sup>16</sup> An 8 minute version of what was originally a 20 minute total performance is available on You Tube at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDD1q\\_sjor0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDD1q_sjor0) (Viewed 16 April 2016)

<sup>17</sup> David Bradbury was nominated for an Oscar for his highly acclaimed documentary *Frontline* – the story of Australian war cameraman, Neil Davis.

Again, the chosen location for the performance of *Sir Don v The Ratpack* (outside BHP's Annual General Meeting at the Brisbane Convention Centre) was a necessarily static *place*.



Figure 11.

The Brisbane Convention Centre: public space as neo-classic amphitheatre.  
Main entrance up the stairs to the right.  
(Photo Paul Davies)

GST's solution was to create a "spatial trajectory" by constituting a mock, door-stop press conference complete with cameras and journalists and characters playing the chairman of BHP, 'Sir' Don Argus and his minder/body guard (the 'ghost' of environment minister Peter Garrett). In this way, while the *temporal* element remained constant (since the press conference unfolds in an uneditable live sequence), the *spatial* element was constantly moving as per any 'real' door-stop press conference. Whereas, in *Railway Wonderland* space remained static and time constantly shifted, in *Sir Don* time remained fixed (real time) while the performance space unfolded in a process of constant motion.



Figure 12.

The performance 'circle' begins to form.  
Members of GST's 'Ratpack' confront 'Sir Don'  
upon his arrival at the bottom of the stairs.

A white elephant of the 'real' demonstration can be seen in the background.

(Photo Paul Davies)

The convention of the door-stop press conference constitutes an improvised contest between a random assemblage of 'paparazzi' with their notebooks and digital recorders on the one side, and the person they are seeking answers from on the other – the latter sometimes flanked by minders, security, police, barristers in eighteenth century costumes etc. Here was political street theatre instituting the "spatial syntax" of an instantly recognizable trope. The familiarity of the door-stop press conference allowed GST's street theatre piece to undertake "a dialogue with its place of performance," since producing a press conference outside the Annual General Meeting of a large company, perfectly admits and authenticates the insertion of space (of performance) into this particular place (of production).

GST's intention was to claim and maintain performance space by keeping the press conference as *mobile* as possible. As De Certeau points out, a space exists "when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocity, and time variables." It is like "a word when it is spoken, that is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization"<sup>18</sup>. Mobility would also allow the GST troupe to raise the relevant issues (as journalists) and to move all over the Convention Centre's steps in any direction dictated by the central interviewee: the actor (Mike Russo)

<sup>18</sup> De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steve Rendall (Berkeley: U California P, 1988)

playing 'Sir Don'. Or more realistically, to move in any direction dictated by the police who were naturally expected to halt this item of protest in its tracks. However, so 'authentic' was GST's performance that even the police seemed to accept its (dubious) legitimacy.

Like Lefebvre and de Certeau, Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks agree that "events create spaces"<sup>19</sup>. The 'democratic circle' is something they observe forming around any public brawl. This circle (with its echoes of Souriau's sphere)<sup>20</sup> is key to understanding the mechanics of contested spaces, with the proviso that, in the mobile press conference example, there is generally a single combatant on one side answering/avoiding questions, and any number of media players (opponents) on the other, throwing the questions (punches) out. Thus the 'audience' for this fight is, in a very direct sense, also deeply implicated as one of the combatants - setting aside the potential audience witnessing these events via the subsequent media broadcasts, as well any members of the public who might happen to have been going past at the time (see Figure 16 below).

In most examples of this familiar engagement, the common assumption is that the journalists are seeking the truth (or some further complication of the public narrative: a denial, exposure, or trip-up etc.); while the targeted subject aims to subvert the truth or at best avoid making an embarrassing public mistake. Whether correct or not, the basic combative nature of the press conference trope gives it its performative potential. This 'authentic setting,' therefore, allowed GST to shape a piece of latter-day street theatre around the kinds of questions people wanted to ask BHP Billiton's chief executive, but were rarely able to do so. This would (hopefully) draw attention, on a 'public stage' as it were, to the environmental consequences normally glossed over by both the company, and an often compliant or disinterested media.<sup>21</sup>

Over a number of rehearsals, the environmental impact of BHP's activities world-wide was analysed and potential questions workshopped as the genesis of a 'text' for the performance. The issues to be dealt with could be organised thematically under headings like: Toxic Dust, Yellowcake, Water Pollution, Global Warming, Legal Issues, Effects on Indigenous Populations, Industrial Relations, Health and Safety, Nuclear Proliferation etc.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Pearson, Mike, and Michael Shanks. *Theatre/Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2001) 21.

<sup>20</sup> Souriau, Etienne. 'The Cube and the Sphere' *Educational Theatre Journal* 4.1 (March 1952): 11-18.

<sup>21</sup> As Queensland's disgraced former premier, Sir Joh Bejlke-Peterson famously boasted, attending a press conference for him was like "feeding the chooks," a not-so-covert reference perhaps to its acknowledged disinformative function.

<sup>22</sup> It is sadly, hardly surprising that BHP Billiton's share price crashed again recently on news of another devastating toxic spill at one of its Brazilian mines.

It was resolved that each 'journalist' would draw up a set of questions relating to one of these themes and feel free to fire them at the hapless 'Sir Don' in random order, much like real journalists would do in the circumstances (since most media organizations often have not-so-hidden agendas anyway). Thus, as a rudimentary script developed, characters within the 'Ratpack' were designated as the 'Personal journo' (Don Argus, the real chair of BHP, was about to retire), the 'Yellowcake journo', the 'Legal journo', the 'Water journo', 'Indigenous Affairs journo', and so on. Meanwhile, 'Sir Don', in the time-honoured tradition of such events would give a set of standardised, fairly meaningless, bland and ineffectual replies and literally dodge the questions as he worked his way up towards the entrance to the Convention Centre – while maintaining the illusion that he was in fact the chairman of this vast multi-national en route to its AGM. Such a tactic allowed Mike Russo and Scott Davis (playing 'Sir Don' and his 'minder') to lead the impromptu 'press conference' wherever they liked, or felt able to go. In this way, even if it couldn't break through into the foyer of the AGM itself, Mullumbimby's GST still plotted to get its message across to any interested small investors arriving for the meeting and perhaps even draw in the 'real' media and score points in the even greater contest for 'space' on the evening news.

If Lefebvre's application of Fred Hoyle's astrophysical theory is correct and social space can be "generated by the energy deployed within it",<sup>23</sup> then the space of the moving press conference is 'vectored' into being by the focus that multiple cameras and other recorders have when they are all pointed towards the same object/person.

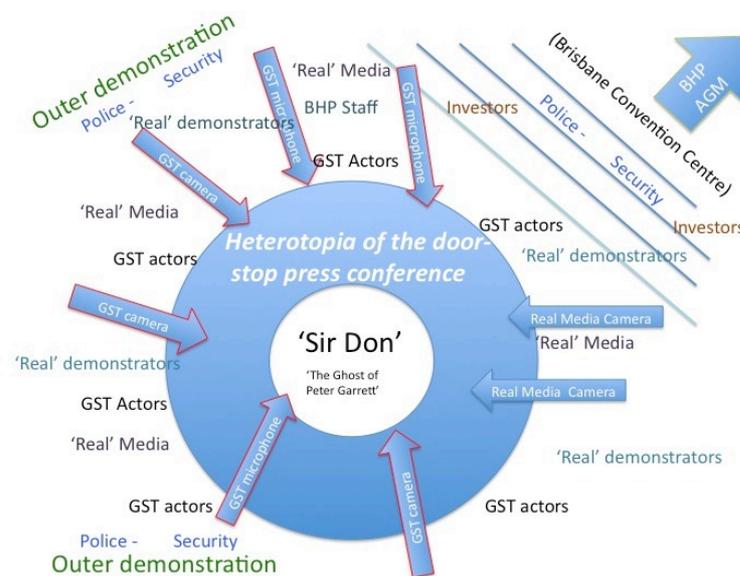


Figure 13.  
Dramatic energy creating Space  
Mapping the performative geography of *Sir Don v. The Ratpack*.  
(diagram Paul Davies)

<sup>23</sup> Lefebvre, Henri. *La Production De L' Espace*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 13.

Figure 13. shows how performance space is created in *Sir Don* using cameras and microphones which focus the outer edges of the circle towards the centre (not unlike a kind of two-dimensional magnifying glass). In this way the arena of the press conference, with 'Sir Don' marking its gravitational centre point (its 'black hole'), is given precedence over other spaces (such as the real demonstration nearby, and the AGM inside the Convention Centre). However, the journey of *Sir Don v The Ratpack* as a piece of agit-prop, is precisely to move from the realm of the demonstration *into* the ordered space of the AGM, illustrating Foucault's point about the permeability of heterotopia, and the liberative possibilities of simultaneity and juxtaposition that are negotiated within them.

Another way of expressing this is to say that if theatrical space can be generated by the energy deployed within it, then that energy itself originates with the interaction of polar opposites (points of alternate ordering: opposing combatants). Again the 'balance equation' comes into play as the motion forward of stage, audience and performers begins. To return to the metaphor of physics, electrical energy is created by an interchange between positive and negative terminals (direct current) or spinning magnets (alternating current). The polar opposites involved in a meta/physical confrontation, such as GST's 'press conference' are the combatants themselves (Ratpack and CEO). In the adversarial stance taken lies the 'charge' that is required to 'detonate' performative heterotopia<sup>24</sup> into being. Once in motion, such spaces allow different subjectivities to be formed as participants with inevitably varying and various points of view are drawn in to the action. All fights, whether staged or impromptu (matrixed or non-matrixed),<sup>25</sup> are also a kind of performance, with narrative through lines, moments of tension, physical engagement, and sweaty endings. Even military parlance, language of the ultimate combatants, speaks of a "theatre of operations."

Pearson and Shanks outline how the performative heterotopia of a typical street fight is formed, and how the resulting subjectivities, based on a circle (Souriau's sphere) are innately democratic.

As a fight breaks out the crowd parts, steps back, withdraws to give the action space. Instantly they take up the best position for watching, a circle. It's democratic, everyone is equidistant from the centre, no privileged viewpoints. There may be a struggle to see better but the circle can expand to accommodate those who rush to see what's happening. Or it thickens. A proto-playing area is created, with an inside and outside, constantly redefined by the activity of the

---

<sup>24</sup> I take the term 'heterotopia' from Foucault's definition in his iconic lecture 'Of Other Spaces' Trans. Jay Miskowicz. *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 22-27. And also from Kevin Hetherington's subsequent refinement in *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> See Carlson, Marvin. "David Levine's *Bauerntheater*: The Return of the Matrix." *The Drama Review* 52.3 (2008): n. page.

combatants, who remain three dimensional...The size and ambiance of the space are conditioning factors. Then just as quickly the incident ends, the space is inundated by the crowd and there are no clues what to watch.<sup>26</sup>

And so, just as any fight is a form of theatre, most theatre is premised upon some kind of struggle or contest, protagonist and antagonist. After fifteen seconds of opening credits on the YouTube video <sup>27</sup> the contest embedded in *Sir Don v. The Ratpack* ‘breaks out’ at the eighteen second mark by the ‘Personal Journalo’ with the line “There he is!” pointing towards ‘Sir Don’ and his minder who are just arriving on foot, initiating a convergence of competing ‘journalists’ towards him. This aligns with Dwight Steward’s advice for prospective agit-prop practitioners to “[h]ave an elastic beginning for your script, allowing time for a crowd to gather”<sup>28</sup>. Clearly, the GST budget did not stretch to the provision of a limousine for ‘Sir Don’s’ arrival, and any less a vehicle might have undermined the all important element of *authenticity*. Consequently, this opening line was designed to draw attention to ‘Sir Don’s’ arrival on foot and act as the trigger point for other ‘journalos’, who at this moment just happened to be milling around nearby in small, discrete groups.



Figure 14.

The circle intensifies around ‘Sir Don’.

The ‘ghost of Peter Garrett’ (Federal Minister for the Environment at the time) stands to the left of ‘Sir Don’ with sunglasses, briefcase and earphone.

(photo Paul Davies)

<sup>26</sup> *Theatre/Archaeology* 21.

<sup>27</sup> This opening sequence was not generated by GST directly. Instead it includes footage of the evacuation of a nearby office building – part of a fire-drill – that just happened to occur immediately after the live performance of *Sir Don* a few blocks away. The whole incident was captured by GST’s various film crews as they were returning to their cars and incorporated into the YouTube upload.

<sup>28</sup> Steward, Dwight. *Stage Left* (Dover, DE: Tanager, 1970) 24.

All of which allowed the GST actors to remain initially indistinct and effectively separate from the larger demonstration which was kept well behind police lines in the background (see Figures 12, 14). Indeed they were also discretely separate from members of the real media who were also present outside the AGM and felt they needed to be part of the general *Sir Don* mêlée once it was instituted - presumably in case they missed out on something.

If GST's performance of *Sir Don* had originated from within this larger, real demonstration, it is doubtful that it would ever have made it even to the intended starting point at the bottom of the Convention Centre's steps: a place that was also monitored by police officers from a covert position nearby. The point here is that the 'heterotopia' of BHP's actual AGM still had to be porous enough (have systems of opening and closing) for the 'real' media and attending investors to get in. Yet the police were marking out a clear Cartesian boundary in order to contain the International Convergence and its large (literal) white elephant off to one side (Figure 14). In this sense, the heterotopia of the GST performance was able to carve out its own spatial niche, a liminal performative heterotopia as it were, separate from the spaces of the other, larger and less invisible events (AGM and demonstration) occurring within the same general, public area.

The effect of the opening line delivered by the 'Personal Journo' is to 'identify' (invest with a fictional authority) the character playing 'Sir Don' and thereby draw the rest of the GST 'Ratpack' into play as the constructed space of the press conference starts to gather shape out of the 'energy' of the oppositional performances brought into being on the footpath. Interestingly, everybody present seemed to understand and accept the role of Sir Don's minder immediately: the 'Ghost of Peter Garrett'. This included the police and other security personnel, none of whom questioned the legitimacy of this character's silent and slightly intimidating presence: a composite of sunglasses, mysterious briefcase and small earphone presumably connecting him to a larger, over-arching panoptic gaze: the world of a higher surveillance scrutinizing and recording everything.

As the mock 'press conference' makes its way up the steps it starts to draw in players outside the immediate GST troupe, including BHP officials, glimpsed in a somewhat flummoxed state in the background (and no doubt wondering who this important person is). Indeed, at the 30-40 second mark a man in a light coloured coat, apparently connected to BHP and obviously concerned that one of his VIPs has been unintentionally accosted by the press contingent, seems to be voluntarily attaching himself to 'Sir Don's' security detail.

At one minute thirty seconds into the video other participants in the demonstration, 'real demonstrators', apparently also ignorant of the nature of the constructed 'performance' occurring, are similarly drawn into the mock press conference, including an indigenous activist immediately behind 'Sir Don'.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Indeed, as soon as the circle of the press conference began forming on the footpath there were loud boos and hisses directed at 'Sir Don' and GST's Ratpack. Clearly,

After questions about the water supply for Roxby Downs (one minute forty seconds), questionable practices involving the military in West Papua working on behalf of BHP (two minutes thirty seconds), carbon neutrality (three minutes), BHP's toxic legacy (three minutes thirty seconds) and nuclear proliferation, the subject turns to yellow cake, a refined form of uranium ore. By now the circle encasing 'Sir Don' has grown considerably and forms an unbroken loop around him. At this point, 'Sir Don' makes a weak joke about how he "wouldn't mind some yellow cake with his morning tea" since he's "feeling a bit peckish" and draws a suitably disgusted response from some of these people. This includes a young anti-nuclear campaigner above and behind 'Sir Don' who seems to be having all her worst fears about the rapacious irresponsibility of big mining companies and their evil directors fully confirmed. (see Figure 15).



Figure 15.

The circle follows 'Sir Don' (backwards) up the staircase.

A 'real' demonstrator behind 'Sir Don' is shocked  
by his remarks about yellow cake.

(Photo Paul Davies)

And so, as this roiling intercalation of heterotopia (mock press conference, real demonstration, real AGM) moves vaguely in the direction of the doors of the AGM, like Pearson and Shanks' circle round a fight, the physical form of the Ratpack expands and contracts, elongates into an ellipse at one point, then spreads lengthways up the steps as journalists and onlookers jockey for a better view or greater access to questioning. Such a trajectory takes advantage of the verticality of the steps (facilitating sightlines) while the roving group always stays focused on 'Sir Don', the spatial bedrock of the performance.

---

from the point of view of the 'real demonstration', both Media pack and Company representatives were perceived to embody two halves of the same problem.



Figure 16.

‘Real’ people outside the GST troupe become involved in the interrogation, while ‘mum and dad’ shareholders (small investors) look on from above.  
(Photo Paul Davies)

Figure 16 shows how, by this point in GST's mobile production, the collision of all three social spaces is complete: demonstration, annual general meeting and site specific performance.

By the five minute twenty second mark ‘Sir Don’ (no doubt surprised that he has managed to get this far), calls to his minder and together they step blithely, if somewhat nervously, through the police line guarding the front doors and on into the heterotopia of the official AGM: the inner foyer of the Convention Centre. At this point most of the 'real demonstrators' have backed off assuming, not unreasonably, that their entrance would now be categorically blocked - which it was by a very non-porous police line. However, the constructed space of GST’s mock press conference remained so readily recognizable (but invisible as a performance), that having gone through this crucial portal, it was now able to superimpose itself (collide) into its opposed place of ordering: the AGM itself (Figure 17). At which point the momentum of GST's performance seemed unstoppable and was clearly approaching a moment of truth in which the 'game' would well and truly be up!



Figure 17.

Inside BHP's AGM.

Heterotopias collide as the circle reduces down again to a few key players inside the AGM.

(photo Paul Davies)

However, by now, even the ranks of the 'Ratpack' are thinning, although a determined few maintain their hot pursuit of 'Sir Don', their subjective anxieties (as performers) about getting this far unimpeded, are reflected in the nervous question framed by the 'Radiation/Health' Journo at five minutes, forty seconds.

Questions about the health of BHP workers continue as the press conference hovers under signs welcoming investors into the meeting and trumpeting the company's many achievements. Clearly GST's artificially constructed heterotopia had transgressed about as far as it could into the space of the AGM and matters reach a climax as the questions turn to 'Sir Don's' own health. This was the designated trigger question to end the performance. At six minutes thirty seconds, as he struggles to answer, 'Sir Don' appears to suffer some kind of breathing difficulty, and asking for water, soon collapses to the ground, causing another layer of confusion (seven minutes) as real doctors start discussing the need to call an ambulance. This cohort included prominent anti-nuclear activist, Dr. Helen Caldicott, also an investor/protestor who just happened to be standing nearby, waiting to go into the AGM and make her own points about company policy. (Figure 18).

GST's original idea here had been that, having been confronted by the heinous crimes of his global corporation, by the Ratpack's relentless questioning, 'Sir Don' would undergo a road to Damascus moment, admit his wrong doing and then collapse a broken man. But by now circumstances were starting to spin out of control.



Figure 18.

Finally ‘Sir Don’ collapses as AGM and performance space collide.  
(photo Paul Davies)

Figure 18 shows doctor-investors, unaware of the general pretence, coming to Sir Don's aid, probably fearing a heart attack, while other shareholders idly look on, or appear to ignore the ‘emergency’ altogether. The YouTube video record ends at this point but the ‘Happening’ itself came to an oddly anti-climactic dénouement some moments later as ‘Sir Don’ miraculously recovers, gets to his feet, and calmly walks back out of the building - fortunately before any emergency services could be engaged. Although one police officer was heard to remark sternly to Sir Don's minder that “they shouldn't try anything like that again.”<sup>30</sup> Pearson and Shanks predict that the spectatorship gathered around a fight can just as effortlessly fade away once the action has concluded – as happened here. “The incident ends, the space is inundated by the crowd and there are no clues what to watch”<sup>31</sup>

In truth, nobody in GST imagined their ruse would work so convincingly that ‘Sir Don’ and what was left of the combined Ratpack would be able to simply walk past a vigilant police line and enter the foyer of a building where security would be paramount. This other ‘audience’ (from the space of the corporate meeting), with its own protocols of behaviour and rights of passage (ownership of shares required for entry) was nevertheless inevitably drawn into GST’s invasion of their space, however peripheral. The invasion itself had been facilitated by a process of constant physical motion, authenticating the Ratpack's pretence and demonstrating their ability to balance opposing forces. The ‘unknowing’ audience pouring into the AGM in the background, contained a constellation of small investors, fund managers, corporate staff, media, police and security personnel and more than enough doctors, as it turned out, to handle any medical emergency. There was clearly risk involved at this point in the form

<sup>30</sup> As recounted to the author by the actor playing the ‘Ghost of Peter Garret’.

<sup>31</sup> *Theatre/Archaeology* 21

of potentially (and irresponsibly) engaging real emergency services to deal with a fake problem. There was also the risk of arrests. Which fortunately also didn't happen.

But risk is always present when fictional elements are inserted into real locations and distinct social formations, but again, I would argue that *balance-through-mobility* is the key factor mitigating against bad outcomes. In GST's case, Dwight Steward's warning about having a definitive conclusion to one's street theatre performance also clearly applies<sup>32</sup>. The collision of created spaces (mock press conference into AGM) becomes fraught as a result of the intervention of real people (doctors in fact) confronting, from their point of view, a real (medical) problem.

What *Sir Don* does demonstrate is the relative ease with which performative heterotopia can be created and how viewers' subjectivities are fashioned and played with once this is convincingly (authentically) in place. It also demonstrates how Foucault's notion of the permeability of heterotopia can be deployed to great effect, melding the spaces of demonstration, mock press conference and official AGM. In such an interplay all these spaces connect with and ultimately challenge each other.

Above all, mobility remained the key organising element in *Sir Don*. The constant moving about of journalists and interviewee, the hankering, restless deployment of cameras and microphones, the urgency of the questions (time is money), all mimicked what happens in a real door-stop press conference. These temporary media events are expected to move.

Finally, both productions offer competing demonstrations of Souriau's declension of theatre space into either the cube or the sphere.

*Railway Wonderland* in its transitioning from platform to bus terminal and with its audience and performance spaces in rectangular mode (Figure 5) readily meets Souriau's definition of 'the cube' in theatre space.

The cube has a sharply defined form and precise limits; limits that are invariable until a change of place and of setting presents us with another cube, cut out elsewhere in the universe with which we are concerned. In the second place...the little cube is open on the spectator's side. It faces him. It exerts a dynamic force in a horizontal plane pointing like an arrow into the hall... And finally, its third trait: its predetermined, confining architecture.<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand *Sir Don v The Ratpack* just as readily encapsulates Souriau's idea of the sphere.

---

<sup>32</sup> *Stage Left* 24.

<sup>33</sup> "The Cube and the Sphere." 13.

No stage, no hall, no limits. Instead of cutting out a predetermined fragment in the world that is going to be set up, one seeks out its dynamic center, its beating heart, the spot where the action is emotionally at its keenest and most exalted. This center is permitted to irradiate its force freely and without limits...

The actors who incarnate this heart, this *punctum saliens*, dynamic center of the universe of the work are officiating priests, magicians whose power extends outward indefinitely into open space.<sup>34</sup>

Whether priests or not, the actors participating in both these plays created a kind of magic that often chimes with site-specific performance.

More than anything else it was the *motion* of the two plays through their chosen places of production that ensured their viability as performances. In *Sir Don* spatial mobility of stage, actors and audience becomes paramount - given the constraints of its real time scenario and the presence of a potentially hostile police line expecting transgression. Movement was also vitally necessary to maintain the press conference illusion: a busy CEO being harassed by the press on his way to work.

In the case of *Railway Wonderland* the 'stationary' nature of a railway 'station' was overcome by locating scenes in areas which framed each other: treating the audience gaze to a pleasurable journey from past to present and back again. Here any notion of a 'real time' unfolding of events was neither necessary or useful. Consequently, the element of mobility in the performance was extended into a collision of different time periods; with equal and stunning effect, a veritable 'wonderland' indeed.

(6991)

---

<sup>34</sup> "The Cube and the Sphere." 13.