

Falling into Place:
Place and its Imaginary in Making Performance

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Summary

This study began with a personal recognition of the importance of space in my creative process. As a theatre director, I need to see and feel the space for a work before I know how to direct or create the performance. Once I know what the space is — everything falls into place. This fascination with space in my creative process has triggered a larger investigation into the operations of place in the making of contemporary performance.

The first part of the thesis embarks on a series of theoretical and creative journeys to learn more about place and how it is positioned within contemporary performance. It journeys through contemporary theory on place in the work of Gaston Bachelard, Edward S. Casey, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and Marc Augé. These theorists think about place as a product of human dwelling and social production, and its conceived dimensions as psychic structures for a culture that embodies the fantasies, desires and visions of our places.

The thesis traces my physical journey from Australia to the Wooster Group in New York City and Forced Entertainment in Sheffield where I observed and worked with two significant contemporary performance companies, each in their own place. The Wooster Group has maintained an ongoing ‘osmotic’ relationship with SoHo, absorbing the underground experimentations of performance makers in the 1960s, to the retail experimentations of Prada today in the now gentrified district. Similarly, Forced Entertainment has lived through a rejuvenation of Sheffield, which is examined in relation to a shift in the company’s aesthetic and style. I also encountered these companies and another, Societas Raffaello Sanzio, at festivals in Australia. Societas Raffaello Sanzio avoid endless repetition on tour with *Tragedia Endogonidia* — a project that creates a new work for each place it performs in — balancing the desires of the international performing arts market with a portable strategy towards place.

The second part of the thesis returns to examine the imaginaries of Australia and Adelaide, the nation and city in which I work. It considers the impact of these imaginaries in a performance laboratory called *The Rope Project*, which explores Adelaide’s myth of ‘The Family’ and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope*. Lacan’s notion of the imaginary is used to

examine the 'national imaginary' of Australia as place where people disappear, an imaginary maintained by representations that imbue the Australian landscape with a hostile agency. The thesis argues that the erasure implicit in the colonial concept of *terra nullius* has informed a national imaginary obsessed with disappearance. A dossier of *The Rope Project* reveals the myth of 'The Family' explored as a representation in the performance laboratory. 'The Family' is the result of two competing imaginaries connected to the city of Adelaide: its founding utopian imaginary, the 'Athens of the South', and its horror-inverse, 'The World's Murder Capital'. This mythology was generated as a conservative backlash to the social reforms of Premier Don Dunstan and maintains a perceived connection between homosexuality and deviance. The thesis offers in conclusion fresh insights into the use of the imaginary and lived aspects of place in the creation of new performance works.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed: _____

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Introduction

One day a whole damn song fell into place in my head

— Billie Holiday¹

There's nothing quite like the moment for an artist when suddenly everything comes together. After beating your head against the creative brick wall, trying to work out what to do, something is unlocked and everything falls into place. Often artists get stuck in this way. You have a sense of the work you want to create, but something blocks you. There's an absence — something is missing. And once that missing thing is there, it all comes together. For me as an artist, the missing thing I need is space.

This study began with a personal recognition of the importance of three-dimensional space to my creative process in my work as both a theatre director and creator of performance. When I trained as a director, I was also taught set and costume design and within the course the directing students also designed the set and costumes for their work.² The majority of theatre work I have created I have either designed myself, or worked with a set designer in a highly collaborative way. In this way making space has been integral to my own creative process. I find that until I can see and feel what the space is for the work, I can't work out how to direct or create the performance.

I first became aware of this when I started directing plays. Until I worked out the space, I would be unclear of how certain thematic or discursive choices would operate in the work. The choice of the space and design would tell me how I would be approaching the material. Beyond allowing me to visualise what it would look like, the space would let me know what it would feel like. Once I know what the space is, I know what to do — everything falls into place. This recognition of the importance of space leads me to question how space and place works within the creative imagination of the artist, and why space is so significant in my process.

¹ Billie Holiday cited in CD booklet by Steven Lasker for *Billie Holiday — The Complete Original American Decca Recordings*, (MCA Records, 1991).

² I was trained in set and costume design at the Flinders University Drama Centre by Mary Moore, an experienced designer who has worked extensively in the United Kingdom and Australia, and who is now a designer that I work with professionally.

This awareness of space for me is particularly three-dimensional *spatial* as opposed to two-dimensional visual. A sketch or an illustration does not provide this sense of space. There is something about the volume of space in a 1:25 scale model that provides me with a feeling that a drawing cannot provide. I find that once a visual concept is spatialised into a model, I get a *feel* for the space; I can project myself into the volume of space to understand what it will feel like in the theatre.

For me directing is very much a spatial act — much of the work I do as a director is making choices about visual composition, proxemics, particular actions or movements that the performers execute, along with the overall aesthetic of the design. In collaboration with a designer, a director develops a spatial concept (actualised as a model and eventually a set) which they use as a three-dimensional palette to compose space and action to communicate to an audience. This aspect of directing feels very different from the emotional, psychological and interactive choices made with the performers. While the aspect of working with performers is central to the role of the director, it is inextricably connected to the performer and ultimately it is something that they execute. In contrast, the spatial arrangement and communication of a performance emerges from the director's work.

These two aspects of directing, one focused on the performers and one focused on space, can be followed in the emergence of the role of the modern director. My training with designer Mary Moore tapped into the modern theatre tradition of the director focusing on space in their work. Mary Moore's design practice comes directly from the European minimalist tradition derived from Edward Gordon Craig and Adolph Appia. Craig and Appia gave modernist theatre a spatial aesthetic, and initiated a directorial role focused on visual and spatial assembly. Craig envisioned the theatre as a collaborative art form, but called into question the primacy of the actor and emphasised the orchestration of the visual components of a performance by an outside eye.³ Similarly, Adolph Appia revolutionised set design by creating three-dimensional set objects instead of two-dimensional painted scenery. The actor and their three-dimensional body were central to Appia's theory, and were to be presented within a three-dimensional spatial environment.⁴

³ Edward Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1968) and Christopher Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig: A Vision of the Theatre* (Australia, Canada, China: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1983).

⁴ Adolph Appia, "Actor, Space, Light, Painting", in *Adolphe Appia: Texts on Theatre*, ed. by R.C. Beacham, (London: Routledge, 1993).

When training as a theatre director I was also a student of cinema studies, where I developed an interest in the montage techniques of the early Soviet directors, and later, Alfred Hitchcock. The rise of modern theatre directors — with their emphasis on space and the visual — was paralleled by the advent of film, where the construction of the *mise en scène* was controlled by its director. Early in film history Soviet directors pioneered their notions of montage, with Lev Kuleshov, Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin experimenting with composition and editing as the way a director communicated and immersed an audience in an experience.⁵ Later these montage techniques would find their way into Hollywood cinema through directors such as Hitchcock and remain in a mutated form as one of the cornerstones of film direction. There is an emphasis on visual assembly and construction as the primary task of the director within film direction. Reflecting on the work of the director in film, it is interesting to consider the parallel emphasis for the theatre director on composing and organising space.

I am interested in understanding *why* space is important in my creative process, and how it has become a way for me to approach directing or creating a performance. In this study, I propose that there is a spatial transference at play in my creative process. The concept of transference comes from psychoanalysis and is discussed by Sigmund Freud in the context of transference with an analyst:

[T]he patient sees in him the return, the reincarnation, of some important figure out of his childhood or past, and consequently transfers on to him feelings and reactions which undoubtedly applied to this prototype. This fact of transference soon proves to be a factor of undreamt-of importance, on the one hand an instrument of irreplaceable value and on the other hand a source of serious dangers. This transference is ambivalent: it comprises positive (affectionate) as well as negative (hostile) attitudes [...].⁶

Freud discusses transference in terms of a projection of previous experiences with other people onto the figure of the analyst, but transference as a concept has been applied in other contexts. There is a notion within acting that when creating a character the actor ends up — through transference — creating the character out of people they know or

⁵ Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York, St. Louis, San Francisco: McGraw-Hill, Inc, 1994), pp. 136-152

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-analysis* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1973), pp. 31-32

have encountered.⁷ The suggestion in this thinking is that actors represent what they have experienced or encountered; their particular lived experience is converted into character through an act of transference. I wish to borrow from this application of transference in the process of actors creating characters to explore how artists draw upon their lived experience in the process of creation.

In this study, I explore how the theatre director (and designer) create space through a similar kind of transference: the places that they have encountered and experienced inform the kinds of spaces they create. A good example is my own process in the performance laboratory for *The Rope Project* (see Dossier: *The Rope Project*). The central feature of the design was an imagined lounge room space of the so-called 'Family'. I sent photographs of the set of the project to my colleague, set and costume designer Matthew Kneale. Matthew emailed back saying "don't be freaked out, but the set reminds me of your house." At that moment I had an unpleasant (and somewhat surprising) realisation that Matthew was right: it did look like my house, and particularly my own lounge room. Despite the complexities of the collaborative process and the material that I was working on, somehow unconsciously I had bled elements of my own experience of my lounge room in my house into this theatrical representation. The feeling of my house had somehow permeated the design through my collaboration with designer Mary Moore. Perhaps our transferences had merged in the process of realising the design. Was this due to the extent that we collaborated? What had Matthew recognised of my house in the set? I find the mysterious workings of this transference compelling, and my fascination with this process underpins this thesis.

If transference is linked to one's lived experience, it is the places that we have experienced or encountered that we are likely to reproduce. While the term space suggests a three-dimensional actuality, the term place offers three additional qualities that are relevant. Place implies an experiential dimension: something or someone is in place, and that object or person has an experience of being implaced. This is of particular relevance to transference, which is directly tied to experience. Secondly, there is an aspect of function, purpose and cultural shaping with the notion of place. Space can be purely abstract and geometric as a concept, whereas place carries the shaping and purpose of those who dwell in it. A place has a particular cultural function (for example, a house) which is built from experiential relationships (my own experience in my house) coupled

⁷ This is an articulation of part of the training process for actors at the Flinders University Drama Centre when I was an undergraduate student in the acting course. The notion of transference, character and personal experience is also discussed by Steven L. Reynolds, "Imagining Oneself To Be Another", *Noûs*, 23.5 (1989), pp. 615-633 and Richard Wollheim, *The Thread of Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

with the cultural concepts of what that place is (house as a specific dwelling place in our culture). Thirdly, given the encultured formation of place, it can have a conceived or imagined dimension. Place can embody a cultural vision or aspiration, it can also be a canvas for our collective fantasies or desires. It allow us to imagine what we are or could be.

Given these additional dimensions, I embark on this study with an interest in the concept of place, and how place — with its three-dimensional actuality, and experiential and cultural information — relates to the creative processes and imagination of the artist. This thesis travels through understandings of place within contemporary theory and performance, looks inside the creative processes of established contemporary performance companies, and finally returns to Australia to interrogate the imagined dimensions of place and their impact on developing new performance.

In the first part of this thesis, I embark on a series of journeys to learn more about place and engage with contemporary performance practice. I visit a range of theorists who have dealt with how we perceive place and how it is generated through human and cultural activities; here I encounter Gaston Bachelard, Edward S. Casey, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and Marc Augé. I also undertake a physical journey to work with and observe the processes of two significant contemporary performance companies, the Wooster Group in New York City and Forced Entertainment in Sheffield in the United Kingdom in 2002.

While I was with these companies I considered how place and space figured in their creative processes, and how important or fundamental it was to their way of working. How much was place and space a starting point in their work? Could I observe the channelling of spatial transferences from their places into their performances? Had the changing nature of their places over the past twenty to thirty years impacted on the work they created? In addition to my time in New York City and Sheffield, I encountered the Wooster Group and Forced Entertainment at the Adelaide Festival of Arts and Melbourne International Arts Festival respectively. Subsequently I encountered Societas Raffaello Sanzio at the Melbourne International Arts Festival, which destabilised my reflections on spatial transference and provoked a further layer of theoretical work.

In the second part of the thesis, I return home to my place to investigate these concerns by looking at the imagined dimensions of place within a national identity of Australia, and contested identities of Adelaide. I take up the concept of the national imaginary, drawing

on the psychoanalytic thinking of Jacques Lacan. I examine a national imaginary of Australia as a place where people disappear; I look at the representations of the lost white body within the Australian landscapes of the beach and the bush. I then explore two competing imaginaries connected to the city of Adelaide — one is its founding utopian imaginary, the ‘Athens of the South’; and the other is its horror-inverse, ‘The Perfect Setting for a Horror Film’. I look at the interplay of these two imaginaries within the mythology of the so-called ‘Family’ — an alleged group of high-powered, deviant homosexual men who abduct, rape, and mutilate young men.

I finally present a dossier of materials from the performance laboratory of *The Rope Project*, an experiment in generating a contemporary performance work tied to Adelaide. *The Rope Project* examines the perceived connections between homosexuality and deviance in the visual language of Alfred Hitchcock’s 1948 film *Rope* and Adelaide’s mythology of ‘The Family’.⁸

I conclude by examining my own connection to place to Adelaide as an artist, and in what ways it enables a space to pursue experimentation, while managing the material need for mobilisation nationally and internationally. I ultimately consider my fascination with place through my desire as an artist to speak to people through the complexities of their own experiences, lived and imagined.

⁸ The first research and development of *The Rope Project* was in January 2003 with the support of the Australian Performance Laboratory, the Adelaide Festival Centre and Brink Productions; the second performance laboratory was presented in December 2006 with the support of APL and the Australia Council for the Arts.