

STRETCHING TIME, WRITING ‘GROUNDLESS FORMS OF MEANING’: INVITING AN APORETIC CONSCIOUSNESS OF REFLECTION INTO PERFORMANCE’S AFTERMATH

Outlining the seven sequential elements that constitute the lifespan of a performance (training, workshops, rehearsals, warm-ups, performance, cool-down, and aftermath), Richard Schechner contends that “theatre people have investigated training, rehearsals and performances but have slighted workshops, warm-up, cool-down and aftermath” (1985, 16). The “theatre people” that Schechner describes favor those processes that lead directly to the product – in this case, the performance – which, seemingly, has the most value and is the *raison d’être* for all involved. The other neglected elements – workshops, warm-up, cool-down and aftermath – are perceived as ancillary or, perhaps, so excessively idiosyncratic that they do not warrant attention.

Of all of the components of the seven-part sequence, it is aftermath, defined as “the long-term consequences or follow-through of a performance” (ibid, 19) that receives the least amount of attention. Aftermath, as outlined by Schechner, is a broad temporal category that encompasses such heterogeneous practices as “the changes in status or being that result from an initiatory performance” or “the slow merging of performer with a role he plays for decades” as well as the reviews and criticism, theorization and scholarship that might impact performers and understandings of performance-making over time (ibid, 19). Arguably, this last category of activity within aftermath – performance theorization and scholarship – has only proliferated in the decades that have passed since Schechner wrote *Between theatre and anthropology* in 1985. However, theorization and scholarship *about* aftermath written from within performance practice – that is, the theorization and scholarship which investigates the long-term consequences and follow-through of a performance written from the perspective of the performance-maker – is sparse.

Certain exceptions exist with which most theatre makers are familiar. Writings by Konstantin Stanislavski, Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski, Anne Bogart, and Tim Etchells – which provide extensive discussion of practice *over time* from within each director’s

experience – constitute only part of the growing canon of literature by directors, in particular. That said, even within and among these familiar sources, a reader is called upon to intuit various shifts in each writer’s thinking over time. That is to say, while many of the aforementioned writers have penned reflections and arguments at several *moments* throughout their careers, few of them have examined questions regarding the long-term consequences and follow-through of *particular* performance events and experiences.

This bias toward analysis of the recent, the immediate, and the momentary is prevalent also in the reflective writing from performance-as-research (PaR) scholars. On the one hand, reflective and/or analytical writing about PaR and its aftermath becomes central to the practice, itself (or - the *praxis*, if one is to operate from perspective that action and reflection work dialogically). This, coupled with the pressure to demonstrate art’s positive “effects” (Baldacchino 2009; Thompson 2011) has limited the generative possibilities of reflective scholarly writing in the field, frequently reducing narratives, rhetorically and conceptually, to testimonies of personal and professional growth. Jonathan Neelands, writing about applied theatre research in particular, explains the proclivity among PaR scholars in the field to produce “evangelised reports of personal victories in making miracles happen against all odds” (Neelands 2004, 47). On the other end of the spectrum lives the “critique” of practice, written from inside a training or performance experience, in which the methods and concepts associated with a particular paradigm are interrogated (see, for instance, Gates 2011; Taylor 2010). Although, in some cases, evangelized reports might serve an important purpose, and critiques are surely welcome and necessary – the problem I seek to articulate here is not so regarding particular outcomes, as the problematic perception within our field regarding the relationship between practice and writing. In Neelands’ “evangelized reports” example, it is the report – *the writing* – which is to blame. And critiques of practice, often rich in detail, steeped in many years of embodied experience, still have the capacity to miss significant aspects of that embodied experience, when translated into a written document. Even within the rich territory of the rethinking of “performance as philosophy” (Cull

2012) and the “difference of performance as research” (Fleishman 2012) a dichotomy between “making” and “writing” continues to be reinforced.

This essay proposes that the “affective turn” in performance scholarship, which has elevated the status of PaR in some respects, requires a corresponding re-examination of existing models of reflective practice, which compartmentalize reflection temporally and orient the writer towards reflection as a form of “problem-solving,” implicitly encouraging narratives of amelioration. The temporal boundaries of *beginning* and *end*, set up by Dewey in his recommendation that reflection take place “at the beginning, to determine more definitely and precisely the nature of the difficulty to be dealt with” and “at the end, to test the value of some hypothetically entertained conclusion” (Dewey 1910, 77), exact a reductive influence on reflection’s potential. Although Schön (1983, 1987), Moon (1999, 2006) and others (Carlile and Jordan 2007; Newman 2000), have relaxed Dewey’s temporal framework in order to promote a sense of the “on-goingness” of practice by advocating for processes of reflection-in-action and storytelling-as-reflection, reflective practice most often remains fixed within a social sciences-based orientation towards instrumental reason, which is predicated on a linear construction of time in which an event is understood to have discrete points of beginning, middle and end. Peter Woods (1993), for instance, suggests that we cannot know that any particular educational experience has been “critical” for our development until it has ended and we reflect on the event. Note in Woods’ logic that there is an assumption that an experience has a finite ending point. To this extent, Woods’ perspective on reflection – or, a retrospective analysis of one’s work and its impact, which is presumed to occur in a time and space perceived to be *other* and *apart from* the time and space of the experience – bears a relationship to the way that others have conceived of reflection as a linear, cumulative and ultimately sequential practice in which the value of experience can only truly be appreciated *after* and *away from* the discrete event of the experience, itself.

Baldacchino (2008, 2009) suggests that arts-based research, released from the confines of social sciences-informed approaches to learning and knowledge production, must be characterized by the *aporia*, paradox, groundlessness and divergent thinking

characteristic of the arts, themselves. Baldacchino recommends that we embrace art's "groundless forms of meaning" which are "beyond product and process" (2008, 244). To Baldacchino's thinking, I am adding Sally Mackey's (2012) inquiry into how students and teachers remember past arts events. Mackey, whose retrospective analysis of a performance event from her distant past prompted her to revisit the way in which she and her students have archived the event, creating a series of "sites of memory," has inspired me to uncover the paradoxical and aporetic aspects of an event from my past – an event that occurred many years ago in linear time, but which produces in me a feeling of its ongoingness even as I live in the present, at an increasing distance from the moment upon which I reflect. Accordingly, this paper draws on fragments of reflective writing that I've collected, collated and manipulated in response to a performance training experience now eight years old. Seeking out examples from within my archival cache of a hybrid form of performative-reflective composition, I have endeavored to work from Anne Brewster's idea of a writing that "literalizes a post-retrieval idea of memory" in which writing "is not an instrument of the retrieval of stored information" but instead is "characterized as a technology of memory, and memory as *tekhne*, writing" (2005, 397).

To this extent, I will explore these writings as a set of attempts or gestures that seek to include, to incorporate, to absorb reflective writing as a performative act (Langellier 1999; Pelias 1994; Pollock 1998; Spry 2001) and as a generative process (Ness 1996; Phelan 1995) that lives within the "what" and "when" of performance-making, although it occurs *after* the "performance" is over. I am seeking to stretch time, or, rather, to lay down a fabric of writing that stretches over my experience of the pastness of then, while also accommodating my experience of the presentness of then, or, how "then" is "now." This is to say that, because my experience of re-membering or re-animating this training gives rise to a non-linear experience of time, I have come to find a need to create a kind of writing that is also productive of a non-linear experience of time (even as it seeps back into the conventional categorical confines of how I imagine time). Also as part of my time stretch, I am seeking to *wrap time around* Schechner's seven sequential elements, as the following discussion of aftermath will involve discussion of a performance training experience, thereby conjoining "aftermath" as the designated "end" of the performance

sequence with “training” as the designated “beginning” of the performance sequence. As a means of offering an image for guidance in how I am conceptualizing (or, feeling) this time-stretch, I would like to invoke Martha Graham in her iconic stretchy-fabric costume from *Lamentation* (1930).

I would like to suggest that Graham’s body, for my purposes, exists at the kinetic interstices of writing and memory. The fabric, which contains while also amplifies the extension of Graham’s body, is a kind of mediating device, or technology, which might (roughly) be likened to an instrument such as a pen, pencil or typewriter used in the writing act. *These analogies are immediately imperfect for me, even as I write them.* However, the images continue to *do* something for the discussion, even as they limit or perhaps even pervert my argument. In this sense, the performative-reflective writing that I am seeking to create might be understood in the terms that Rebecca Schneider lays out in her discussion of “re-performance:”

Touching time against itself, by bringing time *again and again* out of joint into theatrical, even anamorphic, relief presents the real, the actual, the raw and the true as, precisely, the zigzagging, diagonal, and crookedly imprecise returns of time. (Schneider 2011, 16)

To this extent, with the pictorial as well as the narrative example to follow, I am interested in charting the way in which narrative and temporal entropy will continue to exert itself within these exercises, drawing me back into precisely the generic structural chasms and collapse into positive(istic) outcomes that I seek to resist. I ask for the experiment to stretch time – but I will inadvertently collapse time with each act of writing. I ask for the experiment to accommodate incongruity, paradox and aporia, but each act of writing will still potentially account for something concrete, fixing points of meaning against my better intentions.

The Experiment –

I, You, She: Becoming Person in Training

How long does it take for a training experience to sink into you?

I mean: really sink in.

Is it a slow drip?

Leaky faucet.

Percolating coffee.

Does it rush forth?

A summer thundershower.

A breaking levy.

At what point do you feel that it has become a part of you?

Just before you are ready to operationalize it for a show?

During the execution of something difficult, something technical?

Just after you've taught it to someone else?

Or, are you like me? You live and re-live formative training experiences over and over again.

You: growing out your relationship to practice in a series of episodes unbounded by time and space.

You: walking down a city street, minding your own business, surging towards your pedestrian destination, and – spontaneous combustion – you realize something you hadn't before about that training you thought was locked in a rehearsal room from a different lifetime.

When does training begin and end?

Eight years ago I was preparing for a two month trip to Australia, where I would become an intern for Tess de Quincey. De Quincey's technical expertise is in Bodyweather: cultivated over the years that she trained and performed as part of Min Tanaka's company Mai Juku; extended further as she adapted that practice in the development of her own company in Australia.

Eight years ago equals 2005, and in 2005 De Quincey and five of her dancers were in the midst of making a performance called *Dictionary of Atmospheres*. I would begin my journey by meeting them for their rehearsals in Sydney. Four weeks after my arrival, we would travel to Alice Springs, in the Australian Central Desert, where there would be more rehearsing and then setting the piece for performance in a dry riverbed for the Alice Desert Festival.

Being an intern meant that I would take on an assortment of small responsibilities, which were *to be determined* once I arrived. Fix props and make them functional. Distribute publicity. Organize a party in Alice. Once in a while – get coffees. It also meant that I would be able to train with the De Quincey Company while they were in rehearsal in Sydney and Alice.

Now I would get to bring my body into that system – *that system, that system, that unknown to me system* – even if only for a short time.

The anticipated outcomes for me as a performer? Like my intern responsibilities, they also were *to be determined*. I was a university student in California at the time – my relationship to practice was imbricated within that receptive role: to do what the instructor asks, to become what the director wants. I had yet to ask my own questions about how my training might impact me in the long run. I lacked the distance – the separation from the immersion of school – to know how. And perhaps because there was such a sense of that vast unknown from the outset, various dimensions of the two months in Australia have lingered with me ~ substantially ~ for all of these years.

That training is, I think, still sinking in.

In what follows I wish to share an experiment in navigating this multi-dimensional temporal space of training. Asking: what happens to a training experience after it is over, but not done – still being integrated? Eight years and thousands of miles separate me from the points of origin from which my memories depart. And yet I’ve convinced myself that this experience constitutes what Peter Woods calls a “critical educational event,” in that I was not only trained with specific skills, but that the event helped me “become person” (Woods 1993, 2). Woods explains that such critical events promote “education and development in uncommonly accelerated ways,” leading participants to “make great leaps forward” and “discover new things about the self” (ibid).

This sits right with me. I became (another) person over the course of that summer.

So I think.

So I think.

Accordingly, my experimental question is this: how might the *before*, *during* and *after* of training correspond narratively to an exploration of *grammatical person*? Specifically, what might be produced in matching a *before* memory with the first person (“I”), a *during* memory with the second person (“you”), and an *after* memory with the third person (“she”)?

In this approach, I am attempting to extend Monica Prendergast’s concept of “soliloquizing as reflective practice.” Prendergast points out that “soliloquy happens when our acting ‘I’ engages with our reflective ‘Me’” (Prendergast 2003, n.p.). In my adaptation, rather than clinging to the I/Me over time, I’m proposing that an implicit shift in “person” might take place over the course of a training experience that constitutes a critical educational event. Or, to problematize the very system I’ve just set up – my reminiscent narrative is superimposing a shift in “person” over top the scattered, fractured atlas images that I’ve held onto, nurtured, perverted over time. And so: all of

this is not to suggest that the (my) “I” actually gets left behind for some (other) “You” and finally the (strange) “She” in a move towards increasing objectivity or selflessness. Rather, I am proposing that this shift might occur in spatial terms. I am attempting to project different variable locations of self. Of course, the “I” still lives inside all three narratives (*it is me we are talking about ... yes ... ok ... I know this ...*), but by toying with the various pronouns, I experiment with different valences of self. By describing self as “you,” my self takes up a different spatial location in my imagination – and hopefully in yours. By describing self as “she,” myself takes up a different spatial location in my imagination – and hopefully yours.

The shift is one of *focus* rather than *identity* per se. When a participant enters a new training experience – one that represents a substantial departure from previous training, in a new context, with new people – there is a bit of that experience of “solitude in public.” One is aware of other performers in the space, and perhaps even of a watching audience. But relationships to those *others* and, indeed, to the technique itself, have not been formed. Over time, as the training, the environment, and the others in the room become increasingly familiar, a participant’s sphere of focus expands. Like the circles of light that Stanislavski uses to explain how an actor can manage her concentration of attention, “as the circle grows larger, the area of your attention must stretch” (Stanislavski 1989 [1936], 84).

Let’s see what happens when I stretch the grammatical person from I to You and from You to She. Prendergast’s soliloquizing “I/Me” remains (in reality) the center of all three narratives. I am, after all, still describing myself. But is there anything to be gained from describing myself-as-other?

Before – I

I enter the rehearsal room. The University of Sydney's Rex Cramphorn Studio. Everything goes without saying. Others are on the floor. Crouched down. Right hand side of the room. Buckets filled with water. Wet cloths – dunked into bucket, lifted up, hovering above, wrung out, and – laid out on the floor. Two hands travel the cloth across the floor, sending a line of moisture to the other side of the room. Turn around. Push the wet cloth back across the floor to the point of origin.

I want to be helpful.

But what if I get it wrong. Watching. Intercepting visual details. This all seems important. We're not just washing the floors, the dancers are elongating their bodies in a traveling stretch that sends them across the floor with the cleaning project. I realize already I'm dressed inappropriately. But I think I've seen enough to walk over to the starting position and participate in this activity. And: it begins. I'm moving across the floor in a downward dog-type posture. Keenly aware of belly fat hanging below me. Wondering if I'll make it to the other side of the room without crashing into someone else. Wondering if I'll be asked to: stop. Just – stop – that's alright – we've got it. You can just – sit to the side. But no one comes. No one stops me. And I – well – I don't run into anybody.

During – You

You stand softly, quietly, in a red powder dustbowl.

Everything goes without saying.

Lines are formed, as lines are formed, for the MB (muscle and bone; mind and body) training. You travel across the floor. No, not floor, now. It's ground, earth, dust. Strengthening and stretching. Casting yourself through space. Undeniably aware of the

large open sky above you. Endless expanse of blue like a color study against the red orange rust palate below. The omnipresent sun in charge and ... dust, dust, dust.

Kicking up red earth dust.

Mostly individual work at first, as it always is. Soft feet simple traveling right down the line. Then start again at the beginning. Movements become more challenging. More demanding. Walking becomes hopping. Hopping becomes leaping. Awareness of your place in the line. Always. Awareness of the symphony of movement cascading across this space like notes organized on the measured rows of a piece of sheet music.

You are a note on a page.

After – She

Restaging her training in Sacramento.

She has it all set up in the backyard. Backyards are small in downtown Sacramento. Just enough space for one line – her line – she’s the only one doing this. Duplex on her left. Apartment complex on her right. Little bit of a fence in between.

Everything goes without saying.

She is: walking across the grass. Walking becomes hopping. Hopping becomes leaping. Awareness of her place in space. No one in the duplex or the apartments would know if she was doing it right or wrong. But she’s still asking questions. Living backwards in time. Reaching back towards a set of experiences and observations by hurtling herself forward in this here and now. In the backyard. In Sacramento.

How long has it taken for this training experience to sink into me?

I mean: really sink in.

At what point did the novice I who first walked into the rehearsal room in Sydney become the only-slightly-more-experienced you of the desert? Is the post-experience she merely a re-enactor of an increasingly distant past?

When does training begin and end?

It strikes me that in rehearsing these stories for you here, now – in restaging these memories by arranging letters on an illuminated screen – I am not in fact becoming one or the other of these people.

I was always me, as I was you, as I was she.

Of course. All three memories could have been written in the first, second or third person.

Perhaps training, in this reflexive space, at this reflective moment, is not a matter of becoming (other). Becoming person in this sense has more to do with an expansion of capacity. A proliferation of characters.

Conclusion

Efforts to validate performance-as-research have led, in some instances, to an unfortunate misrepresentation of the act of reflective or analytical writing as “oppositional” to the making of performance. Cull wishes to protect performance as an independent, autonomous category of activity, adjusting the implicit assumption that performance is a passive practice to which or on which is applied the logic of “text-based research” (2012, 25). This is an important – an essential – move. However, it complicates the landscape of

reflective and analytical writing that emerges out of PaR. Because, as Fleishman indicates, “traditional textual scholarship” (2012, 29) is associated with a “particular technology of communicating” (ibid 30) – that is, *writing* – the potential for a radical performative-reflective writing associated with PaR has been heretofore submerged beneath the primary agenda of establishing independent, autonomous *ground* for performance practice. Accordingly, I would like to suggest that, at this point, PaR is uniquely positioned to absorb (claim) reflective writing not as that which lives, categorically and epistemologically on the ‘other side’ of performance, but within the generative space of performance, itself. In other words, I propose that performative-reflective writing has, potentially, always already been a part of performance practice and, by extension performance research. Looking to journals of actors in rehearsal, directors preparing for a show, designers marking on a page – these are all spaces in which such writing has been underway for a very long time. Embracing the radical otherness of this kind of writing and playing with its expository potential (rather than relegating it to a narrow empiricism which relegates it to the status of artifact) could lead to a further reconciliation between practice and research.

In order to do this, however, one must fully contemplate not only the way in which “performance is philosophy” and “performance is different” (which are fine and important assertions), but also the way in which art is *neither* product *nor* process:

Art is not a product, even when there seems to be an object called *art*. Likewise art cannot be reduced to a process, even when many make an argument for art as a process in order to avoid it becoming a product. To define art from within the paradoxical assumption that it is an *in-between* would help us understand the art form’s open character. (Baldacchino 2008, 244)

According to Baldacchino, art as an *in-between* is a reference to art’s groundlessness. In the making/doing of art, there is no ground *per se*, but rather a horizon, a set of endless possibilities. The traps associated with articulating the value of art, or, more specifically, the value of performance, include the inadvertent de-valuing of what art *is* and what art *can do*. The divergent methods of art (if we can even say that methods, in the conventional sense, exist), the paradoxical nature of the art experience, and the aporetic

consciousness of action and reflection built into the *art act*, when translated, are too easily lost. Writing, itself, which fits so neatly into extant academic and intellectual paradigms, has bedeviled the process of re-valuing art and performance. However, my suggestion is that it is not the act of writing, itself, that is the trouble. Instead, it is the way that we understand the categories and temporalities of performance (in which, for instance, training is somehow apart from performance and performance is somehow apart from aftermath) and the way we have implicitly delimited the potentialities of a performative-reflective writing practice, that have led to chronic dissatisfaction with writing as an instrument in and of PaR. My proposal is that the more that writing emerging out of or as part of PaR embraces the great unknown, unexpected, divergent qualities associated with rehearsal processes, the more that writing will be seen as kin to performance, rather than sitting in judgment apart or away from performance.

As a pair of closing images, I would like to leave you with Robert Smithson's 1965 work *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, which was recreated in 1999. What is important to understand about the works is that they are "enantiomorphic" sculptures (mirror images of each other which are not identical to each other) composed of painted steel and mirrors. In addition to the dialogue that exists between the two sculptures, themselves, there are the many different dialogues that exist in the reflections and refractions that are played out between the mirrored surfaces. What is produced, in this instance, is a literal manifestation of the "groundlessness" of which Baldacchino writes. Or, in the words of Gaston Bachelard, an "intimate immensity" (1994 [1958], 183). By virtue of the fact that the mirrored surfaces perform and re-perform with limitless possibilities, they are replete with potential meaning, but meaning which is always shifting and, to some degree, contained within the chambers in which they are housed. Such is the potential for a restoration of performative possibility within the reflective writing on PaR.

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