

## **Dissatisfied ghosts: Theatre spectatorship and the production of cultural value**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper charts an investigation into how creative and dialogic research methods can enhance understanding of what audiences make of the experience of watching theatre. It does so by drawing upon two connected research projects. In *The Spirit of Theatre*, a study conducted with the Library Theatre Company in Manchester, we piloted creative techniques; lessons learned in this project indicated important questions for the larger *Theatre Spectatorship and Value Attribution* study. The British Theatre Consortium<sup>1</sup> of writers and researchers worked with the Royal Shakespeare Company, the New Vic in London, and the Drum in Plymouth to consider audience response to a range of plays, over time. In interviews and workshops we identified and analysed imaginative mechanisms implicated in the formation of cultural value, through networks of association. The methodology re-positions the spectator as a partner in the interpretation of their experience of watching a performance. However, not all respondents value performances on the basis of their imaginative utility, indicating that there are competing models of cultural formation in play amongst the audiences we surveyed.

**Keywords:** cultural formation, imaginative utility, associations, workshops, interviews, theatre ghost, 'organised forgetting'.

Every spectator is already an actor in her story; every actor, every man of action, is the spectator of the same story. (Rancière 2009, 17)

This essay draws on two related studies of audience response to theatre performances; the first, *The Spirit of Theatre* conducted in 2012, concentrated on the Library Theatre Company, Manchester, at a time when the company had moved out of the theatre where it had been based since 1952, and was facing the end of its independent existence. This project acted as

a pilot study for the second project, *Theatre Spectatorship and Value Attribution* (TSVA). Full reports of both projects are available as *The Spirit of Theatre* and *Critical Mass: Theatre Spectatorship and Value Attribution* on the British Theatre Consortium website.<sup>2</sup>

The discussion here will focus on an experimental strand running through both projects, in which we tried out new methods of engaging with our research participants, combining and modifying creative writing teaching and oral history techniques. Both projects were concerned with investigating how spectators construe the value of theatrical performance. Building on the findings of *The Spirit of Theatre*, TSVA aimed ‘to identify associational networks of experiences that together with theatre attendance give rise to value attribution’, and to investigate the role of memory over time.

When Jacques Rancière writes in *The Emancipated Spectator* of the active role of the audience member in relation to the meaning and value of a theatrical performance, he prompts us to consider audience members’ imaginative use of their experience, both as individuals and collectively. Taking up the challenge implicit in this re-positioning of the spectator as an active participant in the formation of culture, I discuss what our methods were able to reveal about how audience members deploy their theatre experience in the service of personal and shared narratives of their own.

All investigation of audience response, unless conducted in the auditorium at the time of the performance, is investigation of memory. The analysis of material below contextualises our creative evidence in relation to the findings of the projects more generally, in order to explore some of what is forgotten or disregarded by our respondents, and why.

## **Methodology**

In *The Spirit of Theatre* project, ninety-seven audience members who had seen Chris Honer’s production of Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and her Children* in February and March 2012 completed questionnaires, before, straight after, and one week after the show.

Thirteen respondents volunteered to take part in interviews of between thirty to forty-five minutes. All interviewers used a common script. Six face-to-face interviews were conducted by trained students, and recorded; seven telephone interviews were conducted by a post-graduate with professional experience of arts marketing interviews. We also devised an on-line interactive questionnaire with illustrations by Simon Woolham, some of which we have used here.

For the *Theatre Spectatorship and Value Attribution* project, 317 audience members completed questionnaires relating to fourteen shows at three theatres: the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford on Avon, the Young Vic in London and the Drum at Plymouth. Questionnaires related to nine shows produced between October 2013 and April 2014, were timed for before, one day after, and two months after the performances. Thirty-five respondents also participated in thirty-minute in-depth interviews conducted by three post-graduate students and two BTC members. Eleven respondents attended three workshops, one at each theatre. For the workshops we devised a common format, with

variations to prompt memories of the particular shows under consideration. A further set of questionnaires was sent to audiences of five shows, staged by each of these Companies at least one year earlier, offering us a long-term comparison of audience memories.



**Figure 1:** Spirit of Theatre: Dressing Room. Copyright Simon Woolham 2012

It was Matthew Reason's work with audiences, and in particular the collaboration with Dee Reynolds as part of the *Watching Dance: Kinesthetic Empathy* project, which first prompted our use of creative investigative techniques. For the *Watching Dance* project, as a way of trying to access the imaginative and emotional traces of a performance in the mind of the spectator, Reason arranged workshops in which audience members used 'free writing' exercises to recreate their impressions and memories of performances by Ballet Rambert. This was a way of translating one sort of experience into a cognate artistic form capable of representing affect, but of course at the same time it is an interpretative act by the writer (Reason 2012).

There are ethical considerations which are particular to the process of working creatively. Sharing imaginative work can feel exposing, but unless the writer chooses to make the distinction between pretence and reality explicit, the material cannot be read as if it is literally true. It is crucial that both during the workshop and in interpreting anything said or written there, we remember the provisional character of fictional contributions. During the workshops, I explicitly marked key moments of transition from private imagining to public presentation, maintaining the workshop as a protected space in which participants

could move between these two states. As a result, not everything that was devised is included in our report – only what respondents chose to share.

Creative writing can give a particularly rich insight into an individual's personal 'bank' of associations, knowledge and beliefs in relation to a particular stimulus – but it may not, since the activity is fundamentally autotelic, and the more experienced the writer, the more speedily she will edit and shape material which arises from any given starting point. When using creative techniques in order to replicate the imaginative mechanisms involved in the formation of cultural value, the greatest difficulty is in producing comparable results, which can be shown to relate to a selected initial stimulus, rather than the writer's own private agenda. For the *Spirit of Theatre* project, the 'theatre ghost' was the device I invented to give us the focus and comparability we needed. In the TSVVA project, we used prompts - lines and objects to remind us of the performances under discussion. We also explicitly discussed with participants the relevance of their final stories to their memories of the show.

Quotations are anonymised throughout. Pseudonyms used here are consistent with those in *The Spirit of Theatre* report.

### **The Theatre Ghost and Memory**

The *Spirit of Theatre* project began with detailed discussion with oral history expert Fiona Cosson; in particular we concentrated on the use of narrative analysis in the interpretation of oral history interviews (e.g. Abrams, 2010<sup>3</sup>), which can be traced back to a key essay by Alessandro Portelli.

What makes [oral sources] unique and necessary is their *plot* – the way in which the narrator arranges the material in order to tell the story. The organisation of the narrative (subject to rules which are mostly the result of collective elaboration) reveals a great deal of the speaker's relationship to their own history (1981, 9).

The historians' accounts alerted us to the dangers of interviewees offering what they think the interviewer wants to hear, something which the process of inventing material that is distinct from the personae of both investigator and respondent worked effectively to counteract. The invented character and later the invented story provides an object of disinterested attention, which is also then available for shared interpretation. Oral history is also closely concerned with the 'telling' potential of errors and lacunae in interviews – a theme which for us broadened into a wider consideration of the selectivity of our respondents' memories.

In *Cities of the Dead*, Joseph Roach depicts how the history of the Atlantic slave trade and the social and legal relations on which it depended are rehearsed, acted out, re-invented and learnt through performance. Roach moves from discussing the role of 'effigies' in processions to performances including scripted texts – performances which

'consist of a set of actions that hold open a place in memory into which many different people step according to circumstances and occasions' (1996, 36).

Marvin Carlson represents the repetitive nature of theatrical production as crucial to the relationship between theatrical culture and collective memory, styling theatre as a 'Memory Machine' (2003, 11). He sees theatrical performance as disinterment of the past, and connects acting with the idea of the ghost through the dramatic character, a being brought back to life through repeated, consensual acts of imagination.

## The Ghost Question

During the thirty-minute in-depth interviews we conducted with audience members after the Library's production of *Mother Courage and Her Children*, we introduced the prompt to invent an imaginary character into the play. Interviewers used a script but were encouraged to ask follow-up questions. The introduction placed the interview in the context of the changes to the Library Company, and referred back to the supernatural beliefs of Annie Horniman, who established the repertory theatre system in Manchester.<sup>4</sup> We asked the interviewees about their experiences of the work of the Library Company and about what they valued about going to the theatre. The penultimate section introduced the idea of ghostly characters in plays, and the idea that many theatres have stories of ghosts or haunting associated with them. We asked, 'if you were to devise a theatre ghost which might haunt our new theatre, what would the ghost be like?' And then, 'What is the spirit's reason for demanding attention of the living?'<sup>5</sup> The final question asked the interviewee to reflect on whether the interview had revealed anything new.

The challenge to *invent* a ghost for a future theatre space foregrounds the agency of the spectator and attempts to bring into conscious awareness what Roach and Carlson both identify as processes of collective cultural memorialisation. It suggests the outline of a virtual effigy which is flexible enough to allow contributors to endow it with qualities and characteristics reflecting their own responses to theatrical experience over time.

## How did our contributors respond?

In their questionnaires, the audiences for *Mother Courage* tend to use a range of familiar terms to answer direct questions about what they value in theatre. Most frequent among these is 'liveness', closely followed by 'thought-provoking' and synonymous phrases, such as 'thinking about ideas'. Many contributors valued 'being transported', 'being absorbed and escaping reality', and 'being lost in the moment of the play'. This desire to escape is regularly paired with 'seeing anew through others' eyes', and access to 'a different time of human history, experience or relationship'. Across both projects (*The Spirit of Theatre* and *Theatre Spectatorship*) and in relation to all the shows, the terms of valuation and the relative ranking of these, are similar.

However, in the *The Spirit of Theatre* project, no two ghost characters were in any way alike. All thirteen interviewees offered invented characters which functioned as avatars

of their connection to the theatre. Each interviewee shaped the narrative of their relationship to the theatre, by using the opportunity to invent a ghost that embodied their key ideas, repeating and so emphasising governing themes in their own verbal accounts.

'Janet', a retired maths teacher, was interviewed by two second year undergraduates. She invents a benevolent ghost; an actor who comes back to haunt the theatre because he cannot bear to leave, just as she herself looks to the theatre for social connections. But she believes the ghost should 'let the young ones in'. She goes on to carry this motivation through, putting herself in the persona of the character she invents, as she advises and praises her student interviewers.

... you're asking me about the theatre and theatrical experience and speaking about ghosts. You're asking me about life and living because the theatre's all about living life... Saying that, I know you just sit there in the dark and don't fidget, but actually what's being presented is a larger than life picture... and seeing you two and the questions you're asking and your obvious knowledge of the theatre and of Brecht... I see that you're both injecting I would say a lot of dynamism into the modern day. As you can see I'm quite a bit older than you... when I see you I realize that older people like the ghost would learn a lot from you... there's no harm in referring back to the past, but don't get caught up in it!

We can admire the rhetorical skill in moving from the particular feedback to a generalised context, in: 'you're asking me about the theatre... you're asking me about life...' Yet the persona she has invented also permits Janet to dramatize the relationship with her interviewers. She explores an intense sense of loss, of marginalisation, as the learning and teaching roles are reversed, the perspective shifts, the dynamic present is contrasted with the dragging past, and 'older people like the ghost' suffer in a dissociated state of limbo; '...don't get caught up in it!'. It is a speech driven by the energy of coded, compressed emotion.

'Claire' is a professional 'risk' manager with a strong sense of dramatic irony. One of the things she particularly enjoys about theatre is that 'it's not like going to the cinema where the same thing is going to happen, it's anything could happen'. At the beginning of her interview, like many of our contributors in both projects, she remembers first going to the theatre with her mother. In Claire's case this was particularly thrilling. 'My mum naughtily used to take me out of school to see the ballet when it was in town...' The transposition of 'naughtiness' from child to adult captures all the pleasure of this conspiratorial companionship in a liminal 'holiday' setting; theatre becomes a licensed transgression, an adventure, a lark.

It can open you to new ideas and learning things about different cultures, different people and different ways people might think. I think it can make you

more understanding. You can be having a really stressful time in your life but it just allows you a bit of a release, as you're sitting in a theatre with all these other people and you get involved in that thing and forget everything else, so I think it can be very beneficial.

Claire's theatre-going career parallels the development of a sense of independence and growing confidence, marking key moments of transition in her life. She speaks of what is almost a second adolescence as she begins to go to the theatre on her own and allows the memory of a particular play to resonate in analogy with her account of a process of inner change.

I've always enjoyed it and I've always gone lots and since age sixteen I've gone regularly, but the thing that triggered me going more often is I'd always gone with other people, never on my own, and then about eight years ago there was a play I really wanted to see and no one else was interested in going with me, and I booked a ticket and I thought everyone would stare at me but I turned up and I kind of realised that loads of people go to the theatre on their own, so I probably went a lot more after that. It was *On the Shore of the Wide World*.<sup>6</sup>

She is at first unsure about inventing a ghost character, but when asked what might be such a character's reason for demanding the attention of the living, the invention flows and Claire endows the figure of the ghost with the feelings otherwise only implicit in her account of her own history. Its motivation summarises the main tensions she has presented in the interview: personal independence versus loneliness; control versus release.

I think possibly because of the company and to be part of it, because you think of ghosts as being quite lonely and the reason they haunt places is because they want to be close to people and interact with people, so I think a theatre ghost is one that wants to be around people, whether generally because they're lonely or want to be a part of entertaining people, even if it's just as a member of the audience.

At the end of the interview Claire has her invented ghost bring us full circle to the capacity for play which she learnt with her mother at the theatre as a child, giving the whole interview a narrative structure which speaks of deep familiarity with dramatic plotting. 'Maybe they [the ghost] would be a bit mischievous again and want to make unexpected things happen'.

'Philip' is initially the most reluctant to invent an imaginary character and doesn't see the point. But he then picks up on the reference to Annie Horniman in the preamble to the interview question, directly.

... this theatre here, the Capitol Theatre<sup>7</sup>, used to be called The Horniman. So in a sense her ghost is still at the Library, wherever the Library Theatre exists. And in a way that would be what I would want, so that she becomes the link from the past through to the future... so there is some continuity, and the things she stood for... women's rights and... some sort of environmental concern and recycling and being her own woman and all that kind of thing would be the kind of spirit you would want in the Library Theatre.

'Bill' tells the story of his life through his connection with the theatre. He was a working class boy at a secondary modern school who first went to the theatre with a friend who had passed the eleven plus exam and gone to grammar school. Bill identifies most with characters in Arthur Miller's plays and expects to see represented in theatre the political forces and characters which have shaped his world. At work he joined an amateur company and now in retirement has had his own first play performed. He discusses what the idea of the theatre ghost means for the aesthetics of perception.

It's a struggle to express this present, powerful, kind of 'in your periphery vision' and a player can conjure up that magic. It makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. It's there, but not there. Carlos Santana used to have a spirit guide and that kind of 'in your peripheral vision' but if you turn it's not there. The way a ghost should be. Your imagination does the work. If you see it, the nice thing about plays is, it's what happens in your head.

Bill presents his invented ghost in action in a fully imagined scene, with costume, gesture and intention. Here, imaginative utility is a product as much of the audience's willing and informed attention as it is of the content or style, and the quality of the spectator's experience is the audience's collective responsibility. We can see that there is an implicit contract involved. In exchange for this level of imaginative labour, for this serious application and critical self-examination, a working class or lower middle class audience can expect representation on stage and politically relevant content. In this account, theatre itself is haunted by its historic democratic and civic functions; its potential deeply unfulfilled.

I would want it to be a kind of political and working class. Certainly lower middle class. I don't want any royal ghosts in there, not like Hamlet's father, I would like a working class ghost with a point of view, with an attitude. Dissatisfied. And demanding. And kind of turning its mouth down and shaking its head if it didn't like something, if they did a Noel Coward! ...poor and run down, but casually dressed, jeans and a checked shirt. Silent. Looking. Watching. Shaking his head if it's not good enough.

In each of these quotations, as in all these interviews, the audience members responded to the invitation implicit in the preamble to the questionnaire, to position their experience of the Library Theatre's work in relation to its proposed move into a new theatre. Each makes links between the past and the present in her or his own way. For us as readers of these contributions, the creative exercise produced an embodied oral history of the relationship between the Library Theatre Company and its audience, through a cast of imaginary characters. Respondents were able to represent their critical engagement with the role of spectator, and to exercise interpretative agency in relation to their contributions to the research. The exercise prompted our further exploration in the *Theatre Spectatorship* project into how a critical consideration of imaginative responses could allow our participants to both recreate and interpret the resonances of their experience as spectators. Imaginative responses seemed to offer shared access to associations which were not apparent in answers to questionnaires.

The Theatre Ghost device was unique to the situation of the study of one theatre and its role in the cultural life of a city over a finite period, within living memory. For the study of three different theatre audiences, and a range of shows, we needed a different way to access the process by which spectators might put their memories of performances they had seen to use.

### **Memory and Context**

There was some dissent in answer to the *The Spirit of Theatre* questionnaires about one significant aspect of the Library Theatre's production. Across both projects, theatre spectators attributed less cultural status to musical theatre than to 'straight' theatre. For many contributors, this marked the boundary of their taste. The class basis of this evaluation was particularly noticeable in the Manchester audience, since despite their familiarity with Brecht, many of the respondents commented with surprise that a serious play such as *Mother Courage* should include popular music. This was an important reminder that audiences share unspoken assumptions about the value of an artistic experience, which may only appear in the breach.

It is worth considering here what sorts of narrative conventions our participants did identify in the shows they saw and what sorts of fictional tropes these spectators find particularly memorable, since it is within this imaginative landscape that we might form those personal associations which were the object of our creative workshops.

In order to address this question, we analysed the predominant memories that audience members in both *The Spirit of Theatre* and the TSVA survey reported in their questionnaires, relating to ten plays in four different theatres but excluding the plays in the long-term study. Of the most striking memories reported, the majority were of women buried alive, or dead, dying, or killing themselves. This largely reflected the predominant dramatic themes and tropes in the theatres' programming. As far as representation on stage was concerned, in the nine recent productions we surveyed there were two male to

every one female performer, with women cast to play male characters in all four large cast productions at the RSC and the Library Theatre.

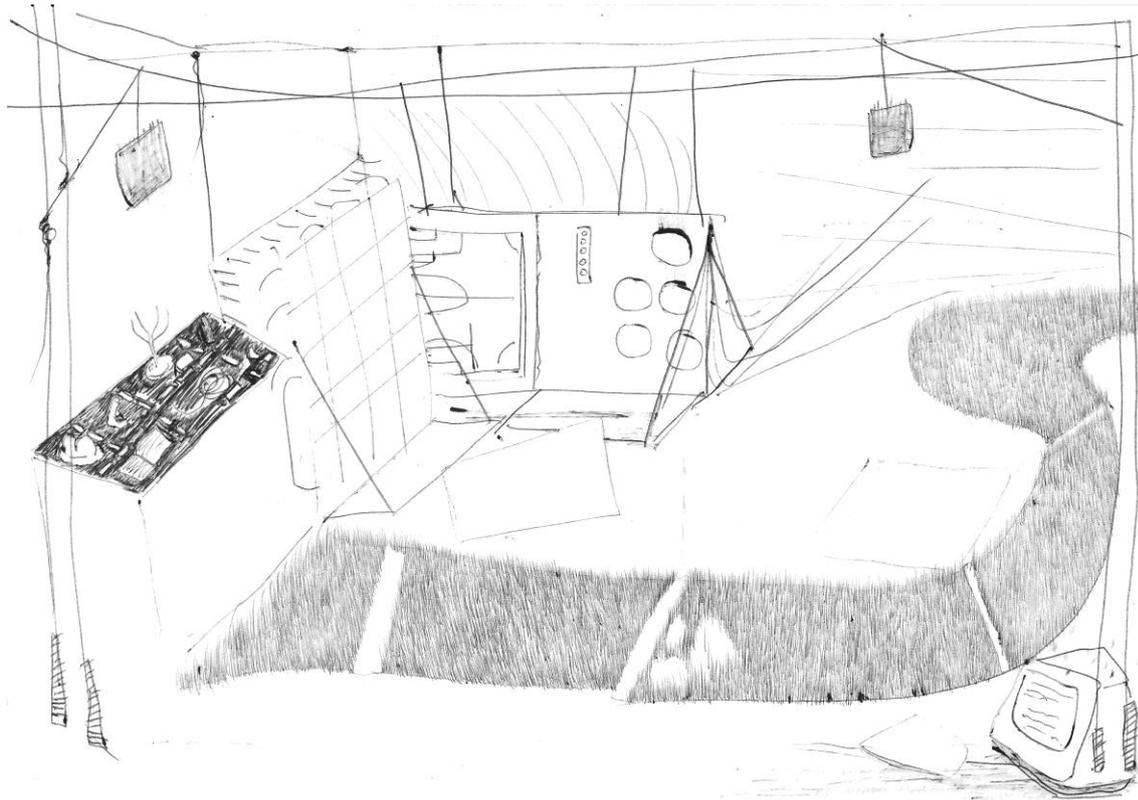
The majority of our respondents were women as is the case with theatre audiences generally.<sup>8</sup> The women in the TSVA survey were more likely than men to attribute a high value overall to their experience of seeing a play. This suggests that programming is not in itself alienating a majority female audience, and confirms that the ability to identify directly with characters and situations is not a decisive factor in the attribution of value. However, in the TSVA project, where we analysed preference for different theatrical genres, there was some indication that women were choosing to see more of the plays that we categorised as new writing and experimental than men. In these contemporary shows, the dramaturgy was not necessarily any less clichéd in its presentation of female characters, and women were also cast to play male characters, for example as in 1927's *The Animal and Children Took to the Streets*, just as they were in the large-cast classic plays, such as *Mother Courage*. However, in these categories there was a slightly higher proportion of female performers, with twenty-two male performers to sixteen female. In other words, for the new writing and experimental plays, the ratio of male to female performers was 3:2, while for the large-cast classical plays this ratio was 2:1.

Racial and ethnic diversity is even less visible in our sample of shows, with only one play, Mark Ravenhill's adaptation of Voltaire's *Candide*, representing any characters appearing to be from non-European or immigrant backgrounds and no non-white principal characters or performers in any of the productions. We did not ask any questions directly relating to either gender or racial representation on stage in these studies, and there were few if any spontaneous references to either, which implies that these elisions of representation may be characteristic of the culture we studied and replicated by the conventions of its reception.

This overview indicates that every spectator must negotiate not only with the reactions of fellow audience members at a particular performance, but with sets of unspoken but shared cultural values, with powerful emotional and social significance. These tramlines of collective memory underscore our personal associations. Rancière's active spectator is never an isolated subject.

### **Theatre Spectatorship and Value Attribution**

The *Theatre Spectatorship* workshops were conducted after participants had filled out all three questionnaires, and began with a brain-storming of memories of and associations with the performances. Workshop contributors at each theatre had seen different shows at different times; some had seen more than one of the shows under consideration. Once our lists were complete we discussed the contents. Then contributors worked on their own, responding to a series of prompts to draw and write their own scenes or scenarios. Finally, each participant wrote a paragraph, or section of a scene in dialogue, representing the character, situation or story they chose to present to the rest of the group. It was this



**Figure 2:** Spirit of Theatre: Wings. Copyright Simon Woolham 2012

considered piece of writing that we then discussed as a group, checking interpretation with each contributor individually, including the key question of what influences the writer detected in their own work.

Results from these creative workshops were relatively easy to compare, as I was the only facilitator. However, recordings, written records, and my interpretations of the contributions were shared and discussed with the BTC group as a way of ensuring that those readings were consistent with the evidence gathered.

### **Invented scenes: 1. *Happy Days***

- He: What is so funny?  
She: Nothing.  
He: Why are you smiling?  
She: Am I smiling?  
He: Yes.  
She: Perhaps I'm happy.  
He: You've no right to be happy.  
She: I don't think you have the right to determine how I feel.  
He: I could tell you something which would take away that smile.  
She: I know what it is you are going to say which explains why I'm smiling.

This dialogue was written during the workshop at the Young Vic by participant HD15.<sup>9</sup> The participants had seen Beckett's *Happy Days*, David Greig's *The Events*, and Mike Poulton's adaptation of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (at the RSC). The workshop participants, and this contributor in particular, were able to compare the Young Vic's production of *Happy Days*, and Juliet Stevenson's performance in it, to others, including the original production with Billie Whitelaw, directed by Beckett himself. HD15 commented on the difference in audience reception for Beckett's work when it was first produced. 'Nobody laughed', he told us. Present day audiences appreciate the humour in Beckett's writing but when audiences first saw it they sat 'in stunned silence'. We agreed that Juliet Stevenson's performance was more inflected than Whitelaw's, vocally and emotionally. The Young Vic production included contextual elements in the design; for example the pile of sand which buries Winnie was part of a cliff face and so its increase in the second act had a visible source which implied a physical logic. This slight shift towards the naturalistic supported the attribution of active agency to the characterisation and altered the relationship between text and spectator. For two contributors, the design went too far in this direction by introducing a modern crime scene-style tent at the opening of each act to disguise the actors' entrances onto a thrust stage without curtains, something which implied a setting in time for the play, and made a feature of its staging. This interfered with their sense of the text's fundamental ambiguity. However, both found Stevenson's performance remarkable and very powerful. In the original production, Whitelaw's declamatory style confronted the audience with an *expression* of her alienation. Stevenson's Winnie, by contrast, *resisted* her suffering. Her repetitions and trivial rituals amounted to a refusal to acknowledge oppression, which intensified its emotional effect and implied the existence of external agents responsible for her pain.

The group discussed *Happy Days* as a depiction of the inability of a husband to communicate with his wife or to meet her needs. HD15 said: 'a sexist marriage'. Reading his dialogue, quoted above, we agreed that it attempted to redress the balance of power between male and female partners. The wife's smile and her laughter are an assertion of agency, while the abstract setting and the rhythm of the lines represent an attempt to invoke and comment on Beckett's style. In his scene, HD15 combines and compresses the workshop discussion, a comparison between earlier and current productions of Beckett and his own compassion for the suffering Winnie.

This was the consensus of opinion in the group. My own observation is that this piece of writing is shaped by the way the company positioned the spectator: as witnesses to abuse amounting to torture. Consequently, a sympathetic and attentive member of the audience responded not by contemplating his own existential condition, but by imaginatively challenging the relations of power in a dysfunctional marriage. This is not political action in the sense of chaining oneself to the railings outside parliament or going on hunger strike - but it is a rehearsal of empathic redress provoked by that particular production.

## **Invented scenes: 2. *Candide***

Creative responses to a performance can still engage with the underlying structure of a dramatic text, even when the participant dislikes the play. One contributor to the RSC workshop, C12, was disappointed with Mark Ravenhill's adaptation of *Candide*. His argument was that Voltaire had written a satire, whereas Ravenhill had written a polemic. (Another contributor agreed, but enjoyed the polemic). C12 particularly disliked the speech made by the young woman at the modern-day party, who first justifies her action, and then kills all her family. He felt that this was something he might read in a *Guardian* editorial; he was himself a journalist. The scenes with the film director which satirise contemporary media were 'crude and boring'. He preferred the ironies of the play within a play (where *Candide* confused pretence with reality and joined in with the action on stage to rescue a character that had fallen overboard from a pasteboard ship) to the sections where Ravenhill projects into a dystopian science-fiction future, in which the future of humanity is threatened by anthropogenic climate change. Our participant explains that his scene is set in a spaceship containing a group of pioneers who were trying to save the future of humanity by undertaking a journey into space during which they were periodically unfrozen then re-frozen. One of the pilots is mysteriously shot.

The bullet had entered through the top of the head, passed down through the neck, chest and stomach and passed out through the groin. An impossible shot in most places in the universe from directly above, but not here, except,

"Where did the gun come from? There are no guns," she said. "This bodes some strange eruption to our state," he muttered. "What?"

He shook his head, and remembered the world left behind. We thought this would be better. Yet again, here was proof that it was not."

I asked whether it might be necessary for there to be a relationship between a man and a woman on this space journey, in order to allow for the continuance of the human race, as our participant had suggested that these pioneers would not be able to make it to their new home in their own lifetimes, despite the cryogenics. The writer argued that instead he intended to explore the story of a protagonist faced with having to decide whether to wake up his family to the truth that their journey is in vain. His theme was loss.

C12 repositions the father-figure in his variation on Ravenhill's plot, so that his hero is responsible for the life or death of an inert off-stage family. The girl no longer fires the gun. This is not something which the group or the writer commented on in our interpretative discussion – although it is quite pointed in the scene. Consequently, the privileged conventional trope of women's passivity was silently restored.

Despite the writer's strong reaction against Ravenhill's text, in many respects this story echoes both its themes and its techniques, indicating a considered critical engagement

with the play and its frame of reference. This writer and the group agreed that the opportunity to dispute a play's argument and propose one's own alternative version or interpretation was one of the most important pleasures of theatre-going, a conclusion which incorporated the provocation in Ravenhill's dramaturgy.

### **Invented scenes: 3. *Hamlet***

In the same workshop H6 apologised for the way her personal life was intruding into her exercise and was explicit about drawing analogies between the production of *Hamlet* we had seen and a painful conflict in her own family.

So there we were, champagne glasses filled to the brim, standing on a balcony overlooking the sea on a beautiful summer evening. When I say we I mean my husband and I, my stepson and his wife, and my grandson. The occasion is the celebration of my 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday. Toast completed, my husband asks his daughter-in-law 'and how are things?', at which she breaks down in tears and tells us her marriage is 'over'. This sets in train a summer of events which 'bodes some strange eruption to our state'.

The final quotation is one I had included as a prompt, from Act 1 Scene 2 of *Hamlet*. The champagne glass was a prop, from the staging of the first court scene at Elsinore, which I had also mentioned while the participants were constructing their characters. In the production, the scene where Hamlet confronts Gertrude was played in a deliberately comic style, which on the night I saw it got two laughs from the audience at Gertrude's expense. In the earlier discussion of memories of the play, H6 said that Jonathan Slinger's Hamlet seemed to her to be a man who couldn't grow up. His attitude to Gertrude showed that he could not accept an adult woman's independent sexuality. When we discussed the interpretation of her writing, H6 referred back to this theme by saying that her story reflected her own and her husband's feelings about the behaviour of the partners in her stepson's divorce. In the story the announcement of the divorce happens 'at her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday party', with the narrator as the step-parent who is implicitly displaced and challenged - upstaged - by the concerns of the younger generation. This clearly associates H6's experience with Gertrude's, and particularly in this production of *Hamlet*. On stage, Gertrude is seen in mid-celebration when Hamlet's behaviour interrupts, and forces her to concern herself with his abandonment of Ophelia. However, H6 also elides the positions of King and Queen, combining the perspectives of different characters in the play. She positions Gertrude at the centre of the narrative and discounts the question of her complicity in Hamlet's father's murder. Hamlet's father's ghost, in this version, becomes the mechanism of the son's obsessive denial of his mother's sexual identity, which is at the root of his rejection of Ophelia - what H6 earlier had labelled 'an inability to grow up'.

Mark Turner calls the process of substitution which we see in both C12's and H6's stories 'blending'. This refers to the ability to re-frame imaginative material, a cognitive

process of 'conceptual integration' that characterises human consciousness and allows for artistic expression (2006, 93).

I proposed the possibility that one way audiences might derive value from seeing a play was as a framework to interpret aspects of their own lives, but H6 disagreed. She felt that the use of the situation in *Hamlet* as a comparison with her family problem was a direct result of the workshop, rather than something she would have done of her own accord, a reservation we will return to at the end of this paper. In fact, H6's response to Hamlet's character, including the comparison with her own family, was something she had felt when she first saw the production, according to her own report in the questionnaire she completed before taking part in the workshop.

This example demonstrates how the preoccupations the spectator brings to the performance can shape their experience of it. It illustrates the complexity of substitution available in the imaginative resource of the play. It also perhaps signals the writer's need to isolate her playful speculation from the possible consequences of any emotional discoveries made in the process and to maintain the provisional nature of its interpretation.

## Reservations

Although a majority of the respondents to the TSVA questionnaires reported making vivid and important associations between a performance and either their personal life or public events, a proportion balked at or disagreed when these responses were directly questioned. One member of the audience for *The Animals and Children*, asked whether the show had any personal associations, answered, 'None - strange question? We live in the 2010s not 1920s - why did you ask this?'

In their interviews, most respondents made associations fluently without pause, but a significant number had to make an effort to remember associations, which did not at first occur to them. In one interview, a respondent began by saying that he could not think of any association between his personal life and any plays that he had seen, but inserted into a later answer an example of an association he had made between a particular storyline in a play, and the memory of an acquaintance who had killed himself.

Other respondents designated the sort of associations they thought it appropriate to make. For example, one interviewee who had seen *Wolf Hall* suggested that it was dangerous to use historical material as too literal an object lesson for contemporary life. This respondent did make connections between character types in plays, and in her own professional experience as a lawyer, saying of a troublesome erstwhile colleague, 'He's not *exactly* Iago...'. For this respondent as for others, dramatic fiction was satisfying when it illustrated continuity of human motivation irrespective of distance in time and place or of fundamental differences of political organisation. Several respondents remarked that the plays they were seeing showed that politics or human behaviour, or both, were always the same: of *Wolf Hall*, 'The play was 'political' and politics change little over the years'; of *Candide*, 'The underlying themes are as relevant today as they were in Voltaire's time'; of *Hamlet*, 'The emotional aspects of the play seemed timeless, i.e. there are simply elements

of the human condition, feelings such as loss, grief, contempt, heartache which resonate with a modern audience as much as they would have done when the play was initially written'; of *Happy Days*, 'I think the play is timeless'. Not all of these contributors are inhibited from making use of the dramatic material themselves, but that activity is not validated within a critical framework that approves of the universal and unalterable in the plays themselves. Perhaps this goes some way to explaining why a substantial proportion of our contributors do not recognise the question which asks whether they make personal connections with the plays they see.

Another contributor, a voluntary workshop participant, was not convinced that there could be any connection at all between the process of writing a story and the experience of seeing the show. He politely articulates a contrasting model of the motivation for going to theatre; the spectator as collector of experience.

If this is a daft answer I apologise. But in a way, I think the things that stay with you are the things that you'd meet a friend for a coffee and say let me tell you about x. So I could well tell somebody about *Fight Night* because it was intellectually interesting and I was critical of it so funnily enough that alone can make you... it's a bit like, would you recommend this hotel to your friend, well yes because the bed was a bit lumpy but the receptionist was brilliant and it was like that with *Fight Night*, would you recommend it? Well yes, and that could be because of the intellectual content plus the slight uncomfortability with the audience if that's a word.

As we see, this by no means excludes the potential for challenge – emotional and intellectual – in that experience, but it is neither socially constructive nor necessary. The metaphorical correlative for theatrical experience offered by this participant is a hotel with both positive and negative aspects, as opposed to other contributors' 'like oranges that provide vitamin C', or just 'food'.

#### **Invented scene: 4. *The Events***

Several participants discovered in the workshop how scenarios in the plays can provide analogous narratives for personal experience and how dramatic characters can be substituted for actual relationships without initially being aware of putting them to use.

One such participant, ET3, had seen David Greig's play *The Events*, in which two professional actors performed with choirs local to the venues on their tour. The play imagines a situation in Scotland where a killer like the Norwegian Anders Brevik has attacked and murdered a large number of young people, members of the local Vicar Alex's congregation. Her problem is in reconciling her grief and rage with her religious vocation and belief in forgiveness. She is the only openly gay character in any of the plays we surveyed. In our participant's discussion of the play he responds to how David Greig's dramaturgy positions the audience as a community grieving for the loss of members of

Alex's congregation. The play takes actual events in Norway and repositions them in an imaginary Scotland, deploying Norway as a model for Scottish independence and presenting an uncomfortable clash between benign and exclusive versions of nationalism. However, the local choirs, which take a formal part in the action on stage, function as proxies for the whole audience wherever the show is played. In watching the show, we are thus drawn into an engagement with the real victims of Anders Brevik through the extended dramatic metaphor of a service of remembrance, presided over by a gay woman celebrant – herself the quintessential symbolic target of far-right attacks.

Our participant is a teacher who finds himself associating the empty chairs, which represent the murdered youngsters in *The Events*, with his own working life. His scene begins with a man alone in an empty classroom, tidying his desk. He tells us that in writing his scene he was thinking of his own community, a term which suggests an elision of sexual identity, school, and neighbourhood. A girl arrives in the classroom, to ask:

Girl: Do you miss them?

Man: Do I miss them?

Girl: Yes, all of them, you know. When it's quiet like this?

Man: Is it quiet like this? I suppose I don't think about it. I try not to think about it. Makes it harder when I think about it, so I try not to.

ET3: Oh there is a bit actually because when I was thinking about Happy Days, that kind of connects with me... I kind of relate to, the way they say the same things over and over again... I was drawing from my Dad a bit, because he can be a bit like that....

*Interviewer: So you recognise in your own life and relationships, a particular relationship with your Dad in fact, that business that somebody can't shift?*

ET3: Yeah. In the sense that some people deal with things by not dealing with them...

*Int: So we've got a way in which it's very clear that you're using the material of the plays?*

ET3: Yes.

*Int: Both plays, both experiences?*

ET3: Yes.

*Int: ...to connect and make a connection with things that you think need to change in personal life?*

ET3: Er, yes.

This scene, and the discussion of its interpretation, illustrate the tentative process of interpreting personal associations in the project, but also crucially the way in which the dramaturgy of the play in production itself *licences* a level of connection between

participant and product, show and spectator, by exploring the nature of the responsibility of a community for the violent behaviour of its members; something that in other productions depends instead on the personality or situation of individual research participants.

## Conclusion

The reservation of some participants about the artificiality of the workshop raises important questions. How far can we say that the activity of association, ‘conceptual blending’, and imaginative use of dramatic material, both structural and thematic, informs us about what spectators do with their experience of seeing a show, outside of this experimental context?

We cannot say that this process is analogous to everyday activity on the basis of the evidence from within the experiment. However, there is consistent evidence from responses to our questionnaires and interviews that these spectators talk about the shows they have seen, mostly in face to face encounters; that this activity is very important in social and family life; that this communication mostly reinforces their opinions; and that respondents’ level of interest does reflect the associative potential and therefore the imaginative utility of the production. The creative activity in the workshop incorporates similar sorts of associations to the responses offered by many respondents to the other forms of enquiry in our research. We can also say that the ‘conceptual integrations’ the participants perform in the experimental context are unique and that what is produced can be self-revelatory. On some occasions the process releases a drive and energy, which in the case of H6 for example was enough to overcome a sense of the impropriety of the content. In questionnaires and interviews, spectators report that they use their experience of performance to explore other people’s motivation and to re-frame their relationships. In the workshops we saw this happening, not reliably as it might if the effect were produced by the structure and prompts, but variably, as we might expect in the case of a process driven by participants’ actual needs and concerns. The workshops also showed the sensitivity of participants’ responses to the interests of others in their group, so that what is done with the memories of the shows picked up on other people’s memories as often as on the contributors’ own.

Our evidence bears out Rancière’s challenge to the idea of the passivity of the spectator, and indicates that spectators are actively engaged in the production of cultural memory, in sensitive relation to the role implied by the dramaturgy of the performance, albeit with more or less awareness of their role. Through the use of imaginative investigative techniques, we can see that audience members *select* what material is relevant to their interests when deploying the scenarios and characters of the play. In trying to articulate the value of the theatrical experience, the extent to which it provides fictional material of significance to the spectator – its imaginative utility – seems to offer a way of assessing value which traces the allusive potential of a piece of art, judging by its malleability and resonance, irrespective of questions of taste or form.

At the same time the existence of predominant memories across the whole of our survey suggests that there are accepted underlying narrative conventions, which, for

example, privilege females as key candidates for victimhood, even where the leading characters are predominantly male; an example of what Tracy Davies and Ellen Donkin characterize as ‘an organized forgetting’.<sup>10</sup> Amongst our research subjects, the agency of the spectator is itself a contentious proposition, and is in competition with an acquisitive model of cultural formation.

Illustrations by Simon Woolham.

### **Biographical Note:**

Julie Wilkinson is a playwright, actor and Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University. She has written many scripts for the stage including *On Saturdays this Bed is Poland* (2007); for radio, including the four-part Radio 4 series *Coal* (1994), and television, including *Children’s Ward* and *Emmerdale*. A member of the British Theatre Consortium, Julie contributed to *Critical Mass: Theatre Spectatorship and Value Attribution*, a research project supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and published at [www.britishtheatreconsortium.co.uk](http://www.britishtheatreconsortium.co.uk). Julie’s one-woman show *Springtide at Mablethorpe*, a satirical blast against climate-change denial, will be on tour in Summer 2015. Contact: [j.wilkinson@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:j.wilkinson@mmu.ac.uk).

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> The British Theatre Consortium is a co-operative of academics and playwrights, with members based in four Universities; Warwick, Birmingham, Manchester Metropolitan and Royal Holloway University of London. When the *Spirit of Theatre* project began the members were David Edgar (Playwright and President of the Writers' Guild of Great Britain), Steve Waters, Professor Dan Rebellato, Professor Janelle Reinelt and Julie Wilkinson. Current membership: Edgar, Rebellato, Wilkinson, Dr. Chris Megson, Chris Bridgman and Dr. Jane Woddis. The organisation acts as a forum in which theatre makers, administrators, students and academics can come together to share views on all issues concerning contemporary theatre and performance in Britain.

<sup>2</sup> [www.britishtheatreconference.co.uk](http://www.britishtheatreconference.co.uk)

<sup>3</sup> 'In 1979, Alessandro Portelli set out the case for oral history as a distinctive genre or category of historical practice...[he] provided oral historians with a theoretical and methodological foundation for their work.' (Abrams 18)

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<sup>4</sup> Introduction to *Spirit of Theatre* interview: 'Thanks for agreeing to help us with our project. Here is the background to explain why we're doing this research now.'

The Library Theatre Company was founded in 1952 following the model established in Manchester by Annie Horniman who invented the Repertory Theatre system here, with her Gaiety Theatre Company, between 1907 and 1921. Annie Horniman was a believer in women's rights, before women had the vote. She also commissioned a number of local writers to write new plays, establishing what became known as The Manchester School of Playwrights. She rode a bicycle and cleaned her own theatre with an early sort of vacuum cleaner. She also believed in Ghosts.

At the moment, Manchester City Council is building a brand new theatre and arts centre to house both The Library Theatre Company and the Cornerhouse Cinema on First Street near Oxford Road Station. This is a good time to investigate what it is that audiences get from their experience of watching theatre, and the work of the Library Company in particular.' (Wilkinson: 2012, Appendix 4) Annie Horniman, theatre producer, 1860-1937, established the first repertory theatre company in England at the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester. The first season of the Horniman Company was in the autumn of 1906, and continued until the early 1920s. The Library Theatre was set up by Manchester City Council in 1952, but those involved in its beginnings acknowledged the inspiration of Horniman's example.

<sup>5</sup> Ghost prompt from *Spirit of Theatre* interview: 'You'll know that there are many ghostly characters in plays. You might think of Hamlet's father who appears to tell his son to revenge his murder, for example. Whenever actors perform they are conjuring up characters which are only present in our imaginations. Most theatres have resident ghosts or stories about ghosts which shift and change with every new influx of actors. Our new arts centre in Manchester does not yet have a ghost. If you were to devise a resident theatre ghost for our new theatre, what would the ghost be like?' (Wilkinson: 2012, Appendix 4).

<sup>6</sup> Simon Stephens play *On the Shore of the Wide World* premiered at the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, 13 April 2005.

<sup>7</sup> The Capitol Theatre in Manchester Metropolitan University is the home of MMU's School of Theatre.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. 'Taking Part' annual survey, commissioned by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in partnership with Arts Council England, Sport England and English Heritage. In 2008 the Arts Council published a breakdown of the survey results relating to participation in Theatre in 2005-

<sup>6</sup> 'Gender has a consistent impact on the likelihood of theatre attendance: even when holding other things constant, women are significantly more likely than men to have attended plays/dramas, other theatre performances and street arts/circus'. (Chan, Goldthorpe, Keaney, Oskala, 4)

<sup>9</sup> For contributions to the *Theatre Spectatorship* project, we used codes rather than pseudonyms, this convention has been maintained here for ease of cross-reference to the final report.

<sup>10</sup> In their introduction to a study of critically neglected women playwrights of the 19th Century, Davies and Donkin write: '... it is as if there is an organised forgetting, patterns of exclusion, suppression, or repression, and a widespread social and scholarly amnesia about them.' (Davies and Donkin, 2)