


Please cite the Published Version

Pinchbeck, Michael  and Mangan, Michael (2019) Somewhere between remembering and forgetting: Working across generations on The Middle. Performance Research, 24 (3). pp. 122-131. ISSN 1469-9990

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2019.1579028>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

Version: Accepted Version

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Additional Information: "This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Performance Research on 2/9/2019, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/13528165.2019.1579028>."

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Somewhere between remembering and forgetting: Working across generations on The Middle

By Michael Pinchbeck (University of Lincoln) and Mick Mangan (Loughborough University)

Remember thee? Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee?
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmixed with baser matter. Now to my word:
It is 'Adieu, adieu, remember me'
(Hamlet 1.5.95-103).

The materials of theatre are, for Shakespeare, the materials of memory. On one level this simply means that Shakespeare's theatre is a 'remembrance environment', a place whose physical and social properties shape remembering, a place of mnemonic instruction and of recollection (Wilder 2010: 1).

The Prologue

MICHAEL PINCHBECK: Between 2011 and 2013, I devised three performances inspired by Shakespeare plays: The End (inspired by A Winter's Tale (1610)) in 2011, The Beginning (inspired by A Midsummer Night's Dream (1596)) in 2012 and The Middle (inspired by Hamlet (1600)) in 2013. They were later amalgamated and shown together as The Trilogy from 2014-2016. This article focuses on the central section of The Trilogy - The Middle - a one-man show which was designed to be played in a theatre foyer - a liminal space between the outside and the inside, the real world and the theatre. Hamlet is a character caught in a limbo between 'To be or not to be' and by casting my father, Tony Pinchbeck, to play the title role, I sought to explore time passing, staging ageing and the relationship between father and son. My father

studied Hamlet when he was at school so, in the world of the piece, he is stuck in the middle between the fading memory of reading that play 50 years ago and reading it now. He is trying to remember what it was like to be Hamlet while I continue my struggle to stay in the wings.

For this article, I reflect on the complex dramaturgical process of working with my father to revisit his performative memories. The dramaturg's job is to look for and after something that is not yet found. As David Williams, academic and dramaturg, tells Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt Dramaturgy and Performance, 'you don't really know what is being sought' (quoted in Turner and Behrndt 2007: 117). As such, the dramaturg is in a limbo, or in the middle, between finding and looking, knowing and not knowing. For The Middle, I spent time playing with the material I wanted to use physically: a table, a chair, 40 metres of bubble-wrap and my father's memories. I found I could create interesting images with this material that could speak about ageing, stasis and mortality and the archiving of memory. As the final text suggests:

Tony: I am in the middle. Between having learned what to do and having to do it.
Between practising and performing. Not knowing how you might receive it. Between remembering and forgetting. I am in the middle of talking to you. In the middle.{{note}}1

The older we got, and the longer the show toured, between 2013 and 2016, the more the notion of father and son resonated. A retired solicitor, my father is 75 this year (2018), and as he grew older and the show toured for three years, his memory of playing Hamlet faded so the text he spoke was always further from events it described. As Matthew Goulish, the USA-based performance practitioner, writes, 'Some words speak of events, other words, events make us speak' (Goulish 2000: 97). These were the words my Dad's memories made us speak. For this article, I reflect on concepts of memory, time passing and ageing with Mick Mangan, who explores these themes in his publication Staging Ageing: Theatre, Performance and the Narrative of Decline (2013).

The article weaves together my dramaturgical experience of making the performance with Tony (my father), and Mick's experience of watching it through the lens of his research into issues of age, ageing and reminiscence. In Wrinkled Deep in Time: Aging in Shakespeare (2009), Maurice

Charney writes 'It seems to me now that Shakespeare was preoccupied with issues of aging that must have had an acute relation to his own sense of growing old' (Charney 2009: 1) and Hamlet in particular, speaks to this notion of growing old.

That sense of ageing in Shakespeare is marked by jumps and discontinuities. The before and after paradigm occurs often in the plays because it offers a way of highlighting psychological contrast. Duality is central to Shakespearean structure – This is certainly true of Hamlet, which depends on an earlier/later dichotomy (Charney 2009, 32).

As such this article takes an earlier/later approach: **Act One – The Director** was written by Michael Pinchbeck and **Act Two – The Audience** was written by Mick Mangan. Our aim is to explore the piece through different lenses of 'before and after' and to allow the 'jumps and discontinuities' in our memories of the real and/or theatre time to collide and echo. The curtain rises...

Act One – The Director

MICHAEL PINCHBECK: We are in a theatre foyer during the interval between The Beginning (2012) and The End (2011). [[note]]² A white-haired man sits enshrouded by bubble-wrap mumbling a soliloquy from Shakespeare's Hamlet. His son, the stagehand, unwraps him carefully and then the man starts to tell a story. It is a story about a man in the foyer during the interval. It is a dramaturgy of what takes place in foyers during intervals. People finish their drinks. People take phone calls. The stagehand brings props onstage for the white-haired man to use, a pencil becomes a cigar, a handkerchief becomes a blindfold, endless glasses of water build up on the table over time to suggest the detritus left behind at the end of an interval. Slowly it becomes clear from the text that the white-haired man is the stagehand's father and that he is reading a text that the stagehand has written for him. The text itself is in front of him and he turns over the pages one by one, reflecting on the fact: 'His handwriting [is] becoming more and more like mine' (Pinchbeck 2013).

The Middle operates in the space that exists between father and son, between the outside and the inside, the real world and the theatre, text and speech act. It asks how we perform text and

how text performs. It reflects on its own process, at one point referring to the writer sitting on the stairs listening to The Shipping Forecast 'writing this now' (Pinchbeck 2013). [3] It also sits between the text of Hamlet and the text of its own narrative, the ghost of Hamlet's father haunting the play and the real father of the author haunting this personal homage to Hamlet. It becomes clear that the father – Tony – has played the part of Hamlet before and he recalls this soliloquy from over 50 years ago. The text operates in the space between the words on the page and the words in the father's memory. It also toys with notions of character, the play within a play, and the particular history that each actor brings to the stage. Perhaps as well as Hamlet, Tony makes manifest Polonius. Charney reminds us 'There is a striking moment in Hamlet when Polonius loses the thread of his discourse and has to reconnect with what he was just saying' (Charney 2009: 7). Tony often loses the thread of his discourse and the only way he can reconnect is through his memory of performing this role before, be it Hamlet or himself, a man on a stage or a father. As Lina Wilder suggests: 'Polonius remembers acting in a play, however this reinforces the sense that, real or fictional, such recollections are intimately bound up with theatrical experience' (Wilder 2010: 15).

The other man too, Michael, who is both the writer and the stagehand, the author and the son, sits to one side, only venturing into Tony's performance area when he needs to give his father a prop or, in one case, the time. Everything in this world is on the edge of some kind of meaning and the performance event exists in a kind of 'non-place'. At once, neither interval nor performance, neither foyer nor theatre. As Marc Augé states: 'In the concrete reality of today's world, places and spaces, places and non-places intertwine and tangle together. The possibility of non-place is never absent from any place' (Augé 1995: 14). The Middle operates in what performance scholar Adrian Heathfield describes as a 'nowhen' (Heathfield 2000: 110), neither past nor present, now nor then. In this interval, the audience are implicit in a choreography, a dramaturgy of events, and active in a way that they can never be in the formal context (and confines) of the theatre auditorium. The text of The Middle refers to them as being: '...like a tide, you come and go, ebb and flow' (Pinchbeck 2013). As Tony says:

Tony: It is too loud. Or maybe I am just sitting under the speaker. The writer turns to the middle of his notebook. And starts to write about what people do during the interval. He is writing this during the interval now. In a foyer. In a theatre.

The refrain 'In a theatre' is repeated several times during the text and the performance never forgets its own ephemerality, nor the fact that it sits between the two bookends of The Beginning and The End. At the same time, it is an autobiographical response to being onstage. Tony – has been performing amateur dramatics for 40 years – and first learnt the text of Hamlet when he was at school. Now he is relating the text of Hamlet to the fact that he has grown old, and is himself in a state 'betwixt and between', organising childcare for his grandchildren and residential care for his parents. He refers to a 'middle generation, squeezed between beginnings and endings, just like tonight' (Pinchbeck 2013). His words echo both the UK Labour Party's talk of a 'squeezed middle' [note]4 and Philip Larkin's poetry published in *The Less Deceived* (1955) about how the children are 'coming', the parents are 'going' – in fact two poems within the collection had these titles. This notion was made particularly pertinent by the fact that two of my grandparents passed away during the making and touring of the performance. As such, the performance allows my father to make an auto-dramaturgical response to that bereavement.

I slip into first person here deliberately. This account is deliberately problematised by the fact that I am my own dramaturg, and in this sense, it outlines a tentative blueprint for an 'auto-dramaturgy', what we might describe as the attempt to be the 'outside eye' of one's own work. An evolution of what Eugenio Barba describes as the 'actors' dramaturgy', I use this phrase to describe the act of dramaturgy that takes place when devising from autobiographical stimuli. [note5] The phrase has been used before in a dance context, Patrice Pavis describes it as: 'A dramaturgy anchored in the dancer's body which pre-exists every project, every construction and every intention' (Pavis 2012: 5). This description suggests auto-dramaturgy as an inner rhythm inherent and specific to a performer that precedes any work they do and is therefore always present. However, Marie-Heleen Coetzee and Allan Munro describe auto-dramaturgy as such that '... the "artist" is centrally located and therefore the authorship and authority (the locus of control) and the discourses accessed are personalized' (Coetzee and Munro 2014: 107). In defining the 'auto-dramaturg' they suggest 'There has been a burgeoning

of performances that draw on an individual's experiences of the world, and this "personal discourse tapestry" is used to develop the performance text' (Coetzee and Munro 2014: 107).

This concept of a 'personal discourse tapestry' chimes with most of the work I have made for the theatre as each performance is autobiographical in its approach and incorporates the (auto-)biographies of the performers involved in its devising. We might also consider the fact here that Shakespeare's actors too would bring their own performance history to the stage. As Wilder suggests, 'Polonius recalls his acting experience as a student, for example, he recalls both the character's and (probably) the actor's past. 'I did enact Julius Caesar' (3.2.99-100). On one level, the materials of Polonius' reminiscence are entirely theatrical' (Wilder 2010, 14). I, as the auteur-director, am always centrally located and the authorship and authority are personalised but there is a shared sense of authorship with the other members of the company as the work draws on all of our 'experiences of the world'. As my dad said of making the show together:

Michael asked me to contribute a few words here and there to the text, and he is always very receptive to ideas, so The Middle does feel like a joint venture, especially with its autobiographical slant (Tony Pinchbeck 2014).

Writing about this performance – The Middle – as I am now – it is difficult to remember fully the precise journey we took, my father – Tony – as performer, myself as writer/director (prompt, stage hand, technician etc.). As Mick Mangan himself says, in Staging Ageing, 'As we get older, memory changes shape' (Mangan 2013, 23). We are all five years older now than when we wrote it, performed it or saw it, and our writing is looking back through time, our memory changing the shape of the words we said and the movements we made. As Tony recounts in the show, from the 'table of his memory', learning Shakespeare's play at school:

Tony: I memorise as many of Hamlet's soliloquies as I can
As a bank of quotations to use in an exam
And here I am recalling them on this stage
Fifty years later.

It is in this moment of recall, indeed in the middle of this re-call, along the hyphen between doing something again and calling it to mind for the first time, that the show takes place. As Mangan states, 'To remember the past is, whether we like it or not, to perform a creative act in the present' (Mangan 2013: 23). As my Dad, Tony, speaks the lines above, in the present, I am writing 'To be or not to be' in chalk on the front of his old school desk, as if a teacher writing it on the chalkboard' in the past (the 'table of my memory' here perhaps being re-interpreted, or re-called, as a tabula rasa) – conjuring ghosts of my Dad's memories onto the stage where he is re-calling and re-enacting them. Thus, The Middle is very much concerned with what Martin Hargreaves describes as a 'deconstructive spectrality' where 'ghosts of various kinds, in various shapes and at various times' populate and share the stage together (Hargreaves 2004, 148).

We see this haunting in Shakespeare's original text too, as Hamlet is visited by the ghost of his father, indeed as David Bevington argues, in Shakespeare: The Seven Ages of Human Experience (2002), 'Hamlet seems prepared to follow the dictates of his ghostly father' (Bevington 2002, 120). My role as stagehand is also to follow my father's 'dictates', or theatrical cues. However, I subvert his call for naturalistic objects with signifiers of the rehearsal process. When he talks about his teacher giving out exam papers, I bring him a copy of the script. While the memory is of the past, the aesthetic is of the creative act in the present. As Wilder writes, 'The props, the players and the physical space of the stage provide the vocabulary of Shakespeare's memory theatre, in their frequent absence such objects become a way to evoke a mind and a past' (Wilder 2010, 2). The Middle makes its subject matter its own intervality; it references the music and imagery of advertisement breaks (Hamlet cigars, Hovis etc.) to reinforce its examination of what lies in between one thing and another. The aesthetic of bubble-wrap suggests a performance in transit or in stasis and evokes my father's mind and past.

The location in the foyer suggests someone being themselves rather than a character. The performance is framed by the sound of waves washing on the shore and music from Radio 4's Shipping Forecast fading in and out and therefore hovers somewhere between falling asleep and dreaming. As Tony says at the end, before ushering the audience back into the theatre, 'None of this will be here when you leave' (Pinchbeck 2013). He speaks of the emptiness that fills a theatre when no one is there, to ask what happens, like Augusto Corrieri's recent

monograph, In Place of a Show: What happens in theatres when nothing is happening (2016). Corrieri goes in search of the atmosphere of the empty theatre space and asks what it evokes. I conducted a similar exercise by inhabiting theatre foyers during intervals to observe behaviour. As the audience leave the foyer, I cover him up again in bubble-wrap. He is protected against what the future might bring or perhaps simply rested until the next performance.

Tony: And everything here will be returned to normal. None of this will be here when you leave. Just as it was when you arrived. I am just here. Where one thing ends. And another thing begins. In the middle.

In making The Middle, we decided that I should 'sit in the wings', a space neither quite on nor quite off the stage, and that I should become the stagehand/prompt/technician to enhance the real-life relationship between father/actor and son/writer. As Tim Etchells, writer, performer and director of Forced Entertainment, observed for The Guardian blog in 2009 about offstage action, this enables a 'glimpsing [of] reality inside the frame of theatre' (Etchells 2009). I operated the soundtrack and the PowerPoint presentation from the wings and referred to the text in case my Dad needed prompting. In doing so, I retained my place in the margins of the page, and the stage, as an inside/outside eye. However, as Etchells notes, 'Whether it's watching prompters or stagehands, sometimes you can't take your eyes off the jobs you're not meant to see' (Etchells 2009).

I worked, too, in the margins of the script, taking notes of how to edit the text or time the music more appropriately to the rhythm of the piece. The dramaturgy of The Middle sought to reflect the natural ebb and flow of an audience 'toing and froing, coming and going... like a tide' (Pinchbeck 2013) and the piece began and ended with the sound of waves lapping on the shore and the Shipping Forecast. At one point, my Dad sings a song that used to lull me to sleep when I was a baby, sound-tracked by my two-year old daughter Lydia whispering the word 'Daddy' over and over again. As such, the text explores a space between a father and a child, an actor and a writer, the state of being awake or being asleep, or half way up or down the stairs. Even when, in its earliest manifestation, The Middle was performed as a stand-alone piece,

everything in its fictive cosmos was about being between one thing and another. This was made even more apparent when The Middle was shown as part of The Trilogy (2014-2016).

To end Act I, I want to reflect on the role of dramaturg in contemporary performance. Traditionally, the value of this role has been attributed to its marginal status. An article in The Stage, for example, concluded that ‘... the dramaturg’s liminal status remains his or her greatest asset, whether as conceptual curator, creative pathfinder or critical provocateur’ (Anderson 2015). Similarly, when I interviewed Jochem Naafs, a Dutch dramaturg at HKU Theatre (Utrecht), about what he did, he said: ‘There is this part of the dramaturg that is seriously in-between, in a kind of liminality. You are part of the project and you are not, you are part of the outside world and you are not. Maybe you can try and make these parts run more smoothly together’ (Naafs 2012). However, in recent years online debates about the nature of the dramaturg have proposed that the importance and the centrality of the role should be more widely recognised and understood. Synne Behrndt, writing as dramaturg with Fevered Sleep on their recent productions, states that ‘devising is a process of creation and it is a process of loss’ (Behrndt 2011, 185). It is perhaps the role of the dramaturg in both the devising process and in the documentation of it to capture and record this loss.

As David Williams suggests of his work with Lone Twin, the dramaturg ‘... acts as an aide-memoire, or archivist of the process, an agent of reculer pour mieux sauter, (‘go backwards in order to jump forwards’) or a reminder of what’s forgotten, overlooked, misplaced in the headlong rush forwards; a braking mechanism, proposing festina lente (‘make haste slowly’)’ (Williams 2010, 201). Naafs concluded that:

I would like to think of myself as a dramaturge. The problem is that I find it hard to describe what that is. Here is what I know: I find myself at the sideline. Sometimes I join, most of the time I am just watching. But quite often I find myself in the middle. Stuck in the middle. In a liminality, between the line. Between creating and observing, between acting and passing. Between active and passive (Naafs 2012).

Naafs' view chimes much with my own, especially in the making of The Middle, when the concept of liminality seems pertinent to the subject of the piece. As Michel de Certeau said it is, '.... not here or there, one or the other, but neither the one nor the other, simultaneously inside and outside, dissolving both by mixing them together, associating texts like funerary statues that [the writer] awakens and hosts, but never owns' (de Certeau 2011, 174). Perhaps de Certeau gives us another tentative job description for the dramaturg, being both simultaneously inside and outside, dissolving both perspectives by mixing them together. The dramaturg and the dramaturgy they oversee associate texts, awaken and host, but never own. In this act, I have reflected on a memory and revisited my own notes, writing and working in the margins, during the practice as research. As Robert Shaughnessy states: 'To write a note is, surely, a form of theatrical address, for it must envisage, and speak to, a future version of oneself who is presumed to have forgotten; to that avatar, it says: you must remember this, you must remember me' (Shaughnessy 2006). As Hamlet says himself: 'Adieu, adieu, remember me'.

Throughout the devising process we were dealing with that space which exists somewhere between remembering and forgetting the text: both the text of Hamlet, first performed 50 years ago and the text of our show which was written down. For one moment, where my Dad was blindfolded standing on the desk, he memorised his recollection of standing on a diving board in Malta in 1967 having his photograph taken by a friend, and often paused between the words. The image he was reenacting was projected behind him and I took his photograph as he spoke.

Tony: I am in the middle of walking the plank
Over a beach in Malta
On a student holiday in 1967
I am in the middle
Between studying and working
Between learning what to do and having to do it
I am in the middle of talking to my friend
Who is taking a picture of me
Walking the plank
Between sky and sand

And I am laughing while I am talking
I am in the middle of jumping and falling
Between the memory and the photograph

As Wilder suggests:

In contrast to deliberate forgetting, unintentional forgetfulness is conceived not as erasure but as misplacement. Purposeful recollection, in such contexts, is the literal re-collection of materials that have been lost through the negligence of the rememberer (Wilder 2010, 43).

This act has captured what I remember from working with my father, that which burnt my memory, that which is erased and misplaced. As David Bevington writes, 'It is in this accepting mood that Hamlet prepares for his own finale without having a clue what it will be, or what he is to do; he knows only that he must be ready' (Bevington 2002, 139). And so, waiting under bubble-wrap, was my father.

Act Two – The Audience

MICK MANGAN: By the time we head out to the foyer, we have already seen The Beginning, a witty three-hander which is haunted by repeated echoes of A Midsummer Night's Dream, and which riffs repeatedly on the reminiscences of the actor/characters about 'The first time I performed'. These reminiscences become increasingly contradictory as The Beginning goes on, and the illusion of authenticity becomes thinner and thinner, making it increasingly apparent that Pinchbeck, we realise, is playing theatrical games, messing with the boundary between the fictional and the real, as the onstage actors create characters who turn out to have an ambiguous and shifting relationship to their own real-life identities.[{note}]⁶

This sense of uncertainty and instability follows us into the foyer – where an elderly gentleman is being gently uncovered from his bubble-wrap cocoon while reciting lines from Hamlet. He then continues the self-referential game whose rules have already been established in the first part of The Trilogy.

Tony: This is the interval
This is when you usually drink

[Tony drinks]

This is when you possibly get drunk

[Tony drinks]

The monologue announces and reflects upon its own 'in-between-ness': its physical and temporal location flouts not only dramaturgical conventions but also the architectural conventions and the commercial imperatives of mainstream theatre by filling both the space and the time of the interval with performance. And as a result, we, the audience, too are somewhere in-between: we are displaced from our usual vantage point of a seat in the auditorium, but not quite released from the contract of spectatorship into which we entered when we bought the tickets. The 'we' that the text addresses/constructs is a savvy theatre-going audience, so we are perhaps not completely out of our depth with the notion of a performance that happens in an unconventional setting. Even so, we are, to start with at least, placed in an unfamiliar and perhaps uneasy relationship with the performer and his monologue:

Tony: ...This is when things start to unravel
When things become unclear
When you turn to someone next to you and say
'Is this part of the show?'
And they say

Michael: I don't know

Are we in stage time, or are we in what Alan Ayckbourn has appropriately called 'real (theatre foyer) time'? (Ayckbourn 2002, 21). Or in some liminal time that exists between them?

'Liminality' is a concept that some might say has been rather over-used in Performance Studies and Cultural Studies. These disciplines have adopted and adapted van Gennep's original anthropological studies of rites of passage (van Gennep [1908] 2004) so as to concentrate on that ambiguous and transitional phase of separation and isolation, when the individual is neither fully part of a society nor entirely divorced from it. Performance per se is often seen as effecting a kind of liminality, and so Pinchbeck's ironic use of the foyer as a liminal space for an in-between performance is well suited to his own cheerful approach to the ambiguities of theatrical meaning. But the notion of liminality has been adopted in other ways by other disciplines. For Age Studies, too, it has turned out to be a useful term. Barbara Myerhoff draws on Turner and van Gennep in order to suggest that for post-industrial societies, old age may be seen as having its liminal dimension. This can be purely negative, leaving people marginalised, de-socialised, excluded, not belonging. Myerhoff also, however, stresses the positive possibilities:

Liminality – being socially in limbo – anomie, rolelessness, neglect and social irrelevance may have the complex advantage of leaving old people alone, to be themselves only more so... people whose reemerging originality ... may be as delightful, surprising and fruitful as anything to be found among the very young (Myerhoff 1992, 223-4).

The two words 'liminal' and 'limbo' are cognate terms, sharing a common etymological derivation in the Greek term limen, usually translated as 'threshold'. 'Liminal' tends to carry connotations of positive change, and often youthful energy. 'Limbo', on the other hand, in traditional Christian cosmology is a region on the borders of hell; even in its more recent secular usage it denotes a condition of stasis, neglect, immobility or confinement. Tony describes himself in just such a way: 'I am in limbo,' he says. But there is also a sense that he sees himself going through a creative process. He is: 'A middle aged man / In the middle of a stage' – and that last word takes on at least a double meaning now. Even more positive is his next image: 'Emerging from a chrysalis...'

Tony: Hamlet in bubble-wrap

A neo-geriatric in aspic
In the middle of being a father and being a son
Michael's dad and Harry's lad...
Between dealing with the sadness of a parent's departure
And sharing the joy of a new arrival
Between trying to keep memories alive
And creating new memories
I am in the middle
A middle generation

There is something both tender and ambivalent about this passage - a bitter-sweet poem about accepting the ageing process. It is also a speech which once more turns towards the meta-theatricality which is the through-line of The Trilogy: the next couple of lines tie together the images of ageing with the conditions under which they are delivered: 'Squeezed between beginnings and endings / Just like tonight'.

In the first few moments of the play we experience Tony as the disembodied voice of a Shakespearean character. Then he becomes the anonymous man in the foyer of the theatre, a meta-theatrical presence commentating upon his own actions. Thirdly, modulating from the third person to the first, Tony becomes himself - quite literally so, as he explains that he is the father of the writer. He explains that he is there because 'My son asked me here to help him out / Because I have been here before / And I know how this works.'

The monologue goes on to explore Tony's own memories and the relationship between himself and Michael - a relationship which is theatrical as well as a familial. Tony is an experienced non-professional actor, and now he is bound up in an experimental theatre production of a kind which is rather different from his implied past experience in amateur theatre. The similarities and the differences between the father and son are explored. Their relationship is portrayed as one of affectionate sharing, as Tony obligingly helps out his son the playwright, struggling to read his handwriting (which is 'becoming more and more like mine'), echoing some of Michael's own hopes and fears for the performance, wondering - as Michael also wonders -

‘why he has never had a proper job’, and speaking the lines that have been written for him. Throughout all of this, Michael remains onstage – just on the edge of the stage, in fact, as he has been on the edge of the stage earlier on in The Beginning. Michael spends most of this second section of The Trilogy watching Tony’s performance of a monologue that repeatedly observes and subverts the expected boundaries between dramatic fiction and lived reality. It also explores other boundaries – notably those between Michael and Tony, between father and son. The Middle weaves together (one of Pinchbeck’s own favourite metaphors for performance-making) the meta-theatrical playfulness of The Beginning and The End with a ‘story’ that is also concerned with ageing, time and memory, intergenerational relationships, and fathers and sons.

Because of this, The Middle stands out in several ways from the other two parts of The Trilogy – not only in terms of its physical and temporal location and its change of cast, but also in its difference in tone. The dialogue in The Beginning and The End is full of spiky banter as Ollie Smith, Nicki Hobday, and Michael himself, the performers (and characters) in the other two plays of The Trilogy engage in competitive point-scoring. The tone of The Middle, by contrast, is affectionately reflective and occasionally wry, reflecting that sense of ‘between-ness’ which is its main theme. In this comparatively short piece of theatre, Tony uses the word a surprising number of times, to describe his present situation, his past selves, and the relationships he perceives between them. At various points in his monologue he describes himself as ‘something in between’ - ‘between a writer and an audience’, ‘between having learned what to do and having to do it, between practising and performing’, ‘between remembering and forgetting’, ‘between studying and working, between learning what to do and having to do it’, ‘between sky and sand’, ‘between the memory and the photograph’, ‘between a practice test and an important exam’, ‘between success and failure, between being treated like a boy and being treated like an adult’ ... The list continues, and as it does the ambiguity of the term ‘between’ becomes increasingly clear: it is a word which points both towards a sense of connectedness and (simultaneously) a sense of isolation, of not being entirely settled in any one place.

At times The Middle even seems to be turning towards Reminiscence Theatre – that specialist mode of Verbatim Theatre, which draws its material from the reminiscences of the elderly.

Tony: I am in the middle of an exam room in 1960

I am sitting at a desk in the middle of a test

I am in the middle between learning what to do and having to do it

Between a practice test and an important exam

[Michael writes on the desk: 'To be or not to be']

Our English teacher has written on the blackboard in chalk

Extracts of Shakespearean text

It is A Midsummer Night's Dream or Hamlet or The Winter's Tale

We are to write who is saying what and why they are saying it

The teacher is in the middle of handing out the questions

[Michael hands out paper]

I turn the page over.

One of the key values of Verbatim Theatre in general is a careful respect for those people whose memories and experiences are being dramatised; one of the central aims of Reminiscence Theatre in particular is to validate and celebrate the elderly and their life experiences. In these theatrical practices, issues of 'authenticity' are central: how does one turn another person's intimate personal memories into art – or entertainment – without distorting or (worse) exploiting them? By a strict adherence to theatrical realism? By faithful reproduction of the actual words – perhaps even the specific vocal cadences of the words – as they were spoken by the original subjects? These are the kinds of questions that workers in the area of Reminiscence Theatre regularly have to consider. Yet, as the audience already knows, it is towards any such questions of theatrical authenticity that The Trilogy is taking such a playfully sceptical approach.

As Michael says in the Prologue to this article, I come to The Middle from the perspective of someone who had been writing, fairly recently, about ageing and theatrical performance. One

of the main things that I learned from that experience is just how complex it is to make good, authentic art about the ageing process. It is almost as complex, perhaps, as engaging with the process of ageing in our own everyday lives, with all the changes that this brings – to our own minds and bodies, and to the minds and bodies of those about whom we care. No off-the-peg responses will do: neither the traditional ageist stereotypes that chart a bleak narrative of irreversible decline, nor the more recent optimism of the school of upbeat gerontology, which seeks to characterise old age in purely positive – even heroic – terms, are sufficient. An adequately human response to the ageing process needs to resist both cynicism and sentimentality. And an adequate theatrical response necessitates the same resistance: it needs to find its own voice, its own form, its own dramaturgy. This, too, may lie somewhere in-between.

The Epilogue

MICK MANGAN: This is the paradoxical space which The Middle inhabits. It both exploits and explodes the conventions of extreme theatrical realism, both offering and refusing the audience the privilege of an ‘authentic’ insight into one man’s memories, his thoughts and feelings about old age and parenthood. And the generous joke at the heart of it all is that we get to glimpse, in the playful shared creativity which constitutes this performance, something of the quality of a relationship between father and son, actor and director, that we could not have otherwise have glimpsed.

And the curtain falls...

Tony: The Front of House staff check their watches

The programme sellers give it one last push

The ice cream sellers have shut up shop

The tannoy comes on and a voice says:

‘Please return to your seats

The second act is about to begin’

Notes

1. Where indented quotes with the name **Tony** or **Michael** appear they are taken from the original performance text of The Middle (first performance Lincoln Performing Arts Centre, 23 January 2013). There is a video of the piece here <https://vimeo.com/77051942>
2. Michael Pinchbeck devised three performances inspired by Shakespeare plays, The End (A Winter's Tale) in 2011, The Beginning (A Midsummer Night's Dream) in 2012 and The Middle (Hamlet) in 2013. They were later shown as The Trilogy from 2014-2016.
3. The Shipping Forecast, a BBC Radio broadcast which details reports and forecasts of weather around the British coasts, has developed into something of an icon of British traditions. Its rhythmic litany of mysterious-sounding places attracts hundreds of thousands of Radio 4 listeners, both seafaring and land-locked, who tune into it on a daily basis. It has been suggested as a useful tool for helping people to get to sleep.
4. Angela Monaghan cited former Labour leader, Ed Miliband, as describing a 'a "crisis of confidence" now gripping Britain's squeezed middle, as insecurities about jobs, pensions and the future financial wellbeing of the next generation prevail' (Monaghan 2014).
5. Jane Turner describes Barba's approach as 'the score and subscore built through their response to the director's initial material using improvisation' (Turner 2018, 32). Michael Pinchbeck used this technique too in inviting the casts of The Beginning and The Middle to remember their first performances of the texts they were revisiting.
6. To make some kind of distinction, Mick Mangan will follow the speech-tag designations and use the name 'Michael' when he is referring primarily to the character that appears onstage in the three devised performances of The Trilogy. When he is talking primarily about the author/director/deviser of the plays, he will call him 'Pinchbeck'. When both are clearly co-present he will use the name 'Michael Pinchbeck'.

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