Into the wilderness: Gilgul’s ‘physical’ theatre 1994

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Background

Gilgul Theatre was founded in May 1991 by director Barrie Kosky and manager/lighting designer Robert Lehrer, who aimed to establish ‘Australia’s first professional Jewish theatre company’.¹

The word ‘Gilgul’ is derived from a Hebrew word originally meaning revolution, rolling or metamorphosis, but used in mystical writings to describe the transmigration of souls, or reincarnation. A recurring strand in Gilgul’s work was a sense of the layering or overlapping of history and experience; its performance pieces were made at the intersection of a number of fecund, if contradictory, historical and aesthetic influences. The company looked backward to the vicissitudes of Jewish history and in particular to the faded glories of the Yiddish theatre tradition; it looked outward to the fragmentation of contemporary cultural experience, resolutely refusing notions of authenticity, and insisting on its right to borrow, adapt and transmute the sources on which it drew.

Gilgul produced five original performance works during a cycle of seven years between 1991 and 1997. This cycle may be divided into two phases, the first producing The Exile Trilogy. Each of the plays in this series was based on a work from the Yiddish dramatic and/or literary canon:


- **Levad** (1993) made extensive quotation from *Mireleh Efros* (1898) by Jacob Gordin (Tel Aviv: Or-Am Publications, 1987), translated by Yoni

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Prior. It also relied on research into the Yiddish theatre carried out by Prior in Tel Aviv and Melbourne. Venues: Playbox Theatre, Melbourne and Belvoir St Theatre, Sydney.

The second phase produced two works, which drew on an eclectic range of sources including theatre and social history, popular culture, anti- and anti-Semitic literature, war crimes trials transcripts, and Jewish religious and traditional texts, rituals and songs:


This paper traces the discoveries and frustrations endemic to the creation of Gilgul Theatre’s devised original work, through an account of the rehearsal process of its fourth (and least understood) work, *The Wilderness Room*, performed in Melbourne in November 1994. In our account, we aim to illuminate the trajectory of the rehearsal process, including its mined seams, abandoned leads and dead ends. Analysis that concentrates only on the performance event colludes in constructing a teleological picture of theatrical realisation – it leads the reader to assume that the final form was a product of conscious choices and unbroken lines of development. To the contrary, as practitioners will be aware, the performance outcome frequently emerges as much from accident and the need to respond to problems ‘on the floor’ as it is the result of any pre-ordained artistic vision. By conducting something like a historiographic reconstruction of the rehearsal process, we aim to reveal the paradoxes and serendipities that really configure the final form of an original work of theatre.

A secondary aim is to restore *The Wilderness Room* to its position in Gilgul’s overall oeuvre. The production was greeted by critics as anomalous, both in terms of the expectations fuelled by Gilgul’s previously uninterrupted chain of successes, and because its spareness was uncharacteristic of the florid theatricality typical of Kosky’s other work for theatre. We contend that *The Wilderness Room* is worthy of attention precisely because it was so completely the product of its context and the ensemble process or, more precisely, the ethos followed by the company in their approach to the devising process.

Finally, we aim to contextualise the devising methods employed by the company and its members, including the emphasis, or de-emphasis, on particular expressive means. The work in performance was wordless, and relied heavily on physicality – but to what extent does this place it within the frame of physical theatre?

The process of devising was so dense, and its outcomes so contingent, that it would be rash to adopt a categorical position on this question in advance. Rather, by employing an ‘inside-outside’ methodology, we aim to
honour the complexity, and the multiplicity of perspectives, that produced the work. We do not aim to provide a final or authoritative summary. However, in presenting this account as an example from which general conclusions about Gilgul’s work might nevertheless be drawn, we have adopted the strategy of balancing commentary with lists, tables of elements, and illustrative moments and exchanges. This paper was conceived as a dialogue, and we invite the reader to engage in a similar exchange with the materials we provide. In writing this paper, we have followed the logic of our relations to the rehearsal period. Yoni was a foundation member of the ensemble. She had participated in the development and performance seasons of Gilgul’s first three plays, collectively known as *The Exile Trilogy*. Alison was an invited observer from about four weeks into the rehearsal period. The two of us collaborated on an exchange of perceptions; we also conducted a series of interviews with participants, excerpted below. We have tried here to retain a sense of direct speech, distinguishing the words of participants from sections devoted to background and other commentary.

*Sender* sequence. Distributing *matzah*, collapse, awaiting Elijah. Stills are from the documentary *Kosky in Paradise* (1996), with permission from Melissa Rimer and Weis Films.
We begin with a summary of the performance elements and an account of the performance from an audience perspective.

*The Wilderness Room: context and summary*

(1) *Stage action*

**Prologue:** Recitation of ‘The Generations’ (*Book of Numbers* 20-43).

**Section 1 The Wilderness**

Location: A Jewish old people’s home in Melbourne/London/nowhere. The characters remove the towels from their faces, and in turn attempt to reconstruct and lead the *Seder*, the Passover ritual, which they appear to have forgotten. Their efforts include a representation of the sharing of *matzah*, or unleavened bread; the arrangement and consumption of bitter herbs and parsley; and the recall of fragments from *The Haggadah*. The characters sing, but never speak. Each character’s *Seder* is set up in a different part of the space; at the conclusion of each they turn expectantly to the empty chair, or line up by the door.

**Section 2 The Book**

Location: Egypt/at sea. The section begins with Tom/John Harris leading the others in reading *The Haggadah*, using the outsize cardboard boxes as books. The performers crawl into the boxes, which begin a stormy passage within and around the space. The boxes slam to the ground. The performers crawl out. They draw tape measures from their mouths, and begin to measure the space.

**Section 3 The Generations**

Location: The Promised Land/Sydney Cove. The characters are dazzled by the light; they appear not to be able to see as they make their way haphazardly towards the back wall. They begin to crawl up the wall, some giving one another assistance. The panels crash open; the characters slump against the wall, on the bench and on the ground. At random intervals, each takes out a needle and thread, and begins to sew shut their eyes and mouth.

(2) *Entering the Space: The Audience Perspective*

Alison: The Karyn Lovegrove Gallery space is in the old Love and Lewis building on Chapel St Prahran, the funky end of one of Melbourne’s most fashionable streets. The main steel door to the street is closed after dark; the back entrance is around the corner in a laneway off the supermarket carpark, where a security guard in a blue uniform opens the door to let you past. A notice Blu-tacked to the wall of the grotty liftwell reads ‘The Wilderness Room 2nd floor’. The old wooden lift creaks up and down, disgorging black-garbed theatre buffs and cardigan-wearing Jewish matriarchs and patriarchs into an empty warehouse containing only a table and the regulation coffee urn. Disoriented for a minute, you eventually notice a corner door and someone propped there carrying programs. Inside, there is just enough room
to walk sideways between the heavy red theatre curtain and three tiers of benches and assorted chairs wedged in a thin traverse of what the lighting desk has left of the space. Find a seat - the curtain fills your entire line of view. Behind you a couple of ladies are kvetching ‘That Barrie Kosky he’s supposed to be so smart, but I don’t know why he should make these seats so uncomfortable. A cushion even, it wouldn’t be so difficult.’ You become aware of another murmuring edging into audibility, a recitation which slowly cranks up to dominate the space as lights dim. A whispering, ‘The Generations’, on and on ... and the children of Reuben, Israel’s first-born, their generations, by their families, by their father’s houses, according to the number of names, by their polls ... those that were numbered of them, of the tribe of Simeon, were fifty and nine thousand and three hundred. Of the children of Gad ... Someone unseen walks across the space, taking the curtain with them.

The shoebox-shaped performance area takes up five-sixths of the room. White light picks through a blue wash to outline five still shapes on green plastic chairs, slumped bodies with damp white towels covering their heads. Over on stage right is an old brown upright piano, and further back an antique harpsichord – depending on where you are sitting you can see Barrie Kosky, or just the twin black circles of his trademark spectacles peering over at the performers as he plays. During the performance, the lights change in washes of dirty blues, greens and golden-browns pierced with white. The wooden floor is bare. A pile of large flattened cardboard boxes, a card table and other objects are stacked up against the left hand wall behind the piano, ready to be carried on and off. The walls on three sides are covered in rubber, panels of dun brown carpet underlay in a ripple pattern, which somehow create a queasy sense of movement in the space – ships on an oily tide, tripe, vomit, the belly of a whale.

A narrow bench runs along the back wall just below knee height. Above it, dead centre, is a large doorway. Above that a clock, when lit from behind, shows a quarter to eleven. In the last minutes of the performance, five hinged panels in the back wall fall outward, revealing multiples of the same colonial landscape with Aboriginal figures, The River Nile by John Glover. The reverse of the open panels is covered in newspaper; each has a large red cross roughly drawn in one corner.

(3) Elements and materials used in the production
**Personal props:** Each performer carries a ‘fetish object’. Elisa Gray/Esther Abrahams – lace gloves; Yoni Prior/Sarah Burdo – coin; Louise Fox/Amelia Levy – handkerchief; Michael Kantor/Aaron Davis – watch; Tom Wright/John Harris – long spoon. Each also carries a pile of white hand-towels, and a white plastic shopping bag containing a blank child’s scrapbook, a tape measure and a needle and thread. Yoni/Sarah carries a bunch of parsley.

**Stage objects:** Harpsichord; card table, with holes drilled at approx. 5cm intervals in the top; five green stackable plastic chairs; one wooden kitchen chair (the ‘Elijah’ chair); five large cardboard refrigerator boxes, stencilled with the names of First Fleet ships (*HMSS Sirius*; *Scarborough*; *Golden Grove*; *Lady Penrhyn*; *Friendship*).

**Songs:** *Oh Weep for Those* w. Lord Byron, m. Isaac Nathan; *Es Vet Zikh Fun Tsvaygl Tseblien A Boym (From the Twig a Tree Will Bloom)* w. Kasriel Broydo, m. Yankl Trupianski; *Makh Tsit di Eygelech (Close Your Little Eyes)* w. Isaiah Shpigl, m. David Beyglmans; *Ikh Sing (I Sing)* w. Molly Picon, m. Abraham Ellstein; *A Heymisher Bulgar (An Old Hometown Dance)* w. and m. Abraham Ellstein; *A Bis’l Libe, un a Bisele Glik (A Bit of Love and a Little Bit of Joy)* w. Molly Picon, m. Joseph Rumshinsky; *Khod Gadyah (Traditional Passover Song)*.

**Sound:** Recorded voice, director’s harpsichord accompaniment and improvisations from song themes; electric piano ‘demo’ music.

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**The Exile Trilogy**

In rehearsals for *The Exile Trilogy*, an approach to performance development had evolved in which textual elements, music, stage image, use of space and design, and physical expression were independently explored and recombined to produce an identifiable stage language. This approach destabilised established assumptions about the hierarchy of modalities usually employed in the conventions of Western theatre to distinguish the categories of text-based, physical and music theatre. In rehearsal, Kosky referred to ‘a democracy of elements’, an aspiration informed by his previous efforts to challenge established modes of production in opera and music theatre.

Gilgul’s work was received by some critics as postmodern, but this ascription was resisted by the company. In practice, its performance-making structures and methods developed organically for each piece during the rehearsal period in response to the available resources. *Levad*, unlike *The Dybbuk* and *Es Brent*, was a monologue and enjoyed much better the ‘poor theatre’ conditions under which the earlier works were made. Nevertheless it, too, was composed as a response to the chosen source texts and, like the two other pieces, was influenced by the particular characteristics of the working space, and the material, dispositions and perspectives the individuals...
involved brought with them into the rehearsal room, rather than being organised through any predetermined theory or plan.

Within this interaction of elements, the physical 'track' of all three works emerged as adhering most closely to a common aesthetic intention, presenting the body in travail as a literalisation of the metaphorical stresses otherwise presented through narrative. This required extraordinary virtuosity on the part of the performers. Its pathos produced a characteristic kinaesthetic frisson for the spectator as witness to bodies driven to the limits of their individual and collective endurance.

Kosky's remained very much the dominant vision. The ensemble of performer/creators he recruited were, however, vital collaborators in exploring the Jewish experience of exile from an Australian perspective through the production of intellectually and theatrically challenging original works. Gilgul's personnel were not all Jewish, and represented a mix of cultural backgrounds, performance skills and traditions. Its theatre was dense, weaving often oblique and partial references to texts, moments, traditions and performance genres in with those overtly used as the base resource for each work. This density was achieved by a long process of work on the floor; although the company looked to Kosky for initial ideas and for final decisions, he was by no means the only, or even the decisive, contributor to the way particular elements functioned in the overall composition. This complex history of enquiry, contest and collaboration between the participants was the most obvious mark distinguishing Gilgul's production relations from those maintained in the established organisations within which Kosky's other work took place. It endowed the company's members with a sense of agency and a familiarity with each other's methods and perspectives that profoundly informed the rehearsal process for *The Wilderness Room*. Speaking about his work, Kosky remarked:

AR: Do you have a particular approach to making theatre?
BK: Good theatre is composed, not written. Musical forms are an analogy – any lighting designer will tell you that what they are doing is composing with light and space. Gilgul actors realise that in particular scenes a white plastic bag or a side light is doing a lot more work than they are.

AR: How important is the actor in your work?
BK: The actor is still the most important element in the production, despite what I say about plastic bags! The actor can be read simultaneously as the central element of a particular moment and as moving sculpture, which is what performance is at one level.

AR: Gilgul productions are known for their physical energy. Is there a 'Kosky method'?
BK: No! You can’t speak one language all the time. There is no Gilgul technique. Our theatrical language is very much built up over experience. People who come to rehearsals will either see a group of people screaming and yelling at each other with absolute chaos reigning, or a lot of cooks in there, cooking it up, which is what it is. We don’t spend three hours a day stomping or doing yoga. I have no desire to know about an actor’s technique; that is why I am so opposed to something like the Suzuki method. OK, it is a very interesting technique to work with – but ultimately what you see on stage is everyone doing the same thing. What I demand in a performer is a person who has the physical skills of a dancer, but isn’t a dancer; a person who has the musical capabilities of a singer, but who isn’t a singer; and a person who has the intellectual capabilities of an academic, but isn’t an academic. 8

Gilgul’s performers were already used to switching rapidly between characterisation, physical task, narration, song and dance, in a style which owed a clear debt to the Brechtian heritage but was otherwise difficult to classify. As well as their textual references, the works featured the quotation, recreation, and presentation in pastiche form, of a variety of performance styles including expressionist film and theatre acting from the 1920s and 1930s, Yiddish cabaret, ‘classical’ Western acting with a nod to its reception in the Yiddish high art theatre, folk comedy, recitation, task-based action, and so on. These were often structured in a dialectic in which words, song and physical ‘tracks’ were layered or pitted against one another. The intertwined performative strands which constituted the ‘Gilgul effect’, if not the ‘Gilgul style’, depended above all, however, on their deployment in, through, and upon the bodies of the actors, a characteristic which facilitated the company’s reception as physical theatre practitioners. In a recent survey, for example, critic Keith Gallasch cites Gilgul as having established an individual and influential style within the Australian circus and physical theatre renaissance. 9

This renaissance may be framed as the confluence of two broad traditions, derived from largely Western European circus, acrobatics and popular theatre on the one hand, and from what might be termed the ‘Orientalist tendency’ in the European avant-garde, including bhuto, Suzuki technique and the ‘holy theatre’ inheritance of the Grotowskian via negativa, on the other. Aspects of Gilgul’s approach to physicalisation had resonance with both these strands of performance-making. But Gilgul deliberately foregrounded an Eastern rather than a Western European inflection in both its traditional and avant-garde theatre references, using German Expressionist and Russian Constructivist tropes, interwoven with the Yiddish theatre’s appropriation of (and contribution to) aspects of both high and low forms of European theatrical presentation. It also owed much to the European ‘theatre of image’, in particular that of Tadeusz Kantor.
As ‘physical’ theatre, Gilgul’s works therefore occupied an unstable and dynamic space, consciously playing the dialectic between the word and the body, between the comic and the cosmic. Framed within the rhetoric (and to the soundtrack) of melodrama, the work refused the claims to authenticity typical of both traditions, privileging neither the body proper (as might be found in the control and mastery of the circus tradition) nor the metaphysical landscape to which the body gives entry in Orientalist performance. Instead, an insistent and knowing hypertheatricality powered a cycle of citations in which the semiosis of effort was always ironically inflected.

_The Wilderness Room_

AR: Did you develop a particular style in The Wilderness Room?

BK: It was a piece where actors were rarely communicating with each other physically or linguistically, therefore the concentration became on what the actor was doing in the space at a particular moment with a particular object – a table and chair, a wall, a bag, a box ... The style emerged from there. We’ve got all the baggage of the Yiddish vaudeville in the Gilgul stuff and that is a particular style, but remember that it’s a reinvention to suit us. When we talk about Yiddish vaudeville, it is from the perspective of a group of people working in the 1990s who never saw it in the ‘20s or ‘30s.

Both the production and the reception of _The Wilderness Room_ were inevitably affected by the residue of expectations left by the company’s previous work. The ensemble themselves entered the rehearsal period expecting a segue rather than a break from what was by now an established approach to process; that the lack of a ‘core text’ would have so profound an effect was as much a surprise to them as to the critics and audience members who had such a nonplussed reaction to the work in performance. Although in retrospect the decisions which formed _The Wilderness Room_ can be seen to have been as much an organic response to the circumstances of production as those of the previous works, the result was a stylistic departure in which the previous equilibrium of elements was substantially rearranged. In our initial summaries for this paper, it is instructive that the authors’ analyses of the piece were quite opposite. Yoni, from inside, saw the work as the ‘least physical’ of Gilgul’s output, in that it placed fewer demands on the actors’ capacity for endurance, and eschewed the pathos and hyperkinetic struggling bodies presented in previous work. Alison, from outside, saw it as participating most directly in the developing tradition of Australian physical theatre, with its unambiguous reliance on the bodies of its actors, and the subtlety of its expressive demands.
Yoni: The ensemble for this production consisted of Tom Wright and Michael Kantor, Louise Fox, Elisa Gray and myself, all of whom had previously collaborated on *The Exile Trilogy*. Work on the trilogy had, in each case, begun from a single core text that functioned as the spur for, and 'spine' of, the production, even though it had been edited and reconstructed considerably by the point of performance. Such texts were selected as much for their potential to form the magnetic centre of a constellation of other associated texts and references in performance, as for their potential as a single vehicle for reinterpretation. There was an abiding interest in metatheatrical references and incorporation of elements of Jewish religious ritual; music for all the productions had been drawn from collections of Yiddish songs Barrie had found on visits to New York and Eastern Europe; and ensemble members had collected material relating to Jewishness and embodiment, including Oskar Panizza’s classic anti-Semitic text *The Operated Jew*, and Sander Gilman’s contemporary critical analysis.

The initial focus for the as-yet-unnamed work was on the links between the Jewish experience of recurrent dispossession, the aspiration for a return to Zion, and the forced resettlement of British convicts in the colonisation of Australia. The 'no-space' of *The Exile Trilogy* would be replaced by the 'no-space' of *Terra Nullius* in the colonial imagination. Of particular interest was the research conducted by Rabbi John Levi on the 13 Jewish convicts transported to Australia on the First Fleet of British colonisation in 1788, Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, and the discovery of an early Zionist proposal for a Jewish settlement in the Western Australian Kimberley region (see note 12 below). Musical references were to be drawn from the Yiddish songbooks, from the nineteenth century songs of Australia’s first resident Jewish composer, Isaac (later Sir Isaac) Nathan, and from an idea that the work’s form might refer to the ballad operas popular on the eighteenth century London stage, like John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*. On the pattern of previous devising periods, work began with the ensemble discussing the diverse material collected in prior research, and with discussions between Kosky, Lehrer and design collaborator, architect Peter Corrigan, on the physical form of the performance space and the light and objects which might be introduced as performance elements. A significant shift had occurred prior to beginning work on developing the performance, in that it had been decided to present the work in a gallery space in Prahran – another ‘no-space’.

TW: A lot of the early things were fairly inchoate. Barrie was interested in exploring things like transcripts from Adelaide of the Ivan Poliakovich War Crimes trials. He was interested in the experiences of the First Fleet Jews, and in exploring some German texts about *The Operated Jew*.
EG: I knew it was going to be very different to what we’ve done. The idea was to do something a lot more raucous and comical. Which it wasn’t.

LF: I never for a moment thought we would do a show without words. I imagined it as physical, broad, big energy. Fantastic to see it in the end so small and held.

TW: When you move away from that Eastern European orientation, both culturally and musically where do you go? To a certain extent it was feeling around in the dark. I cynically suspected that Barrie was mixing too much in theatrical circles and developing an Australianist bent. Instrumentalities like the Australia Council have in many ways hijacked theatre as the stage for the nationalist project. The main victim of it all seems to have been theatre itself.

MK: I had concerns about the exclusion of Aboriginals from the vision of Australia we were dealing with. The question of European colonialism within the play, as a defining aspect of ‘how we got here’, was very important.

Alison: Another set of factors affecting the conduct and outcome of this production were the rehearsal conditions themselves. Whereas both *The Dybbuk* and *Es Brent* were the result of a group of unfunded theatre makers coming together of their own volition and rehearsing in their own time at night and on weekends, on the basis of mostly in-kind support, the success of these productions had resulted in attention from critics, and the offer of financial and production support from funding bodies and more established theatre institutions. The final play in the Exile Trilogy, *Levad*, was a co-production with Melbourne’s Playbox Theatre, and the ensuing revival and tour to Sydney of the entire Trilogy was sponsored by Belvoir St Theatre.

The company had been awarded a special project grant for *The Wilderness Room* from the Theatre Board of the Australia Council, which made it possible to pay professional wages, but also enforced a relatively standardised rehearsal and production process, with eight weeks stipulated for rehearsal, and performance space and season dates booked in advance. Although generous in established theatre terms, these constraints placed added pressure on the company. Individual company members were familiar with the constraints of a professional production process, and the company as a whole was certainly unwilling to compromise on their commitment to exploration, but they could not but be aware of the need to make decisions in light of the inescapable march of the production timetable. *Levad* had been made under similar conditions, but in that case only Kosky, Prior, Corrigan and Lehrer were involved. Here, the expectation of a similar level of input from each member of a five-person ensemble produced an interaction matrix which was far more intricate. Another complicating factor was that
competing demands on Kosky’s time and attention as a result of his Adelaide Festival commitments, placed additional pressure on his concentration and on company morale.

Yoni: For whatever combination of reasons, the first phase of rehearsal started with its usual energy and intensity, but within a month had hit a wall. Original ideas for a set representing a convict ship, with chambers representing overlapping historical narratives, seemed overly literal when execution was attempted. Mistrust of formal training, and the company’s reliance on a tacitly understood approach to performance-making rather than an articulated rehearsal method, combined to make the extraction of material from unstructured improvisations on the floor difficult. The scant information available on the Jewish convicts of the First Fleet proved insufficient to generate productive historical or biographical narrative frameworks. The ballad opera notion, which led the cast to spend hours writing pastiche song lyrics based on their historically based convict characters, appeared trite when aired, but no-one could think of a way forward. An equal number of hours seemed to be spent in silence, people sitting around head in hands, in gathering gloom. Stalemate.

TW: The whole convict thing was treated far more literally than I had expected. It seemed to me to be a cul de sac.

YP: We had to spend the first month at least divesting ourselves of the baggage that we had brought from the other work. We presumed that there would be parallel narratives. The First Fleet; Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden; then there was this theme of trial, and punishment on the body. But once we started putting them on stage we got into trouble.

LF: All of a sudden we had freedom to create the world around us rather than reading history books and thinking about what life must have been like on the First Fleet and weren’t they hungry.

TW: I think everyone’s theatrical instincts were telling them that we were limiting ourselves. Those music hall pieces were being created verbally because of a lack of clarity about what we wanted out of them, what role they had. I think they were like fire crackers that burnt out and left us with nothing more than ash really.

MK: We spent weeks doing that stuff. But when we got to the point where we decided ‘No, this is totally wrong, let’s get off our arses and do something else’, there was a major shift. We sort of flushed the toilet in a way, which was a great relief.

Yoni: Just as failure seemed complete, a breakthrough emerged. Like many other company decisions, it happened almost by osmosis, through a series of late night discussions and an informal after-hours gathering in Barrie’s flat,
during which a conversation between Barrie, Tom, Mike and Louise led to a momentous decision. Most of the work done in the past few weeks would be junked. Instead, a far more radical plan was adopted. The core of the performance would be based on *Pesach* (Passover) and its accompanying *Seder* ritual. It implied that the convict characters would be retained only by allusion (ultimately through costume), 'layered' over the undifferentiated figures of a group of elderly Jews waiting for Elijah to take them to the Promised Land – in this case from their nursing home common room. Equally radically, the tone of the production would change. Instead of the high-energy theatricality by now traditional in our work, the atmosphere would be tense, elegiac. Silence would predominate, with sounds carried more as a soundtrack than as dialogue, except for carefully chosen songs.

YP: That decision took us out of theatre and put us in performance art, which was interesting given that we had worked on metaphors of theatre for the whole block of the work on *The Exile Trilogy*. It pushed us straight into our bodies.

LF: The Passover Service just says it all you know. I thought it was important for this show, in the way *Purim* had worked for *Es Brent*. A series of rituals that have survived in Jewish culture because they represent all this stuff about chaos and survival. I was really pleased when that came back in. We had a world to create, and then we had that fantastic day of impros where we all did the *Seders* together.

YP: Somewhere out of that we ended up with the descendants of the First Fleeters in a waiting room outside the Garden of Eden, waiting to die. We were talking about the Montefiore Homes, the Jewish old age home here. Trying to find images that paralleled this notion of making, creating the Jewish body.

TW: It's that great late twentieth century game, making jigsaw puzzles out of ideas that could possibly connect, and strands that could be drawn together.

Alison: I was admitted to the rehearsal room at this point, with the new direction established and work to develop it proceeding at full bore. In rapid succession, a series of scenes depicting a fragmented *Seder* ritual were being sketched out. These scenes were wordless. The action proceeded in a carefully plotted set of half-completed sequences, the break in each case coming at the point where the character at that stage ‘in charge’ of the ritual made a mistake, or suffered a physical collapse. Each character took a turn at trying to reconstruct the ritual, each failed, and Elijah in turn failed to appear. The breaks were marked by the manic ‘demo music’ discovered as a built-in feature of the electric rehearsal piano – this was eventually incorporated into the production. Another activity was the translation of the *Haggadah*, the ordinal for the ritual, with Yoni as the company’s Hebrew speaker reading
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aloud in Hebrew and English, company members loudly debating each point, and the Jewish members trying to remember the traditional final Passover song (the Khadjadyah). For an outsider, the chaos of suggestions and instructions, and the overlap between the characters’ and the company members’ own efforts at memory, was at first difficult to disentangle. The overriding impression was of an ironic contrast between the intense silence sustained during runs of the plotted action sequence, and the constant raucous repartee which accompanied every other aspect of the company’s activity. An extract from the notes I took in rehearsal gives a flavour of this cross-chat:

Two weeks before opening. The company is working on the Seder sequence, but are having trouble re-establishing the order of actions. The women squat against the back wall throwing comments while Tom and Michael take it in turns to talk and demonstrate their way to a consensus. Eventually Barrie sums up, playing ‘God Save The Queen’ loudly on the piano and singing the instructions. There is agreement, and they run the sequence, until part way through Yoni is supposed to take Michael’s chair, but Louise strikes it by mistake. Pause.

LF: Sorry.
Others in chorus: You stupid, stupid Jew.
They run the sequence part way through.
BK: Stop!
The actors have begun to talk loudly amongst themselves.
BK: What’s that supposed to be? And then we all fall down? I gave you the cue. (Louder) That’s what’s been happening for the past three weeks. You’re all talking!
EG: Sorry Barrie. It’s because I don’t have my glasses on.
BK: I have to repeat everything three times!
LF: How many times?
BK: Three.
LF: How many? (Short silence. She turns to Michael) Should you still have your bag?
MK: No, you’re right (He puts it away).
LF: (makes an announcement): Michael is a stupid, stupid Jew.
They repeat the sequence, with pauses while Barrie side coaches on pace. It finishes with the table set near the stage right edge of the playing space. One by one the performers go to the side wall and pick up one of the flattened cardboard boxes. They stand in line upstage and ‘read’ the boxes, singing the Khadjadyah. Pause.
BK: OK. Don’t talk, don’t have a cigarette, don’t have a wee. Do it again! (AR rehearsal notes 24/10/94)
These rehearsals were still being held in a space some distance away in both tone and geography from the spare, and somewhat claustrophobic, gallery off Chapel Street in which the performance was due to take place. The company was subject to the gallery’s exhibition schedule in this regard, and so able to hold only a limited number of rehearsals in the performance space before the bump-in week. Once in the space, design and technical concerns began to dominate, as Corrigan’s design of what amounted to a padded cell in high density industrial foam was installed, and Lehrer and stage manager Matthew Delbridge began to hang lights.

A week before opening, however, another creative crisis erupted, as the company struggled with how the piece might end. It was clear that the entry of the Jews to the Promised Land, and the ambiguities attendant on European settlement of the land soon to be named Australia Felix, needed to be negotiated together – the question was how. From the pre-production period, Kosky had retained visions of the convicts crawling out into the Australian landscape, then engaging in surreal measuring and work activities such as pulling tape measures from their mouths, and hammering their noses on to rocks. Again, these ideas weren’t gelling in practice, and rehearsal breaks turned into extended debates, with Kosky and the actors, some trying on costumes at the same time, pulling the structure of the piece apart. The chief protagonists were Kosky and Wright. Wright tested every proposal rigorously, looking for inconsistency or cliché, unwilling to accept the half-baked or convenient compromise. The point was not to find a narrative through line or even a neat closure, but to identify the key image or idea that would raise the elements so far established to a new level of intellectual and theatrical challenge.

As with the previous crisis, the solution found was a lateral one, this time provided by Peter Corrigan. The original idea had been for the back wall to ‘reveal’ a theatrical heaven, complete with rococo fluffy clouds. Instead, Corrigan’s suggestion was that the reveal consist of a repeated image of The River Nile, colonial artist John Glover’s idealised Tasmanian landscape in which sketchy Aboriginal figures are represented as more animal than human. For those in the cast acquainted with the painting and its context, the suggestion had instant resonance. Others, desperate for a solution, readily accepted their opinion; it was quickly adopted. The content of Glover’s superficially bucolic image and its place in Australian art history seemed to them to act as a window into a simultaneous past/future heavy with irony; it also provided an appropriate solution to Kantor’s expressed disquiet at the company’s failure so far to engage with colonial history and the Terra Nullius politics of white occupation. Glover’s peculiar inability to come to terms with the pictorial qualities of Australian flora could be read as a visual metaphor for the First Fleeters’ imposition of old values on the new
scape. Even more telling was the irony implicit in its racist depiction of indigenous population all too soon subject to thorough attempts at termination by the invading white settlers, in this case clearly including ws. Into this dystopic future those seeking Elijah’s promise would crawl, ly to begin sewing up their eyes, ears and mouths as an indication of their ability to see what there was to be seen in this imperfect, antipodean, omised Land.11

MK: It was a real collaborative effort in that sense. A battle of wits and wills. There is no moment in that show that seven people haven’t battled over.

TW: Gilgul’s pieces are continually commenting on themselves and referring to themselves all the way through, just as the verbal patter occurs throughout the rehearsal process. A lot is achieved by establishing a dynamic of play. We have shown you can produce quite serious and hard-edged stuff, and still maintain a high level of humour and light headedness within the rehearsal room.

EG: If another theatre company saw the way we work they would say ‘God, how unprofessional, how can you do that’ but you know you can pull it together. We all allowed plenty of time to do what we needed to do; and I enjoy the mucking around. It creates an environment which is very conducive to improvising and experimenting physically.

MK: If an idea wasn’t essential to what we were doing it just wasn’t there by the end of the rehearsal process. It became a process of refining down to the bare minimum.

LF: If you want to change something two minutes before you open, you don’t take your foot off the accelerator. The idea you have then could be the one you’ve been waiting for. If you block off the change because ‘the design’s in place’ and ‘we’ve booked the previews’ then, forget it, that to me is not good theatre.

YP: Mind you, once you’re out there on stage you’re in charge no matter how hard Barrie’s banging away on that piano to try and drive you faster or slow you down!

LF: I think Peter [Corrigan] has a hugely important role. His designs are just so strong. They are very easy to work with, they resonate with so many feelings. The design contributes as does Rob [Lehrer]’s lighting, which obviously has a real style. Design and lighting are always active, even when it’s a rubber room.

TW: Barrie will often wake up in the middle of the night and realise that things need to be drastically changed. He is an immensely brave man. He isn’t afraid of making the largest possible decisions.
YP: Being very clear what you’re about to do, then handing the reins over to actors to problem-solve. That’s Barrie’s courage, I think.

MK: I liked the way the design for the end section evolved from big flaps rolled down with clouds all over them into the Glover pictures. They were not merely ambiguous; they allowed for different ways of interpreting the vision of Australia as the Promised Land.

LF: The actor was acted upon by the music changing or the ritual changing. In *The Wilderness Room* the actors created a world and a space and just built detail upon detail.

MK: The actor is really part of an elaborate and multi-layered picture that Barrie formulates in images and music. The actor and the lights and the set and the sound are really on a par, which doesn’t mean that the actor is less important but that everything contributes to the images and the sense of the work.

LF: Gilgul defines the actor as an investigative agent. It presumes you have a brain and a response and a contribution, it encourages performers’ intellectual responsibility for the piece and for their own performance.

The resulting performance challenged the actors, and indeed Gilgul’s audience, with a new level of difficulty. The intensity of the last days of rehearsal, and the fact that the ‘final solution’ was found so close to opening night, meant that structured sequences were still being trialled in terms of emphasis, pace and rhythm as the show opened; links between sequences were fine-tuned well into the performance season. Post-performance discussions often turned on the discomfort experienced by cast members when trying to locate themselves in the stage picture – the composition did not allow a clear sight of other cast members at all times – while at the same time dealing with the pacing signals coming from Kosky at the harpsichord. For the audience, the density of the performance composition was perhaps not unexpected, but whereas there were ‘maps’ to *The Exile Trilogy* in the narrative structures provided by the originary texts and their associated references, the structure of *The Wilderness Room* had emerged from the rehearsal process itself and manipulated disparate sources unlikely to be immediately familiar to any one audience group. It shared the complexity of Gilgul’s previous work, but replaced the stamina and virtuosity by now expected of the company with a distilled intensity and a sense of prolonged displacement that was profoundly performative, if unsettlingly untheatrical. As our own initial responses indicate, it could validly be seen both as less and as more ‘physical’ than the previous work. Like the other pieces, it was a multi-modal composition, structured as much around music and the *mise en scène* as on the performer. Nevertheless, placing Gilgul within the rubric of
physical theatre does provide a productive framework of understanding through which to view the company's reliance on the bodies of its actors, the ways in which these bodies worked/were worked, and the degree to which strategies of expression and representation through the physical were articulated and/or denied articulation in the exchanges between company members. The later, 'other' plays, *The Wilderness Room* and *The Operated Jew* in particular, demonstrate a growing concentration on questions of physical vocabulary and technique.

AR: Where to next?

BK: I just don't know. With Gilgul, as with all my work, there is a delicious tension between art and showbiz. I like putting on a show, and I like being able to express ideas in it. People who hate my work have to say that I always strive for the creation of an understandable, cohesive world. A production clicks when you realise that all the elements are actually working. They may work against each other, but it is the one world; there is a vision up there.

**Fig. 1 Sources/initial ideas for *The Wilderness Room***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources/initial ideas for <em>The Wilderness Room</em></th>
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<tr>
<td>The Kimberley Project - an early proposal of the World Zionist Council to establish the new State of Israel in the Kimberley Region of Western Australia.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Songs from the Yiddish Theatre.</td>
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<td>Songs from the Ghetto.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Songs from <em>The Hebrew Melodies</em> of Isaac Nathan.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>The Operated Jew</em> - an anti-Semitic novella by Oskar Panizza (1893) and</td>
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**The Book of Exodus**

The *Pesach* or Passover ritual nb: the *Pesach* ritual, or *Seder*, is outlined in the ordinal, *The Haggadah*, which tells the story of the Hebrews' escape from Egypt and journey to the Promised Land. At the end of the ritual, the front door is opened so that the prophet Elijah may enter. It is believed that Elijah will announce the Day of Judgement.
We would argue that working without a central text forced the company to focus on aspects of process that had been present, although not necessarily articulated, in the previous work. Crucial here was the ethic of risk, confrontation and commitment to aesthetic discovery that enabled the company to tackle the problem of composition from a new perspective, once they had recognised the error of attempting to reconstruct a text as a substitute for texts previously deconstructed. In retrospect, even this departure was not as radical as it initially appeared. The music was still derived from the same Yiddish theatre songbooks as that of The Exile Trilogy. The practice of discussion, ‘working through’ on the floor and further discussion was not substantially different from that followed in the earlier work. A productive ‘spine’ for the production was discovered in the Seder ritual – again, a strategy forecast in the use of Purim and the purimshpil tradition in Es Brent, although here without an associated theatrical reference point. Most importantly, however, The Wilderness Room forced Kosky and the ensemble to confront the limitations of their rhetoric of reliance on empathy, intuition and ‘organic’ solutions to the problems of process. It is possible to see The Wilderness Room as a transitional work, a Part One of a truncated trilogy in which the next part, The Operated Jew, was made but with the third and completing work so far – and probably finally – missing.12 Seen in this light, The Wilderness Room marked an important point of departure for Gilgul. It revealed both strengths and weaknesses in the methods and processes so far employed. The company had now demonstrated that it was capable of developing a new work, and a new compositional style, from scratch. There were also issues left hanging that required further thought. The external demands on Kosky’s time had, in the opinion of other ensemble members, left him insufficiently prepared for the stringency required in the new situation. Ensemble members’ desire for an equal voice had come into conflict with the demands of a pressured and time-limited rehearsal period, contributing to the ‘too many cooks’ effect. The serial crises experienced in rehearsal highlighted the need to clarify decision-making structures and pay conscious attention to the question of physical vocabulary. It was clear that the problems of The Wilderness Room had been addressed in the much smaller ensemble chosen13, and the cheekily re-invented Mayakovskian physical language developed, for The Operated Jew. Despite the difficulties attendant on its development and execution, and the less immediately enthusiastic critical and audience response it engendered, The Wilderness Room was therefore a testament to the potential breadth of
possibilities open to Gilgul, and marked the start of a reassessment of its ‘physical’ expressive mode. It was a truly courageous expedition, without maps, into the overlapping territories of the Jewish/Australian cultural unconscious.

The Wilderness Room is A WAITING ROOM.
The Wilderness Room is A MAPPING ROOM.
The Wilderness Room is AN ARID ROOM.
The Wilderness Room is A JUDGEMENT ROOM.
The Wilderness Room is a DYING ROOM.
The Wilderness Room is A GENERATION ROOM.
The Wilderness Room is AN ARRIVAL ROOM.

THE WILDERNESS ROOM IS WHERE THE LOCUSTS HAVE EATEN AND WHERE YOU WEEP WITHOUT TEARS.

THE WILDERNESS ROOM IS WHERE FIVE JEWISH CONVICTS AWAKE AND ATTEMPT TO MAP THEIR WAY TO EDEN.

From theatre program for The Wilderness Room 1994.

NOTES
1 Gilgul Theatre aims, program for The Dybbuk 1991.
2 Emerging from the ‘establishment’ trajectory of Melbourne Grammar School and Melbourne University, Kosky quickly made a name for himself as a director of theatre and opera, his first major commission being the invitation to direct the premiere of Sir Colin Davis’ The Knot Garden for the 1989 Melbourne Spoleto Festival. The founding of Gilgul followed the failure of his music theatre company Treason of Images to secure Australia Council funding, and from the reconnection with his Jewish heritage that followed a trip to Eastern Europe in 1990. However he continued to work for mainstream theatre and opera companies throughout the period from 1991-97, including Victoria State Opera, Opera Australia, Playbox and Melbourne Theatre Company. His productions, often mounted in collaboration with Peter Corrigan as designer and Michael Kantor as assistant director, were characterised by their theatricality, lushness of means and by the use of vivid, tangential and frequently controversial stage imagery. They were replete with references to arts and cultural history, intellectually uncompromising and as a consequence treated as ‘difficult’ – in late 2002 the ABC political satire CNNN could still run a ‘late-breaking news’ subtitle: ‘Barrie Kosky makes great play unwatchable’ (CNNN: Chaser Nonstop News Network, ABCTV, 31 October 2002). Kosky refused to make things easy for his audiences – in this regard the perceived obscurity of The Wilderness Room was not surprising – but the bitter pill of difficulty was usually sweetened
with *coup d'oeil* missing in this instance. Kosky was equally well known for his combative remarks on the staidness of Australia's theatre and culture in general; his celebrity status was confirmed with his appointment as Artistic Director of the 1996 Adelaide Festival, preparations for which were in train during the research and rehearsal periods for *The Wilderness Room*.


4 Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria: available from The Gallery Shop in postcard format.

5 As a general rule, these categories of theatrical practice may be distinguished by the dominance of one modality over others. In Western drama, although mediated through the body of the performer, the authority of text and spoken language is foregrounded. Dance and physical theatre may be distinguished by the reversal of this hierarchy, with the physical presence of the often silent expressive body dominant. In opera and music theatre generally, music tends to predominate within the mix of expressive modes employed, although design elements are often equally prominent and sub-genres are distinguished by the relative prominence given to dance and the spoken word (see J. Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989); also R. Vella, 'Aspects of Music Theatre', *Interdisciplinarity in Performance* 2 (1993): 13-37). Kosky's approach, reminiscent of the gesamtkunstwerk advocated by Wagner, differed from Wagner's in allowing each modality its own logic and direction, producing a dialectic rather than an overwhelming unity of means.

6 It developed the character of 'Eva Askenfeld’, a composite portrait drawn from historical record, imagination and Prior’s encounters with current and past leading ladies of the Yiddish theatre in the course of her research. Eva was introduced in *The Dybbuk* as the actress playing the innocent Leah, the heroine of Anski’s play.


8 This and following interview and 'dialogue' sections have been reconstructed from interviews conducted separately with Gilgul company members by one or both of the authors between April 1995 and January 1996. The authors would like to acknowledge the assistance of an Australian Research Council Small Grant distributed through Deakin University in conducting research for this paper, including the transcription of interview material. Alison Richards has also been assisted during the writing process by a Monash Faculty of Arts Postgraduate Publications Award.

Wright and Kantor had both worked with Kosky as fellow Melbourne University undergraduates. Prior and Gray were recruited for the original production of *The Dybbuk*; Fox had joined the group for *Es Brent*.

The painting's detail was not easy to decipher in the few moments of its display, and it could be argued that the image carried a heavier burden than it could reliably be expected to bear, given that few audience members were likely to understand the reference. However the scene itself was visually striking, and the performers' actions unmistakable. They predated the controversial 2001 protest action of the asylum seekers detained at Woomera in sewing up their lips by seven years – another mystical predictive cycle.

The Operated Jew was based on material collected but not used in *The Wilderness Room*, in particular *The Operated Jew*, *The Operated Goy*, and *The Jew's Body*. It was a frenetic, contemporary cabaret constructed upon excruciating, draining regimes of exercise, mantra, DIY surgery, deodorising and cleansing, where pseudo-scientific theories of racial supremacy met contemporary obsession with the control, sanitisation and correction of the physical body. A production based on other material located during the research period, specifically the historical effort to locate Zion in the Kimberley and its contemporary implications was mooted, but has not eventuated to date. According to Michael Kantor, Kosky's production of *Davke* (2002) for the Schauspielhaus in Vienna recuperated the concerns with Jewish history and experience evident in his work with Gilgul, but did not constitute a development in the sense envisaged here (personal communication 2002).

Tom Wright, Michael Kantor and Louise Fox, as well as Kosky on keyboard and the stage manager occasionally seated on stage wearing an Anubis mask.