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MA, B.Ed

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the ways in which performance making practice is shaped by its encounters with a range of limits that impact the creative process both from within and without, as a way of making sense of how performance ‘works’.

I apply a hybrid ethnographic methodology to a number of case studies, developing Gad Kaynar’s term “pragmatic dramaturgy” to propose an analytical frame for the interpretation and evaluation of a range of local, contemporary rehearsal practices and processes. In the examination of performance making processes observed or conducted at the Melbourne Theatre Company, the Malthouse Theatre, Back to Back Theatre, and with students at Deakin University and the University of Amsterdam, the thesis considers the ethical and methodological implications of both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ observation, documentation and analysis of creative process.

While examining a range of established practices, the research defines the performance making process as unpredictable and emergent, and proposes that the construction of such processes needs to account for these elements.

This project, in observing, examining and articulating some of the specific limits that are woven into the processes and practices of a range of Melbourne theatre companies, performance makers and future performance makers, puts forward the lens of ‘pragmatic dramaturgy’ as a way of understanding the complex interactions between process and performance that define theatre practice, as a new way of thinking about how theatre is currently produced, and as a response to movements in the field which emerging artists will need to respond to.
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I must always have known this. But I knew it in a different way in a crisis. It is an old story. I have told it before. But I cannot leave this story alone.

**Malthouse Theatre, April 1993**

Refresher rehearsal. ‘Levad’

Crisis

I can remember the words. I can remember the songs. I can remember the moves. I can remember the order of the 78 tiny scene fragments.

Reviews are out, calling my performance “confident” and “driven”.

‘Driven’ is apt.

But – I can’t breathe. All the running and shuffling and turning and talking talking talking and singing singing singing and hurling objects around the stage rob me of breath.

My mouth is always dry.

My lips stick to my teeth

Not enough breath to get through long sentences or lines of songs

Pianist won’t slow down

And – my body won’t behave. It remembers but will not comply.

I am terrified. The whole show seems to have slipped beyond my control.

Oh my. No more virtuoso
Levad was the third part of The Exile Trilogy, a series of works devised by the Gilgul Ensemble between 1991 and 1993. The word levad means ‘alone’ in Hebrew and, since we had to invent a name before we had invented the show, it seemed apt for a monodrama about a Jewish actress, and didn’t really commit us to anything in particular.

The first two parts of the trilogy, The Dybbuk (1991) and Es Brent (1992), had been devised and performed in a derelict auto mechanic’s workshop in St Kilda, Melbourne. This space was lent to the company by its owners, to do with as we wished. These works were made without subsidy, with the ensemble working at night and on weekends. The filthy, cavernous space – with its pitted concrete floor, disintegrating office partitions and rotting ceiling joists was pregnant with possibilities. It looked, felt and smelt like purgatory. We assembled the first two works out of fragments, stitching together remnants of classic Yiddish plays, invented histories, old Yiddish show tunes, biblical and Kabbalistic texts. The space became a strange way station where the lost spirits of Jewish performers we were playing ricocheted between worlds. The space was not a theatre, but the characters kept trying to transform it into one, lurching from schtick to schtick, trying to summon an audience – a director – an exit. That space did so much of the work for us. We found many of the props there – old oil tins full of ancient invoices became holy texts. Peter Corrigan, who designed all the Gilgul works, would wander in and out of rehearsals making small and large interventions. For The Dybbuk, he hung a row of butchers hooks on chains at the back of the stage, and large, abstract cardboard figures which were hung on them to create the graveyard where Leah becomes possessed by the spirit of her dead lover. For Es Brent, he designed a burnt fence that we climbed on and over, and laid down a layer of gravel that crunched percussively under our feet. He had a magic box built in the centre of the stage with a revolving metal beam at its centre and seats hung at either end of the beam that appeared a few weeks into the rehearsal process. Which didn’t work. So the magic box stayed, and the revolving beam was replaced by a ladder fixed to a metal frame that we could scramble and swing on, fall from, and slide down, to disappear into trapdoors built into the box underneath. Rough magic.

We didn’t decide on an opening date for either of these projects until we could see that the work was coming together. Levad was another matter. Levad was made as a co-
production with the (then) Playboy Theatre at the Malthouse, and was part of their subscription season for 1993.

For the first time, we were funded. A grant from the Australia Council paid the creative team, and Playboy covered the production costs.

For the first time, we rehearsed in a rehearsal room and had no access to the performance space, the Beckett Theatre in the Malthouse complex.

For the first time, the set design had to be complete and its construction underway before we began making the show.

For the first time, the date for opening night was set and the show had a name before we had begun to make it.

We just had to make it differently – and faster.

*Levad* was made in eight weeks. The funding was for six weeks of full time rehearsal, which was a luxury, and an acknowledgement that we had to make it before we could rehearse it. We stretched that budget by working part-time. We knew that we would be working the space between the character of imperious actress Eva Askenfeld, who had appeared in both previous works, and her signature performance in Jacob Gordin’s *Mireleh Efros*, the story of Shakespeare’s King Lear adapted to tell the story of a Jewish matriarch who becomes estranged from her family. We knew that we would place this actress, whose invented history we elaborated to take in multiple migrations – from pre-war Poland to Australia and then to post war Israel – in what Corrigan called “a memory mill”, forced to repeat scenes she has played over and over again in her career, and to revisit painful memories.

The memory mill was the metaphor, but we also wanted a real one on stage, one I could disappear inside. And we wanted a desert of salt for this Lot’s Wife, and a deluge. Corrigan designed an island of salt. Two metal channels protruded out of a rusty corrugated iron wall at the back, one of which looped along the floor until it met an enormous, rough wooden edifice studded with signs. The design sketches were taped to the wall of the rehearsal room and, when we began work, two sections of the metal channelling had been constructed and installed in the room, with the rest of the
set marked out in tape on the floor. Working with the channels was very important. They taught me how to move the character. In fact, the only way to move on them was by shuffling. So shuffling became the thing. Within a week we knew we didn’t need two channels, so we dispensed with one. In the last week of rehearsal, the mill was installed. My ridiculous ‘marking’ of climbing up to dislodge the signs and hurl them across the space lost a lot of its faux elegance when I realised how heavy they were, and how hard to dislodge. And how hard to make it look elegant. When we rehearsed this scene, patrons in the café underneath the rehearsal room were startled by what sounded like cannon balls being dropped above their heads.

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 1. *Levad* (1993) Image: Jeff Busby

If the previous two works had been fragmented, *Levad* took the conceit to another level. We became obsessed with the notion of memory and repetition – of repetition in order to hold on to memory.

Of re-hearsing.
Of the horrible repetitions of the migrant experience, and of loss.

The whiteboard in the corner of the rehearsal room was soon populated with lists.

Mireleh Performance 5, Mireleh Rehearsal 3, Queue 4 (Jerusalem), Farewell to the City 3.

We didn’t really put all the fragments together until the last week of rehearsal and the results were faintly appalling. 78 scenes, in 75 minutes. As we headed into production week, a couple of runs of the whole piece made it evident what a hard show it was going to be to perform.

Production week brought a new set of challenges – particularly the tonnes of rock salt that covered the floor of the set. It looked like salt, and snow, and desert, and it glittered. I loved the way the salt crunched under my feet, making me move differently. But it absorbed every drop of moisture in the atmosphere. I was fit, but I was often moving fast and a bit out of breath, and the aridity meant my mouth was constantly dry. We hid water bottles in parts of the set, and 'my character' developed a tic of constantly licking her lips. The whole week, while lighting and sound cues were being set, I was adjusting to the demands of the set, and the demands of the show. I learned its score, and how to manage my energy – which parts I needed to keep my powder dry for, and which I could go at full throttle – and when I could steal a sip of water. I learned how to shift my gait from the slippery channels to the salt. I learned how close the audience was, and how much vocal energy I needed to reach them. The character was transformed in that week as her piss-elegance met the reality of trudging through salt and being doused with fake blood. The attempt to hold to her dignity and diva antics gained an added dimension of valiance and stoicism in the face of futility. I had it sorted.
Opening night came and went, and four more shows and two matinees. By the time the reviews came out, I was laid up in bed with doctor’s orders not to get up for a week. There was no understudy. It was not the sort of show you could learn in a couple of rehearsals, or do with script in hand. We cancelled performances for that week, and refunded or changed tickets.

We did a ‘refresher rehearsal’ the day before the season recommenced.

It was terrifying. I had lost a lot of match fitness. The show ran a lot faster than I could. I could push my body through, but couldn’t get my breath back under control, particularly for the songs. My mouth was even dryer. In the panic, I began not to forget the lines, but to fear that I would forget them. In the break between runs, I ran the lines over and over again.

Bad thoughts spiralling in my head.
I would have to face an audience and do this show badly. They would know I had been ill, and the reviews for this show and the other two in the Gilgul Trilogy had talked about how “punishing” the work was for actors – how we were willing to push ourselves “to new limits” (Thomson, 1993, n.p.). They would be looking for signs of collapse – that I had pushed, or been pushed, too far. Reputations ruined. They wouldn’t be watching the show, they’d be watching me to see if I could get through it.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 3. Leved (1993) Image: Jeff Busby**

Somewhere, between rehearsal and performance, something dropped into place - something almost as simple as “when you’ve got lemons, make lemonade”. What could I make with what I could do? Where were the connections between my ability to do the show, and what the show was about? This was theatre about theatre. The show

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was about an actress undergoing an ordeal, and I was an actress undergoing an ordeal. I stopped concealing what it cost me to do it. In the strange shufflings up and down the channels, I muttered the lines for the next scene to myself. When I couldn’t get my breath, I spoke or sang through and let the effort be heard in my cracking voice. When my legs quivered from the effort of negotiating the slippery channels, I let them. When the shower of blood hit my overheated body and it shuddered, I didn’t brace, I yielded. I claimed it. It became a performance about a failure to perform.

I don’t know if this made a better show than the one we dreamed. It made sense, and it was the show I could do.

_We have tried to say, silenced sometimes by repression, and sometimes by the knots in our own tongues, not that the play speaks thought, but that it is thought._ (Hollis Huston 1992 p. 128)
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Action in/and context: a practitioner’s perspective.

It could be argued that the theatre has always had the most legitimate claim to be the art of the possible. So many of what are hailed as aesthetic innovations are, in fact, the result of theatrical or financial imperatives. (Meech 2011 p. 130)

Like many scholars who come to research out of professional practice, my relationship to this research project is complex, due in no small part to its scope, which encompasses my own practice as a performance-maker and teacher/artist, and a range of practices employed by members of my own community of practice. Indeed, a primary aim of the research has been to subject my own approach to practice to rigorous scrutiny through comparison with other processes, in order to avoid solipsism, or the confirmation of a set of preconceptions. While the research does not constitute practice-as-research in the sense that my practice is offered as research outcome, it is, as Brad Haseman asserts in defending the value of a practitioner’s perspective, “concerned with the improvement of practice, and new epistemologies of practice distilled from (an) insider’s understandings of action in context” (2006, p. 3). The prologue is written therefore, not only from a practitioner’s perspective, but in the language or register in which it was, and is, experienced. Here, I have translated, reinterpreted and reinscribed contemporaneous documentation and present memory of the lived experience of a ‘crisis of representation’ when composing a performance that moved beyond the limits of my own bodily and ‘technique-al’ capacities. The narrative of returning to Levd constitutes an ‘exemplary moment’ – an ‘aha’ moment in the process of performance making in which a number of key issues informing or troubling the project crystallise and are revealed. I continue by describing the process
of re-composing and re-orchestrating the performance to bring it within the limits of the performable. As the story relates, this shift was made within the original structure of the performance, so that the new inflection of the performance and its ‘ghost’, the performance as it was created in the rehearsal room, were co-present on the stage. If the ‘ghost performance’ created in the rehearsal room aspired to the representational and the virtuosic, the performance that emerged from the re-rehearsal, post-illness, edged into a space that questioned both representation and virtuosity, striving to make meaning of a gap between representation and reality, virtuosity and the limits of my own technique that could not be bridged, moving toward what Sara Jane Bailes (2011, p.2) calls a “poetics of failure”. At the time, it felt like a deal with the devil – like ‘when life gives you lemons, make lemonade’ – like ‘cutting my coat according to my cloth’ – like trying ‘to make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear’ – like ‘making the best of a bad job’.

Writing – or rewriting, the story of making Levd ‘in my own words’ was a self-imposed exercise aimed at ‘rebooting’ my thinking around familiar material; to make it strange again. The resulting account appeared to have absorbed much of the thinking around and through theory that I have done in the years since the work was made. A later draft of the account, the prologue to this thesis, was written after I had witnessed the making processes of others, and reflected upon my current work with students, and threw out lines of enquiry that wove through the stories of other processes that I tell here. This revealed to me how strongly the jolt of recognition that I had no recourse to conventional means to solve the problems before me, has shaped the way I watch, make and research performance in the intervening years. It has provided a starting point for questioning how the practice of performance making is shaped by its encounters with a broader range of limits that impact the creative process both from within and without, and a way of making sense of how performance ‘works’. The research proceeds, then, not from a question of whether performance making is shaped by limits, but how the encounter with limits shapes the process. Since, as Laura Ginters (2013, p. 45) states so succinctly, “rehearsal determines performance outcomes”, thinking about how the work of rehearsal is managed has implications for the products of that work.
What is really in the room?

The prologue attests to the point of embarkation for this research, and contains an implicit assumption that performance making takes place in contexts that do not just contain, but are constituted by, sets of limits. Bismarck’s maxim, “politics is the art of the possible”¹ has frequently been adapted to refer to the ways in which performance making responds ingeniously (or not) to the simplicity and poverty of its most fundamental constituent parts. The encounter between performer and audience in time and space always both demonstrates and challenges the notion that theatre is “the art of the possible” in a fluid environment where what is possible is in a constant state of flux. A lecture I give each year, on dramaturgical processes that guide contemporary adaptations of classic theatre texts, begins with a quote from influential theatre-maker, Richard Foreman (2003) “Theatre is about working with what’s really in the room”. Although the citation in my notes attributes the quotation to an interview recorded in the documentary Foreman Planet (Doczy, 2003), reviewing the documentary, searching readings by and about Foreman, and multiple internet searches using every variation of those terms have failed to locate this aphorism. In the documentary, Foreman certainly cites a range of prompts or provocations that have led him to make particular performances, and I am left questioning whether the aphorism was my own response to the examples he offered. It certainly chimes with Bert O States’ (1987, p.1) portrayal of theatre as “great reckonings in little rooms”, where performance “makes itself out of its essential materials” in the delimited spaces that contain it. For me, this lens on the performance making process – of ‘working with what is really in the room’ – distils a way of thinking about performance. Thinking about what can be made with what is available acknowledges the materiality, the precarity and the contingency of the practice by evoking the work of making performance, the limited palette with which the work is made (the ‘who’ and ‘what’ is in the room), and the nature of the ‘room’ in which the work is made or presented. Its evocation of the ‘real’, however, speaks to the ways in which approaches may vary according to the context or emplacement of the work. Through this framing of how practitioners work with ‘what is really in the room’, I hope to offer what Bruce Barton (2014, p.180) observes of new

analytical frames for interdisciplinary performance – “the formulation and articulation of a sufficiently sophisticated and robust “lens” through which this complex intersection may be most productively engaged, experienced, and examined”.

Local Contours

In order to examine these complex dynamics at close range, and in detail, I have undertaken four case studies of performance making, subjecting each to examination through the lens of what Gad Kaynar calls ‘pragmatic dramaturgy’ (Kaynar, 2006),\(^2\) which I will elaborate later in this chapter. The prologue, used to introduce the key concerns of the research, draws on data collected between 1993 and 1998 which informed my Masters research, Acting Jewish. The first two studies in this research project examine projects developed within major theatre companies in Melbourne (Melbourne Theatre Company, Chapter 3; Malthouse Theatre, Chapter 4) with ongoing state and federal subsidy, but without a permanent ensemble of artists. An account of the development of a work by Back to Back Theatre (Chapter 5), an ensemble of artists perceived to have intellectual disabilities, follows these chapters. The final case study tracks a series of theatre projects devised around issues of cultural identity made as collaborations between Drama students at Deakin University in Melbourne and English language students at the University of Amsterdam. These projects use web-based digital interchange methods in order to contend with multiple sets of limits – the limits of experience, performance skills and literacy of the student participants; limits of time, limits of production funding, and limits imposed by the demands of cross-cultural communication.

The research contributes to a growing body of scholarly research on rehearsal and devising practices in contemporary theatre (Cole, 1992; Harvie & Lavender 2010; Heddon & Milling, 2005; Govan, Nicholson & Normington, 2007) that describes and analyses performance making processes. These texts, on the whole, refer to creative practice in the UK, Europe and the US. The growing number of practice as research projects in performance has also resulted in ‘insider’ reports from the rehearsal rooms of practitioner scholars who provide other perspectives on approaches to performance.

\(^2\) Tim Etchells also refers to “a…pragmatic dramaturgy of what’s available” as part of thinking about structure in the work of assembling “scene[s]” or “block[s]” in the construction of a performance (Etchells, 2012, p. 34).
making. In Australia, Gay McAuley’s sustained and pioneering work in developing rehearsal analysis as a strand of enquiry with a distinct methodological approach, has made a critical contribution to the field, as have researchers who have emerged from the Department of Performance Studies at Sydney University under her aegis (Ginters, 2006, 2013; Moore 2006; Rossmanith, 2013). These, when added to several volumes of collected essays on contemporary Australian theatre, (Fensham & Varney, 2005; Fotheringham & Smith, 2013; Kelly, 1998; Tait, 2000) respond partly to the challenge issued by Julian Meyrick (2005, p. 1) to local artists and academics to “synthesise our understandings…of Australian theatre as an artistic, economic and institutional entity”. The synthesis I propose looks at Australian theatre making as creative processes shaped by “artistic, economic and institutional” forces (p. 1).

Positioning: What you can see from where you sit

I do not separate my scientific inquiry from my life. For me it is really a quest for life, to understand life and to create what I call living knowledge – knowledge which is valid for the people with whom I work and for myself. (Marja-Liisa Swantz cited in Reason & Bradbury, p. 1)

The research has emerged from an endeavor to locate and scrutinize points of confluence between my intersecting experiences as a performer and performance-maker in both conventional and experimental contexts, as a teacher of performance and performance making in institutions of higher education, as an academic conducting research both through and about performance, as a former member of the Theatre Board of the Australia Council (1999-2003) charged with determining which performance-makers should receive funding for their practice, and as a member of committees of management charged with the oversight and governance of performing arts organizations (Big West Festival, 2003-2010; Back to Back Theatre, 2003-present). The occupation of multiple positions, sometimes simultaneously, has allowed me to view the practice of performance making at a local, and sometimes national, level through multiple lenses. It has also required shifts and translations of experience and knowledge across borders – from my own trainings to professional practice, from

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3 The collection *Practice-as-research in Performance and Screen* (2009) for example, lists and describes 44 practice-based research projects, including DVD documentation (Allegue, Jones, Kershaw & Piccini, (eds)).
professional practice to training for professional practice, from professional practice and training to research, from all of these to policy development, management and governance in the field of performing arts. After more than three decades in this field, the single clearest point of confluence that has emerged for me has been the challenge for artists working in and with performance to shape and manage the processes by which they create their work within resource limitations. The notion of resource here incorporates human, temporal, and the material resources to be found ‘in the room’, as well as the institutional, infrastructural and the financial resources that enable their mobilization in the making of performance.

This rather instrumentalist deconstruction seems at odds with the tendency to describe processes of performance making in relation to organicity. Paul Carter notes the difficulty in avoiding “biological metaphors” when attempting to “say what art is about”, but frames its making as “material thinking”.

Making art is compared to giving birth: the impulse to make art is compared to a burden, a weight that is carried until it can be delivered. Matter is both the thing produced and the matrix that shapes it. (Carter, 2010, n.p.)

To pursue this metaphor, most accounts of performance are either ultrasound or post-mortem. Critical analysis of the text examines the fetus – all possibility and immanent meaning. Given the ephemerality of live performance, particularly in Australia where performance seasons are so short, criticism of the production is frequently post-mortem – the work has been performed and is gone. Between those two poles – conception and death – lies the critical stage where the ‘work’ is alive, at its most mutable, and emerging. I would like to offer some observations about the logics of practice that inhere to the making of performance, in order to explicate the broader context within which I consider the specific examples I will discuss in this thesis. The literature I review here aids in laying the ground for more detailed analyses of the particular instances in the case studies, whose idiosyncrasies and specificity create their own gestalts, and have required recourse to other bodies of literature to illuminate and map the specific features of these contexts.
Crisis of Representation: Accounting for the ‘unknowing’

Joseph Danan (2014, p. 1) claims that “the nature of representation” in performance has been transformed in the move towards interdisciplinarity and the post-dramatic that “reduce(s) the text to just one element amongst others”. While this describes the landscape of contemporary performance, I would argue that a crisis of representation lies at the heart of each particular instance of performance making because the peculiar constellations of the materials and contexts of its making, presentation and reception are uniterable. This element of contingency is present in the process of all art-making. As Barbara Bolt (2007, p. 3), points out, in reference to art as a material practice, “the outcome cannot be known in advance”, but acknowledgement of contingency is more critical to the material practice of performance because the work is made with such a wide range of unstable and unpredictable materials. Unlike the ‘fixed’ material outcomes of other art-making processes, this instability arises from the need to literally ‘perform’ the materials of the work into being with each iteration and, while disciplined by and through the making process, remains at play from rehearsal to rehearsal, performance to performance, space to space, and audience to audience. I will discuss the methodological implications of this assertion in the following chapter, but would like here to focus on ‘unknowingness’ as an inflection of my claims about the “dialogical and emergent nature” of the performance making process (Bolt, 2004, p. 78).

Bolt’s (2004, p. 78) consideration of “the complex relationship between humans, objects, tools and materials in artistic production” provides an interesting platform to begin thinking about the dynamism and complexity of the performance making process. Drawing on Heidegger’s essay, The Question Concerning Technology, Bolt claims his questioning of “the contemporary instrumentalist understanding of the human-tool relationship…posit[s] a relationship of co-responsibility and indebtedness” (p. 52). Removed from the binary relationship between “human” and “tool”, and translated into the collaborative context of performance making in which humans, spaces and objects (in the form of sets, costumes, props, lights, sounds, texts etc.) co-relate, it becomes evident that “the artist or crafts-person is no longer the sole creator or master of the work of art” (p. 53). Here the dynamism and collectivity at play when bringing performance into being, even in the most conservative (instrumentalist) of
processes, cannot produce “just the representation of an already formed idea” (p. 66). “The logic of practice”, in performance, perhaps more than any other art form, “is in process as a dynamic interplay through which meanings and effects emerge” (p. 78). This logic, fundamental and evident to artists ‘practiced’ in collaboration, converges with Bolt’s employment of Deleuze and Guattari’s characterisation of “the production and interminglings that constitute” artistic production as “machinic assemblage” or “an arrangement of forces” (Bolt, 2004, p. 78). In a later paper Bolt (2007, p.3) advances Heidegger’s concern to distribute agency beyond the human actors in an encounter to a claim about the “intelligence of our tools and materials”, directing attention to the productive relationality between human/s and tool/s as one of “co-emergence”. More importantly for this argument, she exemplifies the unknowingness that attends the process of creation, which the more complex environment of performance must account for.

We may have some awareness of the potential of a tool or a piece of wood – for example, through previous dealings with wood and tools – every new situation brings about a different constellation of forces and speeds. The wood may be a bit harder, the tool sharper or blunter and our own energies more or less focussed. (Bolt, 2007, p.3)

This notion of “different constellations of forces and speeds” can be expanded to incorporate the multiple agents and agencies at play in a performance making context, which itself can be characterised as “machinic” in Bolt’s appropriation of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept (2004, p. 78-79). In the rehearsal process, multiple ‘humans’ and multiple ‘tools’ are intermingled, each of whose properties propose immanent if unpredictable potentialities, but also immanent if unpredictable limits. To take a very simple example, if we locate the/an actor within this frame, the act of ‘casting’ works within this logic. Although the analogy risks the evocation of old jokes about actors being ‘wooden’, actors are likely to be selected based on “some awareness of the[eir] potential”, based on “previous dealings” which prefigure their potential to embody a given role in its physicality or its genre, and/or their potential to work within the “machinic assemblage” of “the conceptual coordinates set by the director and the multiple contextual frames of the performance” (Kaynar, 1997, p. 55). These frames and coordinates include the genre of the work, the potentials and limits of the other artists in the team, the timeframe for making the work, the values and working
practices of the company producing the work, the attributes and coded meanings of
the performance space and the intended or “implied” audience amongst other things.4
In this complex space, each and every element is endowed with interpretive agency
that encounters other elements that posit both possibility and limitation, and condition
the ultimate meaning or representation of the work. It is precisely this contingency, and
the intrinsically idiosyncratic form of the assemblage that makes the process of
performance making both intriguing and risky.

Definitions, functions and paradoxes

I would like to corral and distil the salient features of the enquiry, not least because
these concepts range across a number of broad sub-entities within the disciplinary
domain. The challenge here is to identify how these features – pragmatism,
dramaturgy, management, limits, process and performance making – co-locate,
interact and catalyse within dynamic and contingent processes of performance-
creation. This mapping of the boundaries of the project, creates its own set of salutary
limits that discipline speculations and conclusions regarding the ways in which
meaning-making in the creation of performance can be significantly contingent upon
the limits acting on the artists engaged in that process.

◆ Rehearsal or performance making?

The terms rehearsal and performance making are frequently used interchangeably
and each describes activity or processes that produce or ‘make’ performance. In
academic literature, ‘rehearsal’ is more frequently used to describe the realization of a
pre-existing text as performance, and is certainly the term most present in the public
imagination in relation to that process. As the terms used in work contracts for
performers in Australia indicate, it is also how the work of the professional practitioner
is most frequently described in the industry and, in my experience, how performance
practitioners themselves describe their work.5 There remains a question about the

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4 See Kaynar (1997, p. 55) for a more detailed examination of the ways in which actors’
choices in relation to elements of performance such as “ethnic and gender properties,
materiality, facial expression, vocal inflexions, gesture, pace, proxemics…and so on”, are
conditioned by their imaginative habitation of the audience role.

5 See Performers Collective Agreement: Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (Australian
union for actors), which details hours of work and pay rates for rehearsal and performance.
degree to which the term *rehearsal* describes a process that is intrinsically creative, despite its domicile in the (inelegantly named) ‘creative industries’. A cursory glance at
the roots of the word shows why this might be so. According to Letzler-Cole (1992, p. 4) “the etymology of the word *rehearse*…derives from the Middle English *rehercen* and the Old French *rehercer*, “to repeat”, originally “to harrow again”. Letzler-Cole extracts a suggestion of being part of a cycle of creation and growth from the one of the original roots of the term, noting that, in the process of tillage, “all the elements of growth are usually present before the harrowing that “fits” the soil for planting” (p.4). This, she interprets as a “metaphor for rehearsal…a fine breaking down of the playtext in preparation for… planting in the soil of performance” (p. 4). Her following comment that “metaphors are provisional” (p. 4) suggests that she was not entirely satisfied with the aptness of this one, and she does not then proceed to deal with the aspect of repetition, which is literally present in the French term for rehearsal – *repetition*. The emphasis on repetition, however, accounts neither for the contingent and dynamic nature of the process of realising text as performance, or the speculative and exploratory activities of performance making in devised theatre. This is reflected in my co-option of the two terms. I most frequently describe work processes that realise pre-written play texts as performance, or the phase of the process that focuses on ‘fixing’ rather than inventing the text, as ‘rehearsal’. This is distinct from ‘performance making’, the term I use to refer either to the broader notion of the production of performance, or to processes in which the work is devised by the creative team.

**Dramaturgy**

_The goal of dramaturgy is to resolve the antipathy between the intellectual and the practical in the theatre, fusing the two into an organic whole._ (Katz, 1995, p. 14)

Attempts to pin down proliferating meanings of dramaturgy have gained increasing prominence in the literature of theatre studies, performance studies and studies of theatre history, particularly in the past twenty years. Contemporary usage appears to have shifted and expanded its definition from the description of role whose provenance Mary Luckhurst (2006, p. 24) traces back to “the first official dramaturg”\(^6\) employed at the National Theatre in Hamburg from 1767 to 1769, through a more general

\(^6\) Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781).
description of a function or functions within performance making, to a description of the particular creative logic which guides and governs that process.

Cardullo (1995, p. 3) introduces his collection of essays with an unattributed dictionary definition of dramaturgy as "the craft or the techniques of dramatic composition considered collectively", and reveals the roots of the term using examples that are both telling and predictive. The word, he tells us "is made up of the root for "action or doing" (drame) and the suffix for "process or working" (-itry). Here we may helpfully think of the words "metalurgy" – the working of metal – and "thaumaturgy" – the working of miracles" (Cardullo, 1995, p. 3). These are resonant metaphors when considered in the context of the famously paradoxical interaction between the prosaic mechanics and materials of theatre production, and its oft-mythologised but rarely-realised capacity to produce near-transcendent experiences for both producers and consumers. This usefully broad definition assists in both generalising and distilling the activity and the process by which it is enacted. The peculiar complexity of theatre-making is to be found in its processes of composition in which dramaturgy is a collective process of production. This process conscripts the efforts of a multidisciplinary team to the ‘writings’ of multiple modes of transmission toward a consensus of constructed meaning.

Many writers note that the original meaning of the term simply denoted a playwright, and I note here the association of labour and craft in ‘wright’ (Cardullo, 1995; Esslin 1965; Luckhurst, 2006). While the role definition of the dramaturg, as a discrete function within a creative team, varies considerably, my focus is on dramatopoio-ut, “to put in dramatic form” (Luckhurst, 2006, p. 5). Cardullo (1995, p. 11) claims that “a dramaturg is to a play as a mechanic is to an automobile; he may not have built it, but he knows what makes it work, and this enables him to rebuild it as the theatrical occasion warrants”. This mechanical analogy is a useful one, for the process of performance making as a set of functions is a complex machine with many moving parts. Katalin Trenscenyi and Bernadette Cochrane (2014 p. xi) assert that, in the shift to a “new dramaturgy”, its definition has shifted and “become synonymous with the totality of the performance making process...the inner flow of a dynamic system”. Dramaturgy then might be most broadly defined as the peculiar intelligence or logic that informs the creation/construction of a work of/for theatre. When considered in the
light of Carter and Bolt’s conception of ‘material thinking’, this suggests that this intelligence or logic manifests most actively in rehearsal, and only its traces remain in the performance produced by that process.

Implicit in this conception is that a parallel dramaturgy exists: one that ‘makes’ the process. This dramaturgy of process informs decisions about what to do, where, when and with whom, that shape the ultimate work. These decisions manifest the structural/architectural/procedural principles that govern and guide artists in the process of making a work of theatre. As Trencsenyi and Cochran assert (2014, p. xii), “by being ‘process conscious’ we understand that when creating a piece of theatre, the way it is made, the process’s ethics, aesthetics, ecology etc. become dramaturgical concerns, and they inform and shape the materiality of the production”. While many of these forces operant in the working processes of theatre artists are tacit, sometimes instinctive, or learned through a practical apprenticeship, the need to render them explicit gains urgency when we consider the needs of artists-in-training who need to learn to operate within, and construct their own, performance making processes. ‘Process-consciousness’ is equally important for professional artists who are responding to the demand for new dramaturgies that can respond to “technical innovations and ever more diverse means of production [which] have made the theatre environment even more structurally complex, poly-cultural and information rich than before” (Eckersall, Monaghan & Beddie, 2005, n.p.).

**Pragmatic dramaturgy**

*Extrinsic parameters such as the management of the theatre; the definition of the theatrical institution; its implied spectators; the reality conventions within which it operates; its human artistic, technical, spatial and financial resources; its marketing methods; and so on might be no less important to academic play and performance analysis than they are for practical theatre purposes.* (Kaynar, 2006, p.245)

Of particular use to this project, has been the model of “applied” or “pragmatic dramaturgy” proposed by scholar and dramaturg Gad Kaynar (2006) in his analysis of the influence of ‘circumstantial’ or contextual elements in the work of a number of German dramaturgs working in state-subsidised repertory theatres. In particular, he identifies key ‘extra-theatrical’ and ‘intra-theatrical’ parameters (or limits) which
condition the ways in which dramaturgs perform the delicate balancing acts required in 
order to select repertoire, and to function as an “intellectual at work within the theatre” 
(Seeberg in Kaynar, 2006, p. 247). His claim that the impulses governing or guiding 
the realization of a work for the theatre can be interpreted as ‘circumstantial’ begins to 
reconceive the role of the dramaturg (and, by extension, of dramaturgy) to that of 
bricoleur. Kaynar (2006, p. 257) evinces concern, from his experience as both 
company and production dramaturg, as a teacher of dramaturgy, and as a researcher, 
for “disturbing discrepancies in basic approach between the non-contextualised 
hermeneutic reading of a play…and the conceptions for its stage realization”. He calls 
for more “contextually aware” modes of interpreting a performative text, and for 
“pragmatic dramaturgical reading which converts the extra-textual and automatic 
deliberations into conscious deliberations already in the pre-production stage” (p. 257). 
In this call, he challenges contributors to discourses of dramaturgy in professional and 
academic contexts to deal concurrently with ‘the world of the play” and the “play of (or 
in) the world”, and to “maintain a balanced relationship between the textually intrinsic 
and extrinsic deliberations of applied – or pragmatic – dramaturgical interpretation (p. 
247). “Such conceptions” he claims, “are usually bound not only to the play and its 
own aesthetics, but also to additional technical and empirical constraints, with the 
latter quite often modifying the final pattern, effect and meaning of the production more 
than any constituent of the play itself” (p. 247).

Locating his research at an institutional level, within established repertory theatres, 
and taking dramaturgs employed by those institutions as literary advisors and/or 
production dramaturgs as his subjects, necessarily draws the focus of his conclusions 
toward reception rather than the rehearsal process. He does, however, propose a key 
distinction between written script and planned production, or between the source text 
and the target text. He describes a series of tasks that comprise the dramaturg’s role, 
which I have placed within a table below, indicating how those tasks might translate in 
the context of the entire creative team and, as Bolt (2007, p. 3) after Edward Sampson 
states, removing “the focus from the acting individual” to “place(s) it in the relations 
between actors”.


21
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DRAMATURG</th>
<th>TEAM/PROCESS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does “background research”</td>
<td>• Conduct and apply background research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Introduc[es] text and translation corrections”</td>
<td>• Test text and translation for communicability, concordance with ‘character’ and relationship, stylistic, rhythmic and musical elements. • Extrapolate to mise en scene.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Keep[s] improvisation records and the rehearsal logbook”.</td>
<td>• Construct rehearsal process. • What and how will be worked on. • Improvise and filter the results • Monitor evolving meanings throughout rehearsal process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts as “the director’s third eye” and speculates about “the spectators’ emotional and synaesthetic reactions”.</td>
<td>• Maintain a third eye – see from within and without the ‘world of the play’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Suggests… textual modifications and revisions” (in rehearsal)</td>
<td>• Suggest textual modifications and revisions, (in rehearsal) and to mise en scene.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Observes and analyses audience response”</td>
<td>• Test performance before audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Suggests textual modifications and revisions” (when in production) (Kaynar, 2006, p. 252)</td>
<td>• Refine through textual modifications and revisions, and modifications to mise en scene in reaction to audience response. (Often the function of previews)</td>
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Figure 4. Comparison of functions of dramaturgy and collective dramaturgy

Tracking concatenation and simultaneity

The description, definition and analysis of dramaturgical activity involving multiple agents present a set of challenges to the researcher attempting to track the process
whereby, what Katz, cited earlier, calls “the antipathy between the intellectual and the practical” is negotiated (Katz, cited in Cardullo, 1995, p. 1). The difficulty arises in part because, as previously noted, the researcher is trying to watch the activity of a complex production machine, in which there may be a large team engaged in a wide range of tasks which are “woven together with context” (Sampson, cited in Bolt, 2007, p. 3) to create performance, or a small team in which individuals perform a wide range of diverse tasks. These tasks play out in a complex matrix of time and Eugenio Barba (1985, p. 76) differentiates between two dimensions, or axes, of what he describes variably as “plot” and as “texture” or “text” in active dramaturgy. He describes the first of these as “concatenation” – “the development of actions in time by means of a concatenation of causes and effects or through an alternation of actions” (p. 76). When observing, or constructing, a rehearsal process, this development is easiest to track. At a simple level, the process (and the resulting performance) operates in a clear chronological order at the level of both text and process, whose logics are imbricated. In the text, one scene follows another; in the scene, one performance moment follows another. In the process, one rehearsal follows another. Technical and design tasks are defined, designed, contracted and completed in a sequential order. This is the ‘what happens next?’ in the journey of the project toward the encounter with audience. For the purposes of this analysis, however, it might also be located in the process of the performance making project – the decisions about what actions/activities might be done in the workshop/rehearsal, and in what sequence, in order to develop actions that are located and sequenced in the ultimate realisation of the process in performance. In a process of devising, when the process is not informed by the structures of a pre-existing text (the sequence in which acts or scenes appear), the dramaturgical demands are rendered even more complex. Here, the question might be ‘what do we make next?’

The second dimension Barba describes is that of simultaneity. As Patrice Pavis (1992, p. 193) frames Barba’s conception, this is “the simultaneous presence of several actions”. On this vertical axis, (as any stage manager or production manager can testify) elements operating on the evolution of the performance are happening simultaneously. The rehearsal room is populated with people carrying out role-related tasks in concert – all of which converge in the creation or interpretation of a moment or moments of performance. Collaborators whose input is intermittent (particularly the
design team) weave in and out of the room and the process – sometimes interpreting what is happening on the floor and extrapolating to their own area of expertise and responsibility; sometimes actively intervening and introducing some element into the room which will determine or refine a way forward, or which will ‘thicken’ the moment of performance. The institutional structure, or infrastructure, surrounding the process is being enacted by a team operating in parallel with the work in the room. These ‘actors’ – operating in areas of governance, repertoire development, management, marketing and publicity, costume, set and props construction, venue or box office management, or fundraising are playing different parts, but are also weaving in and out of the process of creation to underpin, drive or draw the process to its realisation as a live encounter with an audience in a performance space. Since, as Paul Monaghan (Eckersall, Monaghan & Beddie, 2005, n.p.) notes, Barba’s notion of ‘actions’ is inclusive of “all the elements of performance (text, light sound, movement, space, design, shifts in all of these through time)”, the task of capturing the complex interaction of elements in any given moment in a process moving inexorably along the ‘concatenation’ axis is particularly resistant to ‘transcription’. It is, nonetheless, the task of the creators to compose within this demanding matrix – to determine the precise interaction of all the elements of performance within each of the action frames in the sequence of events.

‘Process dramaturgy’, as a double layered concept which tracks the evolving meaning of a performance, maps the process by which all the meaning threads of the evolving performance are knit together, and speculates about the relationship between those two flows. This model provides another, more pragmatic perspective on Bolt’s (2007, p. 3) concept of a “constellation of forces and speeds”, in co-locating the responsibility for the ‘process dramaturgy’ of the work with and between all and each of the team members within a “confluence of literary, spatial, kinaesthetic and technical practices, worked and woven in (a) matrix of aesthetic and ideological forces” (Beddie, Eckersall & Monaghan, 2005, n.p.). Although they locate the comment in terms of developing political understanding of the function of dramaturgical practice, Beddie, Eckersall and Monaghan (2005, n.p.), quote Peter Brook’s admonition to the group of performers he toured with through Africa in the 1970s, “the way we work is our work”. In his sense, dramaturgy may be interpreted not as intervention, but as a process of collective
negotiation to locate or invent a set of meanings or patterns – negotiations that are carried out, on the whole, on the rehearsal floor. Rehearsals are structured events, as is a rehearsal process. Just as a performance-maker (writer, devisor, choreographer) decides what should come after what in the work that will be presented, agents working in the rehearsal room, to adapt Kate Rossmannith’s term (2003, p. 12), “make[s] performance making” or manifest a dramaturgy of process in decisions about what part or aspect of the performance will be worked on, how it will be worked on, in what sequence, for how long, and when. This ‘process dramaturgy’ incorporates pragmatic consideration of how to shape and structure the making in the net time allocated to entire process. From the initial project planning stages, in which a specific time frame is allocated to a performance making project, to the daily scheduling of rehearsal tasks and foci, to the moment to moment decisions that determine the next step in work on a particular task, the narrative of a performance-in-the-making is being written and creating its own gestalt.

Dramaturgy as bricolage

Bricolage is a term that has been productively co-opted by a sometimes bewildering array of disciplines, particularly in the social sciences and in interdisciplinary research methodology, and I use several definitions throughout this thesis. As Kincheloe notes, “the French word, bricoleur, describes a handyman or handywoman who makes use of the tools available to complete a task. Some connotations of the term involve trickery and cunning” (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 680). Indeed, Paul Atkinson (2010, p. 17) notes that the co-option of the term has been so widespread in “the analysis of cultural forms” that “there is a danger of its losing any analytical specificity and becoming a catch-all term”. Of interest to this project, however, are its roots in a craft-based approach to

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8 After many years of teaching the concept of bricolage as a performance making tool in the context of a course on post-modern rendering of classic performance texts – and many jokes with the students about expanding their vocabularies to include impressively exotic theoretical terms – I was thrilled to notice, while driving through Belgium in 2008, a chain of DIY stores named Mr Bricolage. This was a timely reminder that the concept was not the invention of a Gallic post-structuralist theorist, but one securely grounded in an everyday ‘working’ reality.
creation/construction, with the associated qualities of resourcefulness – an ability to read the immediate surroundings, to assess the potential of available materials to meet a particular purpose, or to examine available materials to divine a purpose for them. The approach could equally be construed in reverse; that is, to assess available materials with a purpose in mind in order to speculate on what an assembly of those materials will not allow one to construct or create. This process, while apparently negative, can be productive in negotiating both process and meaning in the creation of performance, and in determining what meanings can be shaped out of complex clusters of elements. The issue of purpose is particularly critical here, especially when applied to theatre-making processes.

As evidence of the impact of ‘circumstantial’ factors on the interpretive options of a creative team, Kaynar (2006) offers a number of examples from his own experience as audience and dramaturg. The example that drew my attention as evidence of the impact of incidental bricolage on the meaning of the text concerned the capacity of site to inform the reading of a performance. Kaynar describes the production of an Israeli-written play about familial and factional conflict in a small village on the West Bank during the period of the first intifada. The work was presented in the context of the Acco Festival for Alternative Theatre, a festival held in the old Arab quarter of this small coastal town. By accident or design, the production, originally set in a butcher’s shop, was allocated by the curatorial committee of the festival to one of the many “gloomy vaulted venues” of clearly Arabic architectural style. Kaynar describes the meta-theatrical effect of this venue – in a historic location which testified to waves of occupation through centuries, in its gloom, in its claustrophobic sequestration of performers and audience within the same barrier-less cavern – as one which transformed a flat, didactic melodrama into a performance event which had the capacity to evoke echoes of unrelenting Antigonal tragedy.

**What sorts of limits are performance making processes subject to?**

*Think of limits as the physics of the world that the problem exists within.*

*(Kelton, 2014)*


**Limits and constraints**

When analysing the limits each of the projects were subject to, it has been important to make a distinction in my own mind between what constitute limits and what constraints. The two ideas are conceptually close but, in their usage, there are nuanced and important differences. In this research, I have taken the notion of limits to express a constellation of elements in the field that are a ‘given’ and inherent in the particular context and, in some cases, at or from the time I entered the process. In the case of the Back to Back (Chapter 5) ensemble and the students with whom I work (Chapter 6), for example, ‘casting’ is a given – these are the ‘actors’ that we have to work with when making performance. In the case of the Melbourne Theatre Company (Chapter 3) and the Malthouse Theatre (Chapter 4) the text and/or score is a given and, by the time I began observing rehearsals, casting was also complete. In both these instances, as well as with Gilgul’s *Levad* described in the Prologue to this thesis, the sets had been designed and were under construction as or before rehearsals began. I will focus further on the effects of the sequencing of meaning and aesthetic-defining actions in the chapters that analyse the rehearsal processes which produced *Return to Earth* (Melbourne Theatre Company, 2011) and *The Threepenny Opera* (Malthouse, 2010).

Constraints, in the context of the literature on creative process, are frequently framed as limits that are self-selected and negotiable, rather than fixed or imposed, and this distinction is critical to this enquiry. As a compositional strategy in visual arts or music, for example, the selection of a set of self-imposed constraints is an important factor in the generation of innovation. Patricia Stokes’ (*, 2007, p.110) account of the “constraint generation process” that gave rise to Pop Art is particularly apposite. As artist Roy Lichtenstein recounted to her, a group of artists made “a calculated career choice” by compiling a list of the salient features of Abstract Expressionism – “abstract, complex, emotional, painterly” — and “a second list” which “included the opposites of the first… realistic, simple, slick”. This second list formed the “subject and task constraints” which they elected to use, and which then defined the practice and aesthetic of the Pop movement. Musical composition, whether the formal ‘wrighting’ and notation of music by a sole composer who will hand the score to musicians to realise, or the structures used by musicians when improvising around particular chord progressions or rhythmic
structures, also work as a set of “enabling constraints”. Lynn Fels, in reference to the use of role drama with school children, describes enabling constraints as:

a framework and logic of practices: a hierarchy or structure of relationships, rituals, practices, and established forms of engagement which impact significantly on any interactions that occur within a complex system. These constraints set out the parameters of coherency that define and yet enable an agency...in flexible and responsive movement, interaction, and response. Enabling constraints simultaneously limit and permit dynamic interactions to occur. As Davis et al. (2003) explain, ‘The rule structures that enable complex systems maintain a delicate balance between sufficient randomness to allow for flexible and varied response and sufficient organization to channel such responses into coherent collective activity’ (pp. 224-5)...participants work within the framework, logic, coherency, and language of a co-created world as defined by context, environment, and roles; within these established yet enabling constraints, choices of action and interaction unfold’. (Fels 2009, p. 129)

As Stokes (2007, p. 107) concludes, the election of constraints acts to mitigate both the paralysis that can attend too many choices, and the reflexive recourse to familiar problem-solving strategies. “Choices”, she says, “are confounding: responses rewarded in the past are repeated... Without constraints, composition takes place in cul-de-sac of the customary and the successful”. This distinction might be reflected in the differences between performance making processes that contend with the complex matrix of limits embedded in the text in the case of processes of realising a prewritten text, or in the ‘enabling constraints’ that characterise the development of ‘pretext/s’ into performance text in the case of devised performance.

In this study I have elected the constraint of distinguishing between ‘optional’ constraints and ‘inherent’ limits in the projects I investigate. In the semiotically dense and sometimes chaotic space of performance making, the distinctions are sometimes hard to detect. Frequently these limits are theoretically flexible. Some of the parameters drawn by Kaynar, are defined as existing within the institutional or company context, rather than within the theatrical project itself, and pertain to the ways
in which those institutions or companies customarily work. These are generally established and precede activity ‘in the room’ where performance making happens within a “framework and logic of practices” and a “hierarchy or structure of a “hierarchy or structure of relationships, rituals, practices, and established forms of engagement” that has been determined and put in place, generally by agents not involved in the creative process, before the artists arrive (Fels, 2009, 129). Kaynar (2006, p. 248) identifies the following “considerations” that “affect[ing] applied dramaturgical interpretation” from outside ‘the room’.

- General and artistic management; system, structure, hierarchy, personalities
- Artistic policy
- Human artistic resources: dramatists, directors, actors, designers etc. Artistic, administrative and fiscal management of human resources.
- Human technical resources and para-artistic staff and their artistic, administrative and fiscal management
- Physical and spatial facilities and manipulation
- Budget
- Marketing

Because Kaynar is concerned with the larger organisational context of performance – making rather than with the structures and organisation of activity ‘in the room’, he gives us only the before and after, rather than the process whereby the dramaturgical pre-text is converted into performance. All of these parameters have operant, knock-on effects on the construction and progress of the process of performance making that are disciplined and conditioned by the resources available to the team embarked on that process.

**Time and motion**

*All performance and theatre is bound by location in space and time, tied to limits that it cannot completely escape.* (Kershaw, 2011, p. 66)

The length of the rehearsal process was a key consideration in the initial framing of this enquiry, and the allocation of time to a performance making project can be an expression, or a knock-on effect, of many of the factors noted above. My own practitioner experience and anecdotal observation has been that time is the
performance-maker’s most valuable and expensive resource, and that the time frames within which professional performance making and rehearsal play out are frequently remorseless and fraught with irreconcilable tensions between pragmatic and artistic considerations. In most cases, once the process of rehearsal begins, unlike in many forms of art production, there is no retreat, which can be both galvanising and limiting. Laura Ginters (2013, p. 66-67) notes, that “a production, no matter the kind of show or its length, is generally allocated four to six weeks of rehearsal”, citing former Artistic Director of the Melbourne Theatre Company, Simon Phillips’ explanation that “you tend to – for financial reasons – work to set rehearsal periods” although “there’s no logic in giving a play that’s an hour thirty [minutes] long the same length rehearsal period as a play that’s twice that long” (p. 66-67). As Ginters concludes in relation to directors who are, on the whole, responsible for determining the shape of a rehearsal process ‘in the room’, this means that “their practice” is determined by a more pragmatic logic and “is moulded to fit the available time” (p. 66-67). This clearly has implications for how much, and what sort of, exploratory work can be undertaken within the process – how many interpretive options can be tested before the process reaches a place from which there is no retreat if the performance is to be sufficiently ‘fixed’ to be ready for an audience.

Kate Rossmannith’s (2003, p. 54) reflection on the management and experience of time in rehearsal implicitly advocates that analysis of these processes needs to be “sensitive to temporality”. She cites Susan Letzler-Cole’s description of rehearsal process as “stop/start” and Simon Callow’s use of the term ‘halting’, noting that the rehearsal processes she observed “operated under enormous time pressures” overall, but also that “there seemed to be both a distinct compression and stretching of time” in the “temporal flow” of the work (p. 54-55). Many artists will testify to the capacity of a time-restricted working period to galvanise and focus a creative process, creating a salutary momentum and acting to obviate solipsistic and fruitless meanderings from the path. Marion Potts, (2010, p. 7) in the 2010 Rex Cramphorn Memorial Lecture, identifies the problematic relationship between time and momentum when she describes the “crazy scheduling” which takes place in current local performance making practice, and the need to develop new working processes rather than pursuing “anachronistic ways of working”. She speaks of yearning for the three-month rehearsal periods of “European models”, but states that more rigorous work may require more
than just “lengthening rehearsals”, having “experienced [the] creative complacency and lethargy – knowing that these were directly connected to the three yawning months stretching before us” (p. 8). Here, she describes process that have time, but lack momentum – a much more complex notion of “force or speed of movement” (Bolt, 2007, p. 3) when applied to the “process of reaction” between “the multiple material elements” (McAuley, 2012, p. 5) working in concert in a rehearsal process. As I will discuss further in the chapter on the Melbourne Theatre Company, the ability to bring a production in on time is frequently associated with the ‘professionalism’ of a director.⁹

**Limits of accounts of rehearsal**

This thesis adds to the growing body of literature reflecting both academic and practitioner interest in processes of performance making, and the ongoing, “stop/start” project to investigate and validate the nexus between these two, embodied in the varying inflections of the practice as research model.

Gay McAuley (1998b: 75) notes “the desire to observe and analyse rehearsals is probably a peculiarly modern (or, rather, postmodern) phenomenon, born of the shift in interest from the reified art object to the dynamic processes involved in its production and reception”. This desire arises, of course, within the paradigm shifts wrought by questions around representation that have emerged in the postmodern era, when works of contemporary theatre increasingly and self-reflexively make the making process the subject of performance, drawing on and recuperating the idea of rehearsal as metaphor. This is not an entirely new practice when one considers, for example, the scenes of rehearsal in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1599) or *A Midsummer Nights Dream* (1595), or Molière’s *The Rehearsal at Versailles* (1668), Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), or even Michael Frayn’s *Noises Off* (1982). And it is perhaps not a coincidence that the desire arises in an era where questions of the authenticity of representation are staged ceaselessly in the media as we channel-shift

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⁹ Wesley Enoch, in interview with Laura Ginters, frames this ability as an intrinsic element in his approach to directing when he asserts that “I wouldn’t actually change the four- to five-week rehearsals; my rhythm is all based on that...we slackened off the time pressures and resource pressures that we have, we would have to redesign what our processes are” (Enoch in Ginters 2013 p. 67).
and mouse-click between the political dramas and reality television programmes whose careful image-management we are increasingly aware of.

Susan Letzler-Cole’s 1992 documentation and analysis of the practice of contemporary American directors in rehearsal was a milestone in the field of rehearsal analysis in that its scope embraced a number of rehearsal processes. A survey of the pre-eminent theatre and performance journals since the beginning of the slow egress of theatre and performance studies from literary studies in the 1950s reveals a large number of single articles that testify to the rehearsal processes of particular performance projects.\(^{10}\) Other large studies have been primarily located in the realm of theatre history, relying heavily on the analysis of available contemporaneous documentation of the work of singular individuals whose innovations in practice marked turning points in the development of modern drama, such as Stanislavski (see Gorchakov, 1962; Mitter, 1992; Toporkov, 2001) or Brecht (see Esslin, 1965; Mitter, 1992; Willett, 1967). The particular benefit of Letzler-Cole’s study is its close focus on, and capture of, rehearsal practice in a particular moment in, it must be acknowledged, American theatre. There is a question, however, about the degree to which the survey of the practice of any group of artists or companies can be held or assumed to be paradigmatic of either the essential components of a creative performance making process, or a/the range of representative performance making practices. Letzler-Cole does not explain why she selected the performance projects she observed. The directors she follows were (and largely are) artists of considerable standing, particularly in the US. She merely describes them as “professional” (Letzler-Cole, 1992, p. 2). Presumably there was an aspect of timeliness since each of these projects was completed between 1985 and 1989. Presumably, also, the participants in these projects were willing to allow her to breach the fabled privacy of the rehearsal studio to witness the rehearsal process.

Jen Harvie makes parameters for the selection of subject clear in her introduction to *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes* (Harvie &

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\(^{10}\) The Tulane Drama Review (now The Drama Review) was the first periodical whose editorial policy treated drama as an entity distinct from the play-as text, and dates from 1955. Other early periodicals with a similar focus, and which are still in publication include Performing Arts Journal (1976), but most journals with a focus on text to, or as, performance were born, or reborn in the 1980s.
Lavender, 2010). Key criteria for selection of the companies whose performance making processes were documented included exemplarity

of current cutting-edge theatre and performance”, of “redefining established practices and inventing new ones”, of variable “strategies of leadership” from “dispersed” leadership to that of an “individual director”, of “the diversity and multiplicity of contemporary… performance practice”, of “involv[ing] collaboration and presentation on the international theatre festival circuit”, and of providing researchers with “privileged access to each company’s or practitioners processes of making theatre. (Harvie, 2010, p. 3-4)

While the focus of my research is determinedly local, Harvie and Lavender’s collection of articles is of particular use to this project, since the companies under observation are, on the whole, engaged in the creation of new, or renewed (re-read or ‘misread’).11 work. Some indication of the changes wrought in the eighteen years between the publication of Letzler-Cole’s study, and Harvie and Lavender’s collection is evident in the projects they elect respectively to document. Letzler-Cole – whose focus in the 1992 publication is, admittedly, the role of the director – examines the rehearsal process of 10 projects.12 While most, if not all, of the directors she has chosen might be described as auteur directors, and half of the projects she documents involve the directors producing texts they have written prior to its realisation as performance, all but one of the processes begin with a pre-written playscript.13 Of the 11 projects documented in Making Contemporary Theatre, only one – Luk Perceval’s production of Chekhov’s Platonov for the Schaubuhne in Berlin in 2006 – begins from a pre-

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11 Here I borrow Gerald Rabkin’s (1983, p. 45) term, “misreading”, which he uses to describe the tendencies toward textual deconstruction in American theatre in the 1980s in order to counter orthodox interpretive practices that attempt “to close a text by a ‘definitive’ interpretation”. Rabkin interprets the task of “innovative directors” as an act of recuperation in which the director must “recover” the text “by removing the layers of false accumulations, and by “demystifying” the text itself by probing it for symptoms of insufficiency and ideological blindness” (p. 50). In the intervening decades, the ‘misreading’ of canonical playtexts in production by auteur directors has become normalised, but the practice does reframe both the process of realizing text for performance, the interpretive processes of the creative team, and the role of the director as the leader of those processes.

12 This trajectory of interest is confirmed by her later publication Playwrights in rehearsal: the seduction of company, in which she documents the effects (sometimes as directors of self-scripted texts) of the presence of the playwright in the rehearsal room.

13 See Chapter 6, Elizabeth LeCompte devising Frank Dell’s The Temptation of Saint Anthony using, amongst other sources, the screenplay from Ingmar Bergman’s The Magician as pre-text (Letzler- Cole, 1992, pp. 91-124).
written text. The range of projects documented in this later collection also testifies to the rapidly expanding range of options available to contemporary performance-makers. It suggests that, where a pre-written text is the starting point for a process of realisation, misreading is no longer an exceptional practice, and it testifies to the proliferation of gaps in boundaries around performance disciplines and genres. The inclusion of a significant number of projects that are created by cross-cultural groups and/or artists who draw on, reference or consciously appropriate and/or misread performance forms and traditions from non-Western cultures indicate a conscious and strategic cross-fertilisation and contemporary recuperation of those forms and traditions. Harvie, as noted above, also points to an increasingly globalised and sophisticated market for this work on the international festival circuit.

A qualification here is that history is written by the victors. There is much to be learned from the accounts that are now emerging from rehearsal rooms as the trickle becomes a flood, but a rapid scan of accounts such as those published in the Harvie and Lavender collection reveals that, for the most part, they are emerging from the rehearsal rooms of companies and artists who, whatever their beginning, are now sufficiently successful to be deemed worthy of academic enquiry. On the whole, the projects documented are relatively well resourced, and the artists or companies well-established. It does mean, however, that the sets of limits with which they are contending are frequently both qualitatively and quantitatively different, and this may account for significant variation between the working processes of artists and companies producing work for such large national and international audiences. Of the examples I examine, Back to Back Theatre provides the single instance of a company with an increasingly visible presence on “the international theatre festival circuit” (Harvie, 2010, p. 4). My research has approached the analysis of rehearsal from a different angle in its address to “local contours of experience” (Maxwell, 2006, p. 36).

Gay McAuley’s detailed account of the production of Michael Gow’s Toy Symphony at the Belvoir Street Theatre in 2007 has been both illuminating and influential in this research project, as one of the rare detailed accounts of a single rehearsal process that examines local practice. As noted previously, McAuley has been instrumental in the development of methodologies for the documentation and analysis of rehearsal for several decades, and both her reflections on, and application of, ethnomethodological
methodology have guided my own research practice and thinking in this project. Since my study is inherently, if not always explicitly, comparative, I have also drawn on the substantial contribution made to the local field by Kate Rossmanith (2003), largely in her doctoral thesis which examines two local examples of performance making practice in significant detail, and through the lens of cultural production, with a specific framing of performance making not merely as the production of a cultural artefact, but as the making and remaking of a culture of performance – making by members of a community of practice.

New dramaturgy: entering the digital domain

Also evident in the case studies presented in the Harvie and Lavender collection are the opportunities increasingly available to performance makers through the development of digital technology – requiring new practical skills and performance literacies, rendering previous givens in live performance such as the delineation of a performance space, and the co-presence of audience and performer in that space, problematic and fraught with possibilities, fraying the seam between real and virtual space, performer and set, and challenging fundamental ideas about the ‘liveness’ of performance. This marked trend to “ever more diverse means of production”, means that creative teams are developing ever more diverse processes for developing their work, creating with an ever more diverse range of collaborators, and for an ever more diverse range of “implied spectators” (Kaynar, 1997 p. 49). In general, this has not been a shift in which old performance modes are replaced by new ones, but a process of accretion whereby new aspects of performance are layered in amongst older and more enduring modes of expression. This has rendered the problem-solving and decision-making processes more complex through the need to consider a vastly expanded array of options. Set design now frequently encompasses both real and virtual architecture. As I write, the Deakin Motion Lab, sited in my own university, has just concluded a collaboration with the Victorian Opera on a production of The Flying Dutchman, in which Wagner’s “impossible” scenographic demands that “the hero and the heroine… rise to the heavens out of the water” (Hodgeman, cited in Harford, 2015, n.p.), have been answered by the construction of a game engine of virtual scenes which the audience watches through 3D glasses as they navigate through virtual Scandinavian fjords and oceans. Mise en scene now frequently encompasses the real
and virtual presence of performers, working in synchrony and asynchrony, and real and virtual time and space.

Digital technology has also created new means of transmitting and publishing information from the rehearsal room, allowing interested parties to become virtual observers of process via rehearsal blogs. Tim Etchells of Forced Entertainment was one of the first artists to establish a rehearsal blog, and has lately expanded this practise to incorporate blog-as-performance, publishing reports from rehearsal, fragments of performance and non-performance writing and what he terms ‘virtual events’ from his own website: http://www.timetchells.com/. These communications from the front are increasingly used as a means to speak to the community of interest and couched in a variety of languages – from those distinctly of the practitioner¹⁴ to those such as Etchells that approach the idiom or register of the academic.¹⁵

Limits of the field

Despite repeated and proliferating claims in the academic literature that, to quote Joseph Danan, (2014, p. 3) “a radical transformation of the theatre and our relationship with the stage” is underway, and that “there is a widespread preference for non-dramatic texts…for writing developed from the stage…[and] for interdisciplinarity”, this transformation manifests only in parts of the field of western theatre. New dramaturgy, in which “the whole nature of representation is transformed”, is making slow but steady ingress into mainstream theatres which continue to present work largely characterised by pre-authored classic and contemporary plays and musicals in familiar genres. This is the case in Melbourne, Australia, where the companies and artists under investigation in this thesis are situated, but the pattern is also evident in the established and concentrated cultural precincts of the West End in London, and Broadway in New York. This is an important qualification in this study, where issues of what constitutes ‘professional practice’ and the realpolitik of training and employment opportunities for performance-makers are under implicit and explicit scrutiny. To this end, the case studies I present in this thesis have been selected to exemplify a range of performance making practices that are spread across a continuum from the

¹⁵ See http://www.timetchells.com/blogsection/notebook/
mainstream to the fringe. I am aware, as I was aware when selecting these projects from those accessible at the fieldwork stage of my research, that this continuum, even in a medium-sized city such as Melbourne, is very long, encompassing a wide range of sites and sorts of theatre. Nor have I addressed the outer margins of this continuum. Repertoire choice and rehearsal practice at the state theatre company, the Melbourne Theatre Company, might be deemed conservative, but not so conservative as in productions touring the larger commercial theatres, or outer-urban amateur theatre companies. Back to Back Theatre may propose radical inflections of ‘performance theatre’ and spectatorship, but not so radical as experimentation that takes place in live art events in a range of found sites across the city. As such, there are wide gaps between these companies, and between these companies and other performance making sites that could not be contained within the scope of this enquiry while satisfying its aim to conduct microanalyses of rehearsal practice. The following chapter, on methodology, will discuss the selection of sites for observation and analysis in greater detail.

**Performance making in training contexts**

While it is true that all centres of conservatory model training in Australia are associated with universities they have retained a degree of independence from their host institutions and continue to provide vocational, practice-based training for the purposes of producing professional artists. Universities, on the other hand, have trod, and continue to tread, a rocky road in defining and implementing their relationships with, and support for, practice-based learning. As we note in *Lineages, Training, Techniques and Tradition: Rethinking the Place of Rusden in Melbourne’s Contemporary Theatre*, the absorption in 1992 of 26 Victorian institutions of higher education into eight multi-campus universities effected a normalisation of more

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17 Elinor Fuchs (1996, p. 79-80) defines “performance theatre” as having *inter alia* a "continual awareness of itself as performance" and an “unavailability for re-presentation”.

18 For example, the National Institute of Dramatic Art in Sydney is affiliated with the University of New South Wales; the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne is now a Faculty within the University of Melbourne; the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts sits within Edith Cowan University in Perth, and actor training is offered as a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane.
traditional university-style modes of teaching, and made the pursuit of the innovative practice-led pedagogies of the 1970s unsustainable (Eckersall & Prior, 2009). My own institution is descended from the arranged marriage between a regional Victorian university and several teacher-training colleges. The direct forbear of my department, the Drama Department at Rusden State College (later Victoria College) “was characterised by diversity and a DIY approach that was imaginative and empowering for students” (Eckersall & Prior, 2009, p. 59). We have endeavoured to continue this legacy of the “DIY approach” since the amalgamation in 1992 with Deakin University, but with considerably fewer resources, within a larger and more complex institutional culture and structure, and many more students. This has resulted in significant shifts in the realpolitik of training students in and through practice.

The progressive de-resourcing of higher education has led to what could be perceived as contradictory demands on project leaders in making performance with and on students of Drama. As Glenn D’Cruz (2010, p. 101) notes, the Drama course at Deakin “does not attempt to provide students with a comprehensive actor-training”. Although many students enter the course with aspirations to enter that profession, the curriculum adopts a practice-led research approach in which performance theory, theatre history, improvisation, textual analysis and performance-making are investigated in and through practice. The challenge, then, for the leader of a process of devising performance is to draw the individual aspirations of the participants into a process in which a sense of joining a broader community of practice is engendered, one which provides a positive reframing of what performance and performing might be. Similar processes are used in the development of community theatre – the development of creative processes whose aim is to produce not a cacophony of individual voices, but an authentic representation of those individuals as a community. This approach is sometimes at odds with student participant perceptions of the purposes of such a project. Some enter (and leave) these projects with aspirations to develop their individual performance skills, or expecting a showcase for those skills. These aspirations can conflict with both the values and purposes of training focused primarily on performance making rather than performing, and can be the source of some conflict and disappointment. When contact time between teacher and students in the cloistered context of the university is strictly limited, it can be difficult to effect this reframing and the experience can leave some students flat. In Chapter 6, I will
discuss some of the ways that an investigation into the potential of telematic theatre as a vehicle for cross-cultural devised performance making has made some headway in addressing the limited resources and decontextualized setting of training performance-makers.

**Making performance making**

This thesis investigates how a number of performance making processes respond to the limits inherent in the contexts in which they occur. It sets out from the story of a moment of crisis in which I needed to evaluate (to cite my imagined Foremanesque aphorism), ‘how to work with what was really in the room’ in relation to my own practice as a performance-maker and performer. In the following chapter, I relate how the adoption and adaption of key principles and aspects of ethnographic methodology have allowed me to evaluate a number of other professional performance making projects through a lens of what Kaynar has called “pragmatic dramaturgy”. These projects are examined in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. In the final case study, I return to my own practice as a performance-maker in an educational context, training others to make performance. The study is comparative – within limits. Comparisons are only partly possible when the practice is so complex, idiosyncratic and contingent, and the dynamic interplay of the interpretive agents in the process of making so unstable and unpredictable. In this conception, to adapt Rossmanith’s (2003, p.12) observation of rehearsal as “cultural praxis”, each project “remakes performance making”. Subjects of the case studies were selected based on two broad criteria – access during the period of the research and their particular placement in the wider theatre community and urban culture of Melbourne. Out of this, some conclusions can be drawn about how practices relate to their specific placement in culture, community and institution. Despite perhaps being ‘primed’ by a search, if not to validate, at least to contextualise my own experience, the adoption of ethnographic methodology in which I spent many days watching the practice of others has taught me that, like in rehearsal, meaning does not precede the process. It was necessary to allow the processes to play out before I could identify the particular sets of limits each project was working within, and begin to reflect and speculate about how those processes produced each work of performance.
CHAPTER 2

Methodology: (Pragmatic) dramaturgy and ethnographic research

April 27, 2010. Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne

Day 1 of rehearsal on ‘The Threepenny Opera’, a co-production between the Malthouse Theatre and Victorian Opera. This is the first of my periods of rehearsal observation and, as I enter this familiar room, I realise that I am not sure where to sit. I have worked in this room as a performer/devisor with the Gilgil Ensemble in 1993, and as a researcher observing the same director, Michael Kantor, rehearsing Patrick White’s “The Ham Funeral” and Tom Wright’s “Journal of The Plague Year” in 2005, with a smaller ensemble of actors most of whom I knew well as friends and/or fellow artists. In both those instances I seemed to know where to sit. This morning, tables have been placed in a square formation so everyone can see everyone else. Cast and crew are choosing seats, laying out their scripts, introducing themselves to people they have not met before, and greeting old friends and colleagues. I know only a small number of cast members and some of the crew. Kantor, with whom I worked in the Gilgil Ensemble, greets me warmly and, seeing my indecision, tells me I should sit at the table. “Should I?” I ask nervously? “Of course”, he replies emphatically, “You’re one of the crew”.

The day begins with the usual introductions around the table. Michael welcomes everyone to the project, introduces each of the team members and establishes what role each will be performing. I have not recorded precisely what words he used to introduce me but it ran something like, “This is Yoni Prior – many of you will know her, or know her work. We worked together for many years and she is an old friend of The Malthouse. She will be watching rehearsals on this project as part of her doctoral research, and she will explain what that is about”. I glance hastily at the research statement attached to the pile of research agreements I have brought with me, trying to remember how I managed to describe the research project relatively succinctly. I am relieved that Michael has introduced me as a

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19 Kantor’s first productions, on taking over the artistic directorship of the Malthouse Theatre in 2005, was a double-bill of Patrick White’s The Ham Funeral (1948) and Tom Wright’s Journal of the Plague Year (2005); the latter a stage adaption of Daniel Defoe’s fictional biography of the Great Plague of London.
fellow artist, and anxious to reassure the assembled theatre workers that I bring a practitioner’s experience and lens to the project, but I am equally concerned not to take up time when everyone is keen to embark on the work of realising this show. I give a brief summary of the project. I am interested in looking at how artists shape and adapt their individual and collective processes to cope with the realities of resource limitations. I invite them to read the research statement I have provided, ask them to sign them at their convenience, and say I am happy to answer any questions they might have.

April 28, 2010 Day 2.

I arrive early and look for somewhere to sit. The room has been rearranged. Yesterday the entire team sat around the table, read the play, listened to presentations from the director, the musical director and the designer, looked at set models and costume sketches, and discussed the play, the adaption, the process and the rehearsal schedule. I elected not to join the discussion, though I was aching to do so!

Today the tables have moved to form a bank along one side of the room, where the directorial and production team will sit, and the floor has been cleared to indicate what constitutes ‘stage’ or ‘actor space’. It is a big team in a relatively small room – considerably smaller than the stage on which it will be performed. I look for a ‘neutral space’ – one from which I can see the entire room, but unmarked as territory belonging to the directorial team, the actors, or the production management team. I squeeze onto a small table in a corner; my laptop precariously placed in the space unoccupied by an actor’s bag and some small hand props. I watch the rehearsal. I note what scene is being worked on and for approximately how long. I describe what people are doing in the room in as accurate and uninflected manner as I can. My own reflections, questions or interpretations are written in a different font from that in which I record the activity in the room. I cannot type fast enough to capture people’s speech to the precise word, so paraphrase and make note that I will need to return to the speaker for permission to quote them. This is a noisy room and a noisy production, but I am aware of the noise of the keystrokes coming from my computer, so I also have paper and pencil in case there are quiet moments that the tapping might interrupt. In the breaks I review what I have written. At lunch I sit with some of the performers who I have not met or worked with previously. They ask questions about the research and give every appearance of being genuinely interested. “Oh yes!”; says one, “That’s what we’re doing all the time, isn’t it? Working out what the limits are, and what we can do in the time, and whether there’s really time to test any options. Have you looked at The Production Company? They get their shows up in a week! Then you really have to do your homework!”.  

42
“Both performance and field research are public, embodied, vulnerable, and risky ventures” (Conquergood, 2013 p. 5)

Identifying the exemplary moment

Ethnographers decode cultures. In this project, I am trying to decode work cultures that produce performance through a range of creative processes. Just as ethnographers’ processes are imbricated in the cultures they decode, and in fact, it is possible to argue that they should be, research that seeks to reflect upon and contribute to the development of artistic processes must, of necessity, develop methodologies that are resonant and consonant with the artistic practices they examine. While this may seem counter-intuitive in the context of more empirical research approaches, in creative practice research it is axiomatic. Practice based creative research has been developed over the last twenty years precisely because using exteriorly derived knowledge paradigms to interrogate creative practice inevitably yields only such knowledge as can be constituted within the specific methodology applied. Knowledge that is inherent to, and generated by, creative practice itself is opaque to any methodological approach that does not incorporate artistic knowledge as a core principle. Since artistic knowledge is intrinsic to the specific practices of specific art forms, but also to the specific practices of specific artists, it must be investigated from the perspective of praxis, and specifically from a perspective of artistic praxis.

This research is not practice-based in the conventional sense of being pursued and articulated primarily through my own practice. However, it must, in order to interrogate the nature of rehearsal and performance making process and its relationship to the limits of each individual process and context, incorporate the kinds of knowledges that performance generates. There is a question around precisely where (and when) the knowledge about process emerges in a performance making process. To investigate process, it is necessary to articulate dramaturgical knowledge – that is to say, understandings of what meanings are brought together in the performative moments of both rehearsal and performance.

To make visible a fundamentally dramaturgical contention about the salutary function of limits and constraints, I will use a method of analysis that sits at a junction
between dramaturgy and ethnography. I am a dramaturg and scene-maker by trade, so the strategy of identifying, and creating or deconstructing key scenes that exemplify or unlock meaning in a dramatic narrative is intrinsic to my practice and the way I think, and also to the framework within which I wish to examine the processes I have selected. A pragmatic dramaturgical strategy constructs ‘exemplary moments’ to convey meaning because it is impossible to tell the whole story. The ‘whole story’ does not yet exist at any given moment within the rehearsal process, and in the moment of performance, the ‘whole story’ becomes something quite different from the rehearsal ‘story’ since it is overlaid with elements that only exist within performance, and, more specifically, only exist in specific ways within specific performances. For example, my performances of Levad exist in completely different ways and construct radically different knowledges pre and post illness. The two sets of meanings (of the two different sets of performances) can be integrated via a narrative of ‘what happened’, and then ‘what happened next’ (i.e. after my illness and return to the show), but they can never be conflated into a single set of understandings about what Levad is (or was) as a performance.

When one considers process, there is never a possibility of generating a stable ‘understanding’ of what happened and what was produced. The meanings of the work continue to change through the entire rehearsal process, and even beyond the performances themselves as new perspectives and contextual lenses are brought to bear on the work and its implications. It is therefore necessary to construct a framework for articulating knowledge about process that accommodates its necessarily provisional nature, and the inevitably narrative nature of its construction.

I therefore articulate my own entry into the role of observer in a rehearsal process as a story that is constructed by offering a series or sequence of ‘exemplary moments’, or what anthropologist Michael Agar (1996) describes as “rich points”, in the research process: “key moments when…things finally fall into place” (Seligmann, 2005, p. 248). In this case, when I deconstruct the scenes described at the beginning of the chapter, they crystallise a number of key issues relating to the choice of methodological approach, the selection and application of methods for data collection and analysis, my positioning in relation to the subject/s of my enquiry, and hint at some of the ethical implications of the adoption of such an approach. I have used this approach throughout this thesis, selecting and articulating ‘rich points’ in
the narratives of each of the case studies for their capacity to be emblematic of particular sets of limits operant on the creative process. Not all moments in a rehearsal process have the capacity that playwright Jenny Kemp describes in relation to her own manipulation of the temporality of experience in which “You can stop in any moment, anywhere, and it will be full, and the ‘history’ of that moment will be alive” (Minchinton & Kemp, 1998, pp. 79-80). To echo Kemp, I too am “looking for the moment when many resonances are possible” (pp.79-80).

I use these moments to tease out their implications and representative potential for speaking of an entire process, while, at the same time, their clearly temporal nature (the moments are always contextualized in terms of their location in the process) makes it clear that these moments are always provisional knowledge constructions that must be read in terms of an overall process. They, in fact, come to stand in for, to represent, whole processes, even while they explicitly articulate their temporary and provisional nature. In effect, what I have called the prologue to this thesis also acts as a series of ‘exemplary moments’, scenes that ‘set the scene’ and mark the territory I will explore in this investigation. The action of writing the prologue itself functions as analysis, but through it I would argue that I am also enacting a practice based methodology – a sort of dramaturgy of research in which the choices themselves enact the argument as it forms. This approach aims to allow the reader to ‘see’ something of the lived experience of both making and researching performance, “the context – the smells, sounds, sights, emotional tensions, feel of – the culture she (I) will attempt to evoke in a written text” (Wolf, cited in Johnston, 2013, p. 11).

**Creative research methodology**

This project aims to investigate what sorts of limits pertained to a range of representative contexts, and to examine how they impacted on/conditioned the process of making.

I embarked on this enquiry from an open-ended question about the interrelationships between performance making practices and the sites, content, forms and genres of their making. Common sense, anecdotal accounts and current academic literature, and my own lived experience as a maker, suggested that limits bound and shape the
performance making process and therefore the performance made. I have taken this as read, but adopted a more practice-focused approach in asking what sorts of limits, imposed or self-imposed, pertain in each of the contexts, and in each of the projects, I have investigated. The questions that follow from this relate to how these are read or recognized by the performance-makers, how the engagement with these limits then becomes a factor in the planning and progress of the performance making process, and how this ultimately works to shape the individual work of performance.

Existing methodological approaches distinguish between ‘practice as research’ and ‘practise led-research’. The use of dramaturgical strategies as tools for the analysis of rehearsal practice locates my research questions and the modalities of research in a fertile, if sometimes uneasy, space between these two positions. As I will unpack further in this chapter, and as the narrative of my entry into an ‘other’s’ rehearsal room above shows, the occupation of fertile, uneasy spaces might accurately characterize both my experience of locating myself in relation to the key questions and to the subjects of my enquiry throughout the research process, and the nature of the performance making process itself.

Baz Kershaw contends that,

> The differences between research ‘in’ and ‘in relation to’ the arts suggest fundamentally contrasting procedural modes, the first treating creativity as a means of investigation, the second implying it and its products as constituting a field to be studied by some other means. (Kershaw, 2009, p.105)

To use Baz Kershaw’s (2009, p. 105) distinction, it is important to note from the outset that all the processes/projects I investigate, including those in which I examine my own creative practice are framed as research “in relation to the arts” rather than practice-as-research, since it is the process by which the works are made that is under investigation. The title of Gay McAuley’s 2012 book, “Not Magic But Work” frames rehearsal practice explicitly as ‘work’ and Kate Rossmanith (2003) describes performance making as “cultural production”. I am interested in the interstitial space between these two ideas. Performance making is a practice/process that is work, but also produces work. Rehearsals, specifically (and distinct from, say, the exploratory activities of a period of ‘creative development) are purposeful activities directed
towards a public outcome – “stages on the way to the ultimate goal of performance in front of audiences” (Grant, 2007, p. 20). The work of performance making occurs within a professional culture that, as with all cultures, is distinguished by established rites, protocols, procedures, orthodoxies and habits. The work produced is generally sited in a particular definition of culture – the broader culture of the arts – but also within sub cultural sites where both the artists and the work are seen to “represent(s) certain values and work practices” and be “associated with a certain kind of theatre and certain social values” that distinguish them from one another (McAuley, 2012, p. 6).

My own work with the Gilgul Ensemble, described in the prologue to this thesis, and the telematic performance projects made with my students at Deakin University constitute two bodies of work. These works were produced more than a decade apart and in very different contexts, and made in collaboration with other artists, or with students, as part of my working life as a performance-maker and a teacher. If the performances made in these contexts do not themselves constitute research outcomes, the research has been led by the practice, as I have documented, questioned and investigated the processes by which they were made. My journey through this project, however, has exemplified some of the claims Brad Haseman (2006, pp. 3–4) makes for the value of practice-as-research in that it draws on and aims to extend “epistemologies of practice distilled from the insiders understandings of action in context” and contends with materials and practices that “may be unruly” and require the researcher “to eschew the constraints of narrow problem-setting and rigid methodological requirements”. I have followed what Haseman describes as a tendency in practice-led research to use “experiential starting points”, “to ‘dive in’…to see what emerges” (pp. 3–4). There is an implication of time, trajectory and direction embedded in this notion of ‘emerging’ which conditions the way the ‘work’ of performance making ‘works’, and, as a result, creates an irresistible logic in the way I have documented and analysed it. Practice-led research implies a sequence – the practice both leads, and leads to, the research. This project is thus a process of research ‘in relation to the arts,’ but is constructed via a hybrid methodology that applies the aims and premises of practice as research to a process in which my experience and practice as an artist provides a framework and investigative methodology, even though I do not make works that comprise, of themselves,
research outcomes. The format of this thesis is therefore a ‘traditional’ one – this is not a practice and exegesis approach – but the methodology is artistic and practice based in nature in order to provide an analysis that can speak directly to and in terms of the theatre practices it addresses.

Scope of the research

What is under analysis here are working processes in which I have watched the creation and extrusion of performance works through processes of performance making and rehearsal into performance to see how one generates the other, and in which my aim is to make visible how a particular process created a particular performance. It needs to be noted that, as a complex collaborative activity, there is no position from where the totality of the process is visible. As Gay McAuley (2012, pp. 11-12) points out, it is often impossible to determine “where the creative process begins and perhaps where it ends”, given that the rehearsal period is only the managed and formal part of the process in which all participants are ‘in the room’ for a determined period of time. McAuley speaks of the “bounded nature of events”, and of the boundaries she negotiated when observing rehearsals of Belvoir Street Theatre’s production of Michael Gow’s Toy Symphony in 2007. She acknowledges that, before rehearsals begin, “the writer’s process… had been going on for years” (pp. 11-12), and questions which work happening ‘outside the room’ she should attend or attend to – production meetings? meetings between director and writer? the informal gathering of actors in breaks? These are but some of many invisible drivers, such as the private preparation conducted by directors and actors, that are not visible to most participants in and during the process, but which have a profound impact on the way the process proceeds and what it produces.

Subjects

I have chosen to generate data through the examination of five case studies of performance making practice. In two of these projects, which bracket the study, I documented and analysed my own practice as a maker in collaborative performance making projects. In the remaining projects, I acted as an observer, documenting the performance making process of three local theatre companies in Victoria, Australia. This is an apparently simple distinction that I will unpack further later in this chapter.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Position/Status</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Exile Trilogy Part Three: Levad (1993)²⁰</td>
<td>Gilgil Theatre at the Playbox Theatre</td>
<td>Devisor</td>
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<td>Return To Earth</td>
<td>Melbourne Theatre Company</td>
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<td>The Threepenny Opera</td>
<td>Malthouse Theatre/Victorian Opera</td>
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<td>Ganesh Versus the Third Reich</td>
<td>Back to Back Theatre</td>
<td>Observer</td>
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<td>Researcher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Telematic Theatre Projects:</td>
<td>Deakin University &amp; University of Amsterdam</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
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<td>Unsettled Dust (2009)</td>
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<td>Director</td>
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<td>Quarter-Acre Dreaming (2010)</td>
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<td>Researcher</td>
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<td>Aragung: The Bark Shield Project (2010)</td>
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<td>Do You Accept? (2011)</td>
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<td>Boat People (2012)</td>
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<td>Are You There? (2013)</td>
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Figure 5. Status of the researcher in each case study

The processes I observed occurred in institutional contexts that sit in particular positions in the contemporary cultural landscape of Melbourne, at particular points of distance from a notional ‘mainstream’. Acknowledging that the notion of a ‘mainstream’ is fuzzy and vexed, in this simple conception, the artists and the works they make can be seen to "represent(s) certain values and work practices" and be “associated with a certain kind of theatre and certain social values” that distinguish them from one another (McAuley, 2012, p.6). I have chosen to study my own community of practice, conscious that this perspective limits the knowledge claims that can be made about theatre-making in other contexts. In the introductory chapter, I made a case that each instance of performance making provokes a ‘crisis of representation’ because the particular constellation of agencies working to create a performance creates its own *gestalt*. Nonetheless, when considered in the light of the settings in which they occur, which manifest, as I established in that chapter, as “framework(s) and logic(s) of practices...hierarch(ies) or structure(s) of relationships, rituals, practices and established forms of engagement which impact significantly on any interactions that occur within a complex system” (Fels, 2007, p. 129), most established rehearsal processes will broadly resemble one another in many respects. While taking “cognizance of local contours of experience” (Maxwell, 2006, p. 36) however, I have worked on the assumption that Western cities of comparable size will have a similar range of sites of theatrical production spanning mainstream to fringe, institutional to independent, subsidised to self-subsidised, and answerable to a range of external stakeholders who are answerable to their own individual creative agendas.

Both the Melbourne Theatre Company (Chapter 3) and the Malthouse Theatre (Chapter 4) sit in the mainstream as the two largest theatre companies in Melbourne. Back to Back Theatre (Chapter 5) might be considered an outsider in that it is located in a regional city not far from Melbourne, but also makes a form of ‘outsider art’ which explicitly challenges notions of a mainstream.\(^{21}\) The university students with whom I

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\(^{21}\) The ‘outsiderness’ of Back to Back Theatre will be considered in Chapter 6 but, for the purposes of this argument I will use Arielle White and James C. Kaufman’s simple statement that, “Though there are many definitions for what “outsider” art may be, it typically refers to art that is created by persons who work or exist outside of the sociocultural mainstream” (White & Kaufman, 2014).
make work at Deakin University have not yet approached even the margins of professional practice and their course of study does not aim to provide a ‘professional training’. I will discuss the problematic nature of working to both teach, and to critique and expand their notions of what might constitute, a professional practice in Chapter 6. The work of Gilgul Theatre, which effectively disbanded in 1997, is offered as an example of a company in a critical moment of emigration from the fringe to the mainstream.

With the exception of the Gilgul Ensemble, which was active only between 1991 and 1997, each company has been in operation, and an occupant of their designated position in what McAuley calls “the wider theatre community”, for several decades. The Melbourne Theatre Company began operation as the Union Theatre Repertory Company in 1953. The Malthouse Theatre began as Hoopla Productions in 1976, moved to the Playbox Theatre in 1977 and adopted its name. It has continued to produce new performance work through a shift to the Malthouse Theatre in 1990, adopting that name in 2005. Back to Back Theatre was formed in 1987 in the regional city of Geelong, but has regularly performed work in Melbourne, frequently at the Malthouse Theatre. The Drama course at Deakin University began at Monash Teachers College in 1961 and has survived through multiple changes of management, institutional mergers and name changes, from Rusden State College, to Victoria College, to its current location in the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University. As such, each project sits within an established institutional framework, has its own work spaces and the support of managerial and technical staff, is in receipt of (relatively) stable ongoing government subsidy, and regularly produces works of theatre, whether in the context of an annual season, or over designated periods of time. The Melbourne Theatre Company and the Malthouse Theatre present annual subscription seasons of performance. Back to Back Theatre (Chapter 5) is currently in receipt of triennial funding, at both state and national level, and plans its work over three year periods or longer. Deakin University presents works made with, on and by students in units of study offered in stable annual patterns. As a result, it is possible to see these companies as having ‘established’ and ongoing work cultures and practices.
To further focus the research, and in order to draw a clearer set of comparisons between these contexts and processes, I have elected to investigate projects that are, or are defined by their producers as, new work. Some projects – Gilgul’s *Levad*, Back to Back Theatre’s *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*, and the student-devised projects at Deakin and Amsterdam Universities – are definitively so, original works written and/or devised by the students or artists themselves. Some, such as the Melbourne Theatre Company’s *Return to Earth*, begin with a pre-written, ‘authored’ text. One project sits in an ambiguous space. I have acted as observer on a number of Malthouse rehearsal processes (see Prior, 2008), but will document here the rehearsal process for the 2010 production of Brecht and Weill’s *The Threepenny Opera*. While the work is clearly a part of the Brecht canon, and frequently staged, this production constituted a re-interpretation of the original opera, and the text had been substantially edited and rewritten for this production by local playwright Raimondo Cortese.

**Exclusions**

In order to limit the scope of this enquiry and enable a closer, more nuanced appraisal of the subjects, and because their practices are more unpredictable or respond to more complex briefs, there are some notable exclusions from this study that are important players on the same field. I have excluded large-scale commercial theatre productions of work that is either self-produced or ‘bought in’ as touring productions. Community theatre and theatre in education, in which I have an abiding interest, have also been excluded given that their processes are generally eclectic and contingent. I am saddest about the exclusion of an investigation of the working processes of a number independent companies and artists, which was a component of the original research design, and whose ingenuity in creating and adapting theatre-making processes in resource-limited contexts offer some interesting perspectives on the constraints-breed-creativity argument. Independent artists make theatre in much more complex environments and, often, within more complex constellations of limits, than

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22 In Melbourne, production houses such as Cameron Mackintosh, The Gordon Frost Organisation and The Production Company present large-scale commercial performances, mostly globally successful musicals such as *Les Miserables* or *The Lion King* where the template for the performance has been set in an original rehearsal process elsewhere, and replicated, often with a local cast, for local presentation. Other cultural institutions, often landlords in sites of presentation such as The Arts Centre, Melbourne, will buy in touring productions of work that have succeeded elsewhere but only on rare occasions will commission or produce the work themselves.
the established companies I have examined. As a result, their processes, partly driven by their own creative imperatives and preferences, and partly by the stringency of the limits within which they work, are far more eclectic. To a degree, the ways in which artists in this sector offer alternatives to established practices are represented in my consideration of the work of the Gilgil Ensemble and of Back to Back Theatre, and in a single example offered in the conclusion.

**Ethnographic approach**

The rationale for the use of ethnographic methodologies for the analysis of creative practice is, by now, well rehearsed (see Atkinson 2010; Conquergood, 2002; Ginters 2006; McAuley, 1998, 2006, 2012; Rossmanith 2003, 2008) as a means “to provide rich, holistic insights into people’s views and actions, as well as the nature (that is, sights, sounds) of the location they inhabit” and to “document the culture, the perspectives and practices, of the people in these settings” (Reeves, Kuper & Hodges, 2008, p. 337). Ethnographic methods for recording and analysing particular cultural practices involve observation and documentation, frequently through long periods of immersion in ‘fieldwork’ as participant-observer. My status as observer/participant observer shifted in the broader sense as I moved between processes in which I was making work, and processes in which I observed others making work. As is evident in the ‘exemplary moment’ that begins this chapter I describe, the distinction between participation and observation is slightly troubled in this case, and I will unpack further this in my discussion of the constitution of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ categories later in the chapter. In each case study, I documented the rehearsal process, taking detailed field notes to compile ‘thick descriptions’ that mapped each of the processes as they unfolded in time. Since, as Peter Moloney (cited in Cole, 2001, p. 162) states, “the things that are to be discovered are not known by anyone before the work of rehearsal begins”, these rich field notes allowed me to track and interpret the activity in each of the rooms in detail and in sequence as a “process of reaction” between the “multiple material elements” at play in each project (McAuley, 2012, p. 5).

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23I use the term, first coined by Clifford Geertz, to refer to detailed first hand documentation that captures what McAuley (2012, p. 9) describes as “both the detailed minutiae that make up the ‘passing occasion’ and the larger structures of the ‘long story’ of which it is part”.

53
Review and analysis of the patterns peculiar to each context at the end of each project, when compared with each other, brought into relief salient similarities and differences between them. Just as the narrative that begins this chapter attests to the sorts of issues that arose when I was an ‘outsider’ observer in a familiar context, I have sifted the collected data to identify which constellations of limits pertain in each context, and looked for an exemplary moment or moments that can be deconstructed and closely analysed to demonstrate this set of limits and ground my conclusions. Sometimes these moments were evident in the moment they occurred, as happened when performer Eddie Perfect negotiated an ascent on a very high table during rehearsals of The Threepenny Opera (See Chapter 4). More often, they have emerged only at the end of the process when I have reviewed the whole rehearsal narrative, including its culmination as a public performance and could identify patterns. In some cases, the meaning (or ‘exemplarity’) of particular moments has only been evident after review and comparison of all the case studies.

**Data collection: “Taking note while taking notes”**

Following the broad distinction I have drawn between observer and participant-observer, modes of documentation have varied from case study to case study, depending on my relationship to the project.

When taking field notes as an observer, I developed a notation practice designed to separate the tasks of documenting and interpreting in order to defamiliarise the familiar and facilitate some critical distance from my subjects. James Clifford, who has written extensively on ethnographic practice, distinguishes between *transcription* – the recording of events as they unfold with the gaze of the researcher fixed on their subject; and *description*, in which the researchers gaze is fixed on the writing, fleshing out rudimentary notes to produce a “more or less coherent representation of an observed cultural reality” (Clifford, 1990, p. 51). If we frame performance making and rehearsal as work practices, I was concerned to capture *what work* people were doing. This included noting what sort of activity was being undertaken, whether it was ‘on’ or ‘off’ the floor (the distinction, for example, between rehearsing a scene, or discussing the work around the ‘actors table’), which scene was being worked on, how many times the scene was run in one session, and where the stops, reverses, reflections
happened within the scene. In general, I took notes on a laptop computer while the rehearsal was running, in as uninflected a voice as possible. To establish a distinction for myself between documentation and interpretation, my practice was to record ‘what happened’ and my own reflections and questions about ‘what it meant’ differently – usually by using different fonts. Linda Seligmann (2005, p. 249) calls this “taking note while taking notes”, and the separation between ‘taking notes’ and ‘taking note’ helps with the ‘distancing’ necessary for the ‘insider’ by treating the uninflected documentation as data that may be interpreted in a number of ways and from a number of positions.

McAuley (1998b) writes of the value of data gleaned from video-recordings of rehearsals, and many artists record parts of the creative process as a regular part of their practice. This is probably used more commonly in processes of devising in order to capture improvisations on the floor, as Back to Back Theatre does (see Chapter 5), and as I have done on occasions in my own work as a performance-maker and teacher. Having once endured the intermittent presence of a video camera through a difficult devising process, I felt that bringing recording devices of any kind into rehearsal rooms where I was not a participant in the process would be intrusive, though one of the companies provided video footage of rehearsal and performance on request. This meant that some dialogue I have documented is paraphrased, but I have returned to speakers where I felt I needed clarification or confirmation, or they needed the option to keep the material ‘off the record’.

**Document Analysis**

Despite the fact that rehearsal is even more private and ephemeral than performance in relation to ‘the public record’, these processes, “often lost in performance” (Letzler-Cole, 1992, p. 2) actually generate a surprising amount of ‘trace evidence’.

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24 In keeping with my anxiety regarding unwanted interference in the rehearsal process, and aware that rehearsal is also about ‘listening’, I also kept pencil and paper to hand for moments when I judged that the tapping of keys might prove distracting to the participants.

25 During the difficult process of devising *The Wilderness Room* with the Gilgul Ensemble in 1994, cameras were a constant and sometimes intrusive presence, collecting footage for a documentary on the director, Barrie Kosky. The film, written and directed by Melissa Rymer was completed in 1995 under the title *Kosky in Paradise*. (See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=deiE09BDcE4&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=deiE09BDcE4&feature=youtu.be))
In my own practice as a performance-maker, the generation of ‘working documents’ that might be considered as ‘raw data’, is an intrinsic part of the process. In order to analyse my function as a performance-maker and performer in *Levad*, the process from which I am now most distant in time, I drew on my own contemporaneous rehearsal notes, hand written in a series of numbered exercise books. These notes, of the type I would normally make in any performance making process, were largely recorded in rehearsal as we ‘wrote’ the work, and contained dramaturgical/historical research, ideas for scenes, song music and lyrics, fragments of the existing texts we were cutting up, fragments of performance text we were inventing, descriptions of action sequences, lists of scene sequences, performance problems or questions to be re-visited, and diagrams of stage traffic. Written in the sequence in which we worked, these notes provided a detailed map of the process – what material we worked on and in what sequence throughout the devising and rehearsal period. Since I was also gathering data for what would constitute my MA thesis, I supplemented these ‘working documents’, generally registered on single pages, with my own reflections – usually on the opposite page – with speculation and reflection about broader issues that were arising from the process. Since the work was my own, and with the consent of my collaborators, I conscripted the assistant director to video-record particular sorts of rehearsal activity – largely improvisations and, once scenes had found enough shape to be repeated and edited, rehearsals of scenes and sequences of scenes. These were moments in which I could not (and perhaps should not) see myself – and the recordings allowed me to revisit and analyse an ‘outsider’s’ view of events. The recordings also document directorial interventions and mid-scene stops, starts and discussions. This material allowed me to reflect on the director – actor relationship and the ways in which these interactions were taken up, translated, and translocated into the fictional narrative of the performance. In this particular instance, video documentation was not used as a compositional tool, and we tended not to review and transcribe recorded improvisations in rehearsal. Our practice was to do a sequence of improvisations then return to the table and write the text longhand – into my exercise books. The richness of the data contained in the notes and the video recordings of rehearsal in particular has allowed me to return to it after twenty years and examine it through a different lens to glean new meanings. It is perhaps testament to the shifts in performance making practice that technology has wrought in the twenty-year gap between projects that the devising process at Back to Back theatre customarily
involves the recording and transcription of improvisations to create a large repository of scene texts and ideas that the company later edits into scenes.

Additional data was gained from rehearsal schedules, which map the rehearsal process in interesting ways that describe both time and space. Rehearsal schedules are both disciplinary and predictive. Schedules are generally developed in consultation between the director and the stage manager on a week-to-week basis, and serve to coordinate the complex activity in the room. Analysis of these documents can yield telling information about assumptions and practices embedded in the rehearsal process – how much time has been allocated to the entire process? How much time allocated to what sorts of activities? How much time in the rehearsal room in contrast to the amount of time the team will have in the performance space before the production is presented to an audience? Schedules need also to be constructed around demands from outside the room such as publicity calls or costume fittings, or the need to incorporate work that is not directly under the supervision of the director such as music or choreography rehearsals. Early rehearsals will frequently be scheduled in scene sequence as the team works through the narrative arc of the play, in which meaning is expressed partly through sequence. Schedules that emerge in the middle of the process can reflect more complex demands from within the room such as scenes that are proving resistant to interpretation and require more attention. Later schedules will map the bringing together of parts of the play that have been rehearsed separately into sequential groups of scenes and ultimately runs of the entire work in sequence.

The data collected out of the other account of my own (collaborative) work with a co-researcher, and with students in Melbourne and Amsterdam, which ends the thesis, was collected very differently, and the differences reflect the context in which the work was made, and further demonstrate the technological tools now routinely available to performance-makers and in university contexts. Again, I have drawn on ‘working documents’ – pre-project research carried out by my colleague and myself, questions and provocations which might catalyse scene-making, ideas for scenes, scenographic schemas, devising strategies, readings and images. As the process proceeded, this documentation was amplified by the addition of class plans, casting schemas, scene drafts, rehearsal and production schedules, notes on student progress at particular
stages, provisional scene sequences, video recordings of improvisations and rehearsals, directors notes through the sequence of performances and, ultimately, descriptive feedback to students in the process of assessment. A rich source of data was also drawn from online sources. As I will describe in further detail in Chapter 7, not only were the performances made to be streamed online, but much of the work of learning, making and reflecting was conducted online, on university virtual learning sites and on social networking sites. My own students were asked to operate as both creative collaborators and reflective practitioners through creating and sharing their own working documents which capture and synthesise dramaturgical research, theoretical perspectives, class/rehearsal content, the requirements and progress of technical or design tasks and personal reflections. Since these works were not produced in a professional context, the analysis lacks the ‘validation’ of responses from professional reviewers, but it has been possible to draw on anonymous student feedback submitted through the university unit (course) evaluation systems at both universities, and to seek participant feedback through interview after the projects were completed.

I attended multiple performances of the projects – or, indeed, performed in them – and documented my responses in order to think about how the encounter with limits through rehearsal processes had shaped the performance outcome. Insofar as it is possible to judge the ‘success’ or otherwise of the projects, extending the study into the performance season also allowed me to draw on reviews of the work published at the time of production to provide one sort of validation, though I have not been concerned to analyse audience responses. Where I have felt it necessary, I have returned and interviewed subjects and solicited their views on my evolving interpretations.

The resulting data set created a detailed map of each process in which I could track the “process of reaction” between the “multiple material elements” at play in each project.

The interpretation of the data relating to all and each of the case studies in this thesis is inevitably and productively informed (but also limited) by my history and experience as an ‘insider’. As is the case with many who cobble together a career in and around the performing arts, I have worked at different times as a performer, a devisor, a writer,
a director, a dramaturg, a choreographer, a translator, a producer, a policy-maker, an
assessor of applications for funding at national and local level, a board member of a
number of arts organisations, a teacher of both practice and theory, and a researcher.
As such, I bring a trained eye not only to the creative processes, but to ‘pragmatic’ and
instrumental considerations which can strongly condition approaches to rehearsal
such as funding sources and levels, audience constitution and reach, reporting
requirements and performance indicators, and a broader range of stakeholders who
the project producers may need to answer to. Viewing this ‘thick description’, which is
such a hallmark of the ethnological process, with a gaze conditioned by this
experience, allows me to draw connections and conclusions across a rich reference
field regarding the relationship between the micro-culture of the specific rehearsal
room in a particular moment, and the institutional, sub-cultural, cultural, political and
social contexts in which they produce ‘culture’.

Judgement or taste?

While making an argument for the value of my experience, I need also to acknowledge
and challenge my own partisan position and alliances with modes of making and
thinking about theatre that might limit or colour my judgment. Although my position
varied in relation to each of the case studies, I have needed, to quote Linda Seligman,

to embrace the assumption of cultural relativism… [to] begin with the
premise that there is a rationale or logic to each society's or culture's
values, beliefs, and practices; that no one way is better than or
superior to another; and that the goal, then, is to strive to understand
each culture's logic and rationale. (Seligman, 2005, p. 230)

I certainly approached the investigation prepared to interrogate the rather problematic
line between my judgement and my tastes or preferences. Indeed, I am now well-
rehearsed in navigating these shoals with my students. A not infrequent response in
course evaluations in my university centres around the tastes of lecturers in the
creative arts for the ‘non-mainstream’ (or, as expressed in one anonymous student
complaint, for the “abstract and over the top” in course content, teachers’ feedback,
assessment criteria, and the inflection and application of assessment criteria. Although

26 Date withheld to preserve student anonymity
I have worked across the mainstream to fringe spectrum in my working life, the description of the work of the Gilgul Ensemble will attest to my preferences as a maker and an audience, which lean toward the experimental, the exploratory, and the complex. The fact that, after decades of watching and making theatre, I am sometimes bored by conventional performance and the ‘well-made play’ may simply be an indication of a jaded palate, but I have made and taught well-made plays and would assert that I am alert to, and appreciative of, the craft and imagination evident in its making, and conscious of its cultural value.

The upside and the downside of inside

The positionality of insiderness commits researcher–participants to showing their place in the setting that they are investigating. (Labaree, 2002, p. 107)

The ethnographic distinction between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ is convenient in that testifies to a clear, if un-nuanced and un-problematised positioning of the researcher in relation to the culture, subjects and/or work they are observing. Ethnography has continued to deconstruct, unpack, nuance and problematize these terms, recognising the importance of looking beyond “this methodological dichotomy” (Labaree, 2002, p. 99).

American researcher Robert Labaree (2002, p. 97) offers a critical survey of the benefits and dilemmas of the “insider participant observer” that has been particularly helpful in the analysis of my shifting and often ambiguous status in relation to the subjects of my enquiry. He summarises the “interrelated advantages to insiderness” (p. 103) in relation to four broad values that offer a neat framework within which to organise the somewhat messy choreography of what ethnographer James Clifford describes as the “continuous tacking between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’… [in] a dialectic of experience and interpretation” that characterised my experience throughout this project (Clifford, 1988, p. 34).

I have re-ordered here Labaree’s (2003, p. 103) summary of the benefits of membership of the community they are investigating to the researcher as follows:
• “the value of deeper understanding and clarity of thought for the researcher.”
• “the value of greater access”;
• “the value of cultural interpretation;”
• “the value of shared experiences;”

In a sense, my claim for the authority of my experience also acknowledges that the opportunity to bring that experience into a focussed program of research allowed me to deepen and clarify my thinking about the complex network of elements that, as McAuley (2012, p. 5) asserts, “both constrain and make possible the production of the artwork as well as the work itself”. Although the “tacking between the inside and the outside” has required both rigorous self-reflexivity and a degree of nimbleness, my position as a researcher has also allowed me to look at my own work as if from the outside, and to watch the work of others participating in familiar processes from further back ‘in the room’ and with a greater degree of objectivity.

It is interesting to note that most accounts, including key texts on rehearsal observation (Harvie & Lavender, 2010; Letzler-Cole, 1992, 2001; McAuley, 2012) touch only lightly upon how the researchers gained access to the rehearsal processes they witnessed, and few problematize the issue, or the positionality it assumes. Jen Harvie (2010, p. 15) notes, that allowing access to rehearsals has been an “industry taboo”, but acknowledges in the introduction to the collection of essays Making Contemporary Theatre: International rehearsal processes, that the collection itself constitutes evidence that “this taboo may be fading”. She grants that the contributors occupy a range of positions in that “some writers are academic observers; some, participant-makers” and that the editors “have sought insider, experience-based, close engagement with the work” (p. 15). Contributors to this revealing collection of essays do acknowledge their varying positions in relation to their subjects, but tend either not to problematize those positions, or to do so only by implication.

My ‘insider’/participant status is evident in relation to the analyses of the Gilgul and Deakin University projects, as these address projects in which I participated as part of my working life. Access to the workspaces where I acted as a non-participant observer was undoubtedly facilitated by what Labaree (2002, p.113) calls “community membership”. I have worked, at other times, with each of the other companies whose
processes I observed but did not (formally) participate in, and with many of the artists who worked on these projects. Some are long-standing friends. The relatively unquestioned welcome, and unfettered access, I was given in each of these rooms, and the level of frankness in responses to interview questions and informal conversations with artists with whom I have established relationships as collaborators, past and present, suggested that those artists viewed me as a trusted fellow-traveller with their best interests, and the best interests of my community of practice at heart.

As the opening story testifies, in the projects I observed, each of the project directors, the gatekeepers who provided the initial point of access, introduced me to their teams as an experienced professional artist and teacher. Implicit in this was a reassurance that I would bring a capacity to “interpret the culture of the community” (Labaree, 2002 p. 104), based on shared experience of the necessary and productive vulnerability, barely contained chaos and anxiety of making theatre, which I have described in the prologue. I have shared the “intense, embodied experiences”, and “the simultaneous feeling of in control/out of control” (Seton, 2010, p. 17), of the performance making process, and am quick to reassure my students that this comes with the territory, but rely equally on their perception of my experience and ‘community membership’ to persuade them that they will be safe in my hands.

As the narrative of my entry into the rehearsal process at the Malthouse Theatre testifies, however, this is (and was) not unproblematic, and what strikes me as I reflect on the experience of the first two days of observation I have described is how fluid my positioning was, and how the shifts between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ were being negotiated virtually from moment to moment. In this scene, the director introduces me

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27 This research project was approved by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (Project number 2011-036). In each case, permission to document the process was solicited from all members of the creative team. In the case of the three companies I observed as ‘outsider’, this was negotiated via the director, who solicited the permission of the rest of the project team before I began observing. Permission was sought from my co-creators in the Gilgul Ensemble to use and publish the documentation we gathered in rehearsal. Students in both universities involved in the telematic performance projects were briefed at the beginning of each process about the aims of the research projects, with the research aims carefully explained, and with assurance that any data used would de-identify them.
as a member of the community of practice (‘one of the crew’, rather than ‘one of the team’), as an artist he has worked with before, and describes me as a friend, which positions me as an insider. But he also describes me as a researcher who will be observing the process, an outsider, and I am the only person present who needs to articulate to the assembled team what I am doing in their room. I am obliged to ask them to read a research statement and sign forms, which may reassure that my ‘insider sympathies’ are augmented by a notion of ethical obligation and academic rigour, though it also evokes the/an institution of academia to which they are outsiders. I am invited to sit with the team as they read and discuss the play, but do not join the discussion, nor am I explicitly invited to do so. When I return the following day, the room has been territorialised. There is clearly marked territory for the actors, either when they are on the floor, or when they are watching the work on the floor ready to step up when required. There is clearly marked territory for the directorial and production team which gives them a clear view of the actors’/acting space. But there is no ‘unmarked’ space in this crowded room and, as an ‘outsider’ with no role in the making of the work, I need to sit literally in a narrow interface between actors’ and production team’s territories. This map-reading testifies to a more nuanced definition of ‘insiderness’ in which I am inside the community of practice but, as the map of the room indicates, outside the sort of micro-culture that is created between participants in any particular collaborative process.

It also raises the question why rehearsal rooms, despite the ‘fading taboo’ and the increased traffic of others not directly involved in the making of the work (such as researchers, interns, publicists, journalists etc.) through the space, maintain the aura of, as Letzler-Cole called it, “a hidden world” (Letzler-Cole, 1992, p. 1). Why might the gatekeepers have stressed my status as an insider and, beyond the formal obligations of candidature, why did I need to explain myself, and my research, to participants in each of the case studies?

As Letzler-Cole (1992) notes, the rehearsal room has been a hidden world for reasons that accord with the peculiar logic of process and production in performance. An audience for the work is, in most cases, the destination rather than the journey, and the rehearsal room is a site for exploration, testing and refining. Work done in the studio is, by definition, unfinished – unready for public scrutiny. It is often difficult,
stops and starts, embarks on unproductive paths and has to beat an undignified retreat, is ridiculous, descends into chaos, or conflict. Participants are vulnerable in these moments and, as Mary Luckhurst (2010, p. 174) notes, “can distrust a figure they sometimes perceive as external to the rehearsal process and inherently negative”. An insider, however, is able to read the map of that process, with a nuanced understanding that “performance’s methods of improvisation, rehearsal and experiment assume an accretion of failures as an integral part of the creative process. One must continually make and continually fail in order to create” (O’Gorman & Wherry, 2012, p. 2). And as the response from some of the actors over lunch attests, some of the participants saw value in an insider perspective, and a research question, that took into account the unstable materials artists are working with, and the demands of working within time-pressured, messy and emergent processes.

Not observing, but watching

There is something paradoxical about presenting an argument for watching rehearsals, when rehearsal rooms are all about watching. I have substituted the term ‘watching’ for ‘observing’ here in order to point out that the gaze of the watcher is qualitatively different from that of an observer, in that it connotes both attentiveness and expectation.28 The watchers gaze is fixed on something that is unfolding, or may unfold through time, and this practice of purposeful watching is common to both the ethnographer and the theatre artist. To return to the aphorism I have attributed to Richard Foreman, ‘what is really in the room’ in performance making is a complex web of watching – watching that is evaluative, critical and diagnostic, always tacking between the moment on the rehearsal floor and its implications for ‘the long story’ of the performance-that-will-be-watched by an audience.

When acting as ‘observer’ in my ‘non-matrixed’ positions in other people’s rehearsal rooms, and ‘watching the watchers’, the rehearsal space seemed to be criss-crossed by an intricate and dynamic network of gazes, like the trajectories of laser beams tracing bullet firing lines which are a trope in police procedural television shows. Directors, writers, dramaturgs, stage managers, technicians and designers watch the

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28 “to look at something for a period of time, especially something that is changing or moving”. [http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/watch?q=watching](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/watch?q=watching) Accessed 12/1/15
work from different places in the room, from different perspectives and through
different frames, attending to aspects of the work that fall under their remit. Actors
watch the other watchers in the room and each other but also, to adapt Boal’s term,
act as ‘spectactors’, monitoring their own ‘acting’, and calibrating and recalibrating
their performances to the emerging score of the work. The watching is evaluative,
each watcher assessing the way in which the action of the floor will contribute to, or
align with, the emerging interpretation of the work-that-will-be-watched by an
audience, effectively forming a ‘shadow audience’. Indeed, echoing the ethnographic
term, the stage director, who is inside the team but not inside the cast, is frequently
described as providing an ‘outside eye’. As the work is being prepared for an
audience, I am one of a number whose watching is also being watched – as a stand-in
for the audience the performance will meet when produced, but also as audience to
the process of its making and the production of its meanings.

This watching, of course, shifts in perspective in relation to my own work as I watch
from within the process. To return to my own story in the prologue to this thesis;
working as a maker and performer in the creation of Levad demanded simultaneous
but essentially distinct sorts of watching and monitoring. As criss-cross the interstitial
space between maker and performer, my gaze emanates from the floor, but splits,
merges with that of the director, loops back to the actors space, then splits again – the
maker attending to the creation and composition of the emerging text, and its
emerging meaning, while the performer attends to the embodiment, register, rhythm
and inflection of that text. In this context, I am, as Schechner (1985, p. 37) describes it,
“beside myself” performing to what Kaynar describes in another context as “the implied
audience” (Kaynar, 1997, p. 49).

When working in another interstitial space, between director and teacher with students
at my university, I am watching the work emerge, but also watching for what each
student is learning from the experience, and watching to check that they are watching.

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29 Augusto Boal uses the term ‘spectactors’ to describe the transformation from spectator to
actor that is a fundamental principle of Forum Theatre. In this context, the spectator watches
the actor and, when she/he wishes to change the outcome of the scene, steps in to perform
the role of the protagonist and make new choices. Boal (1998, p. 7) describes this
‘spectacting’ as “rendering the relationship between actor and spectator transitive”, but I use
the term here to describe the dynamic tension in the self-conscious watching and doing
required of an actor in the construction and performance of their role which is both transitive
and simultaneous.
Students can sometimes be bamboozled by the fragmented nature of a rehearsal process and assume, implicitly or explicitly, that their attention is only required in the scenes in which they participate as performers, when the practice of purposeful watching even when not ‘required’ is actually critical to their learning. This sort of watching has the effect of binding and layering the fragments as they are interpreted and shaped, and teaches them to frame and shape the offers they make in rehearsal in tune with the evolving narratives, themes and the formal/generic elements of the work.

**Witnessing and the observer effect**

As a researcher who will observe/watch, record, analyse and, ultimately, testify to what I have seen, I am also *witnessing*, a term whose usage in legal contexts hints at a set of ethical issues and responsibilities related to the relationship in which the testimony of the witness can have consequences for the witnessed. Performance ethnographer, D. Soyini Madison (2005, p. 4) reminds us, “Representation has consequences: how people are represented is how they are treated”. I am also reminded here of Tim Etchells’ (1999, p. 17) statement that, “to witness an event is to be present at it in some fundamentally ethical way, to feel the weight of things and one’s own place in it, even if that place is simply, for the moment, as an onlooker”. Beyond consideration of using insider experience to contextualise the vulnerability of artists in moments of necessary failure, I am aware that ‘publication’ of my impressions of these private processes can have other sorts of consequences. McAuley (2012, p. 8) rightfully points out that an insider may feel pressure from without or within to restrict their testimony since “when a person is located within a community or group, that person is subject to the power relations of the group, and may be reluctant to hurt people’s feelings or offend the powerful who have influence over future job opportunities”. While certainly aware of a reluctance to hurt people’s feelings there are other potentially other vulnerabilities at play in the private space of the rehearsal room.

The relationship between the artists I observed and the institutions they were working in or for varied. Most were freelancers, contracted only for one project in an industry where there is high unemployment, and it is a commonly accepted belief that each project acts as an audition for future employment. Actors are aware that another sort
of watching is at play in the rehearsal room – one in which not only their past successes, but their inventiveness, technical skills, and capacity to adapt to distinct rehearsal processes are also being audited. Rehearsal rooms can be leaky, and the informal ‘peer assessments’ that percolate as narratives from the rehearsal room and are published through informal networks of ‘industry gossip’ can often determine future employment opportunities within that company, or in the wider field as they contribute to the formation of artists’ reputations’ in their community of practice.\(^{30}\) The members of the Back to Back ensemble were the least vulnerable in this respect, as they were the only performers in ongoing employment with their company.

Harder to assess are the potential implications for these subjects of publication in academic contexts, and whether these were anticipated or understood by any of the participants. If the requirement to read my research statement and sign a research agreement tells them that I will write a thesis (rather than, say, a journalistic profile) and testifies to the seriousness of the endeavour, few seemed to understand what that thesis, or journal articles drawn from the research might look like, and even fewer showed any understanding of the networks of academic publication where my research might be published. I have published or co-published articles on the work of the Gilgul Ensemble drawing on my MA research (see Prior, 1998; Prior & Richards, 2003; Prior 2006; Prior & Richards, 2008; Prior, 2010) on early productions in Michael Kantor’s period as director and Artistic Director at the Malthouse Theatre (see Prior, 2008), on Back to Back Theatre (Prior, 2013) and on early iterations of the joint Telematic Theatre projects Deakin University and the University of Amsterdam (see Prior, van der Zwaard & van der Laaken, 2009; Prior, Johnson & van der Zwaard, 2011) with no noticeable effects on the reputations of any of the stakeholders that I am aware of. Nor has my own reputation seemed to suffer from my published and critical analysis of my own work.

In the final analysis, of course, my own work as a performance-maker or director/teacher will succeed, or it won’t, entirely independent of its status as a subject of research, since the research has been designed such that it does not impinge on

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\(^{30}\) I recall a moment in another rehearsal room (not one of the case studies in this thesis) when an actress was, I thought, working valiantly to decode a particularly difficult moment, and asking for more time on the floor to do so. Another team member leaned over and said quietly, and rather uncharitably; ‘There are some actors who just suck all the air out of the room. If she wasn’t so bloody good, she’d never work again!’.
those processes. My capacity to subject my own vulnerability in the process of making and performing *Levad* to analysis, described in the Prologue, and then to convert it into a (pragmatic) dramaturgical strategy which re-formed the work to accommodate it, allowed me to snatch some (modest) victory from the jaws of imminent defeat. In relation to the work with my students, the same might be said, and the stakes are relatively low in relation to reputation. It is, in any case, my task and responsibility to work for the success of these projects, and treating them as research is a way of thinking about my own processes as a maker and a teacher. The progressive exposure of students to the cycles of testing, failure, evaluation and reconceiving that inhere to the creative process is designed to accustom them to the precarity of the enterprise, and “to trade some short-term expectations of sustenance for the longer-term potential for flexible and transposable agency” (Lowry & McKinnon, 2012, p. 47). In both these contexts, I expect the work to be difficult, I expect to struggle with the material and the process, and I expect my collaborators and students will do the same to a greater or lesser degree. Whether they succeed or fail, by any standards, these experiences present opportunities for learning and growth that an easy and seamless process might not. In both these contexts, I was in a position of ‘agency’, and was able to act if failure loomed.

Nonetheless, where possible, I have de-identified some subjects, mindful that I am examining some exemplary moments in which they were vulnerable. This has been easier in some cases than others, given that performances are public, and for-the-public, and marketed-to-the-public in web-based contexts that a simple Google search will reveal. Consideration of the consequences of representation and publication, however, became critical in moments in one of the case studies where difficult parts of the process presented me with a set of methodological dilemmas, and prompted some deeper investigation of the ethical implications of rehearsal observation.

**Ethical witnessing: or how many actors does it take to change a light bulb?**

*How many actors does it take to change a lightbulb? One hundred. One to change the globe and ninety-nine to say, “I could have done that”.*

The selection of the Melbourne Theatre Company as a site for observation was made as a means of anchoring the research within an example of tried and tested
approaches to rehearsal, and of rehearsal processes most commonly adopted in repertory theatres – a benchmark against which other processes might be assessed. The company is not noted for, nor can it's reputation afford, taking big creative risks, particularly not in the rehearsal process, though it sometimes produces works that might deal with ‘risky’ material or, less frequently, ‘risky’ forms.\textsuperscript{31} The relative stability of its interpretive processes, even accounting for differences from, say, director to director, is testament to a sort of institutional approach to risk management that involves careful vetting of performance texts, selection of directors, and casting of actors with experience in the genre of the performance work. As I will discuss in Chapters 3 and 5, the investment and management of time is frequently the most effective creative risk management tool.

At the Melbourne Theatre Company, the most formal of contexts I examined, my territory in the room reflected both my status in relation to the institution and the project, and the mutual anxiety that attended it. Access to this rehearsal room had been the most difficult to negotiate, despite having worked for the company in the past. I knew the director least well – socially but not professionally, and only some of the actors in the cast. The rehearsal room was the largest, and the cast the smallest, so there was lots of unmarked territory to choose from, but I elected to sit in the most distant corner of the rehearsal room I could find. The director had also (and with good grace) introduced me to this team as an ‘insider’, and referred to my professional reputation and experience as a performance-maker. As rehearsals proceeded, however, and the creative team became engaged in negotiations about the fit between the process and the genre, members of the team would sometimes retreat to my corner to discuss their concerns. Here I became concerned about a potential observer effect, where my couch, remote but so visible in the large room, might begin to look like an alternative locus of negotiation. In this situation, prior relationships with friends in the team needed to be renegotiated in order not to appear partisan, or to undermine the necessary agency of the director.

\textsuperscript{31} This assertion might be modified by recent changes in the artistic directorate of this company, the employment of maverick \textit{auteur} directors such as Simon Stone, and the addition of a season dedicated to the development and production of riskier independent works (see Conclusion).
This aspect is infrequently problematized in rehearsal analysis. Lourdes Orozco, who does not reveal her relationship to her subject/s, nor how she gained access to the project, describes the observation of an unhappy devising process in the making of *Une façon d’aborder l’idée de méfiance*, and the “*enfant terrible*” (Orozco, 2010, p. 138) tendencies of Argentinian/Spanish director Rodrigo Garcia which resulted, in the instance she examines and for a variety of reasons, in a ‘cold reception’ for the work. She evinces no concern that her considered but critical appraisal of the process by which it was made might in any way damage the reputation of the director, though it might be argued that Garcia is so strongly positioned in the cultural landscape as to be relatively immune. His long history of presenting work “capable of inspiring disgust and admiration in equal measure” (Orozco, 2010, p.122) with his own company, and his ongoing presence and status on the international touring circuit, would suggest that there have few consequences of the publication of this account for his ongoing practice and resources.

As Labaree concludes,

> The previous or negotiated personal relationships one forges with particular individuals are not isolated from the interpersonal dynamics experienced between one’s own informant- friend and other members of the community. The friendships that insiders create prior to becoming participant observers are likely to be open for all to see within the community. However, when the transition moves from community member to achieving the role of being a researcher of that community, suspicions of illegal partnerships or hidden purposes can arise, undermining access to others. (Labaree, 2002, p. 113)

In this context, there were moments where I felt that some participants viewed me with some suspicion, perhaps conflating perceived allegiances to independent performance and my status as an academic and researcher with the role of a critic looking for something to criticise – this time the performance of the process, rather than the performance of the performance. As I wrote, I continued to be alert to, and to interrogate, the ease with which my perspective on the process slipped toward the ‘familiar’ – that of the actors and the writer who were friends and past collaborators, and of my own as an actor with the Melbourne Theatre Company in the past. As I will describe in the following chapter, my own experience with this company was as an
actor in a context which was relatively hierarchical, and in which the agency of the actor was inflected in very particular ways. Consideration of this was instructive and pointed to the necessity, in periods of observation of all the projects, in my mode/s of observation, and in the position/s from which I viewed the work, to keep ‘walking around the work’, attempting to view the process from the positions of other members of the creative team, and to consider the broader institutional framework in which the work was being made.

**Time heals all wounds?**

Ethnographic methodology stresses the need for long periods of immersion, and I will spend some time discussing the limits imposed by short rehearsal processes, and the permissions granted by longer rehearsal processes, in following case studies.

Suffice to say that, in my experience, time is a precious resource in performance making, which goes some way to explaining my anxiety at taking up time not directly concerned with the project of making/rehearsing when I attended the first rehearsal of *The Threepenny Opera*. I am interested, however, to look at how issues of time have conditioned my methodological approach and both ‘constrained and made possible’ the conclusions I have arrived at.

I am aware that my consideration of each of the case studies, emerges from the privileged position of having, and taking, enough time to see the project through to its end in a season of performances, to solicit the views of participants at the end of that process, to review both documentary and interpretive data collected throughout, to audit published reviews, to evaluate the process in relation to its cultural/institutional context, to consider the difference between this context and those in which the other case studies took place, and then to engage in a lengthy period of reflection. Which is to say that my interpretive work was conducted under much less stringent time constraints than those of the team who were making the performance.

Even so, I have had to reflect on some residual anxiety about whether any critical aspect of the study – and its publication – might “cause more harm than necessary to achieve the value (of the research)” (Labaree, 2002, p. 115), for the participants rather than the companies that produced the work who, in ‘the long game’ are generally
highly successful. This has been somewhat ameliorated by some further consideration of the effects of time.

The ephemerality of performance has some protective features. The production of *Return to Earth* at the Melbourne Theatre Company, for example, received mixed responses from both audiences and critics. The director, however, had come to the project on the back of a number of very successful productions with the company, and has since made highly successful work, both within and without that company. The actors, designers and technical crew have moved on to successes and ‘mixed successes’ in other productions and other areas. In Chapter 6, I will address the ways in which the Back to Back ensemble have turned external concerns about their agency and welfare into complex, brilliant and highly successful theatre-about-theatre. The telematic projects with my own students, addressed in Chapter 6, were not all, or always, successful or happy for all students, or for my co-researcher and I, but ongoing correspondence on the Facebook pages we created for each project would suggest that none were adversely affected by the experience. And I have used my own struggles as subject for performance, and a subject for research.

The ways in which creative processes unfold in performance making mean, to reframe Moloney’s dictum, that I could never know how that process would end. Good processes sometimes produce bad work. Unhappy processes sometimes produce outstanding work. 32 McAuley (2012), also points out that it is hard to know where the creative process actually ends, when rehearsals is only the formally arranged and managed part, and when performances so frequently change in their encounter with an audience. My experience with *Levad*, in which the ‘crisis’ meant that I returned to the performance season with a differently inflected performance, finding solutions to problems in performance rather than in rehearsal, is by no means unique. This is evident in a number of the case studies I examine. *The Threepenny Opera* continued to develop through the performance season, including adapting to minor crises and the effects of a long and demanding season. Back to Back Theatre productions often tour for long periods of time, and the works are constantly being ‘tweaked’ to find new meanings and inflections, to accommodate new actors, or to adapt to new sites of

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32 One of the earliest ‘ethnographic’ accounts of a rehearsal process is David Selbourne’s first hand testimony to the difficult process that produced Peter Brook’s extraordinarily successful production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Selbourne, 1982).
presentation. Seasons of student work at my university are generally very short, so there is limited capacity to correct or adapt over a small number of performances, but we debrief (formally and informally) and related assessment tasks require them to reflect on the entire span of the project, from development through to presentation.

Observing Watching Witnessing Documenting

I cannot claim the methodological conceit of unpacking an ‘exemplary’ or “rich moment” as an innovation in rehearsal analysis. Indeed, Susan Letzler Cole’s seminal study of rehearsal begins with just such a moment, as do many ethnographic accounts of particular cultures. I would hope that this account, however, testifies to the useful adaption of a methodological approach, adopted, adapted and refined in other disciplines, that offers “guidance and concepts that ‘are good to think with’” (McAuley, 2012, p. 5). If my aim is to make connections and comparisons between the sites in which performance making and rehearsal processes happen, and the broader cultural framework in which they set, and to speculate on mutual impact of one on the other, then observing/watching/witnessing and documenting in detail the work of practitioners in these settings is the best place to start. The creation of what Clifford Geertz famously called “thick description” (see Geertz, 1973), supplemented by the sort of documentation generated by these processes, produces rich data which map the processes and yield, upon analysis, exemplary moments that testify to the particular constellations of limits which are present in each context, and which characterize the complex and interrelated set of positions I occupied as a practitioner/researcher through this study.

I would contend that my status as a practitioner/researcher has meant that I have viewed the work of performance making in three ways that are interrelated but distinct in the frames they construct around what is being viewed. As a researcher using established ethnographic methodological approaches to document and analyse performance making practice, I am observing. I am sometimes a participant/observer and sometimes an observer but the term, especially in relation to the practice of ethnography, suggests a purposeful activity conducted at a critical distance. As a researcher who embarks from a practitioners perspective, who investigates and researches a practice which is about watching, being watched and producing work
which will be watched, my gaze is characterised by the peculiar attentiveness and expectation connoted by that term. I am watching processes that play out in and through time, that are emergent, and are directed toward outcomes that are unpredictable. Finally, as a researcher who will watch, record, analyse and, ultimately, testify to what I have seen, I am also a witness who offers a critically-engaged testimony after due consideration of my positionality in the settings I am investigating.
CHAPTER 3

Return to Earth at the Melbourne Theatre Company: A Tale of Two Tables

In Return to Earth I created a naturalistic world with cracks in it, where for a long time I was creating fantasy worlds with a sliver or two of naturalism. (Katz in Galloway, 2011)

What do the great laws and necessities of theatre mean for the specific performances of theatre artists in the world? Does theatrical reality create a limiting necessity or a space of structured possibility? (Fortier, 1997, p. 50)

Week One: Table One. Talk around the table

27th September, 2011. Day 2 of rehearsals for Return To Earth at the Melbourne Theatre Company. The cast is sitting around the actors’ table. Two are missing, working on other shows and unavailable - one until mid-week and the other until the beginning of next week. They were at the first reading yesterday. I was not. I was across the road at the Malthouse Theatre where another of my case studies, Back to Back Theatre’s ‘Ganesh Versus the Third Reich’ was in final technical rehearsals before its premier performance on 29th September.

The writer is here, and sitting at the table. The stage manager is sitting at the table, as are the assistant director and an intern. I am introduced, and make a brief statement about my research, but no one indicates where I should sit. I sit on one of the couches behind the table, which now partly obstructs my view of the set installed in the space, and this is where I stay for the remainder of the process. The set – a set of concentric revolves – is built into the corner of the room

Return to Earth was produced by the Melbourne Theatre Company, directed by Aidan Fennessy, and performed by Anthony Ahern, Allegra Annetta, Talia Christopolous, Julie Forsyth, Kim Gyngell, Eloise Mignon, Tim Ross and Anne-Louise Sarks.

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The interactions described above occurred in the first week of rehearsals for *Return To Earth*, a play by Lally Katz produced by the Melbourne Theatre Company that premiered on November 4, 2011 in the Fairfax Studio at the Melbourne Arts Centre. The narrative of the play follows the return of Alice to a small coastal town after a long, unexplained absence. The play charts her encounters with her parents, who have ‘gone organic’ since she left in order to combat a local epidemic of cancers, her best childhood friend, her widowed brother and terminally ill niece, and an auto-mechanic with whom she forms a relationship. Alice discovers she is pregnant, which means she is not able to donate a kidney to her niece who dies at the end of the second act. The brief final act sees Alice still living in her parents’ home with her new baby and, in the final moments of the play, she reveals that she had spent the long period of her absence in outer space.

While the focus of this chapter is the process by which the work was realised in rehearsal, I begin with the play, the writer, and some considerations of genre and style, in order to stake out the territory I will be mapping, and introduce the particular sets of limits and constraints which I perceived as acting on the process of producing *Return to Earth* for presentation. The Melbourne Theatre Company is a particularly text and writer-focussed company and this is reflected in its repertoire choices and its rehearsal processes. Since it is the choice of play text that forms the first step in the journey through interpretation to production and reception, I would like to begin by considering the nature of this work.

The writer, Lally Katz, has been a relentless experimenter with genre, and her early work in particular has been associated with the genre of ‘magic realism’ (Ricci-Jane Adams, 2008). Katz’s own description of the play under discussion here as presenting “a naturalistic world with cracks in it” uses a generic indicator that might imply she is willing to accept this classification (Katz in Galloway, 2011, n.p). As prominent writer and critic Alison Croggon avers
(2011a, n.p.), much of Katz’s writing is distinguished by a fascination with “slippages” between multiple worlds, both within the frame of the “world of the play”, and within the frame of the performance event. Productions of her early works, such as The Eisteddfod (2004), and The Black Swan of Trespass (2005), were created with her own company, Stuck Pigs Squealing, and directed by co-founder and regular collaborator, Chris Kohn. Both these works played within mise en scenes of “a stage within a stage, miniaturised and finished with minute attention to detail that creates a hyper-realism...[and is used to] demonstrate their inherent fictionality” (Adams, 2008, p. 240). Other characteristic ‘slippages’ between frames, realities and genres appear in The Eisteddfod, where the writer herself appears as/in an introductory voiceover and intervenes in the action through the medium of a puppet. In this and other works, unlikely characters (or bears) play out fantasies in what may or may not be real spaces – to them or to the audience. When interviewed about The Apocalypse Bear Trilogy, which was the first production of one of her works with the Melbourne Theatre Company, she described the recurring figure of the Apocalypse Bear as “a little like having an imaginary friend” who, once invented, “kind of became real to me. Everywhere I'd go I’d see him. I’d see him coaching a kid’s football team at dusk on the oval. I'd see him sitting on the tram” (Katz in Clayfield, 2009, n.p.). Katz frequently employs strategies that D’haen (1995, p. 192) identifies as common to both postmodernism and magical realism such as “self-reflexiveness, metafiction, eclecticism, redundancy, multiplicity, discontinuity, intertextuality, parody...the erasure of boundaries, and the destabilization of the reader” but with an unselfconsciousness that ensures the work remains warm, humanist and playful. Croggon (2007, n.p.) calls her a playwright of “brilliant surfaces” that “open to unsettling abysses”. In her review of the return season of The Eisteddfod in 2007, Croggon reflects:

Lally Katz is a true original, and so confounds all attempts at categorization. She is not quite like any writer I have
encountered, although her work calls up shades of Pirandello, Cocteau, Chekhov and a bunch of other people. There is an anarchy in its core which means that anything might happen, a perilous sense that the whole might disintegrate into total nonsense: but it never does, because also at work is an unobtrusively steely discipline and a very sharp wit. (Croggon, 2007, n.p.)

There is a sense of an authentic, if idiosyncratic, worldview in the work – a singular but integrated imagination – as if we are being shown how this writer receives the world as co-present layers of the quotidian and the fantastical/imaginary. In this, persistent features in Katz’s work fit, though not always neatly, into established definitions of magic realism. Ricci-Jane Adams, whose 2008 thesis on magic realism in Australian theatre locates a number of contemporary Australian playwrights within this genre, identifies some of the hallmark strategies commonly employed by artists working within these generic boundaries. Citing Chamberlain, Adams notes that magic realism is “writing that works both within and against the aesthetics of realism’, wherein the magical is naturalized, generating a seamless coexistence of the mundane and the extraordinary” (Chamberlain cited in Adams, 2008, p. 1).

Most analysis of this genre relates to its expression through literature and, to a lesser extent, film. Literary critic and political theorist, Frederic Jameson, locates two definitive points of reference in relation to a ‘diagnosis’ of magic realism in film that can translate to a theatrical frame – history (or narrative) and colour. Jameson (1986) speaks of a perforated history – one which appears familiar but which is strategically defamiliarised by (cinematic) interventions. This familiarity, he claims, generates an “initial security and confidence in some unified narrative” (1986, p. 306), asserting that the films he references “seem to presuppose extensive prior knowledge of their historical framework in such a way as to eschew all exposition” (p. 304). Katz’s evocation, particularly in Return to Earth, of familiar sites and registers – Australian, coastal-suburban,
familial, pop-cultural - is so accurate that the perforations are “not immediately visible to us” (p. 303). The context is historically located, in that contemporary cultural references and memes, (anthemic pop songs from the 1980s, ‘going organic’ in order to ward off cancer, television quiz shows) place the narrative in time.

Perhaps more directly related to the task of constructing a performative aesthetic is what Jameson (1986, p. 303) describes as “the intensely visual pleasure” of the magic realist films he proffers as exemplary. Jameson describes particular saturations of colour in the films, but also distinguishes between colour and gloss. Colour, he explains,

separates objects from one another, in some mesmerizing stasis of distinct solids whose unmixed individual hues speak to distinct zones of vibration within the eye [whilst gloss] characterizes the print as a whole, smearing its varied contents together in a unified jumbled objects...which are arranged together as a single object of consumption by the camera lens. (Jameson, 1986, pp. 311-312)

Jameson’s perspective, of course, is as an audience/reader of the works rather than a creator, and the characteristics he identifies pertain to the particular aesthetic choices available to the film-maker, some of which are not available to the theatre maker. Some, however, have the capacity to breach disciplinary limits in a direct fashion, or have a theatrical equivalent. Colour and distinctness here might translate as design choices in terms of proportion/distortion of space and objects, and as the literal use of colour in and of those components Gloss might be interpreted as a set of tonal choices in the embodiment of the figures in that landscape – again, decisions regarding manipulation of proportion and distortion in the bodies of the actors/characters, and the disembedding or overlay of narrative tonality which can determine the degree to which the work is comic – or not, cynical – or not, fantastical – or not, parodic – or not. As
Goldman (2000) notes, genre is something to be apprehended from signs in the text (or, I would add, from the conceptual co-ordinates set by the director) and translated into embodied expression. Goldman acknowledges Fowler’s assertion that “genre is not taxonomic”, but maintains that

in the heat of the moment we respond to genre as if it were taxonomical, as if it were an expression of a coordinated system of types and subtypes – as if it helped us to recognize and place something within a border, within a map of borders…We experience it as something looming or fading, definite or disrupted, something more like expectation or occasion…As such, it involves a sensation like that of classification, of boundaries anticipated and apprehended. (Goldman, 2000, p. 4-5)

The concept of borders is useful to this project since all of these considerations act to define magic realism as a genre or sub-genre. The act of locating the work under consideration within generic boundaries places it within a disciplinary framework in which a generic and aesthetic coherence can be constructed to contain and reify its potentialities. It creates a lens through which its particularities can be viewed and understood by those engaged in its realization as performance, and by those who read the work as/in performance. The idea of construction is important here in the context of a reflection on a making process – the task of translating a written text into words that are spoken, into and onto the bodies of actors, into and onto a performance space and in to and onto a materialised aesthetic. The task of the team constructing the performance, then, is to locate the features and functions of this particular genre – to apprehend its boundaries in order to distinguish those aspects that need to be negotiated, materialized, embodied, and transfused in the process of realizing a/this work for the stage through a rehearsal process.

But *Return to Earth* does not necessarily comply consistently with the disciplinary measures described above. To return to Katz’s own description
(and herald one of the more complex aspects in relation to its theatrical encoding), the work is “naturalistic...with cracks” (Katz in Galloway, 2011, n.p.). The magical elements are not immediately evident in the frame of the work. They remain, for the most part, immanent and mysterious. They materialize unexpectedly, like border raids, at odd moments and destabilize the otherwise quotidien reality inhabited by the characters. These odd moments do not balance neatly with the predominantly ‘real’ tenor of the work. On the contrary, the magic is a furtive and occasional interruption of the realism, if not the real. The central mystery – where has Alice been all this time? – haunts the progress of the narrative. Hints are dropped. She has changed or forgotten her name. She has lost the ability to eat ‘normally’. She couldn’t get an email connection. She has been x-raying herself. The final revelation, that she has been in space, could be read as delusion, fantasy or metaphor. The text will not confirm, deny, nor assist the reader to come to a definitive conclusion about what is real and what is not. It triggers the decoding reflexes instilled by familiarity with narrative tropes such as the murder mystery or the police procedural but there is no closure here.

Whilst using dreams, make-believe and the unconscious in her writing, Katz’s plays are to be read literally in the first instance. She does not signpost or distance the events through a suggestion of their dream like quality. Indeed, “she portrays a detailed and specific reality, which adheres to its own laws of the universe” (Adams, 2008, p. 9). Carlson (1996) quotes Marranca in Theatre of Images in describing the postmodern turn as “process – the producedness, seams-showing quality of a work” (Marranca in Carlson, 1996, p. 141). What is not immediately evident in this text is the degree to which the post modern turn constitutes, constructs or critiques a genre. Do the intrusions of the magical testify to a magical realm within the real, or do they critique the real? Do the defamiliarised/familiar narrative and language rhythms in the text function as critique or parody of the things they evoke, or as a collage or assemblage that creates a new style or genre?
The outer circle: company culture

I locate my analysis of this project at the beginning of this thesis, although it was the last rehearsal process I observed. The logic here is that the choice of a work produced at a State Theatre Company establishes an anchor point for a ‘normative’, conventional rehearsal process against which other processes can be compared. In this respect, my installation as observer of this particular project was serendipitous. Given that the processes I had observed or participated in up to this point were new (or re-newed) works and I was unsure what difference that might make to my conclusions, I simply asked to be permitted to observe the production of a new work within a particular time period toward the end of the second year of my candidature, and this was what the company was producing. Had I not imposed the condition of new work, I might have been sitting in a corner of the studio on the other side of the hall, watching Simon Phillips direct Geoffrey Rush as Lady Bracknell in Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest – a play whose genre and conventions were so entirely familiar that the cast were having a glorious time testing and challenging them.

I will spend some time here discussing the company structure, published mission and ethos in order to map the limits that these draw around creative processes which take place under its aegis, and upon this production in particular. In developing an argument about negotiation with limits, it seems self-evident that this company is the best resourced in the state and, as a result, works with fewer material limits than any of the other companies or artists surveyed here. The prestige of the company means that they can select and remunerate directors, designers and actors from the highest ranks of the national pool. Their substantial production budgets, in-house set, prop and costume staff and facilities, and well-equipped theatres mean that designers (set, costume, lighting and sound) can produce ambitious, technically complex and detailed production designs. The Melbourne Theatre Company describes
itself as “the oldest professional theatre company in Australia” (Melbourne Theatre Company website. About Us, n.p). Depending on one’s definition of professional, this may or may not be true, but it is certainly the longest-established State theatre company in Australia, emerging out of Melbourne University in 1953.

The Company’s mission has not changed since the first season more than fifty years ago: To produce classic and contemporary Australian and international theatre with style, passion and world class artistic excellence in order to entertain, challenge and enrich audiences in Melbourne, Victoria and Australia. (Melbourne Theatre Company website, 2012, p. 1)

The company also defines itself as a producer of plays – up to 12 a year – with only occasional and strategic excursions into projects not entirely driven by a pre-written text.

I should also say that my position as observer/researcher/academic was at its most complex in this arena. I did not come to the party as a disinterested observer, nor was my presence there interpreted as such. One of my first jobs as a ‘professional actor’ fresh out of training in 1983 was at the Melbourne Theatre Company – one of a number of actors imported by Graeme Blundell from the recently deceased Pram Factory. The clash of cultures was immediately evident as we were greeted on arrival to the first rehearsal by a comment from one of the veteran actors of the company. “Oh look”, he said drily, “The shed actors have arrived”. The same actor prompted a disciplinary phone call from the stage manager one evening, who rang to advise that my attempt at a discussion of a scene in which the actor and I were involved

34 The Pram Factory was a converted factory space, home to the Australian Performing Group from 1970 to 1981, and was “a focal point for intellectual, artistic and political life” (http://www.abc.net.au/aplacetothink/html/pram.htm) during that turbulent period. Its work was characterized by formal experimentation linked to a determinedly politically and culturally engaged agenda.
without the intermediation of the director had not been appreciated, and that I should desist from “directing the other actors”. I hope I do justice to the facts here. I am aware that these memories are coloured by the anxiety, and the ideological certainty of a very young artist in very unfamiliar territory. A decade later, anxiety largely subdued but ideological bias still intact, I returned as part of the cast of a radical revision of Goethe’s Faust, under the direction of Barrie Kosky, with whom I had done a number of productions in sheds in the previous three years. It must be acknowledged that we took some adolescent pleasure in pushing against the limits of what we interpreted as the conservative attitudes of both the company and its subscriber audience, and rather fancied ourselves as the lunatics taking over the asylum. It is perhaps inevitable that this history would inform both my attitude to the company another decade on, and the attitude of the Melbourne Theatre Company as my host, but this tension also plays out in the broader arena of Melbourne’s cultural map in which the company stands as the disciplinarian whose task it is to wrangle the unruly theatrical imagination.

In this context, it is perhaps surprising that the company chose to produce this unruly work, by a writer noted for works with “anarchy at their core” (Croggon, 2007, n.p), although, as noted above in the discussion on the genre of the work, it’s unruliness is only evident on a very close reading of the text. By 2011, however, Katz had established herself as a writer entirely able to adapt her craft to a brief. Neighbourhood Watch (2011), produced by Belvoir St Theatre in Sydney as a vehicle for veteran actress Robyn Nevin, contained many formal challenges such as rapid shifts backwards and forwards in time, but remained squarely within its naturalistic generic boundaries. The Golem Story (2011), produced at the Malthouse Theatre in Melbourne, riffed on the Jewish myth of the monster created by the Chief Rabbi of Prague to defend the Jews of the city from persecution but, again, remained within its mythic/gothic boundaries to establish a clear narrative/time/space/world.
Normalising limits

I think you are dealing with three elements that determine rehearsal success: time, resources and processual flexibility. Having the first and the second, but not the third gives you German state theatre… Having the second, a little of the first and none of the third gives you the MTC. (Meyrick, email correspondence, 9/8/12)

My question, as I began the period of observation, revolved around whether it would be possible to locate the point at which the identification of a set of limits ceases to contain, and begin to constrain, the interpretive process? My assumptions were informed by my experience of work as a theatre maker which could be roughly divided into two categories: work within relatively well-resourced institutional companies which had tight timelines, and work in independent projects with moderate to no subsidy, but where the creative teams had lots of time. The argument seemed simple – the combination of a prestigious institutional reputation, programming of pre-written works or writers that have frequently been ‘road-tested’ elsewhere, choice of artists and substantial production budgets, but with the industry standard of short rehearsal periods would lead to less exploratory, although not necessarily less rigorous or thorough, rehearsal processes.

Limited time mitigates exploratory work in rehearsal and produces work in which the outcome is perhaps more consistent in quality, even if less open to the impact of extensive exploration of alternative approaches. Laura Ginters reflects:

What is fascinating is the almost total standardization of the rehearsal period across mainstream theatre company practice. A production, no matter the kind of show or its length, is generally allocated four to six weeks of rehearsal, often closer to four, such that five is a kind of luxury. (Ginters, 2012, p. 66).
The rhetorical elision of ‘professionalism’ and ‘excellence’ echoes American sociologist Howard Becker’s definition of “the integrated professional” – the artist/s who,

because they know, understand, and habitually use the conventions on which their world runs...fit easily into all its standard activities...They use available materials to produce works which, in size, form, design, colour and content, fit into the available spaces and into people’s ability to respond appropriately. They stay within the bounds of what potential audiences and the state consider respectable. (Becker, 2008, p. 229)

This notion of ‘fit’ is a complex but useful one. It resonates with the sorts of spatialities that are constantly being negotiated in the project of making theatre. This particular project, however, came to be emblematic of the imperatives that drive projects within particular institutions towards particular spaces. What I was not quite expecting was the complex territory the artists moved into in their attempt to negotiate with a generically indeterminate text that, on many levels, challenged and subverted the usual disciplinary measures employed to corral it within conventional boundaries.

State theatre companies like the Melbourne Theatre Company produce represent “the bulk of what goes on in the name of art in any society” and operate “within a shared tradition of problems and solutions” in which they define the problems of their art similarly...know the history of previous attempts to solve those problems...the history of work like theirs so that they, their support personnel, and their audiences can understand what they have attempted and how and to what degree it works. (Becker, 2008, p. 230)
Ric Knowles proposes a more critical analysis of the superstructure of mainstream companies in relation to their location in the wider cultural field. While acknowledging that it is within these sorts of frameworks that most works of theatre are produced, Knowles (2004, p.20) challenges the ‘taken-for-grantedness’ of processual and interpretive orthodoxies which rationalise the way they inform the “delivery systems of the theatre industry”. On the other hand, deconstructive processes in rehearsal which privilege a logic of psychological consistency, sometimes at the expense of other potent theatrical logics such as genre and aesthetic, persist because these logics ‘work’ with “the bulk of what goes on” in the theatre (Becker, 2008, p. 232). In this case, however, Mark Schorer’s citation of an image used by Wheelwright aligns the themes of the play with the operations of the narrative of the play, where “the very essence of myth’ is that haunting awareness of transcendental forces peering through the cracks of the visible universe” (Wheelwright, cited in Schorer, 1959, p. 360).

**Delimiting the interpretive space**

Before I return to the narrative of this production, it is important to note that the process of interpretation has already begun. If we accept a definition of this process as one of locating and delimiting a focused interpretive space in which decisions about meaning and the performative expression and implications of those decisions can be made, it follows that choices made before the actors enter the rehearsal room have already drawn some boundaries. Of necessity, part of the entire process is concerned with testing and limiting interpretive options in such a way that the meaning field of the work can be defined and worked. The spatial metaphor proposed by the design for *Return to Earth*, serendipitously a series of concentric circles, can provide a model for this – at least in the preliminary stages of the process, though the neatness and smoothness of the surfaces, and the equidistance between the encircled circles may inaccurately imply that aspects of the process are equally weighted.
Figure 6. Delimiting the interpretive space

A conventional process of repertoire construction (at one end) and rehearsal (at the other), uses these decisions as a series of disciplinary manoeuvres that define the interpretive territory by progressively drawing the borders in and implicitly closing off other options. Clearly, the selection of the text for production and/or inclusion in a season of works speaks to the aspirations and perceived mission of the producing company – the sort of work it will and won’t produce, and the sort of work its audience will or won’t respond to. The narrative, themes and formal aspects of the selected text itself proposes another set of borders, sometimes described as “the world of the play” (Kaynar, 2006, p. 246). The space in which the play will be performed proposes yet another set of limits. The size, shape and orientation of the stage define one aspect of this territory, as does the relationship of the performance space to the audience space. These elements will also discipline and communicate the scale of works that can or might be produced in them. Off-stage space determines
what can be revealed or concealed from audience view. The meaning of the building itself, insofar as it communicates the location of the company in a hierarchy of prestige, professionalism, institutional and/or cultural affiliations, proposes another set of limits (Bennett, 1997).

A further delineation or borders resides in the selection of the director. Depending on the context, the director may have been part of the decision-making process in the choice of play, or have been ‘cast’ as the right director for this play because of her or his particular style, vision and/or approach to rehearsal. It may be expected that he/she will operate as a faithful ‘servant of the text’, working to extract its essential meanings or that she/he will be “intervening forcibly” (Donkin & Clement, 1993, p.2) and bring a particular interpretive approach to extract new meaning from, or impose new meaning on, the text. Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement (1993, p. 2) describe these two positions as “compliance” and “resistance” in the context of interpreting text from a feminist perspective.

As significant a dramaturgical intervention is the task of casting. Di Trevis (2012) concludes that casting is “not just a question of acting talent” but a judgement about an “actor’s potential in three areas:

- The ability, with proper rehearsal, to embody the character
- The ability to work in a way that enables the director to be creative
- The ability to form part of the company the director is creating” (Trevis, 2012, p. 54)

Actors may be transformers, but the act of casting implies that an individual actor as sign or/of character can be made to mean only a limited number of things. Obvious limits pertain to casting for ‘embodiment’ in terms of age and gender. More nebulous considerations may pertain to ‘type’ – such as their appearance or capacity to represent membership of a social class. Judgements about an actor’s capacity to work within particular ‘styles’ or ‘genres’, raising
questions of whether they can ‘do’ comedy or tragedy, or particular forms of
naturalism or heightened performance dictated by particular constellations of
conventions, are even more nebulous. These capacities, a sort of typological
rather than type-casting, define or limit the palette the company will work with –
mostly in salutary ways. The casting of particular actors may also reflect an
existing relationship with the company and its audience.

The logic of casting in *Return to Earth* can be seen in some instances in echoes
of past roles played by the actors. Eloise Mignon, playing the other-worldly
Alice, had been playing a tormented Hedvig in Simon Stone’s re-vision of *Wild
Duck* — another bewildered and childlike character. Julie Forsythe has made a
long career as a character actress equally comfortable and convincing in
comedy or tragedy but, as the relentlessly positive mother in *Return to Earth*
one hears echoes of remorseless optimism in the face of impossible odds from
her role as the progressively entombed Winnie in Samuel Beckett’s *Happy
Jean-Pierre Mignon).

Beyond what particular actors bring to the encounter with character and genre,
they also work to construct a dramaturgy of process, and may be chosen in part
because they have a pre-existing relationship with the director and a shared
language or way of working. Actors who work habitually, instinctively,
reflexively, or out of attachment to particular ideologies or methods will also act
to shape the process of performance making. Trevis’ (2012, p. 54) requirement
that the actors need to “enable” the director’s creativity, speaks to the critical
need to achieve consensus not merely about what the play/text means and how
it should be expressed through the mise en scene, but about how they will work
in rehearsal. The task, which largely falls to the director, is to locate the
common space between the requirements of the play, their own preferred way

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*35 Simon Stone’s adaption of *The Wild Duck* first played at Belvoir St Theatre in 2010, and was restaged at the Malthouse Theatre in 2011.*
of working (to realise such a play), and ways of working which are enabling for the actors. It is important to note this project was atypical in that Return to Earth was initially to have been directed by someone else. The original director left the company for a job in another state some months before rehearsals began having done much of the preparatory work including casting of main roles and negotiating the initial design concept. The project was then passed to Aidan Fennessy who was already employed as an Associate Director at the company.

**Designing Boundaries**

A further set of very influential boundaries had also been drawn by the set design, which was completed and largely constructed by the time the actors arrived in the rehearsal room. This was a massive machine – literally – and, most mornings that I entered the rehearsal room in the ensuing 5 weeks, I found a technician checking and tweaking the mechanisms that drove the concentric revolves in the stage floor. The workshop at the Melbourne Theatre Company operates to a tight schedule for two milestones in each production. Firstly they ensure that there is a set in place in the rehearsal room which has all the key features of the set that will be performed on and, secondly, the construction of the set that will be performed on to meet the deadline of production week and the move from the rehearsal room into the theatre space. More importantly perhaps, the cost, scale and complexity of the design, and the fact that the workshop staff had, by this point, moved on to work on another production, meant that this starting point for interpreting the play was fixed, further contracting the interpretive space.

Ric Knowles (2004, p. 28), discussing the ways in which dominant ideologies become ‘naturalised’ and “shape the expectations that actors, designers and others bring to rehearsals” describes the limitations placed on rehearsals, “in all but a few very privileged locations in the English speaking world” as problematic in that the process is “designed as a delivery system that is too short to allow
for much interrogation, experimentation or mutual trust when normal procedures are not followed” (p.28). The practice at the Melbourne Theatre Company, like most companies of its size, has been a schedule of 4 weeks for rehearsal, followed by a week of technical and dress rehearsals and previews, before opening night. *Return to Earth* required a young girl to play the character of the terminally ill Catta, and legal limits on the employment of children meant that three children needed to share this role, each of whom could only work for a limited number of hours per week. As a result, the production actually had 5 weeks in the rehearsal studio, then a week in the theatre including several previews before opening night.

**Enter Actors**

At this stage in the rehearsal process, then, the interpretive space has been focused through succeeding layers of creative and/or pragmatic choices, and the stage is set, so to speak, for the actors to enter the process as active participants. I will focus now on two tables, activities around which came to be emblematic of the negotiation of meaning of a very particular play text within a very particular institutional/professional setting. The first table is ‘the actors table’ in the corner of the rehearsal studio at which early deconstruction of, and agreements about, the play and its meanings were negotiated. The second table was part of the stage set on which the play was performed, and became the subject of a series of negotiations about mise en scène which revealed the struggle to reconcile process and genre.

The two tables were located in the rehearsal studio. One of them later made it onto the stage. When rehearsals began, key working sections of the set had been built and were installed in the rehearsal space for the beginning of the rehearsal process. This rehearsal room is enormous – the set taking up perhaps only a third of the available space. The set was built into the corner farthest from the door, mirroring the diagonal orientation of the Fairfax Studio
at the Melbourne Arts Centre that was its eventual destination. In the corner directly opposite the set were the stage manager and director’s desks – the former extended to include the control panel for the three concentric circles of revolving stage. In the other corner was the actors’ table and behind this, against the back walls of the room, were two couches and a line of tables holding the maquette of the set, props and costumes. I claimed one of these couches. Ironically, my location in the room came to mirror my relationship to the process. From this couch, I could only see what was happening on stage through the filter of the actors’ table, and at a diagonal. On occasion, actors would retreat to the couch for a chat – some because we were friends, some to canvass my views on the progress of the work. As I have discussed in Chapter 2, these border crossings also reinforced for me the ambiguous position I occupied – neither objective observer nor participant, but somewhere between the two.

Table work

**Week One: Table One. Talk around the table**

27th September, 2011. Yesterday they did a first read-through. The rehearsal begins with a discussion clearly begun the day before about “key themes”. They discuss the narrative thread in the play that concerns eating. The writer reveals that her family had a very idiosyncratic attitude to food and ate “a lot!” until they realized that this was not normal. She wonders whether it was because they were American? The director notes that several scenes indicate that the protagonist, Alice, needs to be re-educated to eat “normally” and asserts that this becomes a code for “normalizing” her. He says there is a question about what is “normal” in this family, and this world (meaning, I presume, the world of the play) but that the logic behind it is “purely emotional”. (rehearsal documentation p. 2).

They begin reading through scenes that do not involve the absent actors in an exercise that the director calls at one point “mapping” and, at another point, “finding
the timeline”. Some of the actors have made some initial decisions about their characters. They read ‘in character’. Some just read for sense.

They read a scene between Alice (the prodigal daughter) and Jeannie (her oldest friend). Aidan asks the actress playing Jeannie whether the scene indicates a general disappointment with her life – that she has had to put aside her dreams of marriage, home and family and settle instead for ‘a partner’. The actress is not sure and says she’s reluctant to put a negative spin on the journey of this character so early. (rehearsal documentation p.3)

The group share occasional stories of the ‘truth is stranger than fiction’ variety. In relation to Alice’s pregnancy, Aidan tells the story of a woman who didn’t realize she was pregnant until “a baby slithered out” (p. 3.)

There is discussion of a scene between Alice and her brother. Aidan suggests that the sibling relationship has once been close but has been interrupted.

One of the actors talks about how “American” the play feels Aidan suggests that this might be a layer in the play – not just that the writer may be “channelling” American television clichés, but that the characters live inside these sorts of dreams and narratives. He notes that the character of the father’s name, Cleveland, conjures both a particularly dour American city, but also the animated television series (p. 5). 36

Aidan notes that the play “reaches the height of kitsch” in the death scene at the end of Act 2. (p. 5).

Discussion about the meaning of the work was woven throughout the entire rehearsal period and negotiated on the rehearsal floor, but the first week gave particular space and focus to reading the play around the ‘actors’ table’. There is not space here to canvas all topics covered, nor have I attempted to analyse how much attention was paid to any given topic. The documentation cited above is taken from many pages of documentation recorded in the first week of rehearsal, selected because it heralds particular issues related to process

36 Fennessy refers here to the animated sitcom, The Cleveland Show, written by Seth MacFarlane, and Richard Appel, and produced by the Fox Broadcasting Company, which aired in Australia between 2009 and 2012.
which, I will argue, ultimately influenced the interpretation of the text. With the benefit of hindsight, I have sifted through this documentation looking for moments that exemplify the rehearsal process followed in this production, and the strategies with which they began to decode the play and reconcile its magic and realist elements. Through this I will draw my own map, speculating about how negotiations between this group of artists, working with this company and on this play both opened and closed spaces of interpretation. To this end, although the description above is laid out according to the order in which the events took place, I will pursue two strands in order to explicate a tension which played out between opposing aspects – compliance and resistance, the frame of the play and the frame of the narrative, intrinsic meaning and imposed meaning, realism and magic, ‘normal’ rehearsal process, and the normalising process which occurred as this ‘not normal’ play was realized in rehearsal.

**Naturalising Naturalism**

When I arrived in the studio, the first reading of the play with a full cast had already taken place and the task for the day was to read each of the scenes in sequence, stopping to discuss each before proceeding to the next. What was being played out here was the ‘normal’ or normative process I assumed I would find in this company. Director, Aidan Fennessy described this task at one point as “mapping” and, at another, as “finding the timeline”. He did not explain further. The task is common practice and its purpose was implicitly understood. These discussions are a critical feature of the sort of deconstruction required to embark on the process of staging the play out of a common agreement about the story, its component parts, its structure or sequence, the characters who inhabit it, and the relationships between them. Despite the ‘cracks’ Katz alludes to (Katz, in Galloway, 2011), there is a linear narrative driven by a sequence of interactions between characters, and this arc needed to be established in order to define the boundaries within which the interpretation will take place. Gay McAuley (2012, p.56), in her exhaustive
documentation and analysis of the production of Michael Gow’s *Toy Story* at the Belvoir Street Theatre in 2007, describes the director, Neil Armfield, setting the team two tasks after the first reading of the play: “firstly, he asked everyone to say what they thought the play was about, and secondly, he wanted to establish a chronology of the dramatic action”. In the *Return to Earth* rehearsal room the mapping activity, to come to a consensus about what the play is about, is limited by lack of access to all the actors. In the first few days, the sequence of reading was determined by which actors were available; as Julie Forsyth was finishing the run of a play in Sydney and Kim Gyngell was completing filming on a televisions series. As a result, the reading of scenes was not sequential. They read scenes that either did not involve those two actors, or involved them only peripherally.

Some of the actors read “in character” – already offering an interpretation through a provisionally constructed character to early readings – something I have noticed in other rehearsal processes. The presentation of an interpretation at such an early stage might be interpreted as what Australian writer and director Jenny Kemp (personal interview, 2012) calls “an offer” or leaping off point, or a pre-emptive strike in processes that, in the “hierarchy or structure of relationships” of most rehearsal processes, privilege the interpretive agency of the director (Fels, 2007, p. 129). It might indicate the way a particular actor prefers to work. It might also be a performance of professionalism – an indication that the actor has done preparatory work before the rehearsal process has begun. These characterisations were neither challenged in the ‘table phase’, nor in rehearsal, and the same tones we heard at the table were heard on stage in performance.

Some of the actors read only for sense. When the director suggested an interpretation of ‘given circumstances’ to the actor playing Jeannie, she

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37 The notion of ‘given circumstances’ is a pillar in Stanislavski’s (1961, p. 4) approach to the creation of “creating a role”, which he explains simply as a “need to
seemed unwilling to commit to an interpretation so early in the piece. Later he
offered an interpretation regarding the relationship between the protagonist and
her brother. This establishment of character history is also standard practice
with particular texts. As Tori Haring-Smith (2003) explains, character is

at the heart of a modern realist text...Realist characters are
expected to display some kind of explicit or implicit
consistency; their actions and their feelings must be linked in
understandable ways. They conform to the rules of modern
psychology. Their past is visible through their present.
(Haring-Smith, 2003, p. 46)

The speculations about characters’ pasts implied in both the negotiations
described above, then, allow the actor to interpret the present moment by
inventing a coherent shared history which will ‘make sense’ of the matrix of
relationships he/she inhabits in the narrative of the play.

Before they began to read through, the cast resumed a discussion begun the
day before. The protagonist, Alice, seems to have lost the ability to eat
‘normally’ and the cast discussed the interactions in the play that revolve
around food. The writer used the word “normal”. The director’s comment, that
the play contains a code about “normalizing”, was offered lightly. It indicated,
however, that the world they were constructing would contain the ‘not normal’
but they did not yet know whether this belonged within the culture/space of the
family, within the register/culture/space of the culture the family comes from, or
caracterised the wider frame of the ‘world of the play’. The theme of
‘normalising’ began here also to predict the culture of the rehearsal process.

Another feature of the discourse around the table was the personal stories that
people told in rehearsal. Fennessy, who is also a writer and a great raconteur,
offered the story of the unexpected birth. Implicit in his story is the message

clarify the external and internal circumstances, and conditions of life of the characters
in the play”.

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‘truth is stranger than fiction’, as it posits a ‘real’ world in which magical, implausible things do happen.

McAuley (2012, p. 56) talks about the perspicacity of actors in the first reading – their capacity to identify issues – interpretive and practical, which turn out “to be of crucial and ongoing importance in the creative process”. The actor who talked about how “American” the play felt, echoing the writer’s own comments about her ‘Americanness’, was expressing something about the strangeness of the play. Here again, without explicitly offering a deconstruction of genre or even style, the director’s response that there were ‘layers’ in the work in which the strangeness sits both in the outer frame of the play, and in the world/culture that the characters inhabit spoke to a tension which had not yet been named or framed. Later, there was a sort of naming, when Fennessy described the scene in which the niece dies as “the height of kitsch” (rehearsal documentation p.5).

What struck me later was not what was present, but what was absent, from the discussion – any explicit address to issues of form and/or genre. The “literalized metaphors” (Hegerfeldt, 2005, p.69) such as the barnacled back which one character reveals part way through the play, and the question of whether the protagonist was ‘really’ in outer space while she was away, were not discussed in the rehearsals I attended.

The description and analysis above is intended to provide some indication of the process of analysis which the team followed in their attempts to weave “together the actors’ characters to create a coherent design” (Haring Smith 2003, p. 52). Haring-Smith compares this approach, which she locates as part of “the language of realism”, to the process by which “different instrument groups” are woven together “to create an orchestral performance of a symphony” (p. 52).

But this work is decidedly not a symphony. To cite Haring-Smith’s (2003, p. 49) assertions about what she describes as “non-realism”, the play, despite it’s
apparent realist surface, is a “web of contrasts and dissonances”. When the actors later tried to apply the logic of psychological coherence to their work on staging the scenes, they met obstacles. The semblance of reality is sleight of hand that summons familiar tropes of “plot and character motivation” but does not substantiate them (p. 49). Julie Forsyth, (2012) when interviewed, talked of the trouble in locating “the right pitch. I tried the wacky comedy path. I tried pathos. I just couldn’t dig it in. You just keep trying. I’m better trying things. Sometimes you open a door and it all becomes clear”.38

Directorial intervention

Modernist approaches to the interpretation of play texts which, despite several decades of challenge from post-modern and post dramatic strategies, continue to inform the creative process of most established theatre companies, proceed from an assumption that the text encases and encodes a set of intrinsic meanings. The corollary of this assumption can be seen in the persistence of core ideas such as the actor and/or director as ‘the servant of the text’, and the primacy of authorial intent as the guiding principle for the performed interpretation of that text.

I would propose that these assumptions are deeply embedded in the culture of this company, particularly in relation to the production of new works. This play was deemed to have proved itself, having passed through a number of hurdle requirements such as public readings and awards,39 as being performance-ready, and there is something of both respect and challenge for the author in a non-interventionist (or compliant, to use Donkin and Clement’s term) approach which asks ‘what does this play mean?’, rather than ‘what can this play be

made to mean?’. Beliefs about intrinsic meaning versus imposed meaning can mean that the work is left to fend for itself in rehearsal – to reveal it’s own meanings and demonstrate its own worth. This problematises the role of the director in determining the level of interpretive intervention required to realize the text as performance and enrolls him (in this case) as the team member tasked with determining the interpretive space – locating the outposts, and drawing lines between these outposts to establish the perimeter boundaries of its territory. This job done, the actors can do their own boundary-riding to identify the limits of the characters – expressed as degrees of mimetic accuracy distortion or proportion of physicality and vocal delivery to an agreed frame, observance of rhythms in the text, or invention of visual scenography in relation to elements of set and objects. Their difficulties in establishing a ‘tone’ or a style in this play functioned as canaries in the coalmine, indicating that they were not yet clear about the boundaries. The process around the table, in this case, did not operate to locate the outer limits of the world of the play and divine its idiosyncratic logic. Instead, it framed the magical, implausible elements inside a ‘real’ world – to reconcile (but ultimately erase) the dynamic tension between the quotidian (the brand name tea, the nightly television quiz show), the dramatic/melodramatic (the local epidemic of cancer, the dying child) and the dream/magical (the barnacled spine, the sojourn in outer space) aspects of the play. What is more, the work had no precise generic precedent, even within its writer’s other works. It fitted loosely into the genre of magic realism, but did not obey all its rules. In the absence of any explicit address to issues of form and genre, the actors were navigating an unmapped space.

In the first week, the writer was also at the table, occasionally contributing to the conversation. She was also a regular visitor to rehearsals throughout the entire process. Given the text had not been produced, and Katz’s history of dynamic collaborations with directors (particularly Chris Kohn) it might have been expected that her role here would extend beyond explaining the text or sanctioning interpretive decisions. McAuley (2012) describes, for example,
many changes to the text – both large and small – which happened throughout the rehearsal of *Toy Story*. This did not happen. The writer was in the room and at the table, but seldom consulted. In this company, with a culture of respect for the primary authority of the writer, the text as written was understood to be ‘fixed’, and to provide the definitive blueprint for production. The writer’s function in the rehearsal room, then, is understood to comprise the provision of clarification, or to sanction minor changes, but not necessarily elaboration, or a continuation or extension of the writing process.

As a result, the text on the page at the first reading was what was heard on the stage five weeks later, adopting a strategy of what Fortier (1997, p. 99) calls, citing Deleuze and Guattari, “tracing, on the basis of an overcoding structure… something that comes ready-made’, which reduces multiplicities to known patterns”. In this process, given that the text was chosen precisely because it was ‘tried and tested’, having won a significant award and having been written by a respected and successful writer, the process was logically geared towards articulating the structure already located within the text, rather than towards the significantly more risky (and potentially counterproductive, given the text had been chosen because it was considered entirely suitable as it was) process of ‘experimenting with the real’.

**Table Two: moving/furniture**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The set design for <em>Return to Earth</em> was constructed around a platform three concentric circles, each layer of which can revolve in either a clockwise or anti-clockwise direction. And at the centre of the central section sat a round, IKEA-esque table and four chairs.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| In Week 2, one of the actors asked if the table could come on and off. Or if they could get rid of the chairs and sit on the table? Later that day, the stage manager

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asks how they will strike the chairs around the table between Scene 5, set in the house, and Scene 6, set on the sea shore. Aidan doesn’t know. “Magic”, he says.

In Week 3, another actor confesses to me privately that she/he hates the table. He/she says it stops the actors from finding a style other than naturalism, though she’s not completely sure what that means in this context.

The next day, Lally asks me if I hate the table as much as she does. The table sits firmly in the centre of the stage and is not moveable. She feels that the concentration of action around the table sucks all the energy in and down to the centre of the stage.

Week 4. Two weeks from opening night – a concession. The table is going and everything needs to be re-blocked. But it doesn’t go until half way through the play, to be replaced by a large armchair for a number of scenes. It is still visible – and remains so into production, in scenes set elsewhere.

The limitation that is most immediate and first apparent…is the one that dictates, in most of the English-speaking theatre world, a two-to-six week rehearsal period that renders impractical any incorporation of set, costume, lighting, or even sound design into the rehearsal process as process, or any attempts to allow the design for a show to evolve alongside its other components. In most theatrical situations directors are forced to arrive at a (single, unitary) “concept” long before they engage in collaborative work with the company, so that they can communicate with their designers, and with their theatres’ publicity departments (who need to market the show before it exists), long before they go into rehearsal. Designers are forced, in consultation with the director, to negotiate a design well in advance of rehearsals (or sometimes even casting), and therefore narrowly to circumscribe the options available to actors, who are usually shown a set model, floor plan, and design drawings for costumes – which are often already under construction – on the first day of rehearsals,
long before they have begun fully to explore their roles...The most frequently used and reprinted texts on scenography, scene, costume, lighting, and sound design...tend to naturalize these conditions as simply the taken-for-granted way things are rather than to frame them as culturally determined and determinate, the products of specific historical, political and economic conditions that function to shape, frame, and contain the designers’ work...Also naturalized in these texts...is the role played by design in providing conventional unities and harmonies, supporting linear throughlines, creating spectacle or illusion, and shoring up a model of theatrical performance as the product of an entertainment industry provided for audiences understood to be consumers. (Knowles, 2004, pp. 28–30)

I begin this part of the discussion using Knowles’ framing to explicate the particular process by which the set design disciplined the process of interpretation and realization of this text. The Melbourne Theatre Company, like most large repertory companies, maintains a large construction workshop in which all stage sets for its productions are built. Aside from the processual habits and orthodoxies of the rehearsal processes generally followed by the company, then, there are economic and logistical imperatives that drive the work flow of the design process. This suggests that it is taken for granted that having a set design completed and constructed before rehearsals with actors begin is a necessary interpretive step in a pre-determined order of events. But it is also part of a necessary logistical sequence that ensures that “the manufacturers”, as Becker (2008, p. 13) describes the workers who create the materials, objects and spaces in and through which the art is made, can manage completion of a sequence of projects in a timely and efficient fashion. Production values are also high in this company, befitting the reputation they maintain for works of ‘excellence’. High production values reflected in complex stage machinery come at a considerable economic cost. Not only must the set
be constructed and installed before the rehearsal process begins, but there is seldom margin for error and the major components of the design are seldom dismantled or modified. All of these factors construct the scenario that Knowles describes – a design process which precedes the process of creating the embodied performance, and which severely limits the degree to which there can be any incorporation of one process as part of the other. The set installed in the rehearsal room establishes limits within which the interpretation of the text-as-performance must be made. The fact that the set design is fixed and not given to change could be viewed as a risky strategy if, despite providing an early point of departure for interpreting the play, the design does not fit the collective interpretation of the play that evolves out of the rehearsal process. In this particular instance, much of the negotiation of the ways in which the interpretations of the director and designer might converge had, by happenstance, taken place with another director, presenting the director who took over the project with a fait accompli.

The set for *Return to Earth* was constructed to occupy the Fairfax Studio at the Melbourne Arts Centre. In this theatre, the performance space is triangular and amphitheatric, protruding from a corner of the studio and facing ascending rows of seats in a semi-circle. It has very little wing space and a relatively low ceiling, limiting the options for technical stage ‘magic’. The design for the play corresponds to one of the features Anne Hegerfeldt describes as belonging to the genre of magic realism. It was a “literalized metaphor” (Hegerfeldt, 2005, p.69). Concentric circles of revolving stage radiated out in an orbit around a central table. Other objects, such as a boat, a garden bed, and a hospital bed, travelled into the space on the outer revolve – easily transferred from offstage to onstage, signifying one of the many shifts in location, and creating a sort of object ballet as they slid into view. Above and to the side of the stage space was a miniature model of a coastal town set down a hill, complete with lights in windows, which served as an illustration of the setting of the play.
This kitchen table, a trope of suburban domesticity and family life, was here isolated in the space. When still, it was a telling, if not compelling image. When the space was activated by the bodies of the actors, it exerted a centrifugal force drawing the scenic energy in to it. It gave their bodies somewhere to be, something to be ‘in relation to’ apart from other bodies, something to lean or sit on, and somewhere to place or manipulate props. Once within its orbit, however, their options were limited. Everything reduced in scale to fit its small, hip-height dimensions. The television, a significant object in early scenes that established the domestic schedule and preoccupations of the family, was a tiny thing, brought out and placed on the table as the family crowded round to watch a favourite quiz show. When Julie Forsyth, playing the mother, was cutting vegetables on it, its height and location folded her body over so low that she had to arch her neck backwards to speak out into the space.

The actors, who voiced their concerns in terms of tasks and actions, asked whether and when it could be moved. Could they do something untoward like sit on the table, or stand on a chair? But its determined realism, and its anchoring at the centre of an otherwise empty space made these options, when tested, seem too grand, out of proportion and symbolically loaded. The focus of action around the table seemed to corral physical/mise en scene possibilities to the naturalistic and minimal, and to sap the actors’ energy. Even the revolve, which moved them through the space and shifted the compositions, rendered them passive objects. In the end, the space opened up was so broad that anything could orbit in it, but nothing could cohere.

As implied by the actors’ discussions cited in the first extract from my rehearsal documentation, the play makes use of a number of filmic strategies, including scenic shifts between multiple locations. One of the purposes of the concentric revolves was the facilitation of relatively seamless transitions. There were moments when objects sliding into view create an almost dreamlike quality, and a bit of theatrical magic. By Week 2, however, the actors were beginning to
resent the table, and the option of moving it on and off was mooted. But the location of the table in the centre of the space made it difficult to move. It was a big, awkward move that could not be concealed from view, and needed many hands and some time to execute. A couple of attempts at this in rehearsal showed it to be a visible, distracting interruption.

In Week 4, the decision was made to move the table – but only once. It was taken out of the space at the end of Scene 11 and did not reappear. Because the open space made isolation of areas with lighting difficult, the table remained in the background throughout the first half – and was particularly disorienting during the oddly lyrical scenes set on the beach. Later scenes set in the family home revolved around a new icon – a large armchair. Its chair-ness maintained the naturalistic tenor of the performance, but its largeness offered more room to move.

Figure 7. Return to Earth. Beach scene (table at rear) Image: Jeff Busby
Beyond the table’s centrality to the actual space and its symbolic meaning, it acted to determine a performance style through the limits it imposed on the actors bodies, the imprint of which remained even after the table exited the frame in the second half of the play.

A number of other generic boundary markers were embedded in the text that might have evoked or expressed the bizarre logic that drove the drama, although they appeared only in a couple of scenes. In interview, theatre director Chris Kohn, who directed many of Katz’s early works, identified the boundary markers which spoke to him – those which are explicit in the text and symbolise of ‘the world of the play’ – as belonging to the character of the auto-mechanic boyfriend, Theo. He is most certainly written as an ‘odd fish’ and, in Scene 15, his back is exposed to reveal a living microcosm of “layer and layer, rows and rows of barnacles. Like half clam shells coming out of his flesh” (Return to Earth, 2012, p. 110). He is a sea-creature, or inhabited by sea creatures. It is also Theo who describes the strange hybrid building that services the town – part hospital, part auto shop. In later scenes, Alice’s pregnancy is revealed in this location, and her niece Catta dies as the family sings The Bangles anthem, ‘Eternal Flame’ – another generic indicator of the ‘kitsch’ discussed in the first week of rehearsal.

Theo: Yeah. We building share with the emergency room. Most of their patients are from car crashes. So the ambulance usually just tows the wreck in when they come in with the patient. We work on the car and they work on the human. That way when the patient gets better they can drive their car outa there. (Return to Earth, Scene 9, p. 100)
Standard practice

I have always envisioned this play to be played as though it is real
life, with a natural feel. I realize there are some surreal and strange
things that happen in it, but I see them as being a natural part of the
reality of the play. (Katz, 2012, p. 81)

While the process that ‘worked’ to make the 2011 production of Return to Earth
at the Melbourne Theatre Company contained some irregular features, it does
testify in the broad sense to ‘standard’ rehearsal practices in mainstream
theatre in Australia, and to the particular sets of limits that structure the process
of realizing a written text for performance. Within these structures, much
interpretive ‘work’ has been done before the formal rehearsal process begins,
supporting McAuley’s claim about the invisibility of many aspects of the creative
process, which do not take place ‘in the room’.

In this instance, the fact that the text had been selected and, although untried,
deemed performance-ready for inclusion in the annual subscription season,
already suggests an approach to its rehearsal. Although efforts to identify and
express its unique generic playfulness in/as performance presented the
creative team with some challenges, there is considerable merit in the
argument that the first production of any work for performance should test its
intrinsic and intended meaning and style without, to paraphrase Donkin and
Clement (1993, p.2), ‘forcible intervention’ in its interpretation. This, too, is a
sort of seeing ‘what is really in the room’, perhaps before rearranging the
furniture, to see if it ‘works’. The quote from the author above, and at the
beginning of this chapter both clearly indicate she conceived of the work as
‘naturalism’ both before and after its production (Katz, 2011, 2012).

Two distinct approaches in actors’ ‘performance’ of their roles as interpreters
was seen in the first reading, which also points to parts of the process
invisible to the observer. All the actors arrived at the first rehearsals ‘well-
versed’ in the play, but only some had made some preliminary decisions about the interpretation of their role. Some were not yet willing to commit to an interpretation, and those who had launched an interpretive strike also created a set of fixed co-ordinates around which the rest of the rehearsal process was, to use Ginter’s (2012 p. 67) term, “moulded”.

The task of interpreting a work with no convenient generic precedent was rendered all the more challenging for the artist who was responsible for determining ‘how’ the work should be ‘worked’. The director inherited the project with a significant amount of interpretive space already ceded. In this case, key elements of the set design had already been decided. As companies who maintain their own teams of artisans and technicians can afford, an almost complete working version of the set could be installed in the rehearsal room before the formal rehearsal process began. It is interesting to consider the contrast in logic between the design for Return to Earth and that for the production of The Threepenny Opera at The Malthouse Theatre, which is discussed in the following chapter. Both, particularly in their disposition of stage objects, manifested particular forms of choreographic intelligence in the way they framed the bodies of the actors, and conscripted them to particular qualities of movement. I will argue in the following chapter that the design for The Threepenny Opera operated strategically to compel the actors to particular and visible bodily effort. By creating a fluid but largely ‘empty space’ (Brook, 1968), the design for ‘Return to Earth’, approached a generically multivalent play in a way that was both pragmatic and consonant with the themes of the play – placing the actors’ bodies in a site in which issues of genre and style could be explored, without over-determining the limits of ‘space exploration’.
CHAPTER 4

Soft bodies, hard surfaces: rehearsing The Threepenny Opera at the Malthouse Theatre, 2010

Malthouse Theatre: Tuesday, May 18, 2010

It is the cast’s first day in the theatre, and on the set. They are rehearsing ‘The Cannon Song’. The director, Michael Kantor, asks Eddie Perfect (playing Mack The Knife) to get up on the table, which is waist-high, in the beat between verse and chorus in order to join Casey Bennetto (playing Tiger Brown) on this stage-within-a-stage. There is a crate to give him a step up, but that is two steps, two beats, and he has one beat to be in place. It cannot be done smoothly. He doesn’t stop and argue. Perfect attempts a couple of options that could allow the melodic line to be sustained. He tries to do it in stages, backs up a line or two into the verse and breaks the ascent into a number of steps between them. This breaks the stage picture for the preceding verse and looks a bit too choreographed. In the end, he finds a sort of narrative solution. He sings through the two lines while climbing up on to the table via the crate. He allows the effort to be heard, but ‘characterises’ the movement so that it becomes a little mime of crawling across a battlefield. His body folds in on itself as he clambers up onto the step, up onto the table, and across the prone bodies of the other performers. The effort resonates throughout his body. We hear the diaphragm flex and the breath shorten. The vocal integrity is breached but he makes no attempt to conceal it. The breach is absorbed immediately into the rough, burlesque aesthetic of the play, and of Weill’s music. It doesn’t fill the crack, but narrativises it. What

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41 The Threepenny Opera was produced by the Malthouse Theatre and Opera in 2010, directed by Michael Kantor, with musical direction by Richard Gill, and performed by Casey Bennetto, Paul Capsis, Judi Connelli, Jolyon James, Melissa Langton, Amy Lephamer, Anna O’Byrne, Eddie Perfect, Dimity Shepherd, Grant Smith and John Xintavelonis.
cannot be cured must be endured, and the endurance thickens the moment by introducing a note of ‘play acting’ and masculine braggadocio. If the effort cannot be concealed, it must be made to mean.

Figure 9. ‘Table Scene’, Malthouse Theatre. June 2010. Image Jeff Busby

[A] combination of precision and improvisation [is] how opera is made. There are general ideas and inspirations that are interpreted and made into concrete realities, whether these are designs or actions, while there are highly precise constraints within which the action must be developed. The temporality of the music and the physical dimensions of the stage on which the work is to be performed, of course, create the most specific of those constraints. Consequently, directors and performers together need to find practical ways of managing the embodied, material constraints and resources they are presented with as well as the musical and narrative demands of the opera itself. (Paul Atkinson, 2010 p.10)

I am interested in drawing out a number of elements from the episode described above for closer examination, as they exemplify a number of aspects
of ‘pragmatic dramaturgy’ in ways that testify to issues I have raised in preceding chapters. As was the case in *Return to Earth* at the Melbourne Theatre Company, the set design for the Malthouse Theatre’s co-production, with Opera Victoria, of *The Threepenny Opera*, had been determined prior to the entrance of the performers into the creative process, and was non-negotiable. As rehearsals commenced, the set was already under construction in the workshop next to the theatre, and I frequently caught the reflection of sparks shooting from arc welders through the window as I made my way into the building. The moment in which this negotiation with the table took place, however, occurred in the week prior to the production opening; on the day the cast encountered the set, which had been installed in the performance space (rather than the rehearsal space). This locates the event in a narrow space between constellations of fixed and flexible limits. This piece of staging, which is potentially negotiable since it is sited in the body of the actor, is embedded in a piece of music whose rhythm is fixed, but whose tempo and expression is potentially ‘open to interpretation’ and flexible. The action requested by the director involves an encounter between the body of the performer and a stage object that is fixed, and demands a considerable physical effort to accomplish. The fixed rhythmic structure of the music allows the performer only a single beat to execute the action. The performer appears to be faced with a choice between compliance with the dramaturgical/theatrical imperative (arriving at his mark on the table in time to enter and complete the stage picture requested by the director) or the musical imperative (executing the action in such a way that the rhythm and the vocal delivery of the song are not impacted by the time and effort it costs to climb up onto the table). His response demonstrates an understanding of, a respect for, and a challenge to the complex set of limits he has been presented with. There is an instinctive and ingenious act of *bricolage* here, if we understand Garvey’s adaption of Levi-Strauss’s term as “a process of fabricating ‘make-do’ solutions to problems as they arise, using a limited and
often severely limiting store of doctrines, materials and tools…relying only on his ingenuity” (Garvey cited in Krislov p.1343).

It is no coincidence that significant thematic connections in this thesis emerge between the creation and production of Gilgul Theatre’s *Levad* (1991) and the Malthouse/Opera Victoria production of the Brecht-Weill work *The Threepenny Opera* (2010). Both works were rehearsed in the same room, and presented in the same building, if not the same auditorium in the Malthouse Theatre complex.\(^{42}\) Architect and stage designer, Peter Corrigan, designed sets for both productions. Michael Kantor, the director of *The Threepenny Opera*, was a member of the Gilgul ensemble, and a co-devisor and performer in the first two parts of *The Exile Trilogy*, of which *Levad* formed the final work. Both were works of music theatre, with the attendant demands on performers’ vocal technique.

*The Threepenny Opera* was the first of the rehearsal processes I observed in the period of my doctoral research, attending two or three days per week for the five weeks of rehearsal, including technical and dress rehearsals and several performances during the three weeks of performances in the Merlyn Theatre at the Malthouse Theatre.\(^{43}\) It was also the last major work directed by Kantor in the final year of his tenure as Artistic Director of the company, though he has continued to direct work for this and other companies since then. This chapter will look at the process of realising the work from a number of perspectives, and from varying degrees of distance, beginning with a ‘close-up’ on a particular moment in the rehearsal process and, to adopt a cinematic term, ‘panning out’

\(^{42}\) *The Threepenny Opera* was presented in the largest performance space in the Malthouse complex – The Merlyn (named in honour of philanthropist Merlyn Myer), which has an audience capacity of up to 512. *Levad* was presented in the smaller Beckett Theatre (named in honour of John Beckett, who designed the conversion of the 1892 brewery into a theatre complex) with an audience capacity of up to 198.

\(^{43}\) The production was remounted in September 2011 at the Sydney Theatre Company.
to investigate the larger frames, such as the genre of the work, and the broader conditions within which the work is being made.

As with the Melbourne Theatre Company, some interpretive space (and here the notion of space is both literal and material) has been colonised before rehearsals begin, through the pre-production design process and the eclectic casting, which I will discuss later in this chapter. The location of this work within the company, and within this building, however, speaks to a range of spatial perspectives that impacted on the process of its realization and its interpretation. The Malthouse Theatre occupies a “middle ground between roles as producer and landlord” (Prior, 2008, n.p.). As producer, the company presents a full season of twelve or thirteen productions each year and, as both producer and landlord, its three performance spaces are generally fully occupied by these or external projects that have hired the space. A set-building workshop is housed in an adjacent building, which services productions mounted by the theatre and works within the logistical and managerial boundaries that exist in most companies of similar scale and structure. As with the Melbourne Theatre Company, these dictate that key elements of the set are installed in the studio for the beginning of the rehearsal period proper, and that the full set is installed in the performance space in time for ‘production week’. Unlike the purpose-built rehearsal complex at the Melbourne Theatre Company, the Malthouse Theatre complex is a repurposed industrial structure in which the proportions of the rehearsal rooms do not necessarily mirror those of the stage spaces. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the transfer of activity from rehearsal space into performance space is almost always about a week in duration and this focuses a large number of complex tasks into a compressed period of time. In this case, the task was rendered even more complex because the size of the rehearsal room was barely half the size of the performance space.
In the instance I cite at the beginning of this chapter, the implication of this production superstructure is that the performer is contending with a component of the set, a stage object, whose properties and position and, to a lesser degree, use and meaning have been predetermined and are not negotiable. In this, it is unlike the collaborative process in which Peter Corrigan worked with Gilgul Theatre in its independently-produced (and largely site-specific) works. In these projects, Corrigan was part of the early conceptualization of the project, proposing uses of the existing properties of the found space, and some strong interventions in the shape of stage machinery or objects. He then shadowed the development process, attending rehearsals on invitation or on impulse, sometimes responding to ideas that arose in the process, sometimes introducing new elements as provocation and, most importantly, sometimes radically revising or excising elements in response to the evolving work. In this situation, of course, the works were made through a process of devising, to which Corrigan’s interventions made critical contributions. But the first two works in *The Exile Trilogy* were made in a very different context to *The Threepenny Opera* – over long periods of time, with much lower budgets, and with far more “processual flexibility” (Meyrick. email correspondence. 9/8/12). In the Gilgul work, elements of the sets were constructed or found, taken up, worked with, then discarded or adapted if they could not be purposed or repurposed in the evolving performance. In *The Threepenny Opera*, Corrigan’s

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44 Playwright and dramaturg, Tom Wright, who was also a member of the Gilgul Ensemble, remembers several radical changes made in the design for the second part of *The Exile Trilogy, Es Brent* (1992). Central to the design, and to the narrative, was a scene in which the performers constructed a machine that functioned thereafter as a table, a cage, and a bizarre climbing frame on which acts of torture and humiliation were played out between The Devil and the beleaguered Jewish inhabitants of the village of Shamgorod. Wright (2015) recalls that, “the first model had a pivoting beam so the structure resembled a balance, or a two-spoked carousel swing”, that was fully constructed and installed, but could not be made to work effectively. This substantial object, which consumed a large part of the limited budget for the show, was discarded in favour of a simple metal frame in the form of a ladder, not unlike an industrial-scale set of ‘monkey-bars’ from a school playground. This
design provided one of a set of interpretive strikes that preceded the entrance of the performers into the rehearsal process.

**Cruel Spaces**

In a sense, one of the striking things that this extract testifies to is the deep choreographic intelligence that Corrigan brings to the work, which manifests in ‘cruel spaces’ that impose stringent demands on the bodies of performers who ‘work’ in them. In my Masters research, I reflected upon the ways in which the materiality of the set for *Levad* conscripted my own body to types and inflections of movement, and I have drawn on that data in writing the prologue to this thesis. The set for *Levad*, constructed of slippery metal pipes and a massive wooden mill, all embedded in a floor of rock salt, required me to locate and absorb a set of distinctions between efforts which needed to be ‘feigned’ in order to express the meaning of the scene and those which needed only to be executed within the real limits of the space, the properties of the stage objects and surfaces, and of my own body.

The movement onto the set also wrought a series of significant changes in the physical execution of the performance, rendering some things harder to perform, and others, easier. I can begin to distinguish between those actions, or inflections of actions, which I must ‘feign’ or ‘act’, and those that merely require execution. [In rehearsal] I have evolved a shuffling gait for the character in her repeated journeys along the metal channels between the wall and the street sign. Once I attempt to travel the slippery surface of the metal, I find I can do so only by shuffling if I am to remain vertical… traversing the deep salt forced a new gait on the body, making the effort involved unconcealable, but also

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ladder was bolted on to a reinforced frame around the central platform/table, on and off which the performers clambered, swung, fell or were suspended.
obviating the need to 'characterise'. Once the signpost [mill] was installed in the space, the 'character' of the actions of climbing it and removing the remaining street signs were also dictated by the difficulty of rotating the object so that I was always visible in action, and of maintaining my grip as I tugged the heavy signs out of their slots and dropped them to the floor. Perhaps the most obvious example of these 'accidental dramaturgies' was the 'shower of blood' in the final scene. The dramatic collapse, mid-song, which we had choreographed in the rehearsal room lost its melodramatic elegance as I gasped and shuddered uncontrollably under the sudden downpour of cold water on my overheated body...In short, the concrete, material aspects of the set made their manipulation into 'real work', adding another layer to the already multi-layered text of 'work' in the tension between the actual and the fictional 'work' being enacted on stage. Coincidentally, it also added another layer to the musical orchestration of the text as the sounds of the body interacting with the actual environment were integrated into the 'score' of the work. (Prior, 1998, p. 118-119)

In an interview conducted in 1996, Corrigan was unapologetic about the challenges he poses to performers in his deployment of space and scale. In discussion about the considerable physical challenges posed to the performer in the set design of Levad he said:

I thought that there would be times when you would be fighting the set a bit, which is...not necessarily a bad thing...It struck me as rather moving in the way the actress had been put through this work experience...that you had to work all the time. It's also extremely interesting to see actresses work. Most of them just loll around the stage. But there was just simply a different power structure in this piece...and so by

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necessity I suppose, the mechanisms, the ‘biomorphics’, the
‘Meyerholds’, sort of took on a more significant role.
(Corrigan, 1996)

Indeed, the thinking behind similar and evident limits and challenges embodied
in the set for The Threepenny Opera was communicated to the cast at the
outset. The first day of rehearsals began with the cast and ‘creatives’: director,
writer, musical director, set designer, costume designer, assistant director and
choreographer assembled ‘around the table’ (as described in Chapter 2). The
director began by presenting his vision of the work (which he described as “a
play with songs” rather than an opera) in relation to its history. He spoke of the
contemporary meanings he hoped to draw out through local playwright,
Raimondo Cortese’s adaption of the 1994 Donmar Warehouse translation by,
and in, its staging as a performance within a performance.45 A new section,
placed between the prologue (Paul Capsis/Jenny singing Mack the Knife) and
the first scene (Mr Peachum auditioning Filch for his troupe of beggars) sees
the cast enter en masse from the loading dock at the back of the stage as
‘theatre workers’, introducing a thematic of theatre-as-work. This imposition of a
narrative exoskeleton also constitutes an explicit gesture toward tropes of
Constructivist performance embodied in the group/body/machine
choreographies of early 20th century Russian directors Vsevolod Meyerhold and
Sergei Eisenstein, and to conventions of composition in Socialist propagandist
art. This hearkening back to Russian Constructivist “machines for acting”
(Hoover, cited in Jameson 2013, p. 26) is also evident in Corrigan’s designs for
the Gilgul Ensemble, particularly for Es Brent (1992) and Levad (1993), and
performs multiple layers of history for an audience with the right reference field.

45Cortese was tasked with ‘localising’ the 1994 version of the text and songs, a
contemporised translation by Robert David McDonald, with lyrics liberally ‘updated’
by Jeremy Sams. This production was directed by Phyllida Lloyd for London’s
Donmar Warehouse. Cortese’s adaption of this adaption, also relocates the action
from London in the 1700s, which John Gay’s original Beggars Opera depicted, to a
contemporary setting in Melbourne, complete with references (also in the
McDonald/Sams text) to Britain’s royal family.
There is a sense of ‘having a bet both ways’ in that the allusions to Meyerhold’s machines locate the work in an established tradition of proletarian theatre, many of whose attributes were ‘borrowed’ by Brecht. 46 The design, nonetheless, walks a fine line between parody, critique and nostalgia when the scale of the set and its ‘machines’ read as diminishing human capacity, rather than reflecting the enthusiasm of Meyerhold and his designers for “the technical environment in which the new humanity would grow” (Graham, 1943, p. 185).

On the first day of rehearsal, following the traditional showing of the set design, Corrigan spoke to the cast first in terms of city and scale. He described the massive trucks which would roll through the space as “fragments of a city” of “significant scale” which could “cast shadows” of the chimneys of industry on the performers who sing in front of them (Corrigan, rehearsal documentation, 2010). In the first rehearsal of the entrance of the performers, some three days later, Kantor described the entrance of the performers in terms of the broader aesthetic of the piece, as being not about “movement and choreography” but about placement against a set that is deliberately “massive”. “You’ll be so small against the set”, he reminded them (Kantor, rehearsal documentation 2010)

The scale of the table that Perfect is contending with in the scene described at the beginning of this chapter, then, fits within a matrix of references to modernist and Constructivist aesthetics, but proposes a massivist and dystopian vision of an industrial and post-industrial cityscape, rather than the 'brave new world' anticipated by the Constructivists. The location of the vulnerable human body within these anti-humanist constructions creates metaphors of scale that manifest the limits of human agency. Rather than “defining and structuring the spatial limits of the playing area, (so that) the

46 Peter Zazzali (2008, p. 294) points to the number of “cultural exchanges” between post-revolutionary Russia and pre-World War II Germany in his article, Did Meyerhold Influence Brecht? A Comparison of Their Antirealistic Theatrical Aesthetics, noting that Brecht was so struck by Meyerhold’s production of Sergei Tretiakov’s Roar China in 1930 that he was still “lauding it four years later while in exile”.

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construction aided the actors in much the same way that a properly designed machine enables a worker to perform more efficiently”, (Law, 1982 p. 71), Corrigan’s “machines for acting” – “the Meyerholds” (Corrigan, personal interview, 1996) – he employs, have the opposite effect to that which Meyerhold aspired to – the presentation of “rich possibilities for displaying the acrobatic virtuosity of his young performers” (Law 1982 p. 77). In the scene that precedes The Cannon Song, Mack The Knife and his gang are ‘placed’ around the massive table in a gross parody of The Last Supper, seated on milk crates so that only their heads and shoulders are visible above the table top. The effect is to foreshorten them and they appear as children playing with furniture constructed for adults. In this cruel and monumental space, performers must make a considerable, visible and palpable effort to execute any physical task on or around the object, creating “a dialectic of effort and struggle between the performers’ bodies and elements of the mise en scene” (Prior & Richards, 2008, p. 233). To reframe a set of conclusions I offered at the end of my research around the making and performance of Levad, the spectacle of the performers engaging with the properties of the massive stage objects and the limits of their own physical virtuosity, producing an aesthetic of unconcealed effort means that,

a second text emerges as the effort of executing that action tells on the body of the performer in signs of exertion - weariness, breathlessness, sweat, strain in the voice. Images of 'stoic endurance' (here perhaps reframed as 'work') in the frame of the piece knit the impact of the fictional history on the fictional body/character into the impact of the real history/time on the real body/performer. (Prior, 1998, p. 126)
As signalled earlier, the performer in the scene is also operating within the limits imposed by a piece of music. At the most fundamental level, he must comply with what Kurt Weill described as “the rhythmic fixing of the text” in music (Albrecht & Weill, 1961, p. 30). When questioning “what occasions for music does the theatre offer?”, and distinguishing between opera and “music-drama” (p. 28), Weill stated that music “can create a kind of basic gestus which forces
the performer into a definite attitude which precludes every doubt and every misunderstanding concerning the relevant action” (p.29). A performer approaching the delivery of spoken text has far greater interpretive responsibility and license. In speech, the “rhythmic fixing” may be signalled by grammar and punctuation, or by emotional colour or intent, but is infinitely more malleable than a text that is embedded in music which records “in written form the accents of speech, the distribution of short and long syllables, and most important – pauses” (p.30).

In this case, if he is to serve the stage picture, Perfect does not have the option to tinker with the rhythmic structure in order to buy enough time to execute the action neatly. What Weill’s music, and the clear distinction he makes between opera and music-theatre, do offer the performer, however, is a clear indication of genre and a concomitant license to subvert conventional notions of vocal virtuosity. At the beginning of the rehearsal process, Kantor said to the assembled cast that the piece they were making needed to be “as rough as guts” and pointed to the parodic and ironic aspects of both the libretto and the music. It is, he said, “a parody of operetta”, that most popular and bourgeois of theatre forms, conscripted and subverted to “challenge bourgeois self-congratulation” (Kantor, 2010, rehearsal documentation). The narrative and libretto of The Threepenny Opera borrow tropes from genres of melodrama and opera, but place criminals and lowlife in their costumes. Similarly, and in a way that fixes the tone, intention and address of the piece, the music borrows familiar tropes and idioms, interweaving and juxtaposing them to form “surrealist music” (Adorno cited in Kowalke 1995, p. 52). In the following, gloriously florid, passage, Weill’s contemporary Theodor Adorno describes Brecht and Weill’s The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny,47 but identifies the defamiliarising and disorienting aspects of the compositional strategies Weill used in The Threepenny Opera.

47 The satirical opera, The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny, was written by Kurt Weill with libretto by Bertholt Brecht; first performed in Leipzig in 1930.
The music (which), from the first note to the last, is dedicated to the shock which the sudden representation of the disintegrated bourgeois world engenders...This music, pieced together from triads and off-notes with the steady beat of old music hall songs, which we hardly recognize any more but are nonetheless remembered like an heirloom, is hammered and glued together with the fetid mucilage of a soggy potpourri of operas. This music, (is) made up of the debris of past music. (Adorno quoted in Kowalke, 1995, p. 53)

**Range of voices**

What is also shifted by the effort of alighting on the table is the tone or grain of the voice. *The Threepenny Opera* is an ironic title in that it is an opera in form, but one that parodies the genre it inhabits. Opera is traditionally a form that denotes and demands a particular form of virtuosity in performance – including exceptionally sustained expression of the voice. As Atkinson (2010, p. 12), notes, “the negotiation of action in the opera has to work around the constraints of singing” which is “an intensely physical, embodied activity”. He recounts a negotiation witnessed in a rehearsal of Tchaikovsky’s *Queen of Spades* at the Welsh National Opera in which the director asked the soprano to sing one of the big arias “lying back against the wall in a semi-recumbent position” (p.12). After attempting to sing from the requested position, the soprano concluded that she could not satisfy the demands of both the mise en scene and the music. The position compressed her midriff such that she could not “sing out”. In this context, the requirements of the form meant that the posture of the singer should not interfere with the integrity of the voice, and the director’s choices were necessarily limited by this demand.

Weill’s “debris of past music” (Adorno, cited in Kowalke, 1995, p. 53), however, opens a space in which the singing voice, virtuosic or no, can be characterized and, although Weill claimed that he did “not consider music capable of realistic
effects” (Weill, letter to the journal “Anbruch”, January 1929, n.p.), the entwined mechanisms of parody and defamiliarisation employed in this work, allow the performer some ‘wriggle room’ in relation to the demand for virtuosic singing. Eddie Perfect, interviewed on radio about his role in the musical South Pacific, expressed his ambivalence about the expressive capacity of the vocal acrobat, saying of his own voice that he had “got to the age where you can kick it around a bit…it doesn’t sound too nice and pristine…not too ‘lovely’. I hated the kind of work where…some little old lady said, “You’ve got a lovely voice. I wanted it to be about ideas” (Perfect, 2012, n.p.).

As previously noted, the cast for the Malthouse production of The Threepenny Opera, were drawn from a range of performance sub-cultures, and this was reflected in the range of singing voices and styles they brought to the piece. Although Kowalke (1989, p. 24) asserts that the work was “composed…with singing actors rather than opera singers in mind”, and reminds us that Kurt Weill had little love for “voice acrobats who have sacrificed their personalities to the singing master”, he also acknowledges that “the vocal demands of Die Dreigroschenoper have traditionally been underestimated (p. 32). Each cast member in the Malthouse production might be defined either as a “singing actor” or an “acting singer”, and the musical director, the ebullient Richard Gill, emphasized early in rehearsal that the variation in the voices was a considered choice. “Everyone has fantastic distinct qualities. It’s not about blend. Eddie sounds like he’s been brought up on B&H.48 There’s Jenny who is all rich and fruity – Grant cuts through all of that” (Gill, R rehearsal documentation, 2010).49

Gill’s comments testify to the fact that the cast represented a range of both individual and generic vocal qualities. Several came directly from opera – or probably ‘light opera’, some – largely those in ‘chorus roles’ – came from

48 Presumably he refers here to the Benson and Hedges brand of cigarettes.
49 Here Gill refers to Paul Capsis, playing Jenny, and to baritone Grant Smith, who played Peachum in this production.
musical theatre. Paul Capsis, cross-gender cast as Jenny, brought a soaring falsetto and a slightly ‘kinky’ gender-indeterminate quality to the role, but also doubled as a dry and droll Archbishop Kimball. Eddie Perfect, whose musical career moves fluidly between cabaret, commercial musical theatre and popular music, can ‘do’ operatic when required, but had clearly been cast for the gravelly intensity of his voice and his capacities as a performer/singer. One critic at least was not sold on this conscious admixture of disparate voices. Critic for the independent online news site, crikey.com, Andrew Fuhrmann (2010, n.p.), criticised aspects of the production that he felt created a “cosy absurdity”, claiming the musical arrangement failed to “fill out the gulf between operatic talents like Anna O’Byrne and the less-spectacular, cabaret talents of, for instance, Casey Bennetto.  

The result is a rather thin accompaniment.” (n.p.). With this in mind, it is interesting to note that the cast of the first production of The Threepenny Opera was almost as polyglot, drawn from across the theatrical milieu of Berlin in 1928 – from opera, operetta and cabaret – but all were performers who could respond to the demands of creating a commentary on “the very musical language and forms…used by paraphrasing them ironically” (Kowalke, 1989, p. 27).

What interests me here, within the frame of ‘what is really in the room”, is that the “hammered and glued” (Adorno cited in Kowalke, 1995, p. 53) nature of the music determines a gestus of action which rejects the anodyne virtuosity and slickness of the forms it cites, and both constrains and permits the performer to adopt a “hammered and glued” acting style. In his imaginative subversion of the impossible virtuosic stage gesture – a leap onto the table – Perfect knit the moment into the broader stylistic vision of the work. He revealed the construction and mechanics of the action but, in allowing the difficulty of its execution to be seen and heard, also revealed the ‘work’ of performance as clearly as did the visible stage hands moving the massive trucks around the

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50 In this production, Anna O’Byrne played Polly Peachum, and Casey Bennetto played Tiger Brown, the Chief of Police.
stage during the performance. On the stage-within-a-stage, he constructed a story-within-a-story, which allowed him to both reveal the crack in the mise en scene, and fold the action into the narrative of the song.

**Negotiating the crack: professional cultures**

*The Threepenny Opera Rehearsal: Day 10*

**Eddie Perfect:** “I remember my first professional rehearsal. I was there with my text and my highlighter, and then we sat and had coffee for a week” (in Prior, 2010).

The moment I describe is also testament to the professional culture and values of the artist. Perfect is a ‘worker’ who has worked in the “hammered and glued” rehearsal processes of the fringe as often as in the more formal processes of repertory and commercial theatre. He has, evidently, little patience for the long days of discussion around the table that can characterize some rehearsal processes in both those contexts. If we are to interpret his attitude to contemporary performance via his satirical writing, his ode to the work of director Barrie Kosky, “Too Fucking Long” (Perfect, Misanthropology, 2011) might suggest that ‘art theatre’ also tried his patience. Since he emerged from the West Australian Academy of Performing Arts in 2001, he has worked across a formidable range of performance forms, and in a formidable range of functions. Trained in musical theatre, he is also a composer, cabaret and musical theatre performer, stand-up comedian, musical director, screen performer and playwright. The rehearsal schedule for *The Threepenny Opera* had to be organized to accommodate his absence on several days when he was filming a television series. While this might frame his inclusion in the cast as a piece of pragmatic ‘celebrity casting’, his presence in the rehearsal room was one of quiet discipline, good humour and thoughtfulness. This was also, possibly, testament to his experience as a performance-maker used to creating and interpreting his own work, both as a solo artist, and in collaboration with
others. When asked to accomplish the impossible task under discussion here, for example, it might have been entirely reasonable for him to point out the difficulty of the task and ask the director to propose how that might be done – or an alternative. Instead he took the bit between his teeth and found a way to make it work in a way that shifted the negotiation from one of compliance with the director’s instruction to one in which the performer augmented the moment through the insertion of a further, deeper and more detailed layer of interpretation – one which indicates a very clear understanding of the concept of gestus.

The focus on ‘getting it on’ and solving performance problems on the floor, rather than through lengthy discussion in fact characterized the entire rehearsal process. Kantor was unapologetic about his ambition to utilize the text as a pretext for staging a spectacle, and the rehearsal schedule made little space for lengthy discussion. The cast spent two days ‘around the table’ and, thereon, action on the rehearsal floor was very much focused on playing with, and solving, aspects of staging the performance. Issues of interpretation, therefore, were largely debated and negotiated in and through action and the ‘fixing’ or ‘blocking’ (see Chapter 7) of the mise en scene.

Perfect’s ‘workmanlike’ attitude, and willingness to accept creative responsibility for solving a problem in performance stood in contrast to at least one of the other performers who was presented with a similar request in another scene. In this case, the suggestion to alight on the table in the middle of a song prompted a long discussion: about how the costume they would be wearing might impede the ascent, about how to integrate the several moves this would

51 As an example, one of Perfect’s recent collaborations has been the recuperation of classic Australian rock and pop music as complex a capella with the music comedy trio, Tripod. See http://mushroompromotions.com/aus/perfect-tripod-australian-songs-album-release-out-23-august-three-sydney-theatre-shows-in-september/ Accessed 27/1/15
52 Since my analysis might be construed as critical, and the performer was young and relatively inexperienced, I have done my best to de-identify him/her.
require into the structure of the music, about how physically risky this might be for both this performer and the other performers in close proximity in the scene, and about how this might interfere with the quality of the singing. This performer drew my attention from the earliest days of rehearsals. He/she was probably the youngest and least experienced in the cast, and had come from a musical theatre and opera background. Her/his approach to rehearsals had been compliant but tentative and he/she rarely performed ‘full throttle’ in rehearsal, except when singing. This might have been attributable to any number of things – the robust ‘workmanlike’ approach to rehearsal process being unfamiliar, or a relative lack of confidence in his/her ability as an actor in this “play with songs” (Kantor, rehearsal documentation). It might also reflect an odd inflection of the rehearsal culture of conventional opera. ‘Marking’, according to musicologist Patricia Gray (2007, n.p), is “the practice used by many singers to save their voices in rehearsals; singers will sing in what seems to be a mere whisper, or transpose the vocal lines so that they don't have to sing extremely high or low notes”. Arts journalist, Michael Cathcart, described the experience of watching soprano Emma Matthews ‘marking’ her part in rehearsal for Handel’s Partenope as “Singing on one-third power” (Cathcart, 2013). Here, however, the performer shifted the ‘marking’ from the singing to the acting, tending to simply ‘walk through’ the acting, “at one-third power” and keep their powder dry for music rehearsals.

This speaks to the sometimes fuzzy limits of the performer’s capacity and responsibility to make what writer and director Jenny Kemp calls “offers” (Kemp, 2013) that form the conduit between the director’s vision of the play and its realization in performance, which is also vexed issue when testing the limits of definitions of “professionalism”. When interviewed about Michael Kantor’s first project upon assuming the Artistic Directorship of the Malthouse company, in which he created an ensemble of performers to produce two plays that ran in repertory, actor and ensemble member, Dan Spielman described the difference between working as and in an ensemble, and working as a ‘performer for hire’,
in terms of a sort of withholding. In an ensemble, Spielman (2005) says, the performer needs “to be answerable for their decisions, rather than just ‘gig it out’, which I think is the thing that people fall back on”. In relation to ‘performers for hire’, he said: “They just do their gig and get out of there and the path of least resistance is the path to continuous work” rather than an environment “where the performer is there to provide solutions to every situation that might arise in the rehearsal room”. The ‘performer for hire’ scenario, as Spielman describes it, illustrates a culture where the performer is doing what is asked of them, but leaving the interpretive responsibility squarely in the territory of the writer and, in particular, of the director. This attitude can betray a sort of personal risk management strategy wherein, if performers limit their conceptual and creative input to compliance and some basic problem solving, any failure can be attributed to the writer and the director. It is an aspect of rehearsal culture that has long fascinated me, partly as a director whose task it has been to manage instances of ‘hostile compliance’ in rehearsal, partly as an actor who has been guilty of a similar approach to collaboration in moments of uncertainty or lack of confidence, and partly as a performance maker who has self-reflexively turned such moments into theatre-about-theatre. It also accounts for added aspects of ‘pragmatic dramaturgy’, or ‘rehearsal dramaturgy’ in a rehearsal process, where the director needs to manage not only the development of the mise en scene, but the particular personal and cultural expectations and anxieties that individual actors bring to the room and the rehearsal process.

A more practical problem arises, however, in the creation of the performance if performers ‘withhold’, producing in the rehearsal room only a partial sketch of what they might or might not offer to an audience once on the stage. This gives

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53 Recorded interview with Dan Spielman. 24/05/05. Unpublished.
54 Both The Dybbuk and Levad contained scenes in which the character of the actress, Eva, remonstrates with an invisible director who evidently wishes her to change aspects of her performance.
the director the complex and difficult task of directing in a matrix of speculation and contingency, and fellow actors the related task of calibrating their performances to or against an uncertain outcome or response. The stage directors task, like that of the musical director, is to monitor and adjust the performance score in terms of energy levels, shapes, nuance and balance between performers. Differences in attack, vigour, rhythm and inflection can shift meaning in its musical expression, even within the “rhythmic fixing” which disciplines its composition. The disciplinary power of the musical score also works to create a musical coherence which has been pre-determined by the composer, “set(ting) down the basic tone and the basic gestus of an action to the extent that a wrong interpretation can be avoided” (Albrecht & Weill, 1961, p. 29). These sorts of differences, when located in the embodied expression of individual stage performances where the performer has more discretion and agency in their interpretive decisions, have the potential to shift meanings minimally or radically, leading to disjunctions and contributing to a lack of narrative, aesthetic and conceptual coherence. Stories of performers who are ‘difficult’ in rehearsal abound in the apocrypha of theatre and cinema. The most recent biography of stage and film director Elia Kazan describes both Marlon Brando and James Dean as distinctly non-compliant in rehearsal, while producing electrifying performances once before an audience or a rolling camera (Schickel, 2006). These stories often collude with the established mythology that surrounds such charismatic performers, framing their non-compliance as a struggle to achieve new levels of authenticity and intensity, which they undoubtedly did. Nonetheless, if the performer gives insufficient indication in rehearsal of what an audience might see in performance, he/she renders the task of orchestrating the performance in its entirety both abstract and unpredictable for director and fellow-performers. In this instance, the director’s gentle persistence, and other actors’ refusal to ‘mark’ their own performances meant that the ‘witholding’ did not ‘fix’ the tenor of performances in rehearsal. And as might have been predicted on the basis of their limited
professional history, the performer was considerably enlivened during final rehearsals when all the elements of the performance – orchestra, costumes, lights, and make up – were in play. By the time the audience arrived the performer had been ‘enculturated’ into the rough and tumble presentational style of the work, achieving a relative congruence of energy and attack with the rest of the production elements.

The contrast between Eddie Perfect and this performer, evident as they negotiated the multiple and occasionally antagonistic demands of the play and the songs in this “play with songs”, reflects what David J Levin (2007 p.11), describes as the “peculiar and defining surfeit” and “agitated and multiple signifying systems” of opera. Their differing approaches to the task of realizing “the score, the libretto, (and) stage directions” indicate that this mongrel genre, despite its well-established provenance, can still produce processual, interpretive and directorial border disputes between the ‘play’ and the ‘songs’ (p. 11).

**Amplification 1: voices**

To widen the frame a little, I would like to exemplify and discuss a similar border dispute in a rehearsal process where directorial authority was split down just these lines – between the play and the songs. *The Threepenny Opera* was a co-production between the Malthouse Theatre and Opera Victoria. It had a stage director and a musical director with distinct but overlapping areas of responsibility and authority. In general, this authority was passed smoothly between Michael Kantor and Richard Gill in rehearsals, which were roughly divided between stage rehearsals – managed by the former, and music rehearsals – run by the latter. Both directors were present in most rehearsals, each interceding gracefully on occasion when the other was in charge.
The move into the performance space in production week, however – a week before the first public preview and ten days before the opening night – provoked a series of encounters between bodies and space which testify to the complexity of relationships in “the disciplinary regime of music-theatre” (Atkinson, 2006, p. 98).

**Malthouse Theatre, Wednesday, May 26, 2010**

The set design has provoked another unanticipated crisis. Rather than the traditional orchestra ‘pit’ providing an interstitial space between performer and audience – neither in nor out of the play – the apron of the stage meets the front row of audience seating and the musicians have been located in plain sight on the left hand side of the stage. The performers voices are amplified. The wire and knob of the microphones are taped to the sides of their faces and their clothing displays the tell tale square bulge of the transmitter packs. Two days before the opening, however, the orchestra is not amplified and it is evident that this has been the source of some tension between the stage director and the musical director. In a late technical rehearsal, they run the musical numbers back to back, without the stage business in between. The musical director is calling the shots. He would clearly prefer to do without amplification and this rehearsal, although there is no public discussion while I am present, seems to be about testing the sound balance. The performers struggle. The rehearsal is frequently halted as one or other politely indicates that they are finding it difficult to hear key elements of the orchestral score, or to hear themselves through the foldback system. Individual microphones are adjusted. As the rehearsal progresses, the stage director is pacing up and down at the back of the auditorium, and on the side of the auditorium farthest from the orchestra. His brow is knit. By the following day, the orchestra has been amplified and is being ‘sound-managed’ along with the voices of the performers.

It is difficult not to sympathise with the aspiration of the musical director to maintain a particular form of musical integrity by renouncing amplification. Clemens Risi (2011, p.50) may be overstating the case – at least for the purposes of this instance – when he describes the “intimate exchange” or “eroticism” between the singer and the listener and claims that “much of the
thrill of the operatic voice, its very special quality, is lost by microphoning, no matter how excellent the technological standard”. Despite the size of the auditorium, and its hollow, industrial construction, there is no real problem with audibility, though the sound is a bit thin at the margins of the audience space. But the location of the orchestra at the side of the stage, which, dramaturgically, incorporates the musicians within the frame of the performance, unbalances its reception in the space, and between the singing voices and the orchestra. 55 Here the demands of the ‘play’ and the ‘songs’ appear to be in conflict, with the stage director urging greater ‘amplification’, and the musical director asking for ‘balance’. This creates a need for what electroacoustic music composer, Simon Emmerson (cited in Jos Mulder, 2010, p. 2) describes as one of the six functions of amplification – the correction of “acoustic imbalances”. In the event, and after both directors have spent much time clambering around the edges of the auditorium, all voices – human and instrumental – are amplified, though the amplification is minimal and errs on the side of ‘spreading’ the sound rather than significantly increasing its volume. As a result, the performers are able to ‘sing out’ as if they were not amplified, but also find lower, quieter tones when required, and the narrative of their “intensely physical, embodied activity” (Atkinson, 2010, p. 12) is palpable and visible in and on their bodies. The subtlety of the amplification allows the individual voices of the singers and the orchestral players to cut clear lines through the huge void with no loss of the ‘thrill’ Risi describes, and with no ‘smoothing out’ of the roughness and immediacy that imbue all the other elements of the production. On the contrary, the valiance of the human voices and the small orchestra perforating the open space serves only to add another layer to the underlying narrative of tension between the vulnerable human presence and the impassive dystopia proposed by the design.

55 Indeed some of the musicians moved onto the stage and amongst the performers at the beginning of the second half introducing the reprise of The Ballad of Mack the Knife.
Amplification 2: bodies

The rehearsal process at the Melbourne Theatre Company described in Chapter 3 was conducted on a provisional set of the precise dimensions of the stage set, allowing performers to habituate to the space, its proportions, and the placement of the stage objects during rehearsal. The performance space in the Merlyn Theatre at the Malthouse, when opened up as it was for *The Threepenny Opera* is massive – more than twice the size of the room they have been rehearsing in. When the actors made the transition from the rehearsal room to the performance space, the stage of the Merlyn Theatre had been laid bare, the wing space exposed, and the huge doors at the back of the stage space opened to reveal the loading dock behind it. This meant a spatial shift for the director, who had spent the rehearsal period closer to the stage action than any audience member would be through its run. As well as the forays to the outer edges to check sound amplification and balance, Michael Kantor covered a lot of territory by foot in the first few days, leaping up on to the stage to speak to the actors, or move them around, then clambering around the back rows of the audience space, trying to take in the whole stage picture. Later in the week, he shuttled between the stage and a seat next to Paul Jackson, the lighting designer, at the lighting desk lodged in the middle of the seating bank, as they made slow progress through the elaborate lighting plot. Sometimes both director and lighting designer were prowling round the auditorium, trying to capture the stage picture from every angle.

As the week of technical rehearsals progressed, it was not only the music that expanded to fill the enlarged space. Individual performances also became progressively amplified as the performers negotiated with the expanded acting space, the massive trucks and the yawning banks of empty seats that awaited the audience. The opening sequence, in which the worker/performers entered en masse through the rear doors, had been choreographed and drilled in odd fragments in the smaller rehearsal studio, where there was insufficient depth to
complete the required number of steps to get from rear to front in the performance space. In rehearsal, the cast had to practice across the width of the shallow rehearsal space, and even then to shorten their steps. The choreographer, Kate Denborough, was also an active presence through production week, overseeing the reorientation of movement sequences to the new space. On the stage, the performers’ strides lengthened and what had looked like a crowd scene in the rehearsal room now transformed into a small cluster of bodies moving through, but isolated in, the vast space. Individual performances also “lengthened their stride’ and became ‘amplified’ in response to the amplification of the space. As was my initial experience with *Levad*, there was a sense that the performers were “fighting it a bit” (Corrigan, 1996), just in the attempt to cover the necessary ground. During this week, some performances even became slightly overblown as they negotiated their smallness relative to the enormity of the set and the space. There was something both poignant and valiant in this hyperextension of the spatial ‘marking’ in rehearsal.

Figure 10. The Threepenny Opera, Trucks – scale relative to actors. Image: Jeff Busby

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This was also their first encounter with the massive trucks in and on which some of the scenes are played. They were pitted with niches that actors – some, as Paul Capsis noted with mild alarm, “in frock and heels” – had to climb into via stairs at the rear. The stairs were concealed, so the ascents were not visible to the audience, but during this week the ‘fixed rhythms’ of the musical score, and the rapid movements of the trucks around the stage space, meant that they often had to make these ascents very quickly. On rare occasions, they had to make them while the trucks were moving. These dangerous moves were repeated over and over again, slowly at first, and then at speed. The choreography of bodies and objects was intricate and, in these early days, witnessing the performers only just making it into their niches on time made me catch my breath. As it did them. Until the sound operators learned the precise cues for switching them on and off, the microphones captured the strained breath as the performers ascended, and the sharp inhalations as they prepared to sing. I found it unaccountably moving, and missed this additional layer to the ‘soundtrack’ when they arrived at opening night having learned these moves well enough to obviate or conceal the effort they cost.

Figure 11. Casey Bennetto (L) and Eddie Perfect (R) Malthouse Theatre June 2010. Image: Jeff Busby
The ‘withholder’, on the other hand, had found the scale. He/she was sharp and detailed, and had found a nice line in petulance and vulgarity, if not a complete enculturation into the ‘hammered and glued’ style of the performance. Her/his performance was slightly too ‘smooth’ for my taste. There was something in the performance of the Disney prince or princess that made me long for the slightly bitter aftertaste of irony, for the knowing wink to the audience, for the subtle ‘crack’ between actor and character, that was evident in most of the other performances. Rebecca Schneider (2004 p. 309), discussing the “rematerialisation” of the opera score as performance, asserts that, “embodiment does not stop at the skin but pierces the air between us”. Something in this performance, despite or because of its formal appropriateness and neatness, was sealed within its own self-prescribed set of limits and seems to be unable to either breach, or indicate, “the air between” the body and the witness.

Atkinson (2010, p.4) speaks of the necessity for director and performers to find “moment-by-moment ways of turning ideas into concrete actions…within the physical, as well as symbolic constraints of the stage design”, describing this task as expressing “a continuity between the practical bricolage of material circumstances and the motivational bricolage of the dramaturgy”. Unlike the generic instability and uncertainty of Katz’s Return to Earth, the particular “hammered and glued” aesthetic of The Threepenny Opera is firmly “fixed” in the text. What is more, it is familiar. The tropes and aesthetics of Epic Theatre, and the productive borrowings from “old music hall songs” that permeate the text, have provenance, and are dignified by a body of theory regularly served up in secondary school and university curricula. The movement of this work over time, from its original ‘shocking’ “representation of the disintegrated bourgeois world” (Adorno cited in Kowalke, 1995, p. 53) to a slightly ossified canon of works which perform and recall past challenges to bourgeois modes of art production, locates it in a frame of what Mike Sell (cited in Tomlin, 2013, p. 24) calls “a hipper, gentler, more interesting capitalism”. Fuhrmann (2010, n.p.)
notes that “Macheath is styled on one of the city’s gangland celebrities”, and points to the conscious but implicit intention, in this production, to capitalize on the nearly contemporaneous ‘gangland wars’ that dominated Melbourne’s tabloid press through the late 1990s and 2000s.\textsuperscript{56} The resistances, encoded in the original text and music, and even when translated into a contemporary context through reference to local political events, have lost some of their political bite.

What resistance remains, to my mind, is theatrical, ambiguous, literal, material, and embodied in the ‘pragmatic dramaturgy’ dictated by Corrigan’s set design. The “chimneys of industry” which Corrigan described in his address to the cast in the first rehearsal, and which are depicted in the set, now read as a sort of nostalgia in a post-industrial era where such chimneys, at least in the inner urban precincts the text refers to, are more likely to be attached to the warehouse-converted apartments of, to adapt Sell’s description, “hipper, gentler capitalists”, than to working factories. Like the Malthouse Theatre itself, these are repurposed industrial structures. What gives the work ‘teeth’, though, is the subtext that runs as a thick seam though the production, in which the vulnerable bodies of the performers, which are both real and not-real, struggle with the scale, and the hard surfaces, of the real and not-real stage design which critic and writer Alison Croggon describes as creating “a world of visual dissonance, a nightmarish simulacrum of a modern city” (Croggon, 2010, n.p.). The gesture towards proletarian theatres of the early twentieth century created by the small huddle of actors in the entrance interpolated by Kantor for this production is ironic on a number of levels. Their ‘smallness’ – in number and against the scale of the set – spoke to the death of this simple notion of oppositional artistic practice, to the death of this simple notion of organized oppositional politics, and to a sort of valorous frailty of the performers bodies in the cruel space.

\textsuperscript{56} This public drama effectively ended when convicted murdered and drug trafficker, Carl Williams, was murdered in prison\textsuperscript{56}. 139
CODA: Limits and Characterisation

I saw the production three times during its run. The third of these viewings was the last performance – a Sunday afternoon at the end of three weeks of eight shows per week. In this performance Perfect’s voice was ragged and, in contrast to the vocal ease and control I heard in the rehearsal room, I felt that he was working very hard to manage the battle with weary vocal cords. In some ways he was working the same mechanism, however, as the moment he negotiated the ascent on the table. He was battling the limits of his own virtuosity. The embodiment of the character in this final performance was as ‘amplified’ as I had seen it – the gestures grander, the bodily energy rougher and more frenetic. The insidious charm of an earlier version of the character, which insinuated but controlled a violence beneath it had come apart, and a raw aggression was revealed in both the performance of the character and the ruptures of vocal tone. In a calculated or instinctive response to the limits of his own capacity to control the tone and grain of his voice, he had shifted the construction of the character to incorporate the insuperable gutturality – to frame it as intentional and bring it within the limits of the construct of the performance. It was a calculated risk on a very fine margin. I’m not sure it worked, but did not entirely trust my response. It is perhaps not surprising that I was ‘primed’ to respond to such an event, given that I had adopted the same strategy, with limited success some years before when touring all three parts of The Exile Trilogy to Sydney. In that instance, after performing fairly demanding roles in both The Dybbuk and Es Brent in the previous three weeks, my voice was fairly ragged by the time I came to perform in Leavd. Like Perfect, and as I described in the Prologue to this thesis, I attempted to incorporate (literally) the raw voice into the characterization. And succeeded? – to a degree. Peter Morrison’s review of the show for The Australian Jewish News indicated that he, at least, was entirely aware of the very fine line I was walking: "Her singing is
often so bad one must assume this is deliberate – the old performer has lost her art?" (Morrison, 1993).
CHAPTER 5

“Scott’s aired a couple of things”: Back to Back Theatre rehearse

Ganesh Versus the Third Reich\textsuperscript{57}. 2011

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The improvisation begins apparently informally. The entire ensemble of six performers is present, with David Woods, playing David The Director.

The actors have just finished a discussion about where they are heading with the rehearsal narrative, and agreed on the frame for the next improvisation.

They do not move on to the studio floor, but remain where they have been talking, sitting on chairs in a corner of the room.

David, as The Director, begins the improvisation by inviting Scott to ‘air’ some things that have been concerning him.

Scott goes in hard – playing it very aggressive. He thinks the show is shit – is filth.

One of the other actors, ‘X’, agrees with him, and Scott asks impatiently what X is talking about.

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\textsuperscript{57} Ganesh Versus the Third Reich was produced by Back to Back Theatre in 2011, directed by Bruce Gladwin, devised by Mark Deans, Marcia Ferguson, Bruce Gladwin, Nicki Holland, Simon Laherty, Sarah Mainwaring, Scott Price, Kate Sulan, Brian Tilley and David Woods. The production remains in repertoire and continues to tour internationally, performed by Mark Deans, Simon Laherty, Scott Price, Luke Ryan, Brian Tilley and David Woods.
There is an energetic trading of insults – particularly with Brian, who is pressing Scott to be ‘more precise’.

X stands and leaves the room.

David asks where X is going.

It is hard to track X’s moves, as he/she is out of the camera frame.

Scott objects to the show dealing with ‘psychopaths’ like Hitler and Mengele and thinks they should make a whole other show.

X returns to the room, slamming the door.

When asked to clarify what he means, Scott demands to know if they are “trying to be smart with him”.

As the tirade escalates, X begins to cry.

Scott demands to know why X is crying.

X replies that Scott was yelling at him/her.

David tells Scott not to worry about it, that he will deal with it.

It is not clear whether the crying is real at this point but X leaves the room sounding tearful and slams the door.

David asks Scott if he (Scott) believes that the group is being manipulated. Scott agrees, accusing David of ‘bribing’ other members of the group ‘just like Hitler and Mengele’.

X has returned and protests that David is a good director.

Scott says that X should get a life and needs to get laid.

X exits again, telling Scott to “get fucked”.

David asks Scott not to ‘get personal’.

Scott protests that everyone thinks the director is God, and he just isn’t.
David thanks Scott for “sharing his truth”, and then thanks each member of the ensemble for sharing their truth and the “essence of their being” when they are on stage. Each is complimented on the particular strength they bring to the work – even Scott, who is told that his frequent conflict and criticism ‘balance everything’

David leaves the room and can be heard comforting a weeping X outside.

He returns to report that he has told X what wonderful work she/he is doing, and that X is just getting him/herself together. David exhorts the company to ‘carry on’ with the work.

CODA:

Bruce brings X back into the room and, calmly and gently, reminds her/him that the last encounter has been one where ‘everyone was acting’, but maybe X has not understood that.

Scott is concerned and requests a meeting between he, X and Bruce to sort the situation out.

There is some discussion about whether X really went to the toilet while out of the room.

(Video documentation of improvisation. Back to Back Theatre. 29/3/11)

**Theatre-About-Theatre**

The ‘exemplary moment’ I offer here reveals twenty minutes of “hundreds of hours of improvisations” (Alice Nash in Hammond, 2009, n.p.), that generated the raw material for Back to Back Theatre’s devised performance work, Ganesh Versus the Third Reich (2011).[^58] I began observing the development and

rehearsal of this work in May 2011, at which time all six members of the permanent ensemble were working on devising the project, with actor and performance-maker, David Woods, who had joined the project at the beginning of the year.\footnote{While the entire ensemble devised the work, including some members who left the company over the five years it was in development, the resulting play only featured the male members of the company.} My interest in this company stems from the fact that both the way they work, and the work they make, continually and consciously challenge prescriptive definitions of a number of salient sets of limits. Indeed, for the purposes of this research, the disability label conjures euphemisms that imply categorical limitation – “disabled”, “retarded”, “slow”, “dumb”, “soft” – and might imply that adjustments need to be made to a creative process to account for these limits. At the core of Back to Back Theatre, a small company located in the regional Australian city of Geelong, is an ensemble of performers who nominate themselves as disabled, a description that would normally imply limitation. Nonetheless, the work they make problematises conventional notions of ability, technique and talent that are already complex and contested in the field of contemporary performance. Artistic Director of the company, and director of the work under observation, Bruce Gladwin, said in interview that the qualified self-description published by the company, as artists “perceived to have a disability”\footnote{From \url{http://backtobacktheatre.com/employment/}} addresses a contradiction in the way the company is seen. The company works with artists with formal diagnoses of intellectual disability, but the work they make is “so intelligent” (Gladwin, 2012).

Over a period of six months, I attended two to three rehearsals per week until the work premiered in October 2011 at the Malthouse Theatre as part of the Melbourne International Arts Festival. The first rehearsal I attended was a reading of a first draft of the script, at a point when the work had been in development for nearly six years and the play-within-a-play structure had been in place for more than twelve months. The story of a group of artists with
intellectual disabilities working with a director to develop a play, and the story of
the play they were trying to make in which the Hindu god Ganesh travels to
Nazi Germany to reclaim the ancient symbol of the swastika from the Third
Reich were already deftly interwoven in the structure of the performance,
although there were still significant gaps in both narratives.

I should, at this point, flag the issue of my particular relationship with this
company. I have, since 2003, been a member of the Board of Back to Back
Theatre and my admiration for its work is neither disinterested nor disguised
here. It is fortunate, perhaps, that the unprecedented success of the company
throughout this period, reflected almost unanimously in both popular and critical
responses to their work, provides some validation for this admiration. Even so,
attempting to testify to the long, rich and often unruly process out of which
Ganesh Versus the Third Reich emerged, confronts me with the galling
recognition that the quality and peculiarly self-reflexive nature of this work
explores and explicates its themes more eloquently than I am able to do in this
thesis and in this language. Alison Croggon’s (2011b, n.p.) description of the
task of reviewing the work, that it is like “attempting to invoke an entire life, with
all its incidence, richness, mundanity, conflict and beauty, by dissecting a
corpse”, chimes with my experience of trying to describe the process of its
making.

Ganesh Versus the Third Reich is theatre-about-theatre, in which scenes
depicting rehearsal are juxtaposed against scenes of the performance that is
being rehearsed and, as such, speaks to all the other narratives of rehearsal
explored in this thesis in complex ways. I am struck by the fact that, also
serendipitously, three of the case studies I present use this structure. While
Michael Kantor’s production emphasised this meta-theatrical strategy within a
frame of rehabilitated Brechtian ‘alienation’, the similarities are most striking
between Ganesh and Levas. These productions, both of which were devised by
drawing on and reframing older texts. use this juxtaposition, amongst other
things, to problematise both the cultural ownership of the spinal narrative\textsuperscript{61}, and the task of locating an aesthetic for the expression of the epic and the mythic. Both works might also be seen as interrogations of the act of theatre-making by ‘outsiders’. The Gilgul Ensemble, in the form and content of its work, and in its public construction in the media, identified itself as standing outside the conventional theatre. In a similar way, Back to Back Theatre claims a position as ‘outsider artists’ whose position at the margins – of ‘society’, and of conventional theatre – “provides them with a unique and at time subversive view of the world”. Both works dealt directly, but in different ways, with the conundrums and paradoxes inherent in the at\textsuperscript{62} tempt to represent The Holocaust and the suffering of the ultimate emblem of the outsider and the marginalized, The Jew. The works of both companies have drawn on postmodern dramaturgical strategies to effect collocations between apparently paradoxical, conceptually complex materials, and to mine the mutual refractions, slippages and uncertainties which lie between process and product, acting and behaving, authenticity and fakery, fiction and reality. The Gilgul Ensemble, however, had a lifespan of only seven years, whereas Back to Back Theatre, with changes in its ensemble and artistic and company management, has slowly developed its visibility and its capacity to “disturb(s) the act of spectatorship” (Eckersall & Grehan, 2013, p. 17) on both national and international stages over more than twenty-five years. As I will explore throughout this chapter, the way the company works, both confirms in its respect for actors’ agency, and challenges in its “processual flexibility” (Meyrick, 2012), conventional notions of ‘professionalism’ most clearly evident in the chapter on the Melbourne Theatre Company.

\textsuperscript{61} In ‘Acting Jewish’, I outlined some of the issues of characterisation which emerged in the making of all three parts of Gilgul Theatre’s Exile Trilogy, given that several of the actors, myself included, were not Jewish (See Prior, 2006).

\textsuperscript{62}From \url{http://www.artsaccessaustralia.org/resources/organisations/aaa-members/victoria/234-back-to-back-theatre}
Figure 12. *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*. Simon Laherty (Levi) and David Woods (Mengele) Image: Jeff Busby

**Origins of the project**

*Ganesh Versus the Third Reich* evolved out of a number of experiments and serendipitous connections. Gladwin describes an experiment with pitch-shifting technology in which the combined effect of a grossly distorted and amplified voice, and the clothing worn by the actor on that day raised the spectre of Neo-Nazism. In the same period, ensemble member Rita Halabarec, who is also a prolific visual artist, was producing repeated images of the Hindu god Ganesh. During a period of creative development in March/April, 2005, the ensemble did a day researching India with one of the dramaturgs for the project, Kate
Sulan. A random Google search that threw up “lots of wacky websites about theories of the Nazi’s having appropriated the swastika” (Gladwin, 2012) suggested a ‘hero’s journey’ and a proposal for a version of the project emerged as part of a mooted trilogy with the working title of *Dumb*.

The initial concept for the trilogy, as expressed by Gladwin in a report to the Back to Back Theatre Committee of Management in 2005, aimed “to create a framed performance forum for the ensemble’s interior landscape, for their perceptions and reflections on contemporary society. This form of theatre draws a direct line to the ‘outsider’ or ‘brut’ art movement”. In this proposal, “Ganesh travels to Nazi Germany” is located as “Act 3”, following an Act 1 in which “a quiz-master as God (asks) a mantra of questions spoken as if it were The Torah” and a second act in which “A cowboy rides into town…He’s small, about the height of an average knee…Macho gunplay leads to the accidental shooting of his dearly loved horse. Unable to let go of the reins, our cowboy is dragged to heaven, like a man dangling from a horse-shaped balloon” (Gladwin, 2005). The project was shelved for a while as they debated whether they had “the right or the voice” (Gladwin, 2012) to make it, but the company eventually determined to examine and embrace precisely the set of self-imposed limits which had daunted them. Gladwin says he came to the decision that “that’s exactly why we should make the show – the fact that we don’t feel we have the right to (2012). And who does have the right to tell that story? Especially the representation of The Holocaust, [an] Indian deity, [an] epic narrative, Hitler etc. We loved the narrative idea but felt the issues in representing it on stage were fraught” (Gladwin, 2012, interview). For a period, the company focused on Joseph Campbell’s concept of the hero’s journey, identifying the

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63 Marcia Ferguson, who was then an associate director at the company, also made a considerable contribution to the dramaturgy on this project.
64 Gladwin refers to the claims of the American scholar, Joseph Campbell, that there is an archetypal pattern in fairy tales, folk tales and legends, which he described as “the hero’s journey”, which features episodes of “separation, initiation and return” and
manifestations of that trope in contemporary film and television familiar to the actors, and improvising around that structure. Once Gladwin (2012) felt the company was able to work within that structure, they moved to the narratives of the *Ganeshapurana* and of the Third Reich, which led to a period of improvising the insertion of the Ganesh story into that of the rise and fall of Nazism using the frame of a hero’s journey. Out of this exploration, key characters emerged. From the pantheon of Hindu gods came Ganesh, Visnu, and Ganesh’s parents, Parvati and Shiva. Out of the history of Nazi Germany came ‘The Angel of Death’ at Auschwitz, Josef Mengele, Adolf Hitler, and the consolidated symbol of victimhood during the period of the Third Reich, the (fictional) disabled Jew, Levi. Early connections were drawn between Ganesh’s elephant head, Levi’s disability and Mengele’s fascination with, and cruel experiments on, the ‘abnormal’ at Auschwitz. Work with the structure of the hero’s journey constructed a narrative in which Ganesh and Levi escape incarceration by Mengele and embark on a dangerous journey that leads Levi to freedom in Switzerland, and Ganesh to an encounter with The Fuhrer in which he reclaimsthe swastika. By Gladwin’s account, they struggled to locate a performance language or aesthetic which could communicate the necessary ‘epic’ quality of the myth and he recognized that the next step needed to be the development of some design ideas which could support them in realizing that “epic-ness”. He also felt that they were encountering limits in the Ganesh narrative and that there was “a limit to how much that could be theatrically interesting” (Gladwin, 2012, interview). Feeling that “it was replicating a genre that was so broad and that already exists so you’re better just adapting it”, he determined “that we just had to concentrate on the more pivotal points of the storytelling…to find the minimum that would be required to infer that story” (Gladwin, interview). In the end, he says, a lot of the Ganesh narrative just had to be written because it “had to be of the genre, which is quite hard to improvise” (Gladwin, 2012). As

“offers a narrative framework for understanding the progression of a character” (Batty, 2014, n.p.).
they worked, Gladwin says that a reflexive impulse arose. He noticed that, while they struggled to reconstruct and render these fraught narratives in a way that acknowledged their familiarity, honoured their cultural weight and remained “theatrically interesting”, the narrative of their attempts to do so, and the discussions happening in the studio around why that was difficult, were becoming more theatrically and conceptually compelling. Out of these considerations emerged the play-within-a-play framework in which that tension was deconstructed through framing the narrative of Ganesh returning to Nazi Germany to reclaim and recuperate the ancient symbol of the swastika within the narrative of a group of artists with intellectual disabilities working with a director to develop that performance.

The Frame: Scott Aired a Couple of Things

The improvisation described at the beginning of the chapter is a moment in the devising/rehearsal process that illuminates some of the ways in which the company positions members of the ensemble as entirely legitimate professional artists, whilst claiming the authority of outsider artists to challenge perceptions and representations of disability. Scene 15 of the play, “Scott’s aired a couple of things” developed from this serendipitous misinterpretation which opened up unmarked territory between “what is fiction and what is not” (Back to Back Theatre, 2011). By dint of the self-reflexive nature of both process and performance, this became a key issue in the content and reception of the work.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, Back to Back’s work is generated almost exclusively through improvisations – hundreds of them - that are recorded and reviewed, and out of which text and action are painstakingly transcribed and edited to create a final performance text. Gladwin (2012, interview) describes improvisation as the ensemble’s “fundamental writing tool”. This improvisation did not happen during my period of observation, but the company provided me with video documentation, and what I describe above is
what I saw in that documentation – several months after the show had premiered. Or what I think I saw in a recording that did not capture each participant’s every move.

In the improvisation David ‘The Director’ invites Scott ‘The Actor’ to air his concerns. Scott states very clearly that doesn’t like the material the show is dealing with and accuses David of “bribing” and “manipulating” the actors. To borrow Richard Schechner’s distinction, Scott is acting and not acting and not acting in this moment as he performs a version of himself (Schechner, 1985, p. 6). The task of challenging authority and provoking debate is one Scott frequently adopts within the company, and his role as provocateur is amplified in his eponymous role in this play. Where his strong political views, deep commitment to social justice and freedom of speech, and his formal diagnosis of autism and Tourette’s Syndrome elide is a moot point, but his relationship with the company has undoubtedly created a space for those views to be expressed, explored and challenged. One of the spurs for the work was his response to an episode following a performance of Food Court in Brussels in 2009. As Gabriella Coslovich recounts:

A man in the audience stood up and threw a metaphorical grenade into the room. “I don’t believe these people made this work,” he said. “I have worked with people like this and I don’t think they are capable of it.” One of the actors, Scott Price, livid at the presumption, stood up, grabbed the microphone and said: “Well mate, you can just get out of here because what you just said is so wrong and so offensive”. (Coslovich, 2011, n.p.)

The question implicit in this exchange – to what degree the actors are capable and what are the limits of their control of the work and its making - is one that the company chose to address head-on in Ganesh Versus the Third Reich

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65 Schechner uses the distinction “not himself” and “not not himself” to describe the performance and function of role in ritual performance.
through a brutally knowing and parodic representation of power relations in rehearsal.

**Losing The Reality Line – Capability And Vulnerability**

The reader will note that I have concealed the identity of the actor who lost “the reality line” (Back to Back Theatre, 2011) and mistook acting in an improvisation for a genuine interaction between colleagues. I admit to having some trouble locating that line myself – despite long familiarity with the company, its work and its members, several months of observing them at work, and seeing the actors repeat the re-framed and edited version of these actions multiple times in performance.

This was partly because everyone lost the reality line in this improvisation.

Gladwin explained in interview that, before David Woods joined the company to play ‘The Director’, he had been playing a “fascist” (Gladwin, 2012, personal interview) version of himself for eighteen months, and that the ensemble had become accustomed to moving fluidly in and out of improvisations where they played ‘stage versions’ of themselves. The improvisation described above began from a clear agreement, but the fact that the actors are playing versions of themselves, called by their own names, to the side of but not on the rehearsal floor, and in a narrative frame of high intensity and conflict, creates a context in which any actor might become confused. In the recording, X’s responses occur outside the frame of the shot. They can only be read through his/her speech, the tone of her/his voice, and the sounds of footsteps and doors slamming. This makes it difficult to gauge the authenticity and level of the distress being expressed. As I watch, it looks as if the actors themselves are unsure to what degree X’s responses are real or manufactured. They try to clarify what is happening but the fictional director drives the improvised scene forward and the actual director does not intervene.
Witnessing the improvisation left me somewhat anxious, and with a number of questions. For example, why did X lose ‘the reality line’? Could the loss be attributed to intellectual disability? Had s/he not understood or attended to the instructions? Was it because Scott in the improvisation is not distinctly different from Scott in the world? Had the intensity of Scott’s performance energy and commitment to the improvisation blurred the line between acting and behaving?

Why did Bruce as the Director not control the improvisation? Should the improvisation have been halted at the first sign of distress because the actor was distressed, or because the distressed actor was disabled?

David: And sometimes when we are working, what’s real and what’s not gets confusing?

Mark: Yes.

David: But afterwards, are you clear what was real and what wasn’t; afterwards?

Mark: Yes. (Back to Back Theatre, 2011, p. 42)

The “afterwards” is important here. Afterwards, X was clear “what was real and what wasn’t” (Back to Back Theatre, 2011, n.p.). The material generated in the improvisation created an entirely new layer in the narrative of the fraught and tenuous relationship between David ‘The Director’ and ‘The Actors’. Afterwards, the actor-who-makes-a-mistake was played by somebody else and X was not required to play out her/his mistake over and over again in performance. The debrief which immediately followed the improvisation (see Coda in description of rehearsal above) was also recorded and provided material for a later scene in which David slides without warning into improvisation in order to demonstrate

\[66\] In this chapter, I cite from the working draft of the script of *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich* by Back To Back, dated August 2011. This was the version that the company took into the first season in October 2011, and quotes from this version are reproduced with the permission of the company. A later edited version is published in Grehan & Eckersall, (2013).
to the actors “how you can create edgy exciting material when you are not sure what is real and what is not” (Back to Back Theatre, 2011 n.p.).

The Dignity Of Risk – No Actors Were Harmed In The Making Of This Show

We are not afraid to step into the cold, dark side. At first we’re scared, but afterwards we feel good. We are witty, emotional, we go deep into the work, we go places you can’t go in real life.67

If the actors at Back to Back are to be given a genuine opportunity to “protest cultural images of disabled people” (Garland Thomson, 2000, p. 335) and make authentic expression of the experience of disability, it will take them and their audiences into “cold, dark” spaces and risky, contested territory. While this may make for salutary, even quasi-therapeutic experiences for both, risk and its management is often the ‘elephant in the room’ in the context of a creative process as complex as this.

It is precisely the risk that everything can fall apart which provides the particular tension and excitement of the live performance event, and any actor stands on the threshold of imminent humiliation and self-exposure in any moment they are both working and witnessed. This is an occupational hazard of working and training as a performer. One of the key capacities implicit in the position description of a professional performing artist, and upon which creative, performance-making processes depend, is the ability to tolerate uncertainty and negotiate creative differences.

Back to Back positions its ensemble unequivocally as professional artists, and asserts that this status brings with it both the right and the responsibility to take risks. Reflecting on this particular moment in the development process, Gladwin (2012) asserts that, “I have an expectation of them being robust. We will try to

understand what’s going on, but there’s an expectation that we need to keep working…and that they have a right to fail and be emotionally engaged”. The fact that the improvisation was allowed to continue challenges the notion that the label of disability should exclude the artist from the salutary experience of creative risk, and the company has an explicit commitment to managing creative process such that it afford its artists “the dignity of risk” (Back to Back Theatre, 2012, n.p.).

Yes, but is it Art(ful)?

David: Yeah. I think anybody can play anything. (Back to Back Theatre, 2011, p. 16)

I think you can think about ‘actors’ in a couple of ways. I sort of divide them in my head into ‘performers’ and ‘transformers’. (David Pledger, private conversation, 2000)

I am acutely aware that the scope of this research will not allow me to address a set of very fraught and delicate questions raised by the analysis of the performance-making processes of this company in the depth they deserve. I approach this territory in order to open up a series of questions about the creation of both creative processes and their outcomes with performers who are located at the margins of professional practice because their technical capacities as performers are ‘different’ and bounded in different ways. When viewed through the lens of salient/salutary limits, the example of the ensemble members at Back to Back raises the question of what sort of ‘acting’ these performers are doing. The company positions the ensemble members as professional artists, and refers to them unambiguously as ‘actors’. What they are doing is ‘acting’ in the broader definition of the term, but the marks of disability on and in their bodies both expand and contract this definition, and the

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68 I found this note in another set of lecture notes, for a unit called “The Paradox of the Actor”. The date on the earliest file is 2000 but I have not noted a date for a post-show conversation I had with director and performance-maker, David Pledger.
‘limits’ of their disabilities, which are by no means uniform, reframe the notion of what constitutes ‘acting’. Despite the “death of character”, heralded by Elinor Fuchs in 1996, the collision between modernist and post-modernist interpretations of “characterisation” as a key aspect of meaning-making in performance is evident, for example, when one registers that core components of most Western conservatory actor training programs still privilege long-established regimes of movement and voice training, designed to develop expressive capacity and flexibility within the Stanislavskian frame of a constructed and consistent psychological ‘profile’ that is distinct from that of its ‘player’. But the features of ‘disability’ evident in some of these actors, as noted above, include limited physical inflexibility, halting or indistinct speech, physical and vocal tics, and a range of idiosyncratic inflections of eye contact that mitigate against this conventional consistency of embodiment. This creates an internal dialectic which is repeated and refracted throughout the company’s body of work, but which manifests most strongly in Ganesh versus the Third Reich. As the work moves between self-consciously framed ‘dramatic’ performance, and the scenes in which the actors play themselves, both categories of ‘characterisation’ are problematized. Brian plays an Indian deity, Scott plays, amongst other things, a Nazi guard – but Simon plays a Jew who shares his precise constellation of disability features. When both disabled and non-disabled actors play ‘characters’ – this is rendered even more complex, opening up a space in which “[e]ach reality of self gives way to reflexive questioning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality” (Gergen cited in Tomlin, 2014, p. 377). Here, too, there is a negotiation of “the reality line”. The actors in the Back to Back ensemble inhabit their roles ‘differently’, but with a compelling richness because the inhabitation summons and implicitly critiques the “boundaries anticipated” (Goldman, 2000, p. 4-5) – the ghost of conventional characterisation.

In a sense, this echoes Gladwin’s earlier comment about the paradox he encountered when he first witnessed the work of the company – the performers
and makers are ‘intellectually disabled’, but make work that is “so intelligent” (Gladwin, 2011, n.p.). To adapt Bryoni Trezise and Caroline Wake’s inflection of Deirdre Heddon’s claims about the ways in which disability performance “both highlights and interrogates variously (and differently) performing selves” (Trezise & Wake, 2013, p. 123), the effect of these performers’ refusal to “play only themselves” works to “denaturalize the naturalization” of conventional tropes of performed ‘characterisation’ alluded to in my analysis of the rehearsal process at the Melbourne Theatre Company (Chapter 3). While ‘disabled’ actors make visible the complex fiction of the ‘erasure’ of self in what Tomlin describes as the “Stanislavskian embodiment of continuous consistency” (p. 374), they also summon the “free-floating…ghosts…of traditional characterization” (Tomlin, 2014, p. 373) within a frame “of such visual and stylistic originality that the text seems not to be reimaginable even where it is presumably restageable” (Fuchs cited in Trezise & Wake, 2013, p. 123).

The ‘difference’ these individual performances expose – ‘in character’, but with the notion of character rendered “citational” by the gaps in ‘consistency’ – act as a sort of “translation” exemplifying Susan Bassnett’s claim that

physical expressivity is not universal and varies from culture to culture. Gesture and body language is represented differently, understood differently, reproduced differently in different contexts and at different times, in accordance with different conventions, different histories and different audience expectations. (Bassnet, 1998, p. 107)

Gladwin calls these ‘limitations’, “part of our palette”, and the work deploys them strategically and subtly (Gladwin, 2012). Trezise and Wake, (2013, p. 124) for example, speak eloquently of the angst they experienced when watching Scott Price’s “perfunctory…aggressively, tauntingly flat” delivery of “pornographic words” in Food Court – a mode of delivery that strips them “of any context or desire”, but also co-opts to a point just short of parody, the flattened, affectless
delivery of the autistic subject. Here, as Bassnett points out in relation to the translation of theatre texts, “Characterisation takes place on the level not of action, but of language” (Bassnett, 1998, p.102).

This tension is revealed in the Back to Back production that followed Ganesha – Super Discount (2013). This work again featured David Woods as the only non-disabled member of the devising team. Movement between scenes of rehearsal, and scenes of the performance of the work being made, also featured in this work. In some of these scenes, Woods played a version of himself – David, an actor – and in some he played an actor with a disability, Trevor. Although Woods is a highly skilled actor who made no apparent attempt to parody this act of ‘cripping up’,\(^6^9\) the contrast between his technique-ally adept performance-of-disability and the ‘authentic’ disabilities of the performers around him reopened the unsettling gap between “performed disability and perceived disability” (Sandahl, cited in Trezise and Wake, 2013, p.122). Amidst the series of fragmented arguments between the actors about who should be allowed to play people with disability that run through the performance, David’s eponymous character blurted out yet another seems-to-be-true account of an encounter with an audience member, this time in Vienna. In the story he offered, this gap is mined, and his comments in interview about “predictive text” expectations of disability (Woods, 2012, personal interview) echo Rhodes’ challenge to Art Brut as an “expressivist conception of art...a legacy of Romanticism” in that there is an emphasis on expression rather than technique” (Rhodes, cited in Davies, 2009, pp.25-41). His complaint that his lack of disability renders him invisible, “expose[s]” and “puncture[s]” the desire to romanticise the disabled subject (Woods, 2012).

“Your performances were beautiful and exquisite and raw”,

and words like special, raw, honest, (putting hand on bleeding

\(^6^9\) Described in Trezise and Wake (2013, p. 122) after Carrie Sandhal, as a pejorative description in disability arts communities for a non-disabled actor playing a disabled character
heart and tilting head) “I want to thank you for your performances”; and there’s me on the end, David the dismissible actor...who’s not got the intellectual disability, and therefore isn’t as praiseworthy as the other actors who have the intellectual disability. Thinking, I may as well not be here...nobody gives a shit about what I’m doing. Do I need a disability for my work to be acknowledged?  

According to Trezise and Wake (in this case talking about the 2008 work, Food Court), the company uses “performance strategies that paradoxically combine the presentational and the meta-theatrical”. The collision of the concepts of ‘strategy’ and ‘paradox’ is useful here when thinking about how Back to Back so knowingly positions its artists as actors who traverse the space between “performer” and “transformer” so that the valorisation of the ‘authenticity’ of evident disability, and the naturalisation of conventional modes of characterisation, exist in a sustained and productive dialectic.

In the work of this company, this performer-transformer paradox is positioned artfully within the performance text. In interview, Bruce Gladwin neatly sidestepped the question of how the ensemble members ‘differences’ are accounted for in the management of the creative process, perhaps because this company does not manage the performance-making process notably differently from any other company. In a period when I was moving between watching the performance making processes of other companies, and conducting my own with university students, I was strongly aware of the similarities of approach to processes of devising and rehearsing, and of the categories of their activities. The Back to Back ensemble ‘worked’ on scene-making (some of the “hundreds of hours” of improvisation that Alice Nash alludes to), review (time around the table and on the floor in reading, discussion and reflection), and rehearsal (reading script drafts, repetition of scenes, ‘tweaking’ interpretation and timing,

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70 Taken from the text of Back to Back’s 2013 performance Super Discount (unpublished)
sequencing, mise en scene and orchestration) and, as with the actors at the Melbourne Theatre Company and the Malthouse Theatre, little time was wasted when they were working. Actors who were not working on the floor were either ‘watching’ the work and providing feedback, or learning lines. On several occasions when I was present, Simon Laherty was working with a tutor or with dramaturg, Kate Sulan, on learning pronunciation for an extended scene in German.\footnote{Scene [12] in the script of Ganesh Versus the Third Reich, published in We Are People Who Do Shows, is a conversation between Levi, the disabled Jew who has escaped from the cruel experiments of Josef Mengele, and a black market salesman who he encounters on a train. The scene is conducted entirely in German, with the English text projected as subtitles below the carriage windows. See Figure 12 above.}

Perhaps only in one significant respect did this process differ from others – it was ‘slower’. This ‘slowness’ was not reflected in the pace or intensity of actual ‘work’ on the floor, but was most evident in the extraordinary care, delicacy and detail with which the content of the performance was constructed.

Figure 13. Scene [12]: Train. Ganesh Versus the Third Reich. Photo: Jeff Busby
Slow Progress And Creative Risk Management

Back to Back Theatre creates works that not only challenge perceptions of disability, but also ironically reference commonly held assumptions in their names (Mental, 1999; Soft, 2002). Indeed, one of the starting points for Ganesh Versus the Third Reich, as noted previously was a fortnight of creative development in 2005 as part of a mooted trilogy with the working title of Dumb (Back to Back Theatre, 2005). I asked Gladwin about ‘slowness’, another euphemism for intellectual disability. I asked if the company works slowly because actors with intellectual disabilities can only work slowly. Bruce reframed the question in his response.

I think I’ve come to some sort of self-realisation that I’ve got a bit of a slow brain. I like the idea of something gestating. It takes me a long time to understand what it is that I’m making. …We don’t know what it’s going to be so we’ve got to discover it, so it just takes some time. (Gladwin, 2012)

Slowness here is characterized as a necessary precondition for discovery, but working slowly is another way of affording the ensemble “the dignity of risk”. The company generates massive amounts of material in order to “discover…what it’s going to be”. This is what Eugenio Barba calls “waste” (2000, p. 61). The long process of inventing, testing, discarding refining, distilling, shaping and repeating, creates a safe environment in which to deal with volatile material, a luxury that other artists working using similar devising processes but within shorter time frames would envy.

Making performance through improvisation, however, is slow work, and the extremely long periods of development the company enjoys are conditioned by a number of factors. At present, the Back to Back actors are the only ongoing, publicly funded theatre ensemble in Australia (Hutchinson, 2005, p. 14). A combination of funding through national and state-based arts funding
authorities, increasing philanthropic donations and box office income, and disability support mechanisms, allows the company to employ the artists on a full time basis. The actors come to work every day and work on a range of activities, which might be the development of creative work (performance projects), performance training (professional development), or work on community projects. The company moves through recursive cycles of more or less formal research, exploratory/speculative improvisations and reflection/reflexion. The creative process is generally fragmented – often scheduled as a week or fortnight of exploration of a particular aspect of the project and reticulated with a more general professional development agenda for the actors. Gladwin’s description of the process matches what I witnessed in the studio – improvisation after improvisation, each followed by discussion and a decision whether to discard the idea, or to reframe and rework it. Gladwin (2012, personal interview) says that his strategy is to articulate “tight parameters” really clearly. When I arrived in May, the company was moving between ‘big picture’ work – reading through the current draft of the script around the table to assess how it ‘sounded’, refining scenes which had already been written, and improvising smaller scenes to fill gaps. Gladwin says of this stage of the process that his job is to be quite precise, before we do the improvisation, about what it is we are trying to achieve. I feel if I can set really clear parameters to the task, then the actors can improvise around that. If I’m really airy-fairy, we get something that’s harder to harness in later...As the script is getting refined, we’ve got these smaller holes that have to be filled and you can be really precise and say “At this point we need about four exchanges of dialogue and it has to be about this”. (Gladwin, 2012)

In part, the interrupted nature of the development process is a limitation imposed by the recent success of the company and shifts in the composition of
the ensemble. In the past decade of its 25 year history, the company has produced a series of works which have created increasing demand for national and international touring, many requests to conduct workshops and take up residencies and commissions, both nationally and internationally. During this time, a number of ensemble members have left, a number of new members have joined the company, and the number of ensemble members has increased from 5 to 6.

This success has also wrought changes in the way the ensemble functions. While all ensemble members participate in the making of the works, not all perform in them, and this has allowed the company to have multiple works available for touring. Some former members retain a less formal relationship with the company, re-joining the company when work they have originated is touring. The company has also developed a model of keeping one or several projects in development while presenting works from the repertoire, though development processes now need to be fitted in around touring schedules, and to accommodate absences of key participants. The ensemble, as permanent employees of the company, work on discrete parts of new projects, are deployed on community projects, work with collaborating artists, or engage in professional development while other members are away on tour. They also work with the community arm of the company, Theatre of Speed, on a weekly basis, and participate, both as learners and teachers, in the annual summer school (in 2015 called CAMP: Come and Make Performance) which draws participants with and without disability from all over Australia for a week of intensive performance and performance-making training. In the period of development for *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*, from 2005 to 2011, the company also made and toured *Small Metal Objects*, *The Democratic Set* and *Food Court*, developed *Tour Guide* as a commission for Linz’s year as European Cultural Capital, produced *Minotaur*, *Pod7*, *Disability Maintenance Instrument* and *Frankenstein* with Theatre of Speed, and conducted several creative developments for a potential co-production with the Sydney Theatre
Company, *Laser Beak Man*. Of these, *Small Metal Objects*, *The Democratic Set* and *Food Court* remain in the touring repertoire.

Breaking down periods of creative development into discrete units over a longer period also allows the company the flexibility to integrate experimentation with design and technical elements, which are more difficult to summon rapidly and which, in conventional rehearsal processes such as those discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 at the Melbourne Theatre Company and the Malthouse Theatre, generally do not enter the performance making/rehearsal process until scene-building activity is completed. Quite early in the process of devising *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*, when the company was still investigating what an ‘epic’ style of performance might look like, Gladwin halted scene development on the Ganesh narrative and focused on design. A week was spent on the larger stage in the neighbouring Geelong Performing Arts Centre, exploring the scenic and stylistic possibilities of interaction between multiple layers of plastic curtains, lighting, animation and projections depicting the world of the Hindu gods, mountains, forests, a train carriage, and subtitles which translated the texts delivered in German, Sanskrit and Hindi. These aspects of the design ultimately provided and marked the scenic shifts which distinguished the Ganesh narrative from the ‘making of’ narrative, and this period of experimentation allowed the company to return to work on scene-building with an understanding of what those elements would and would not allow them to do.

This might be also be interpreted as a strategy for creative risk management. These long development periods allow ample space for risk-taking in the creative process, but ultimately mitigate against failure in the outcome. Working slowly allows time to debrief, to check that everyone has understood what it is that they are making, for changes of mind or direction, to retreat, or re-think. Each moment of the performance is scrupulously examined, shaped and placed
within its emerging structure. At the end, afterwards, the company is very clear what the work means – to them.

Control

Nonetheless, Back to Back is an ensemble, not a collective. Disabled artists generate the content of the work through a process in which their concerns and imaginings are explored, and performances are wrought out of the faithful transcription of the material they generate in improvisation. Their editorial rights are limited, however, by precisely the same sort of license accorded to any professional theatre ensemble that employs a director, which might be interpreted as another strategy to manage creative risk. On the whole, the director makes the decisions regarding how and when the company will work, and the work of shaping, assembling and editing the material produced in development is also his responsibility. There is regular consultation on these sorts of issues, but the negotiations are delicate and complex. Indeed, this delicate balance is satirised in Ganesh, as ‘The Director’, David, attempts to buoy up the flagging esprit de corps of the group of actors by the use of banal chanting which unequivocally echoes the theme song from the popular children’s series, Bob The Builder.

David: That’s what I’m talking about.

If you dream it you can do it.

Just do it.

Can we fix it?

Yes we can.

Yes we can. (Back to Back Theatre, 2011)
In the improvisation which produced “Scott’s Aired a Couple of Things”, and the scene in the performance which was written out of it, David ‘The Director’s’ platitudinous comments act to reframe and sanitise the chaos and conflict that has emerged in the improvisation/debate – to subdue the combatants with anodyne affirmations of their value, and firmly wrest control of the moment from ‘The Actors’. His banal comments carry an infinitely subtle resonance of totalitarianism. Significantly, David does not address the “couple of things” Scott has aired – the troublesome content of the piece and the question of whether the actors are being controlled. Instead he ascribes generic values to the interaction – the “sharing” of “true feelings”, being “strong enough” to “disagree and criticise”, of bringing a “presence” of a “beautiful, focused quality” to the work – essentially emptying the episode of any meaning other than a saccharine experience of working together (from an Improvisation, 2011).

Gladwin describes the use of the “fictionalized biography” as part of a process of rendering difficult aspects of the material open to scrutiny. He describes anxiety attendant upon representing contested and fraught narratives about the Holocaust, Nazism, Hindu myth and religion, and says that the shift to a structure that exposed and explored contestation gave them “a voice...to tackle the material”. The fictionalized biography also allowed the company to attack the complex issue of who controls the creative process when the artists have intellectual disabilities, “to render that process open” (Gladwin, 2012).

What strikes me, in multiple viewings of the improvisation and of the performance, is the sophistication of the deconstruction of the trope of creative control and how that can shift in a moment. The work firmly refuses to provide a simple (another euphemism for intellectual disability) representation of a complex political space, or comfortable catharsis for those who witness it.

The character of The Director walks a knife-edge. His articulation of the genuine joys, ideals and aspirations involved in making “edgy exciting material” that can
challenge perceptions of disability, is contaminated by its deployment of clichés and platitudes of enabling creative activity in order to control the actors. As Collette Conroy notes of the power relations between disabled and non-disabled artists, there is always the danger that “the self-abnegation of the facilitator collides with the self-aggrandisement of the guru” (Conroy, 2009, p. 5). As the play progresses, and the tension between “facilitation” and “self-aggrandisement” is progressively revealed and mined, this propaganda become less and less effective when conflict between the actors and ‘The Director’ escalates. Woods described his contempt for a “predictive text notion of what is or isn’t acceptable...all of which I find appalling and want to mock though imitative parody pushed to the extreme point of possible believable escalation so as to puncture and expose” (Woods, 2012). Nonetheless, he acknowledged a shift in the characterization as the work developed, moving ‘The Director’ from unequivocally dictatorial, to something more nuanced that gave him some more “empathetic qualities”. He provided the following “textual correction” as an example of strategies used to “switch the empathy stakes from hatred to pity”.

“I said in an improvisation:

“If you want freedom you’ve got to make it fixed. I know that sounds contradictory but what I mean is you people need to feel secure.”

I asked to change to...

“If you want freedom you’ve got to make it fixed. I know that sounds contradictory but what I mean is we need to feel secure.” (Woods, 2012).

Ultimately Woods produced a finely modulated representation of haplessness born of good intentions, limited insight, and the exhaustion of patience. In the improvisation, Scott indicates that he trusts neither the process nor ‘The Director’. In the play, David ‘The Director’ is finally rendered impotent by the
ultimate weapon of the disempowered – non-compliance – suggesting that disabled actors might be more empowered in this sort of context than a jobbing actor whose next job is contingent on compliance with the demands of an authored text or auteur director. The actors in Ganesh Versus the Third Reich will not be patronized. Mark and Scott refuse to play Hitler. Scott says, “I’m not going to touch it” (Back to Back Theatre, 2011 p. 53). Brian refuses to say, “I love you” with conviction. Scott refuses to die in the manner required in order to “act well” (Back to Back Theatre, 2011). Unlike their representations in the performance, in ‘real’ rehearsals, the actors do not resist. Gladwin relies little on rhetoric. Surprisingly, he doesn’t talk a lot. He asks a lot of questions. Years of close collaboration with the artists mean that they trust him enough to take risks. Experience has taught them that the risks will pay off, and that Gladwin “will pull something together” that faithfully renders their voices and their experience (Gladwin, 2012).

Chris Kohn locates a “second meaning” in the name of the work, one that analogises the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in the role of the director of Ganesh and the Third Reich, and the character of ‘The Director’ in the play. He describes the work as exposing:

the dialectic internal process of an artist grappling with their relationship to power and agency in this complex collaborative environment. The ‘intellectually able’ artist can be seen (by others or themselves) as a remover of obstacles or deva of wisdom on the one hand, or a kind of autocratic dictator on the other. Naturally, the truth lies not on one side or the other, but in the productive tension between the two. (Kohn, 2011, n.p.)
Audibility

*In this improvisation, Scott describes himself as “a man of many words”*

If, as disability theorist Rosemarie Garland Thomson asserts, much of the discourse around disability revolves around issues of gaze, stare and visibility (see Garland Thomson, 2000; Kuppers, 2003) Back to Back’s work has increasingly posited a discourse of audibility. Gladwin often refers to the company’s “voice”, in describing the task of locating a performance language that can express their ideas, and as the spur for experimentation with technologies that can enhance, amplify, layer and modulate the relationship between the Back to Back actors and their audiences.

By Gladwin’s account, another of the catalysts for the making of Ganesh Versus the Third Reich happened in a period of experimentation with pitch shifting. In this creative development, one of the actors, Sonia Teuben, was amplified with a radio mike and

we pitch-shifted her voice a couple of octaves down…So I had her improvise a scene where she’s a giant…and she was wearing a pair of rolled up jeans and Doc Martens boots or something like that, and she also had her head shaved…. And she became aware that the smallest gesture had this huge kind of effect. And out of that we got the idea that it would be good to do something with the pitch-shifting thing, but also the Nazi thing. (Gladwin, 2012)

Ultimately this technology allowed the company to deal with some of the challenges inherent in representing the epic and mythic aspects of the Ganesh scenes, one of the issues which Gladwin describes as making them feel like “it was too difficult to make” (Gladwin, 2012). If the use of the rehearsal narrative gave the company “a voice” with which they could negotiate fraught narratives
such as the Holocaust and Nazism, pitch-shifting and amplification gave Brian Tilley’s Ganesh a voice which could “thunder” until “senses are shaken”, and the means to transport the audience across the reality line into an epic and mythic space in which the presence of the divine did not seem implausible.

At a more practical level, the company has also engaged in sustained experimentation with limit-challenging technology which can ‘give voice’ to those actors whose disabilities impede their capacity to be heard and understood, and this has had a marked effect on the evolving performance language of their work. Fragments of the testy banter between Scott and Brian in the improvisation I witnessed continues throughout Ganesh Versus the Third Reich, and form part of an ongoing implicit and explicit dialogue about whether the actors have the ‘ability’ to speak. Scott has a mild speech impediment and, as the text in the following scene excerpt shows, the discourse of audibility, linked to his ‘fitness’ as a performer, is made manifest in the exposure of his literal difficulties in speaking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene 8</th>
<th>Speech Impediment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>The other difference, that gives me the edge over you, I don’t have a speech impediment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott</td>
<td>I don’t…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>Yeah you do, you are hard to understand. Under the rugged rocks the rugged rascal ran.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Brian gestures for Scott to repeat*

| Scott   | Under the wugged wocks the wugged… |
| Brian   | You should see a professional. |
| Scott   | Yeah you’re wight. |

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72 From William Blake’s Prologue for A Dramatic Piece of King Edward the Fourth.
One of the other actors, Mark Deans, speaks very little and his speech is very indistinct. In one of the rehearsal scenes, issues of clarity of speech and ‘audibility’ arise and destabilize a claim made by the Director earlier in the text that “anyone can play anything”, when Mark is offered the role of Hitler – with stipulations.

Simon: The thing is Mark, you gonna have to talk. Hitler talks.
Mark: Arrgh
Simon: Hitler was a great orator. You can’t just mumble.
Mark: Lie down
Simon: There’s a lot of script to learn.

*Mark shoots him in the head. Simon plays dead, then gets up from the floor.*

(Back to Back Theatre, 2011, p. 15)

The company’s increasing use of technology that can aid in amplifying and clarifying the delivery of text, in particular, has evolved to the point where its integration into the conceptual framework of the pieces has extended their aesthetic boundaries to incorporate spaces of rare beauty and surprisingly complex relationships with audiences. For *Soft* (2002) the company created a massive white inflatable, to which the audience gained access through a series of tunnels into a large white chamber. This work saw the audience equipped, for the first time, with individual sets of headphones through which a soundscape composed by Hugh Covill, and the actors’ voices, were delivered in high fidelity. Manipulation of these two elements meant that not only was the softest murmur audible, but the layers of spoken text and the immersive sound design could be woven together in subtle ways. One of the actor/devisors on this project, Rita
Halabarec, speaks very indistinctly, and in short, often elliptical, utterances. She created a text of uncanny poetic beauty for this work but could not be understood when she spoke it. While the amplification of voice made her audible, it did not make her reliably comprehensible. Video artist, Rhian Hinkley, animated her words as written text and flew them through the space as projection onto the white walls of the inflatable bubble that encased both audience and performers. Rita’s text thus retained the peculiar music of its idiosyncratic rhythms, was rendered plangent through amplification and integration with the soundscape, and danced in the space.

My mother gave birth to me
A small baby like me.
Sing song, put in the cot, cradle as well
Small clothes, small face, small body.
Old photos about me
Born here, Down Syndrome
My father Down Syndrome
My mother Down Syndrome
I’m perfect
Perfect Baby
Perfect Child
Perfect Woman          (Back to Back Theatre, 2005, p. 15)

In *Food Court* (2008), Sarah Mainwaring delivered Caliban’s, “Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises” speech from Act 3 of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Mainwaring has an acquired brain injury affecting her speech amongst other
things, and her delivery of text is often very slow, breathy and marked by long pauses. Here Hinkley again ‘flew’ and ‘danced’ the written text of the speech on a transparent screen in front of her, developing a “piece of software specifically for the show...so the text responds to the louder and more sustained performance that Sarah gives into the microphone” (Gladwin, 2013, p. 243), so that it’s movement was contingent on the actor delivering the text with sufficient vocal energy and pace to mobilise it on the screen. This was a moving and naked encounter with the limits imposed by her disability. As she strained to push the text up the screen, the struggle to articulate the complex text resonated visibly through her whole body.

In the same work, Mark Deans was silent, but controlled the audibility of the other actors. Gladwin (2012), in typical understated style, describes these self-reflexive gestures as “little agendas”, and says that ideas for the work often arise from the need to provide each of the performers with a new challenge in each project.

Mark doesn’t talk much on stage, so (I thought) let’s develop his talking on stage. And then he had the microphone, so people couldn’t talk unless he put the microphone in front of them. So there’s little agendas in the work which then influence the form of the work.73

This rapid and imaginative uptake of available technology has gone beyond simply rendering spoken text audible, visible and/or comprehensible to making it ‘real’ – materialising and moving ideas through the space.

**Playing The Reality Line**

73 In Food Court, Mark had a small monologue which described a journey through a food court but, in the first stage sequence of the show, was also equipped with a large boom microphone into which the other actors had to speak in order to be heard.
The fact that ‘afterwards’, when the show is made, the artists are very clear about the location of ‘the reality line’, and the ways in which the work plays across its borders, braces them for what are sometimes vehement reactions to the work. I have discussed some of the ways in which the ambiguous framing of this work unsettles its spectators, notions of ‘performing’ and ‘transforming’, and notions of audibility. The increasing conceptual audacity of the company’s work has captured an audience with an appetite for, and literacy in, reading its particular brand of post-dramatic performance, and this is demonstrated in the constant demand for its work on the international touring circuit.\textsuperscript{74} The work has, however, alienated some audiences, particularly those whose capacity to read the complex dialectic is limited by preconception. In its first season, in the context of Melbourne’s International Arts Festival, an unexpected vulnerability, which accompanied the company’s interrogation of cultural appropriation and indicated conflicting views on the limits of creative license, was brought into relief in other ways.

In the week prior to the show’s opening, what Gladwin described as “a virtual fire-storm” erupted around the work, prompted by a self-proclaimed Hindu leader in the US who felt that publicity material for the show he had located online indicated that the work had not merely appropriated material sacred to his culture, but abused it. In his view, they had crossed the line. While the creative and technical team worked to move the show from its rehearsal room above the Geelong library\textsuperscript{75} into the Merlyn Theatre at the Malthouse, via some ‘technical rehearsals’ in the Geelong Performing Arts Centre, there were intense negotiations happening behind the scenes as “people were flying in from across Australia and having these huge, round-table conferences,

\textsuperscript{74} At the time of writing, \textit{Ganesh Versus the Third Reich}, has been performed in 26 cities across Australia, the UK, Europe, the US and Canada, with performances scheduled in a further 5 European cities through 2015.

\textsuperscript{75} During the last 9 months of work on this performance, the Back to Back rehearsal and administrative spaces were under renovation, and company members – creative and administrative – were spread through temporary work spaces around the ‘arts precinct’ of Geelong.
mediated by the multi-faith council attached to the state government” (Gladwin in Gough, 2013, p. 243). At the same time, the “fire-storm” raged online, with devout Hindus encouraged to write letters of protest to state and federal government and funding bodies, and to the company. As Gabriella Coslovich recounts, and as I was briefed as a concerned board member, “some… wanted the play banned, or, at the very least, the script vetted” (Coslovich, 2011, n.p.). The company declined either to cancel or edit the play but, given that the furore had erupted before the work had been seen by anyone, invited Hindu leaders to see the show and “tell us what you think” (Gladwin in Ekersall & Grehen., 2013, p. 257). Although these leaders, upon seeing the work, and on the whole, perceived no insult to Hindu culture or religion in its content (indeed some welcomed the debate in the troubled territory of cultural representation and appropriation), protest emails and letters continued to arrive, a small number of protesters maintained a vigil outside the theatre throughout the season, and there was a discreet boost to security in and around the venue.
Caught in the Act

One of the morally ambiguous desires that this work plays with so cunningly is our appetite for the authentic – for some “freak porn” (Back to Back Theatre, 2011, p. 45). The fact that the actors bear the unmistakable marks of intellectual disability generates both anxiety and excitement. They appear vulnerable and we who watch them are not always sure if they are safe up there on the stage. We are not sure if they are in control, if they know what they are doing. There is a complex frisson, with which I responded to the improvisation, in the possibility that it might all fall apart – that we may be witnessing authentic responses rather than ‘good acting’. We who watch them don’t know where the limits lie - what is fiction and what is not. A viewer of the performance at the Vienna Festival described the moment when he understood that he had been slow to catch on to the game being played with him.

And oh, how caught one feels. How much one is punished in (where) his bias lies, when the fourth wall is broken by the accusation of the ‘director’ that the audience had only come to see a freak show. (Krösche, 2012, n.p.)

Garland Thomson characterises the act of placing the disabled or extraordinary body before the public gaze in performance as a deliberate challenge – as a ‘staring back’. She proposes that this act of self-representation inevitably produces a narrative in which “the disabled body is not only the medium but the content of the performance. The disabled body on view is the performance” (2000, 334). Ganesh Versus the Third Reich, in its bold address to spectators’

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77 Review from Kai Krösche in the German art magazine Nachtmuzik. (translation Yoni Pryor)
preconceptions of the ‘limits’ of the performance making process of this company, and of its ensemble of disabled artists, glared back, remorselessly demanding an apologia from its audience, asking “what are you looking at?”. The work played masterfully with troubling issues around limits that arose in the performance making process – with ambiguities of ethics, meaning, control, intention, ability and authenticity – by presenting a “fictionalized biography” of that process that confronted the audience with multiple challenges to their own ability to identify ‘the reality line’.
CHAPTER 6

Working with impossible triangles and flat actors

Figure 15. Are You There? Deakin University and the University of Amsterdam 2013
SCENE THREE:

A:
B is online hi B is offline

B:
B is online hey

A:
hey you there?

B:
hey i’m there

A:
hey how are you? been a while how you been?

B:
nah yeah

A:
nah yeah me too miss you been a while

B:
yeah been a while i’m good

A:
B is offline

B:
B is online

A:
hey, you're back. how are you, been a while, how you been?

B:

hey i'm back how are you? been a while how you been? we should catch up yes?

smiley face

A:

smiley face A is offline

B:

B is offline

Rehearsal. 13th May, 2013

Deakin University and University of Amsterdam

In fact, in this scene, both A and B are online. In this telematic rehearsal, A is in a classroom at the University of Amsterdam in The Netherlands, and B is in a television studio at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia. The two locations are connected through videoconference and the show that is being rehearsed is constructed within a framework whereby a local audience watches the local performer in the room, and the remote performer projected on a screen in each space. The performers have been rehearsing facing the camera, but my colleague and co-director, Rose van der Zwaard, managing the scene from the Amsterdam end, has suggested that they should sit side on so they are captured in profile by cameras in both locations. Both appear to be looking at computer screens in front of them but cannot actually see one another, so the progress and momentum of the scene relies on cues embedded in the text. The text is consciously banal, and written to replicate the broken rhythms and sequences, flattened tone and repetitions of scrolling words in a text box on a screen. Information about presence and absence (A or B is offline or online) is spoken as text. Although the two performers speak in accents which declare their different language/cultures, the vernacular is generic
‘internetslang’. The relatively monotonous and unpunctuated delivery of the textual rhythms is interrupted and counterpointed by a sound lag of nearly a second, and by a faint audio echo as one voice ‘lands’ in the second location. To arrive at one of the final rehearsals during production week, the two performers have edited a series of improvisations on text chat to create a script, and rehearsed privately on Skype. Its orchestration allows the sound fracture and dispersal in some moment. In other moments the actors anticipate or absorb the gaps in transmission, driving the speech rhythms through so that the utterance ‘arrives’ precisely at the end of the prompt line.

Remediating Performance Making

There is a certain circular logic in this account of a number of telematic performance projects devised in collaborations between Dutch and Australian university students. The initial prompt for using a telematic framework for devising performance across and between remote locations was the desire to push against a set of cultural, practical, temporal, spatial and institutional limits imposed by, or present in, the locations in which we teach. The engagement with this framework has, however, brought us hard up against a complex set of technological constraints which have governed the stories we have been able to tell, the ways in which the collaborative process has been shaped and managed, and the formal and aesthetic aspects of the performances we have produced. My colleague at the University of Amsterdam, Rose van der Zwaard, and I embarked on these projects with the somewhat naïve assumption that we could enhance the learning experiences of our students in their respective discipline areas simply by harnessing available technological resources to connect them telematically. The works we have made together suggest that this is what happened, but in ways that were far more complex and demanding than we had anticipated. Despite the astronomical expansion of technologies of connection, the increasing speed of data flow, and the ready availability of user-friendly transmission devices and software, connections between ‘actors’ that are conducted and managed in the online environment are bounded and
shaped by the limitations dictated by these architectures. Our experience suggests that, when the project of performance making is translocated into this environment, the insistence of the technological demands is both bracing and frustrating. Connecting ‘actors’ in remote locations offers a set of intriguing and challenging opportunities, but compels a re-evaluation and re-calibration of conventional processual, narrative, and formal approaches to performance composition. If the “remediation” of performance into a digital framework is, as Steve Dixon asserts, “the transposition, reworking or deconstruction of texts into different forms or media” (Dixon, 1999 p. 135), then the process of making that performance demands the deconstruction and reworking of conceptions of space, time and connection that observe the boundaries of those media.

Telematic theatre

Since it is negotiation with the particular boundaries of the telematic framework that is under discussion here, Dixon’s simple but precise definition of telematic performance distinguishes this distinct performative architecture, with its specific constellation and integration of technological affordances and limitations, from other established and emerging modes in the broader field of ‘intermedial performance’\(^78\). Technologically-mediated performance in which there is a “conjoining” of “remote performance spaces” (Dixon 2007 p. 419) he reminds us, has a history which predates the ubiquity of Skype and video conference software, reaching back to the 1970s and the use of live-broadcast and satellite technologies to connect artists to each other, and to audiences, in remote locations at the same time. In each of the instances Dixon cites, however, the technologically-mediated connection between locations was vulnerable to both predictable and unpredictable distortion, interruption and

\(^{78}\) Kattenbelt (2008, p. 20) provides another useful set of distinctions, for example, between “multimediality”, “transmediality” and “intermediality” as terms that distinguish particular co-relations between media, in which theatre is conceived as both a peculiar mediality, and a process whereby various media interact with each other.
fragmentation – “technical and empirical constraints”, that “modif[ied] the final pattern, effect and meaning of the production[s]” (Kaynar 2006 p. 247). Dixon and others (see Brooks, 2010; Crossley, 2013; Gieskam. 2007; Giges & Warburton, 2010; Kozel, 2007; Petralia, 2011) offer descriptions of telematic projects in which artists testify to the ways in which their work has needed to absorb or embrace the constraints inherent in the telematic encounter. Dixon asserts, for example, that the telematic experiments of US arts collective, Motherboard in the mid-nineties, were shaped through consciously “embedding the fluctuations in transmission and reception rates... into the dramatic development and final performance dynamics” (Dixon, 2007, p. 430). Video conference technology was used in Susan Kozel’s telematic/choreographic work *Liftlink* (1998), incorporating multiple video streams streamed from multiple locations, and she arrives at a similar conclusion; that the transmission of the “moving images... took on traces on their journey: pixellation, delays, abstraction, overexposure” (Kozel in Dixon, 2007, p. 430). Dixon (p. 425) concludes that “the peculiar and unique aesthetic of telematic performance, which emphasises its own particular quality of interactive “liveness” is a product of the ways in which artists have acknowledged and co-opted “the technological limitations of videoconferencing” in the composition of their work (p. 425). Of the instances cited above, Susan Kozel, Pauline Brooks and Mark Crossley’s accounts address contexts that most closely resemble those within which our projects were made, as they deal with performance making through telematic collaboration with and between students in their university studies. Crossley (2013, p. 12) also goes some way toward problematizing the effects and affects on and for performers (particularly student performers), who find themselves “integrated into multiple layers of mediated material” and “enmeshed with the discourse of other media”. In this chapter, I endeavour to address some gaps in these accounts that, on the whole, look at the performed outcomes of the process, rather than the negotiation with technology in the process of performance making. One of the gaps I will address involves isolating some of
the particular constraints imposed on the compositional process by the architecture, mechanics and geometry of telematic performance, and considering how these constraints impact on key aspects of connection and interaction between actors in both rehearsal and performance. These considerations are focused on the use of this framework when working with student actors, whose ‘limits’ as performance makers and performers create a further set of complex constraints on the construction and management of the performance making process.

**Limits of Location: Mapping the Terrain**

Between 2009 and 2013, my colleague and I produced six telematic collaborations within, and in response to, sets of stringent limits embedded in our location in teaching programs in our respective universities. When we embarked upon the first collaboration in 2009, Rose van der Zwaard, who teaches English Language and Creative Writing in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Amsterdam, was looking for innovative ways to develop art-related second language literacy in description, interpretation, and criticism with her students, within a conventional academic learning context. Some of her students were also studying theatre, but few had any significant experience or training as performers. My interest, as a teacher/artist, was primarily (a) to focus my students on making performance for a broader audience than the familiar cohort of fellow students, family and friends to which they were accustomed and (b) to expose them to opportunities for devising live theatre in the emerging field of digital performance.

Despite the incremental erosion of resources wrought over the last several decades, the Drama course at Deakin University, where I have taught for many years, maintains an ongoing commitment to teaching about and through creative practice and, in particular, to the development of performance making
skills. In this university, as my colleague Glenn D’Cruz (2010) indicates, institutional imperatives impose limits on the teaching of performance making which mean that certain critical resources are limited. The production of pre-written texts, and of devised works developed from pre-texts, is carried out within very limited time frames, and with relatively large numbers of students in each class. The class composition is diverse in terms of the range and level of experience they bring to the process, and in the aspirations and tastes they hope the projects will allow expression of. Some are already quite experienced performers. Some are not. Some have strongly ingrained habits and tastes in terms of performance styles, which reflect their prior experience in and with, as D’Cruz (2010, p. 101) describes it, “musicals, light comedy and naturalism”. This combination of factors, and what we have dubbed ‘the limits of location’ mean that students bring a limited level of ‘literacy’ to the projects. In our joint research my colleague and I have discovered some interesting nexuses in this respect when we have expanded the notion of literacy to incorporate the development of a theatrical vocabulary and syntax that can articulate ideas in ways that are meaningful and communicative in performance. Students of Drama at this suburban university can sometimes be reluctant to move towards performance ideas and genres beyond their immediate and limited experience.

79 For a fuller description of the provenance of the department, and its roots in the innovative Drama program at Rusden, see Eckersall & Prior (2008).
80 Glenn D’Cruz and I teach at the same university and, therefore, under the same set of constraints. His account in Teaching/Directing 4.48 Psychosis (2010), focuses on another unit in which students realise a prewritten playscript as performance and unpacks a set of generic and aesthetic choices partly dictated by the need to provide sufficient performing roles to an unknown number and diversity of Drama students within the limited time allotted in the university timetable. He argues that this is one of the pragmatic challenges that the open weave of, and relative absence of role determination in, post-dramatic texts is able to answer.
81 Scheduled classes in these courses allot an average of 70 hours to the production of a public performance of a play or devised work.
82 For more detailed analysis of early projects from the perspective of second-language learning, see (Prior, Van Der Zwaard & Vanderlaaken, 2009; and Prior, Johnson & Van Der Zwaard, 2011). A version of this chapter was published as Prior, Y. 2014 Impossible Triangles: Flat Actors in Telematic Theatre Australasian Drama Studies 65 Latrobe University, Bundoora pp. 168 - 190.
Few have much exposure to contemporary performance, and the distance between the university and inner urban cultural precincts can limit their access to sites of live, professional performance. This means that their learning in and about performance often happens in the absence of an understanding of a broader context – indeed the aim of the course is to provide just such contextualisation of their learning in relation to historical, contemporary and professional practice. All of these factors, however, can produce a form of insularity that generates a reluctance to move towards adventurous choices in relation to concept, form and/or content.

There is, however, a useful collusion between the circumstances in which we teach and the open weave and options available in the field of contemporary performance. D'Cruz speaks of co-opting the open frameworks of the post-dramatic text and we have, of necessity, become expert in adapting texts of all genres to accommodate large, diverse casts. In the devised performance units we have worked with extended notions of performance such as visual theatre, physical theatre, and intermedial theatre using the conceits and structures of the post-modern and post-dramatic, not merely to ensure the contemporary currency of the curriculum, but also to absorb the numbers, indeterminable gender balance and range of ‘abilities’ of the student participants. These frames, often characterized by the ironic and parodic tendencies of the post modern, also allow us to reframe and, implicitly, to critique the habits and tastes the students bring into the room.

The university provides privileged access to high-level technological resources – particularly videoconference capability, and video/TV resources used for training students in Film and Digital Media. An early ambition for the projects was that the Drama students in my university might be prompted to deal with more complex and unfamiliar ideas in relation to content and form if the use of videoconference technology could bring them into an encounter with collaborators in ‘another place’. Connecting the two groups was an attempt to
counter the sometimes parochial culture of their own location by providing them with a set of alternative perspectives, both literally and metaphorically, that might allow them to view their location – culturally, historically, aesthetically – through other eyes and from another place. Key aims from the Dutch perspective centred on the development of more advanced second language skills through meaningful and purposeful collaboration with native speakers of English in creative projects with authentic public outcomes. While working with relatively inexperienced performers, and being bound by professional and ethical obligation to our teaching roles, created a set of limits to the audacity or sophistication of formal experimentation in this context, the obstacles we encountered in these processes have confronted us with some simple and very practical questions about the nature and function of connection between actors and their audience/s when that relationship is mediated through the digital stream. Given that these projects were interdisciplinary in both their melding of theatre and language studies, and of live and remediated performance, Bruce Barton’s (2014 p. 182) observation, that the “turn to interdisciplinarity is never only a liberating gesture” is apt in that “the performative nature of the discipline, by definition, involves limitation as well as facilitation, and the expanded range of possibilities afforded by this orientation is inevitably accompanied by additional (and often highly durable) conventional frames and expectations”.

**Working in multiple rooms: making in digital environments and on social media**

While the expansion and bedding down of online learning frameworks in university education, first developed in frameworks of ‘distance education’, is now ubiquitous, these projects have seen increasingly large parts of the performance making process shift out of ‘the room’ – a single physical location in which all participants gather to work – and into virtual space/s. In accord with the logic of ubiquitous learning, we have developed frameworks drawing on a range of online affordances that effectively extract elements of the devising
process that need not depend on all the participants working synchronously in the same (real) space, and relocate them in spaces where participants can encounter each other ‘in their own time’. While these ‘other rooms’ were, of course, the only spaces in which the remotely-located collaborators could meet and work together, the sequestration of tasks not dependent on actual bodies co-present in actual space to virtual rooms meant that we could maximize the opportunities for practical, physical, exploratory work in testing, shaping and refining performance ideas when all the bodies were in their respective ‘real’ rooms, or on the limited number of occasions when both cohorts of participants could meet in a videoconference ‘hookup’.

In the earliest project (Unsettled Dust, 2009), the Dutch students acted as co-researchers, offered critique on live-streamed work in progress showings, watched the first performance via Skype, and wrote and posted reviews of the show, but did not participate as performers. 83 Students from both cohorts were allocated research tasks and posted their findings in a password-protected, online learning environment hosted by my university. Enrolment in this site gave Dutch students access to Australian students’ documentation of workshop activity, including scene descriptions and script drafts that were based on all the participants’ jointly conducted research. The ‘hook up’, then, was one of a series of encounters where the Dutch students could view and review the ways in which the inert words and still images visible in the online learning

83 Two of the projects were constructed with no interactive participation by Dutch students. In Unsettled Dust (2009), as noted, Dutch students watched a live streamed performance of the work they had collaborated in making. In Aragung: The Bark Shield Project (2010), we collaborated with the Community Partnerships Team at the British Museum, and with the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge to create a performed response to one of the objects in the Museum’s ‘Talking Objects’ programme – the bark shield appropriated by Captain James Cook and Joseph Banks in their first encounter with the indigenous inhabitants at Botany Bay in 1770. In this project, Dutch students created a number of ‘didactics’ – placards that contained information about both real and invented exhibits around the shield that were mounted in the fictional museum created by the Australian students. In this project, the performance was live-streamed to Amsterdam, to the museums in London and Cambridge.
environment had been enlivened and embodied in the performance space, and in which they could provide the performers with salutary feedback on those scenes’ capacity to communicate ideas generated in real and virtual space.

While the university-hosted websites allowed students to share inert material such as text files, images, script drafts, design drawings, rehearsal documentation, production schedules or online links, and to engage in discussion in nominated forums, the online spaces were clunky to manoeuvre between, and constructed in ways which further fragmented the process and its components. Aspects of the process were sequestered in separate topics or forums and the whole site design rather proper and formal, with little space in which participants could share information about themselves.

**Making on Facebook: Creating a virtual ensemble.**

Within a very short time it became evident that students were spending very little time on the university sites, generally only when directed to in order to complete some specific task. They were, however, ‘friending’ each other on Facebook and, from the second project when Dutch participants were given the option of performing in the work, they began setting up private Facebook groups for each project. From 2012, we virtually dispensed with the university websites, reverting to the use of Facebook groups that offered all the above-mentioned affordances for sharing ‘inert’ materials, as well as video-recordings of scenes in development, but also live and interactive options such as text and video-chat. If the shift involved a loss of a certain, sometimes-useful reminder of the formal learning-based purpose of the projects, it nonetheless provided the best available interstitial space for enabling the complex range of formal/informal encounters that generate and support collaborative relationships.
The shift was also an acknowledgement of the social nature of collaborative
devising, and that this is one of the features that make studies in Drama most
attractive to students. Positive social relations between participants help with
managing anxiety produced by necessary leaps into the unknown, and create a
safe space where crucial tolerance for risk and uncertainty can be developed.
As I signalled in the previous chapter regarding the way they work at Back to
Back Theatre, such tolerance is valuable when managing performance making
in what can be immensely challenging and anxiety-provoking processes for, in
this case, inexperienced practitioners, absent the safety net of a pre-written
text. In this room, on Facebook, there was both time and space for the
‘performances of self’ which allowed collaborators who had never been in
physical or social proximity to each other to navigate each other’s profiles, and
develop some sense of who they were working with.

There is also a sort of democracy at work in the frameworks of digital
discussions that can mitigate the constraints of working with large groups of
students. In the first project, it became clear that the Skype interface struggled
to absorb and relay dense inputs of multiple bodies and voices. Even with the
shift, in the 2010 project, Quarter Acre Dreaming, from Skype to a relatively
high-end videoconference platform, the technology could not yet deal well with
many-to-many interactions such as whole group improvisations or discussions.
My colleague and I sometimes were sometime wont to read this as a metaphor
for our struggles to manage input from such large groups of collaborators.
Working with such large numbers of participants presents in any case, a set of
obstacles to, amongst other things, democracy of input. Discussions, mediated
or unmediated, can be dominated by louder voices, and clarity can be lost when
voices ring out simultaneously.
There always will be people who are louder and that are heard more in class however online there’s a screen of protection, there is no loud voice advantage. (Student reflection, 2013)

Although the logic of threaded discussions on Facebook can be fragmented, in the ‘one-thing-after-anotherness’ of the posting sequence there is at least space for less insistent voices to make offers and be heard. It also allowed my colleague and I, as project leaders, to monitor ideas as they emerged and develop the most promising in order to plan the proceeding stages of the process. If I am frank, it also allowed us to acknowledge and reframe less promising ideas without a public negotiation on the rehearsal floor – a situation in which inexperienced makers in particular can feel alienated, shamed or undervalued. Above all, the layout of the Facebook site created a map of the process, a documentation-by-default that allowed all participants to monitor emerging ideas. As a result, work on Facebook has mitigated some of the negative impacts on ‘flow’ in the creative process effected not merely by the limits on the net hours available to work together in the studio. It has also reduced some of the fragmentation that occurs when the work sessions in each site are timetabled across the week with gaps of several days between them, and opportunities for ‘hook ups’ between both groups were limited. While students seldom visited the university-hosted websites, they were generally ‘plugged in’ to social media via smartphone, tablet or computer most of the time, and responded rapidly to anything posted on the site. There were undoubtedly some disadvantages in this new framework, where we have earned more ‘working’ time, but encountered some loss in terms of ‘connection’ and momentum. As with many digitally mediated encounters, there are gaps and cracks in the dialogue between participants as they join the discussion from their own private rooms which cannot replicate the ‘flow’ of a discussion where everyone is in the same real room at the same real time. The time difference between hemispheres, which varied between 8 and 10 hours, caused some
frustration when students had to wait for responses from collaborators at the other end.

The slow messaging! You’d have this idea and then you’d have to wait to get a response. Then they’d have to wait another 12 or 13 hours to get your response. (Deakin student, recorded class discussion, 2013)

It has also created a new inflection on ‘watching’ the process. In the chapter on methodology, I noted the importance of ‘watching’ in rehearsal in order to monitor the evolving shape of the performance work and calibrate contributions accordingly. But the need to generate sufficient material in the limited time available in the university environment, and the large numbers of project participants, has always required us to move between working with the whole group and dividing the class into smaller groups to work simultaneously on sub-tasks. In contrast, the loss of creative momentum engendered by gaps of days between work sessions, and despite the rather artificial separation of conceptual work from work with bodies in the room/s, the opportunities afforded by working on Facebook at least kept the students ‘connected’ to a collective and sustained ‘flow’ of imagining, inventing and reflecting – and a sense of a collective endeavour or ‘virtual ensemble’.

Location, Narrative, Screen

In effect, the materials and circumstances present in the context already created a set of boundaries governing what could be made with the resources available to us. Certain “accommodations” bearing on theme and structure came with the territory. The large number of participants, their locations on

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84 Here I am co-opting Andy Lavender’s use of the term "accommodating" when he frames the demands on The Builders Association’s 2005 work Supervision. The fact that the work was a co-production, slated for the international festival circuit, meant that “its themes” needed to be “sufficiently accommodating to suit the show’s touring footprint” (Lavender, 2010, p. 19).
opposite sides of the globe, and their existing experience of, and taste for, conventional narrative-driven drama, prompted us to embark from narrative pretexts that could make sense and meaning of multiple sites – real and fictional – and offer a large number of performing roles. Following this logic, the projects completed to date have focused either on narratives of shared history (Unsettled Dust, 2009; Quarter Acre Dreaming, 2010; Aragung: The Bark Shield Project, 2010; Boat People, 2012) or of technology and digital communication (Do You Accept?, 2011; Are You There?, 2013). These pretexts have allowed us to examine perspectives of commonality and difference between the two student cohorts in projects where the distance between them, and the digital framework of their making and presentation could be incorporated as stage metaphor in the history projects, or literal context in the technology projects.

Lisbeth Goodman (cited in Brooks, 2010, p. 52) predicted “the death of distance” through technological innovation. In effect, however, these projects have worked on an opposing logic, both within and without the frame of the event. We have been concerned to develop an approach that acknowledges and embraces the experiential and semiotic distinction between seeing and feeling bodies co-present in space, and seeing and feeling, digitally mediated or remediated bodies, co-present in time but in another space – for actors and audiences alike. In each case, the distance between the participants – their location in different cities on either side of the globe – has been the point of departure in locating performed and performable narratives. Given that the locations of transmission (Australia, The Netherlands, the university, the studio, the laboratory), and the architecture and machinery of connection and transmission (screens, cameras, microphones) are all visible and evident to the

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85 The course content at the Australian university required Australian students to perform, as this comprised a significant component of their assessment. Dutch students volunteered for performance roles, though succeeding projects have seen increasing numbers taking up this option to the point where, in the most recent project (Are You There?, 2013) we had a combined cast of forty-two performers.
audience, their agency as signifiers of distance, of the fact that the performers are not in the same room, has also been absorbed into the narrative frames of the performances, and into the meaning frames of the performed events.

**Making the screen mean**

To pursue this motif of location a little further, the design of each project has required the incorporation and strategic positioning of a projection surface into the dramaturgy and scenography – ‘located’ (literally and metaphorically) within the drama such that the projection (literally and metaphorically) coheres within the narrative.

The history projects have characterized the screen as a distant ‘other space’ from which the local site is viewed and we have tried in these to use the screen as a hypersurface in which the architectural function of the object within the stage design is fused with its function as projection surface. In *Quarter Acre Dreaming* (2010), we speculated on what the suburban culture of Australia might have looked like from a Dutch perspective at particular points in its history, and the material presence of the screen was utilized, literally and figuratively, as a portal through which the Dutch characters could project their impressions. The remote actors’ images were projected onto the last panel in a series of doors depicting a suburban streetscape from where they delivered, amongst other scenes, a verbatim account of the disappointment of early Dutch explorers with the Western coast of Australia as a potential site for colonization, and a deconstruction of the plot intricacies of the Australian suburban soap opera, *Neighbours*. This framing, of course relied on a meta-theatrical narrative framework in which the remote participants’ location at the other end of the world was within the audience’s meaning-frame. The contingent and fragile constitution of this conceit was exposed, as so often happens, when a child in the audience for *Quarter Acre Dreaming* asked why some of the actors were in “another room”.

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The scene from *Are You There?* (2013), described at the beginning of this paper, indicates the way the material presence of the screen has been absorbed into the narrative in projects that have examined aspects and narratives of digital technology. This project began from a set of questions about how contemporary relationships are enabled, disabled and disrupted by the technology that mediates them. The fact that the projection has been dislocated from its ‘natural context’ in the narrative on the screen in front of the local actor, and relocated on the rear wall so that the actors could not actually see each other, illustrates some of the practical and ‘technical difficulties’ that we have contended with when staging these narratives.

**Technical difficulties**

In an analysis of the use of video conferencing technology in teaching Theatre and Performance Studies, Mark Childs and Jay Dempster (2003, p. 2) note three significant problems.

- Restricted video view
- Time delay
- Audio echo

Their account describes an instructional framework that has become both ubiquitous and conventional in recent years, particularly in the university sector – and is the technological framework that we have co-opted to create these performances. The limitations that they identify, on the immediacy and integrity of connection between participants, persist more than a decade later and present even more stringent and complex ‘technical’ challenges when asked to enable more than a formal, binary and linear relationship between lecturer and students in remotely-located spaces. As Johannes Birringer (2011, p. 21) points out, work in the telematic environment demands a new dramaturgy and process of making that can incorporate “cybernetic principles”. At a purely functional level, “one of the challenges in such telepresence performance is the
incorporation of the camera interface into the performance”, given that “camera and microphones are the key interface between performer and network technology: they are the basis for linking the different site-environments into meaningful relationships between the visual and kinesthetic forms and digital outputs” (p. 21).

Can you see me? Space, dimensionality and visibility

Working with live streaming demands that the performance makers think simultaneously in theatrical and televsional space. That is, space defined by the human eye, and by the eye of the camera. Pauline Brooks (2010, p. 52) coins the term “cone of capture”, to describe the boundaries of the local space dictated and demarcated by the frame of the camera. In her account of experiments with multi-location choreography, Brooks unpacks what Childs and Dempster describe as “restricted video view”, in which the ‘real space’ must be reframed in order to answer the needs of both a local and a remote audience. Here she notes that the performance-maker needs to excise “areas of the stage space that are visible only to the live theatre audience” because it is “dead or invisible space to the distant, virtual audience” (p. 54). Our earliest experiments with the telematic framework proved deeply unsatisfying for a remote audience for related reasons. In the first project, Unsettled Dust, the stage set and action were confined to the section of a much larger performance space that could be captured using a single camera located behind and just above the audience block. This meant that a large section of the stage was “dead space” for the local audience, while the fixed wide frame of the video stream rendered much detail in the performance invisible, or ‘dead space’, to the remote audience, who commented on their inability to ‘read’ the meaning located in actor’s faces.
In response to this limitation, from 2010 we decamped to the university television studio, where we had access to multiple cameras and a sophisticated video-switching system. In each project since then, in parallel with the process of developing the performance, we have also developed a detailed camera script for the live feed from Melbourne to Amsterdam that allows us to cut between shots and, to a limited degree, between shot angles. The capacity to move in to mid-shot or close up when the detail or angle of entry is important to meaning or composition, gives the remote audience the privileged access of the camera’s eye to scene detail, though these options were available only in the Australian site. At the Dutch end, participants have worked out of university classrooms only partly amenable to the incorporation of any sort of ‘set’, and have needed to work with a single camera embedded in the solid state video conference unit. This has given them strictly limited capacity to shift the frame because the camera can only move into close up or wide frame or, to a lesser degree, pan from side to side. This coercive framing exists then in tension with
the free play of attention afforded to the live audience in the local space, illustrating Stanley Kaufmann’s (2005 p. 152) assertion that the camera “controls attention irrevocably; you cannot look at anything in the scene except what [it] permits you to look at”.

**Impossible triangles**

The teaching situation described by Childs and Dempster, and Peter Petralia’s account of working as a dramaturg with a remotely-located dance company (Petralia, 2011), involve a relationship between ‘actors’ that is binary and linear and, if not eye-to-eye, then ‘face-to-face’ at two ends of a single video stream. In this configuration, the linearity and singleness of the video stream imposes significant constraints on the relationships between actor and actor, and actor/s and audience.

Paul Sermon’s seminal work, *Telematic Dreaming* (Sermon, 2000), in which a telematic connection was made between bodies located on beds in separate locations through the capture and projection of live video stream from above, skilfully exploited this ‘one-to-one’. Here, participants were both actors and audience, as their real and virtual bodies were co-located on the hypersurface of the bed in each site. In this space, witnesses to the interaction were almost coincidental and the occluded view from outside ‘the live zone’ of performance was a reminder that the performance was not for them, but for the participants.\(^\text{86}\)

This relationship is trammelled, however, when one introduces a third entity as spectator to transactions that are mediated by technologies designed for the face-to-face. Factoring an audience into the mix effectively asks a linear conduit to serve a triangular relationship (projected actor – present actor – audience). When there is also an audience in the second location, the configuration is

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\(^{86}\) See Gieskam (2007, pp. 214-215) for a succinct description of this project and the “issues it raised about relations between the real and the virtual”.

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mirrored, forming a double-triangle (projected actor – present actor – audience in both sites). While part of the work of creating a mise en scene in performance is the rendering of connection/s between actors visible to the spectator, the process of creating a scenographic schema which incorporates ‘flat actors’ is like unfolding a piece of origami. Scenic elements need to be constructed so that the component parts connect with each other to form a coherent, three-dimensional shape, and then folded out again so that the indentations mark the boundaries of the interaction. Even the commonly used expression (in Australia at least) for the disposition of bodies in and through space, “blocking”, connotes dimension and volume that are redefined in this framework.

Flat actors

In each of our projects, we have installed a projector or projectors suspended above the audience seating block, that relay the live feed from the remote location to a variety of surfaces at the rear of the performance space and, critically, behind the local actors. This is, of course, the most common configuration in performances where live-feed footage is layered into the onstage (multidimensional) action for eminently practical reasons. Performances such as Toneelgroep Amsterdam’s Opening Night (2008)\(^{87}\) and The Builders Association’s Super Vision (2006)\(^{88}\) make extensive use of live stream footage to render actors not located in ‘the live zone’ visible, to focus attention and reveal detail, or to provide an alternative angle or frame on action within it. In these instances, even when the use of technology is foregrounded in the dramaturgy, the projection surface that inserts it into the stage action is ‘backgrounded’ in the stage space.

\(^{87}\) This stage adaption of Cassavetes’ film script makes extensive use of live feed video projection that allows the audience to simultaneously view onstage action and the camera’s more selective, amplified and closely framed perspective on details of that action. See: [http://www.tga.nl/en/productions/opening-night](http://www.tga.nl/en/productions/opening-night)

\(^{88}\) See (Lavender, 2010. P.37) for inter alia, a detailed description of the extraordinary complexity of managing a creative process that can integrate “different storylines, media and thematic tropes – along with a range of collaborators”.

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There is a frustrating exigency to this configuration when, as in our projects, the dramaturgy is constructed around live interaction between local (three dimensional) and remote (flat/projected) actors. To render the connection between them visible to remote actors and audience, the camera feed needs to be captured from the point of view of the local audience. But the relegation of the remote/flat/projected actors to the space behind the local actors restricts their view of each other. In order for the Australian performers to be seen (that is for the ‘live zone’ of their faces to be captured and transmitted via the video stream) by the Dutch performers, they must face the camera/audience. However, in order to see the Dutch performers, they must face the projection, thereby rendering the meaning-site of their faces invisible to the Dutch performers and audience.

Figure 18. Flat Actor/Local Actor, Audience configuration

Figure 19. *Boat People*, 2012 Audience/Dutch performer perspective. Image, Deakin University
We have attempted, in a couple of projects, to challenge the uni-dimensionality of the projected image by fudging the angles of screens and actors, or by advancing the projection surface deeper into the performance space (see Figure 17, Boat People). Even when located virtually adjacent to the present actor, however, the ‘dimensionality-differential’ means that the ‘flat actor’, whose only trace is registered on the flat screen, remains invisible to the local actor, or appears as a strange pixelated blur in their peripheral vision.

![Diagram showing a protruded screen setup](image)

*Figure 20. Protruded screen. Boat People (2011)*

As we have contended with these challenges, we have tested a number of partial and provisional solutions, largely to facilitate connections between flat and present actors in scene building and rehearsal, which can be re-oriented when translated into performance. In rehearsal, we have used an extra playback monitor in the Australian performance space on which the flat actors can be seen, mirroring the image projected behind them. In rehearsal, this linear configuration (Figure 18, below) has meant that local and flat actors are able to see each other and lay down the structure of the scene working ‘face to face’. The monitor has generally remained in the space during performances as well, extracted from the frame of the performance by its placement.
behind the local audience, and used only as a point of reference in the peripheral vision of the performers.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 21.** Flat Actor/Local Actor/Audience configuration with playback screen

Similarly, using the ‘origami model’ to establish a stronger sense of connection – of ‘being in the same play’ – flat and present actors in one-to-one scenes have rehearsed privately and face-to-face on Skype, then reoriented their performance to meet the technical demands of the telematic space in rehearsal and performance. In this way, the performers rehearse in linear mode to establish the demands of the scene, and then unfold the scene to accommodate the impossible triangle in performance.

**Digital dramaturgy**

Consideration of these demands has also guided our narrative and dramaturgical choices. In *Do You Accept?* (2011), the presence and location of the screen was naturalized by the characterization of the projected actors as remotely located researchers observing a group of local experimental subjects via video-link. This allowed actors in both sites to acknowledge the literal presence and location of the projection within the bounds of the stage narrative (Figure 16). After *Unsettled Dust* (2009), which was an exercise in collaborative dramaturgy and live video streaming
rather than interactive performance, we abandoned the use of Skype as a means of connection. The narrow bandwidth meant that integrity of image and sound fidelity were poor, unreliable and prone to degrade over the span of the performance. Sometimes the connection was lost entirely. Other recent performance works have, however, used Skype as both medium and content of performance by adopting a similar strategy of naturalization. *You Wouldn't Know Him, He Lives in Texas / You Wouldn't Know Her, She Lives in London* (2011) created in a collaboration between London-based company, Look Left Look Right and Texas-based The Hidden Room, worked this logic – and absorbed its gremlins – by placing a relationship conducted via Skype at the heart of its narrative, so that fluctuations in image and sound quality fit neatly within the frame of the event, rather than as a ‘technical-difficulty’ that breached its boundaries.

![Figure 22. Do You Accept? 2011, Image: Deakin University](image)

In *Are You There?* (2013), described in the introduction to this paper, we used a reflexive strategy that embraced the fractal structure of the stage/screen configuration. By constructing the narrative as a series of shifting and dislocated online interactions
in which the shape and meaning of online relationships were brought into question, the
conceit of pixilation became both a structural and a material strategy. The ‘real frame’
evidence that participants were co-present and interacting with each other, but could
not see each other, was absorbed into a wider metaphor about what we can and
cannot see and understand of each other in relationships mediated through technology
(see Figure 16).

One of the Dutch actors, who came to the project with considerable experience as a
performer, however, described the experience of visual disconnection from both
remotely located scene partners and audience as “performing in a vacuum” (Interview,
2013). As Crossley (2013, p. 6) observes, in the encounter between the live performer
and “the temporal and technological rigidity” of the televisual image, “performer
autonomy and spontaneity in space and time are compromised, or shall we say they
need recalibrating at least”. Both Dutch and Australian performers in these projects
described feelings of dislocation and anxiety when the “techno en scene” (Dundjerovic,
2006, p. 69), that allowed them to be present in the same scenic and temporal
space, effectively rendered them invisible to each other. Performing in an environment
governed by the demands of technology required them to work in ways that were
highly ‘technical’ by requiring the reproduction of behaviour and responses without the
‘natural’ triggers generated by physical proximity and eye contact present in
conventional dramatic scenography. The formality and austerity of this terrain
produced a chillier, more mechanical experience that was sometimes at odds with
participants’ desire for the warmer and more spontaneous pleasures of live proximal
connection between actors.

**Latency, echo and hum**

This dislocation is further exacerbated by a combination of the other two problems
identified by Childs and Dempster – audio delay and audio echo.

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89 Echoing Dixon’s definition of ‘remediation’, Dundjerovic (2006, p. 69) uses “techno-en-scene” to
describe both the “use of technology in the performance environment”, and “borrowing creative
vocabulary for other media in creation of the mise-en-scene”.

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The digital stream struggles to manage dense and complex sound environments. When we experimented with multiple voices from both locations, the result was the sonic equivalent of pixilation. The sound was flattened and, rather than distinct tones layering themselves as a chord, they seemed to break into fragments that ground against one another on the same plane. As a result, ‘choral’ elements in the works had to be carefully composed, generally reducing collective texts to a relatively mono-tonal and rhythmically-disciplined delivery. In *Are You There?* (2013) the performance ended with a joint chorus of questions to online interlocutors, including the repeated question: “Are you there?”. When early attempts to use a range of tonalities and performer-generated syncopation in the delivery resulted in a sonic soup, we replaced this with a consciously monotonous delivery, with performers in each location keeping time only with one another. The texture and syncopation of the chorus, then, was created by the sound lag (or ‘latency’) that inevitably impacted the arrival of the sound stream from the remote location, rather than by the performers’ manipulation of the rhythms of vocal delivery.

This persistent ‘lag’, experienced as a delay between delivery of the performed utterance in the originating site and its arrival in the remote site, further dislocates actor from actor. In the performance conditions compelled by the ‘flat actor scenario’, in which remotely located scene partners are partly or wholly invisible to each other, the performers relied more heavily on textual/auditory cues in order to connect. Without visible indications of meaning and response such as facial or bodily gesture, and with a brief but palpable delay in auditory cues to intention or emotion such as hesitation, anticipation, intake of breath, pitch, or tone, the performers struggled to judge, pitch and sustain rhythms in the text. Over the span of the projects, we used a number of strategies to manage the tyranny of this ‘latency’.
‘Actorly’

In *Quarter Acre Dreaming* (2010), the performers amplified aspects of character or situation that could account for odd pauses in their interchanges. Seen above (Figure 20) is an Australian performer, playing an officious Immigration official, who developed behavioural tics of pausing and fiddling with his pen before responding, or of officiously interrupting the other actor before he had finished speaking. His Dutch counterpart, playing a prospective immigrant-of-colour-behind-a-glass-screen, characterised his *actual* difficulty in hearing as a struggle to hear and understand what was being said to him in ‘officialese’.

**Naturalisation**

In accord with the logic of making digital performance about the digital, in *Do You Accept?* (2011), the sound lag was naturalized as part of a narrative in which
interlocutors’ communication was ‘conducted’ by the same technology that was conducting the performance. Latency in the sound stream testified to the ‘liveness’ of the event, and added a degree of dramatic tension in a scenario where the anxious participants in a series of increasingly cruel challenges/experiments awaited the responses of the remotely-located researchers who would determine their fates (See Figure 19).

*Rehearsal/Habitation*

*Are You There* (2013), used a narrative structure constructed largely around short, one-to-one scenes. ‘Face to face’ rehearsals laid down familiarity with the rhythms of delivered text but also allowed anticipation of ‘cues’. Where a sustained flow of text was important to meaning, performers habituated themselves to the digitally-imposed pauses, and learned to anticipate the ends of cue lines such that the gap in sound stream was bridged (see Figure 14).

*Structural*

In *Boat People* (2012) we attempted a challenge to the tyranny of the sound lag in a ‘rap-battle’ scene, where actors in both locations used the vernacular of rap poetry to characterise the relative positions of boat-bound refugees en route to Australia, and anti-immigration activists protesting a refugee invasion of the Netherlands. The call and response framework was rapidly discarded when we realized that the sound lag meant that they could not keep time with one another, and replaced by larger chunks of sequential text that could maintain their own internal rhythms.

**Im/possible triangle: teacher artist researcher**

To return to the question I raised in the discussion about the ensemble members at Back to Back Theatre who are “perceived to have intellectual disabilities” (Shmelzer, 2013 n.p.), one of the other things that the scene from rehearsal described at the beginning of this chapter speaks to is what sort of acting these performers are doing. In the methodology chapter, I noted that tensions sometimes emerge between staff and students in our university when “students are…reluctant to substitute expectations of conventional dramatic text for horizontal conceptions in which other elements are also emphasized” (Lowry & McKinnon, 2012 p. 48). Early in this chapter I quoted
Glenn D’Cruz’s assessment of the limited “practical experience” that students bring to our course, as both audience and performers, in genres of performance other than “musicals, light comedy and naturalism”. Although we do “not attempt to provide students with comprehensive actor training” (D’Cruz, 2010, p. 101), that is what many of our students would like us to provide, and many have aspirations to enter the profession. Sometimes the collusion between a ‘limited’ conception of what constitutes ‘professional’ that is circumscribed by which performance forms and sites they are familiar with, and a related set of assumptions about what constitutes a useful set of skills as a performer, can bring student expectations into conflict with the complex set of expectations embodied in the university. Even the expectations of the university are sometimes conflicting, as older notions of a generalist ‘education for life’ encounter newer pressures from what McKinnon and Lowry (2012, p. 47) describe as “the rationalization of tertiary education [that] has arguably resulted in a stronger push toward vocational training”. In Chapter 2, I quoted a disgruntled student who complained that staff and, by extension, curriculum, indicated a preference for performance that is “abstract and over the top”, and it is easy to see how students whose idea of the profession is circumscribed by “musicals, light comedy and naturalism” might read curriculum which addresses a broader range of contemporary performance as an expression of ‘academic’ (or an academic’s) taste, driven by ideology rather than address to the industry.

These tensions can manifest in the class context as ‘genre scrimmages’ that introduce a sometimes-productive tension into the process of negotiating which ideas will be explored and how they might be expressed. This is particularly the case in devised performance, which is constructed out of material created by the students themselves. Given that one of my aims in using the telematic encounter as framework for teaching performance making was to encourage my students to experiment with genres of performance beyond those they are already familiar with, it is perhaps ironic that its reliance on performances that manifest on screens most immediately summons precisely the tropes of televisual and cinematic performance that I would generally hope to move them beyond.

It has been my experience that students most frequently offer scenes embedded in the sort of performance genre they understand as naturalism, though it is not necessarily a
genre they have yet mastered. Hypothetically, this sort of representational acting also
derived a coherent frame for performance located within a reference field that is shared
with their Dutch counterparts in these collaborative projects. As a teacher of
performance making, in this and other contexts within the course, my task is to work
with the material they offer, and with my students, to interrogate its capacity to
effectively articulate the ideas they are trying to express, with the aim of locating
formal and generic strategies that will produce a coherent aesthetic.

In this way, the stringent limits imposed by the telematic framework tend to insist,
despite their evocation of ‘small screen acting’, that conventional ‘naturalistic’
performance is inevitably defamiliarised. The ‘glitches’, fragmentation, delays, difficulty
in ‘streaming’ many-to-many interactions, and need to position bodies in ‘unnatural’
constellations – in consort with the large numbers of participants for whom meaningful
roles need to be found – effect a forced reconstruction of these tropes and advocate
for presentational, rather than representational modes of performance. They also
suggest that acknowledgement of these limits can be harnessed to inform decisions
around structure and aesthetic. In the scene I described at the beginning of this
chapter, for example, two very simple strategies are at play that co-opt and attempt
to make meaning of the ‘technical difficulties’ – in relation to both the telematic context
and the actors’ ‘technique-al’ abilities. In this rehearsal, my co-director asked the
performers to position themselves in profile – a much more formal and denaturalised
composition of bodies than an earlier draft in which they both sat front-on in relation to
the audience. The fact that they were ‘facing’ each other at the side margins of the
stage (see Figure. 14, with a visible gap both in the immediate stage picture, and in
the theatrical and meta-theatrical frames that contained two actors who were not in the
same room, imbricated the real and the not-real, and folded a layer of irony into the
scene. They had also been asked to think about the ‘acting’ not in terms of the
characters’ intentions, but as an analogue of the tensions between the intentions
signalled in the text and the way that text appears on the screen in a text chat box –
flat and uninflected.

This sort of reconstruction of conventional offerings achieves a number of goals. It
begins to reframe stylistic choices as something that emerge from a need to forge a
coherent aesthetic out of a limited ‘palette’\textsuperscript{90} rather than an ideological or aesthetic choice born out of a perceived ‘academic’ attachment to the post modern or post dramatic. It also satisfies at least part of the ‘artist’ in me, whose tastes lie elsewhere, and who is concerned, using this lens of ‘pragmatic dramaturgy’, to work with what is really in the room. Finding a balance between what sort of ‘acting’ the students want to practice, and an aesthetic that can encompass varying levels of ‘acting’ skills is not always possible and sometimes requires the “self-abnegation of the facilitator” rather than the gratification of the artist (Conroy, 2009, p. 5). For me, the balance lies in finding, and making meaning of the gaps – the literal gaps in transmission, and the gaps between the technique-al abilities of the student artists and the texts they have created. If this recognition lands with the students, these sorts of experiences have the capacity to produce what Rasmussen (2010, p. 542) describes as “meta-learning”; “insights and knowledge that [are] abstracted from the particular experience to more generalised meanings”.

There are, of course, students who remain unconvinced by the ‘meta-learning’ argument, by pragmatic dramaturgy, and by working with ‘what is really in the room’. While they may understand that this sort of acting ‘works’ in this particular room, their aspirations lie in other rooms – where ‘real actors perform’, in the professional contexts they are most familiar with, and they look for a training that will equip them to access this world. These tensions were not reflected in every project, nor were they articulated by every student, but they have required some negotiation in the development of ‘calibrated’ performances, particularly when negotiations need to factor in differentials in scale and dimensionality between on-screen and live performances. In the Amsterdam site, where the performers were working in classrooms and shackled to solid state video-conference equipment, the live local audience in the Netherlands watched the local performers performing down the barrel of the fixed camera, and the screen performances in both sites on split screens in the same room – which was an interesting and additional meta-theatrical frame.\textsuperscript{91} In the

\textsuperscript{90} Bruce Gladwin speaks in interview of “the actors and who they are and their perceptions of how they fit into society” as “a major part of my palette” in his work with the disabled artists in the Back to Back Theatre ensemble (personal interview 12/3/2010).

\textsuperscript{91} It has only been in \textit{Do You Accept?} (2011), where we treated the Amsterdam site as a found space and incorporated its ‘real’ meaning and features as a university laboratory, that we have been able to make both sites equally meaningful for audiences in both sites.
Australian site, however, student actors needed to locate levels of performance ‘expressivity’, intensity and energy that could penetrate the space between them and their live and present audience, but not register as ‘overblown’ when interacting with their remote scene partners, or on the screens where they were being watched by their Dutch audience.

To a degree, the struggles to reconcile process, form, content, the exigencies of the telematic framework and conflicting aspirations, were rendered meaningful and productive by asking the students to think of themselves not just as reflective practitioners ‘rehearsing’ existing models or genres of performance, but as co-researchers collaborating with my colleague and I as we tried to work out how to make this complex telematic machinery produce live performance. Alongside the students, we have struggled, hesitated, and failed, in a ‘real’ way, through the process of “inventing, testing, discarding, refining, distilling, shaping and repeating” (see page 16). We have often become as lost as they as we have worked to adapt ways of
making that are familiar to us to this new context. In their documentation and course
evaluations, students in both sites have frequently described themselves as ‘pioneers’,
and most were able to contextualize their experiences, both good and bad, within the
speculative and experimental frame of the work.

Gaps In Transmission

Despite some exciting possibilities offered by interactive telematic performance, it
remains a marginal presence and practice – particularly when contrasted with the
ubiquity of screens, virtual scenography and, in particular, live-feed projection in
contemporary performance. There may be a number of reasons for this. As this
account testifies, it is a complex endeavour, layering the technical, temporal and
mechanical demands of televisual transmission into the existing demands of
conventional theatrical production processes. In the creation of works of scale, it
requires a greatly expanded array of resources that were available to us because of
our access to the bandwidth, videoconference capability, broadcast-capable television
studio, and expert technicians in the university context. It may be no coincidence that
many of the accounts of telematic performance emanate from collaborations between
universities since universities ‘have the technology’ (See Brooks, 2010; Brown &
Hauck, 2008; Giges & Warburton, 2010; Crossley, 2013). There is evident benefit in
making connections between students in diverse geographical/cultural locations
through collaborations on creative projects. The technology may create only a notional
‘third space’, but the view from that space allows students to see the ‘other’ location in
ways that can ‘other’ their own.

There would seem too to be limits to the sorts of narratives it can address with
eloquence and coherence. While the narratives of our own relationships are
increasingly shaped, transmitted, trans-located and remediated by the machinery of
digital interchange, we are still a long way from a material experience of ‘a third
space’, except in the most abstract and conceptual sense. The affect and effect of
working with actors whose physical presence or absence is plainly signalled by
differential dimensionalities, the disruptions to flow imposed by audio latency, and the
visible presence of the machinery of transmission, led us to confine ourselves to
stories that reflexively examined narratives of distance, location, perspective, visibility
and audibility in ways that exploited the gaps and cracks in the stream connecting performers in remote locations.

Perhaps less constraining, though very challenging to performers with limited ‘technical’ experience, are the limits on, and disruptions to, connections between performers in remote locations. Debate continues in research circles and the popular press about the relative integrity and richness of relationships conducted via digital means. The obstacles encountered by our students, as they worked to create and sustain the peculiar and mutual support, warmth and pleasure of intimacies which connect and support performers in the unstable space of performance, reflect and amplify the challenges to prior conceptions of interpersonal connection generated by the affordances of current technology. The series of projects we have produced have followed a peculiarly reflexive logic governed by the complex matrix of limitations imposed by the actual and institutional locations of the actors, and by the actual and metaphorical boundaries established by the mechanisms of projection and connection embedded in the technological framework. In each case, rather than ignoring evident and insuperable separations between multiple spaces and locations, we have tried to acknowledge and expose the ruptures and discontinuities in the mise or techno-enscene (Dundjerovic, 2006, p. 69), and to make meaning of them. This has meant working in ways that attend to stringent limits on conventional options – in the disposition of real and virtual bodies in space and on surfaces, in the structure of the works, and in flow and rhythm in the exchange of spoken text. In ways that are both simple and complex, the narrative pretext and dramaturgical strategy informing each project, and the experience of making and performing them, has constituted a layered investigation of visibility – of who can see what from where.

Given the degree to which the works have been moulded by their extrusion through the telematic machinery, they have provoked the occasional question from students about what is being learned about devising per se. While we have found the projects ‘technically’ challenging, when seen through a wider frame they have constituted useful lessons in principles of pragmatic dramaturgy, demonstrating to students, and reconfirming for me, that it there is no per se, and that it is not possible to conceive of a creative process divorced from the material conditions in which it takes place – from ‘what is really in the room’. Dixon (2007 p. 430) cites Motherboard’s claim that “low-
budget technology currently offers the greatest number of people the greatest possibility of experience, interactivity and creativity”. Given the relative dearth and cost of available spaces for emerging artists to make and present work, digital theatre, with all its limitations, offers rooms in which they can connect with, and be visible to, artists and audiences in other locations.

Coda

On ‘Glitch’:

The voids generated by a break are not only a lack of meaning, but also powers that force the reader to move away from the traditional discourse around the technology, and to open it up. Through these voids, artists and spectators can understand the politics behind the code and voice a critique towards the digital media. It can be a source for new patterns, anti-patterns and new possibilities that often exist on the border or membrane. (Menkman, date unknown, n.p.)
CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

Mapping the Field

Art making, even in institutions invested in established ways of working formed and informed by their values and resources, moves forward, rendering studies focused on practices in particular places and times rapidly obsolete. This is as it should be. This thesis has argued for what Julian Meyrick (Meyrick, email correspondence 2012), described as “processual flexibility” in that dramaturgies of process must necessarily respond to and express changes in the nature, context and practice of performance making, which I have characterised as constellations of limits. This study investigates performance-making practices in Melbourne between 2010 and 2015, but its implicitly comparative framework, which locates practices and projects along a continuum from ‘mainstage’, or ‘mainstream’, to ‘independent’, reveals certain pressures that delimit creative processes, sometimes productively. If this continuum constitutes an effective if general representation of the range of theatre making practice found in any Western urban centre, these pressures, many of which are driven by imperatives embedded in the “delivery systems of the theatre industry” (Knowles, 2004, p. 20), are likely to persist. Along this broad continuum, however, shifts have already occurred in the landscape, even in the short time since I began observing rehearsals. In the Western urban centre of Melbourne, the Melbourne Theatre Company continues to address a broad but literate audience, and recent initiatives indicate that it is responding to expansion in the field, and to movement in audience ‘literacy’ and tastes. Brett Sheehy was appointed as Artistic Director of the company in 2012, and his experience in the direction of major contemporary arts festivals is reflected in the inclusion, since 2013, of a separate season of independent theatre work in the NEON festival.92 This festival

92 Brett Sheehy has previously been employed as Artistic Director of the Sydney Festival (2002 to 2005), the Adelaide Festival (2005 to 2008) and the Melbourne Festival (2009 to
brings other self-constituted groups or companies of artists into the Melbourne Theatre Company fold, just as the Malthouse Theatre did in the 2000s. Although the separation of this program from the annual subscription season offered by the company, and the fact that the company continues to employ a Literary Director, this marks a broadening of the company’s developmental activities from a primary focus on nurturing new writing and writers for the stage, to an acknowledgement of a wider range of performance making practices.

Despite calls from conservative commentators that the theatre in Melbourne should return to the “traditional and time-honoured tradition of producing plays that are dynamic and coherent animations of the dramatic scripts they derive from” (Craven, 2015, n.p.), the Malthouse Theatre under Marion Potts (2010-2015) has continued former Artistic Director Michael Kantor’s project of making the company a centre for performance-making in the broader sense, with a stated commitment to present “the combined possibilities of all live arts” (Malthouse Theatre website).93 The current season of performances incorporates the presentation of plays as well as multi-disciplinary performance works, dance and cabaret.94 Here it occupies an important middle ground between the more conventional polish and high production values of the Melbourne Theatre Company and the eclecticism of the independent sector. Back to Back Theatre and the Gilgul Ensemble (in its time) represent companies following their own agendas, proposing implicit and explicit critiques of, and alternatives to, ‘mainstage’ established practices and productions, though the works of both evince an affection for, and strategic adaption of, these practices to meet their own objectives.

Contextualising Contextual Awareness

The ways in which the term ‘dramaturgy’ has shifted in response to changes in the nature and practice of performance making is canvassed in the introductory chapter, leading to two key conceptual elaborations. In this chapter I apply Gad Kaynar’s (2006) notion of ‘pragmatic dramaturgy’ – by way of Richard Foreman’s (imagined) aphorism of “working with what’s really in the room” – to a dramaturgy of process. In

Accessed 2/3/15
93 Michael Kantor was Artistic Director of the Malthouse Theatre from 2005-2010
each of the rehearsal processes I observed and/or participated in, I have endeavored to map the making process in order to reveal the ‘machinic’ or material thinking that underpins that construction. This has been a way to understand the process of what Barbara Bolt (2007, p. 3) calls “assemblage” in performance-making, and how the ‘urgy’ in the slippery term ‘dramaturgy’ reveals its root meaning as a way of working. This conception frames the performance making process as a form of bricolage. Although directors are generally described as directing ‘the play’, this conception frames the role in relation to the process that produces the play. The director, as Kaynar (1997, p. 55) asserts, establishes the “conceptual coordinates”, assembles the parts, and builds the framework of the machine that makes the performance. As Bolt proposes, these parts–animate and inert, human and object, sound and light, space and site – are all endowed with interpretive agency. Each of these elements encloses and proposes its own set of possibilities and limits, and each is in flux, as is the unpredictable process of reaction/interaction between them (Bolt, 2004). In this way of thinking, process does not describe a singular phenomenon or a template. Process, rather, is an emergent phenomenon that takes place within, and is formed by, particular contexts that propose their own limits and procedures – in choice of repertoire, choice of director, choice of artists, length of rehearsal process, site of rehearsal process, the phase of process in which key material aspects of design are introduced – and in the relative flexibility negotiability of all of these. The use of a “contextually aware” (Kaynar, 2006, p. 245) “pragmatic dramaturgy” (p. 257) as an active frame of analysis in performance making can, as Sarah Jane Bailes says of “failure”,

establish an aperture, an opening onto several (and often many) other ways of doing that counter the authority of a singular or “correct” outcome. Whilst an intended outcome imagines only one result, the ways in which it might not achieve that outcome are indeterminate”. (Bailes, 2011, p. 2)

Critical in my approach to this research was the construction of a hybrid methodology that was consonant with the unpredictable processes I was watching and analysing, whilst requiring me to critique my own position in relation to the subject/s of my investigation. Membership of the community of practice under investigation gained me
access to rooms in which performance was being made and, on the whole, reassured subjects that I would act as an ethical and “contextually aware” witness of and to their work. There were moments, however, when some ambivalence about my agenda as an academic was evident, an ambivalence sometimes reflected in student responses to unfamiliar material which was read as tied to an ‘academic’ rather than ‘artistic’ or ‘professional’ agenda. The privileged insider knowledge that allowed me to read these processes, and to read their connections to the broader context of local and national practice was enormously beneficial. Nonetheless, it has been important to remain mindful of my own tastes and biases and, as Conquergood (1985, p. 4) observes of the ethical implications of both performance and ethnography, that “good will and an open heart are not enough when one seeks to express cultural experiences which are clearly separate from his or her lived world”.

The Law of Genre

*Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres. I repeat: genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them.* (Derrida, 1985, p. 55)

The selection for observation of a project produced by the Melbourne Theatre Company was initially conceived as a normative anchor point for an analysis of rehearsal processes, one that complied with Craven’s nostalgic prescription above – a “time-honoured tradition of producing “coherent animations of… dramatic scripts” (Craven, 2015, n.p.). The encounter between a generically unruly text, and a rehearsal process that reflected Derrida’s ironic provocation regarding genre above, produced an unanticipated, if salutary, outcome. Here the notion of pragmatic dramaturgy manifested differently as a troubled negotiation between the limits that shaped the ‘coherence’ of the play and those that shaped the ‘coherence’ of the process, produced paradoxically out of the laudable intention to produce a ‘faithful’ reading of the text. Inherent in the notion of pragmatic dramaturgy and of working within limits is the critical capacity to ‘read’ or assess the limits of constituent materials, and this process demonstrated the difficulty of shaping a process for the realisation of a text whose genre-coding was without precedent and whose limits were hard to read.
The second case study, of the Malthouse/Victorian Opera production of *The Threepenny Opera* approaches genre in a different way – as a delimited space of permission that paradoxically enables and rewards ingenuity. Eddie Perfect’s instinctive refusal of virtuosity in a moment of apparent conflict between the materiality of the set, the requirements of the mise en scene, and the disciplinary agency of the musical score echoes my own response on returning to the performance of *Levad* to find that virtuosity was no longer an option. In both cases, the “laws of genre” governing the performance works allowed the ‘performance of failure’ to invest meaning in the gap between the immanent virtuosity, and the incapacity of the performer to embody it. The process that produced *The Threepenny Opera* at the Malthouse also frames rehearsal as a process of enculturation not just into the “world of the play” that Kaynar describes (2006, p. 246). The process also ‘enculturates’ artists who have little or no shared history who bring a range of trainings and rehearsal traditions to the project of realising a performance, and the instance demonstrates the ways in which the generic limits of the text, and the emerging interpretation, can fold this diversity into the warp and weft of the performance.

The examples of *Return to Earth*, *The Threepenny Opera* and *Levad* also attest to the contribution of the stage design as a pre-emptive interpretive strike that establishes key signifiers of genre and performance style by encoding and anticipating the disposition and activation of actors’ bodies in the performance space. In these case studies, the production procedures of the producing companies condition the “logic of practice” by their requirement that the stage design precede the actors’ work on the text. In this sense, the sequence of interpretive strikes establishes a set of limits and manifests a logic of practice, or a dramaturgy of process, which differs from those at play in the processes of devising performance seen in the instances of Back to Back Theatre’s *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*, and the telematic performance projects at Deakin University and the University of Amsterdam. In each case investigated in this research, the respective creative teams have made the work in a space other than that in which it will be presented and, in the instances of *Levad* and *The Threepenny Opera*, I have considered the process of ‘translation’ through which the performance is moved from one ‘room’ to another.
Ability/Disability/Talent

The case of Back to Back Theatre proposes a different model of ‘sequence’, as an independent company able to determine its own dramaturgy of process. In relation to the discussion above, this is evident in their engagement with elements of design throughout the devising process, guided by a self-determined logic about the right ‘next step’, rather than a preconceived design providing a point of embarkation from which the process proceeds to a stage of working with performers. The concerns and perspectives of an ensemble of “actors perceived to have intellectual disabilities” (Shmelzer, 2013, n.p.) inform the logic of process adopted by this company, so that the “law[s] of genre” (Derrida, 1985) proceed from, rather than precede, the work they make. Here, the performance of ‘difference’, and the preconceived, visible and actual ‘limits’ of the performers, open an unsettled space that it can be written into, and mould the content and form of the work. These limits, which Bruce Gladwin describes as “part of the palette” (Gladwin, interview, 2012), are at play in a ‘slow’ process of making, which permits deep reflection and the testing of many alternatives. Although the process of devising is in many respects entirely conventional – “hundreds of hours of improvisations” – recourse to conventional tropes of performance is ‘disabled’ by the particular attributes of the maker/performers, and these processes have produced work of startling originality and boldness, complexity and nuance. Tony McCaffrey (2014, p. 9) claims “the engagement of people perceived to have intellectual disabilities in performance” challenges assumptions that performance is “an activity which, even in its most resistant and postdramatic forms, generally presupposes a virtuosity dependent upon cognitive abilities”. Back to Back Theatre proposes a startling challenge to conventional notions of disability, ability and ‘talent’ in its strategic folding of ‘reality’ and conventional assumptions around ‘technique-al’ ability back in on one another.

The telematic performance projects discussed in Chapter 6, by accident and by design, challenged some of the very complex ‘limit sets’ at play in the university context. Although the decision to work within a telematic framework can be read as the election of a set of constraints, once embarked on this path both director/s and students/makers learned object lessons in pragmatic dramaturgy as they tested the
limits of the telematic framework to ‘enable’ both collaborative devising processes and performance with remotely-located actors and audiences at either end of a digital stream. Successive projects, and successive cycles of failure, reflection and remaking made it evident that the complex framework, in its reframing of the performance space/s, and the nature and dimensionalities of connection between actors, proposed a set of limits that disciplined not only the structures and narratives that could be explored, but also the mise en scene and aesthetic of the works. In this latter aspect, participants were challenged to rethink certain fundamental assumptions about the dynamic space in which the acting ‘style’ needs to emerge from an encounter with an aesthetic forged in and by the telematic ‘machine’.

Since student theatre productions so often occur in a decontextualized space, there are conflicted perspectives about what constitutes, to borrow Back to Back’s term “the reality line” (Back to Back Theatre, 2013 p. 187) on any number of fronts. I would like to use this concept to address the implications of this research for ‘what is really in the room’ in the training of the performance makers of the future, in a moment when a new realpolitik is emerging and change is imminent in the environment of higher education in Australia. As I write this final chapter, in March 2015, legislation to reform Higher Education in Australia sits stalled in a hostile Senate. The three key elements contained in the package, “subsidy reductions, fee deregulation and system expansion” (Norton, 2015, n.p.) have implications for all students entering higher education. Should the legislation come into effect, it is likely to have and particular implications for, and place particular limits on, how students of performance will be trained.

**Pragmatic Pedagogy**

This concluding chapter does not contain an exemplary moment from a rehearsal room, but it does return the narrative to the rooms where I now do most of my work. It seems fitting that a thesis about pragmatic dramaturgy should end on a pragmatic note, but also – in a project which has been much concerned with observing, watching and witnessing – with an eye to the future. The translation of “pragmatic dramaturgy” from an analytical frame for the interpretation and evaluation of a range of local, contemporary rehearsal practices and processes, to an active frame for shaping
thinking around training for performance making and rehearsal, proposes a response to movements in the field which emerging artists will need to respond to.

In the broader context, funding for training in the creative arts in general, and the performing arts in particular seems to exist in a state of perpetual crisis. Despite the innovations in pedagogy that have accompanied technological innovation, which I discussed in the previous chapter, training for/in performance practice still relies heavily on students and teachers inhabiting the same ‘room’, and on the transmission of conceptual and embodied knowledge between bodies and through practice. This sort of training is expensive, requiring more time and different sorts of rooms from those in which other sorts of knowledge can be transferred or ‘acquired’.

**Tread softly for you tread on my dreams (Yeats)**

The encounter, year after year, with new cohorts of students whose knowledge and conception of the field of performance-making is shaped by the limits of their experience can be tedious if one is not prepared to acknowledge that it returns one, again and again, to first principles and primary questions about what constitutes performance, and how and where it is made. As I noted in the previous chapter, the expectations and aspirations students bring to ‘the room’ are often markedly different from the expectations and aspirations implicit in the course they study. D'Cruz's (2010, p. 101) assessment of the backgrounds out of which students enter the course at Deakin – defines the limits of their experience – experience of genre and experience of a broader context, which shape their expectations and aspirations. My reading of the field, based on my professional experience as a performance-maker, performer and director amongst other things, as well as my anecdotal experience of the post-training experience of these students, suggests that few of these students move directly to the parts of the map where “musicals, light comedy and naturalism” are made. Here, as with the ‘unknowingness’ that attends upon the process of making art discussed in the introduction and the methodology chapter, it is hard to predict how individuals will respond to the ‘process’ of training, and one is constantly aware that this is but one step in a much longer journey whose outcomes are unknown. Graduates arrive at, or transit through, a sometimes-surprising range of destinations. Years after graduation, some are still involved in performance making in professional, community or amateur
contexts. Some give up entirely. Some move into teaching. Some use the generic ‘transferable’ skills embedded in a performing arts degree, such as collaboration, self-presentation, and production management, to move into related and unrelated areas such as community development, retail or other management roles. Nonetheless, our task and professional obligation is to teach, if you like, a form of map reading – how to recognize and read the map of a process, and how to locate that map within the topography of the local professional environment and the broader context of contemporary performance.

Prologue to Epilogue

In the prologue to this thesis, I recounted my own experience of encountering the limits of my own ‘technique-al’ mastery. In that case, my capacity to perform a very demanding work was impacted by the loss of ‘match fitness’ after illness, and led me to find a new approach to the negotiation between my soft body and the cruel space it had to perform in. The dramaturgical logic unearthed by this crisis will not be unfamiliar to the “expert practitioner” (Melrose, 2006, n.p.), but it is hard to learn, and to teach, other than through experience. It is difficult to ‘sell’ working within limits, and moulding an aesthetic to the dictates of those limits, to students whose legitimate aspiration it is to extend their limits through the development of mastery. In this sense, making performance with and on students needs to be, if anything, more dynamic and responsive than professional processes as one calibrates and recalibrates the performance-in-the-making to fit the skills they develop through the making of the work. This makes the process very unpredictable. Students come with little history, although one might have taught them in other courses, and their learning in the volatile and often messy environment of the creative process – when the penny might drop, and which penny – is idiosyncratic and erratic. I am aware, as I move through these processes, of an increasing tendency to shape and reshape the process and the performance around this unpredictability, trying to hold to the conceptual and aesthetic coherence of the project, while leaving some room at the margins. ‘Leaving some room’ allows the accommodation of different “forces and speeds” (Bolt, 2007, p. 3) of learning, encouraging students to make bolder choices in the light of discoveries they
have made, or reframing the interpretive space for students whose technique-al abilities cannot yet meet the implicit initial demands of their role.

While we are teaching in and through practice, we also ask students to engage in a form of ethnography by documenting and reflecting on the processes they experience, both during and after that process. We ask them to map its evolving dramaturgical logic in hope that they learn to read its topography and adapt these reading skills to other contexts – as both performers and performance-makers. In as sense, the requirement to document and analyse their own processes also positions students not only as ethnographers, but as co-researchers investigating their experience “in its own empirical immediacy” (Rossmanith, 2008, p. 142), rather than “reducing it to labels or genres” (p. 145). This allows them to understand, as I have in this research, that the inevitable, peculiar and idiosyncratic logic of any process means that interpretations are context and time-bound. In this respect, each process they experience functions as a case study that allows for microanalysis of the particularity of the instance which, when applied to the project of performance making, is of intrinsic value.

Working the systems

*If technique is considered like language, it is then like enabling speakers to change language itself and not simply improve their proficiency.*

(Cammileri, 2009, p. 28)

The implications of approaches informed by pragmatic dramaturgy problematize the notion of a system, or systematisation, of training for performance-making, proposing instead a logic of exposure to particular matrixes of concepts, spaces and materials to see what might emerge from their encounter and ‘assemblage’. This is also what Bolt, after Carter, describes as “material thinking” (Bolt 2004, 2007; Carter 2009, 2010). This is not to say that training for performance making should avoid exposure to, and practical experience of, existing training regimes and systems. It does suggest, however, that the engagement needs to be “contextually aware” (Kaynar, 2006 p. 257), making evident that a performance maker in the 21st century needs the capacity to critique, evaluate and adapt a range of established approaches in relation to the range of performance styles and languages which constitute contemporary performance and its many ‘rooms’. This approach runs counter to the market logic of
some commodified packages of ‘systems’ that claim to train practitioners for entry into the professional arena. Frank Camilleri (2009 p. 33-34) speaks of the pressures on the “the hybrid practitioner-scholar” to commodify their “esoteric practices” to answer to “expectations of publications and funding grants acquisition”, but additional pressures come into play when one considers the mounting competition for students in an increasingly de-regulated market where learning is characterised as ‘product’. These pressures on existing institutions are increased exponentially by the entry into the market of private providers of vocational education. There exist in Melbourne a large number of privately-run and owned acting schools and studios who make occasional application for certification as providers of higher education with the power to award degrees. Marketing of their offers of ‘specialist’ vocational training frequently implies professional currency of curriculum content that is very attractive, and will require scrutiny if a broader deregulation of higher education is implemented.

The notion that different texts demand different processes of realisation, and that different processes produce different performance texts is, at its core, profoundly unsettling for those one might call, after Susan Melrose (2006, n.p.), “[non-] expert practitioners”. It is a truism that students with ambitions to enter the crowded and uncertain arena of professional performance are particularly vulnerable to the lure of a ‘system’ or ‘method’ of training which promises to ‘work’ in any professional performance-making context. Kate Rossmanith (2008 p. 149) notes that the professional actors she observed in rehearsal did “not describe their work as “‘Stanislavskian’ or ‘Brechtian’ or ‘post-dramatic’” but, in my experience, performers in training often do. To cite a ‘method’ is a way of harnessing that method, with its connotation of technique-al competence, to the project of identity formation and claims of belonging to a community of practice by establishing provenance.

The imperative to construct and deliver both curriculum and pedagogy in performance, in an ethical and pragmatic manner which addresses both student expectation and the realpolitik of employment in the field is examined by Ian Maxwell (2010) and Paul Moore (2006), and one is struck by the barely concealed outrage expressed by both writers in their respective analyses of training processes even in some accredited and long-established conservatory-model actor training institutions. Both charge these institutions with a failure to account for the realities of the professional arena post-
training. Each writer provides an excoriating analysis of what Maxwell (2010, p. 13) calls, after Bordieu, “méconnaissance”…an active investment in a particular way of understanding a situation which, upon critical reflection, would not be sustainable, but which nonetheless bestows strategic advantage upon the investor”. These analyses are partly grounded in the personal experience of each of the researchers as they examine their own subjective experience of actor training and/or the struggle to gain employment post-training. The students Maxwell and Moore describe resemble many of the students that I work with in their aspiration to enter the “theatrical field”, and frequently enter the training context with an existing and self-perpetuating subscription to “various categories of enchantment…ideas such as ‘charisma’, ‘talent’ and the like which serve… to ‘naturalise’ certain practices and logics” (Maxwell, 2010, p. 13). Moore’s research, tracking the attempts of 110 actors to gain employment in the ten years following graduation from vocational actor training, indicates that this attachment to a ‘logic of charismatic enchantment’ is carried through their training and into the professional sphere (Moore, 2006, p. 7-8). Moore’s claims approach pragmatism in performer training from another angle, asserting that performer training in conservatory models “focus[es] almost entirely on acting for the stage and on approaching work under conditions that are rarely replicated in the commercial world” (p. 4). He charges these models with failing to account for the fact that, “the graduate… must adapt skills to varied working environments in which actors have little influence over working procedures” (p. 5). Maxwell, reflecting on Moore’s research, notes that “a majority of respondents to Moore’s survey suggested that ‘luck’ was the single most significant determinant of career success” (Maxwell, 2010, p. 16). Although their address is to “commercial practice”, and Moore (2006, p. 5), in particular addresses the fact that “screen work”, rather than work in theatre performance “provides the most income and involves the greatest number of actors”, these accounts construct an alternative view on ‘decontextualised’ approaches to performer training.

I would propose an alternative potential “determinant of career success” through the example of a group of ‘successful’ graduates of my own university. Since I have just argued for a pedagogical model of ‘exposure’ which balances and contextualises training in a method or methods, I can claim strictly limited responsibility for this success. Although many of my students aspire to work in the ‘professional’ rooms I
have described, they are more likely to find a point of access to the profession in independent practice, where the relative paucity and unreliability of resources demand the most ingenuity in negotiating with limits. To return to ‘the room’, this was certainly the case for the members of ‘The Suitcase Royale’, Miles O’Neil, Glen Walton, Jof O’Farrell, and Tom Salisbury, who met as students of Drama and Media at Deakin University in 2002. Their exposure to a range of multi-disciplinary performance-making practices that the cluster of creative arts disciplines within a cross-disciplinary degree could offer was fertile ground for fertile imaginations. As was the ‘pragmatic dramaturgy’ required by the strictly limited ‘palette’ the university environment could provide for them. The company was formed in their final year of study, during which they created Felix Listens to the World as a graduation project. Describing what they make as “junkyard theatre”, the group assembled an array of objects, machines and toys found abandoned on roadsides, in the dusty corners of storage rooms and in charity shops, to construct a whimsical work that integrated ballet mecanique with shadow puppetry, film, narration, music and physical theatre. According to the group’s members, the work was designed to gain them entrée into Melbourne’s independent theatre scene in mind. The accuracy of their appraisal of what sort of work might provide such entrée is evident in the fact that the work moved directly from the university to the Melbourne Fringe Festival in 2005 where it won a Best Performance Award. On the back of this success, the company took the show on the road through Canada, building audiences from town to town through word of mouth from previous performances.

In interview, Miles O’Neil spoke of the process of making the work as influenced by a fascination with the stories embedded in discarded objects, and a desire to maintain complete control over every aspect of the performance – to the point that lighting for the show was provided by a large collection of small domestic appliances whose operation by the performers themselves was choreographed into the work. He describes a period where they focused solely on “lighting small places” with a variety of lights (O’Neil, 2013, p. 2). Even in this first work, the artists in this then nascent company demonstrated the sensibility of the bricoleur, “using a limited... store of doctrines, materials and tools... relying only on [his] ingenuity” (Garvey cited in Krislov, 1972, p. 1343), which I discussed in the introduction to this thesis.
The performance-making process they pieced together manifested a canny understanding of, to borrow Stanislavski’s term, the “given circumstances” in the context of its making, and the implied or expected context of its presentation. If, as Julian Meyrick (2012) asserts, the determinants of success in rehearsal are “time, resources and processual flexibility”, then the university environment was able to provide “time”, the resource of space to work in, and a culture that teaches, supports and values “processual flexibility”. To this fertile but limited space, the artists brought their own ‘tastes’ for particular performance genres, and objects that contained their own narratives but resonated with the potential for repurposing, and considerable ingenuity. This opened spaces of possibility where genre and object could be in dialogue with one another, and with the bodies of the performers.

Finale

Given my preoccupation with the work of performance making and its processes, going to the theatre can be a busman’s holiday, and this has been particularly the case through the period of doctoral research. In each performance I witness, I find I am looking for the ‘exemplary’ production, and trying to understand what it is about the lens of pragmatic dramaturgy that allows me to experience, if not always articulate, a particular sort of pleasure in viewing. I am a particular sort of audience. I experience a different sort of enchantment because I know, in a general sense, how it is made ‘in the room’. And the reflexes developed through experience as a maker, teacher and research have engendered a tendency to speculate on what precise process created the performance, making my spectatorship a different sort of ‘work’.

Performance theorist and maker, Sara Jane Bailes (2011, p. 200), when analysing the work of performance companies Goat Island, Forced Entertainment and Elevator Repair Service, says that their embrace of failure (which might be understood to inhere to every performance event in its unsettled occupation of the space between presentation and representation, liveness and iterativeness) sits in “a space without margins, “flush with its edges” to borrow poet John Ashbery’s words”. There is an authenticity to be found and, perhaps more importantly, felt in work which goes beyond compliance with a set of traditionally or generically-imposed constraints. This sort of work – and the work that makes this work, is prepared to extend its reach to its
margins, even to throw itself against them hard enough to strike sparks, and in so
doing “illuminate rather than fill some of the gaps and…make evident even more gaps,
holes, fissures, and elisions” that create the complexity and texture of performance.

Some call this “style”. Roseanne Cash (in Belluck, 2011 n.p.), daughter of the
inimitable singer and songwriter, Johnny Cash, says that her father’s example taught
her “that your style is a function of your limitations, more so than a function of your
skills…If you have limitations as a singer, maybe you’re forced to find nuance in a way
you don’t have to if you have a four-octave range”

Limits define spaces and shapes. Spaces and shapes constitute aesthetics. There is
something in a truly dynamic encounter with limits in a performance that speaks to
‘inimitability’, and that communicates to the spectator that the process that made the
work has been informed by a deep and collective understanding of the materials of its
making in their possibilities and their limits.

This project, in observing, examining and articulating some of the specific
constellations of limits that are woven into the processes and practices of a range of
Melbourne theatre companies, performance makers and future performance makers,
proposes the lens of ‘pragmatic dramaturgy’ as a means of understanding the complex
interactions between process and performance that define theatre practice, and hence
offers a new way of thinking about how theatre is currently produced, and new
approaches to working with the limits of ‘what is in the room’.


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<tr>
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<td><em>Es Brent</em></td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Gilgul Theatre</td>
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Personal Correspondence/Interviews

Bruce Gladwin 16th March, 2012 pp. 146-163
Dan Spielman 24th May, 2005
Julie Forsyth 12th November, 2012
Jenny Kemp 8th November, 2012
Miles O’Neil, Tom Salisbury (The Suitcase Royale) 17th June, 2013
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David Woods 28th May, 2012
Peter Corrigan 22nd April, 1996
Chris Kohn 17th August, 2012
Tom Wright 27th January, 2015

Rehearsal Documentation


