

Performance space: the creative environment and the challenging of cultural codes

By
Paul Brownbill

Kinætma is an alliance of theatre practitioners and academics from Indian and European performance traditions working between cultures. In 2004 Kinaetma worked in Kolkata, India with local performers, evoking the journey of Marco Polo from Europe to Asia. *The Silk Route: memory of a journey*, took its audience on an emotional and physical journey with devised performances in banyan trees and bamboo groves and with the occasional participation of fireflies and jackals. Transposed between cultures and continents, the journey evoked Venice and the road to the east and explored cultural meeting points and cultural memory.

As scenographer for Kinaetma I was strongly influenced by the writings of Italo Calvino in his book *Invisible Cities* (1979). Here, Calvino painted pictures of the cities Polo was supposed to have visited on his travels, each one evocative of the emotive experiences of being the first to bridge the cultural divide; each city an exotic and mystical place and yet each one a facet of the same city - Venice.

The realisation of my designs in this site-specific, promenade performance transformed the familiar, stood as metaphors for the content of the action they encompassed, while still being a fragment of the same whole - Kolkata. The playing spaces also allowed the performers, in particular dancers, to exploit their own particular performance cultures with contact improvisation, Bharatnatyam, contemporary dance, vocal and physical narratives, colliding in sympathetic environments.

Perhaps the single greatest influence on a performance is the environment in which it takes place. Where did you last see a performance: in a theatre, a disused factory, a park, a playground, a church? Wherever it was, the challenge for the designer was to make the connection between the space, the performer and the audience (Ruthven-Hall and Burnet 2000: 5).

Thus, by bringing together different cultural identities in a performance space, and challenging the audience's perception of the norm for theatre playing spaces and their relationship to the actual performance event, more specifically the performer's cultural histories, the audience journeyed with us, both physically and mentally. The resultant challenges facing dancers and audience alike proved to be difficult and controversial, and as a scenographer, a manipulator of spaces, the challenges were equally difficult and yet rewarding. It is this relationship between space, dancer and audience that

became a clear vehicle for the expression of, and subverting of cultural identity. As audiences encountered their own familiar spaces transformed and their own perception of playing spaces thrown in to question; the potential for space to become a context for cultural change opened up.

For the purposes of this article I will focus on just one of the environments created for *The Silk Route*, *The City of Desire*, although the same approach to my work can be said for all nine environments built for the performance. *The Silk Route* called on the performance skills of actors and dancers alike, but it is the performance world of the *dancer* that animated and illuminated this *City of Desire*.

Site-specific environments challenge dancers by demanding responses that do not, and cannot take place in conventional theatre spaces. In such an environment, can the performer truly and honestly make reference to their cultural heritage?

Truly site-specific or “found” spaces as I prefer to regard them, those dependant on natural environments and indigenous materials for their creation, by the nature of their natural environments offer a greater opportunity for inter-cultural performance, the nature of which challenges and affects the dancer in terms of their performance and their response to the performance space.

A safe environment is not necessarily a creative one; a symbiosis exists between performer and the found space that does not, cannot, occur on the conventional stage.

If found-space specific work makes any real departure from the usual premise of the theatre it is made out of a desire to let place speak as loud as the human performer who enters that space. How many people go to the theatre and only see the dance?

What is often regarded as real space in the conventional theatre, the space commonly associated with a performer’s setting, its socio-political context and its author’s/company’s context, is the principal way in which audiences understand performances in the context of the outside world. For Calvino’s *City of Desire* I took a bamboo grove.



I chose an area with an arch of bamboo to form the backdrop, into which I would put a silk screen. Through the screen, naked flames would illuminate the silk, enhance its colours and the shadows of dancers performing between the flames and the screen project unpredictable patterns. The dancers would break through the screen to join another dancer already waiting in the space. This space was, defined by a series of terracotta bowls, each with a small fire burning in it, designed to go out sequentially so that by the end of the performance the fires one by one had extinguished. As the performance ended the last flame died.



Rehearsal in the City of Desire

The floor, naturally sand, was strewn with hundreds of fresh flowers giving out an exotic and erotic fragrance and presenting to the eye a carpet of natural beauty. In the centre of this fragrant carpet – the dancer. The human being is at the centre of live performance. Scenographer Pamela Howard refers to the performer as, 'the most powerful living element in the space' (Howard 2000: 87).

Arguably so, but that is true of the traditional performance space. If one's space includes an ancient banyan tree, a grove of bamboo and the

incandescence of thousands of fireflies, then we have to put the performer in a different context. The existing surroundings are there for the taking, the addition of jackals and fireflies an added bonus, but one that a performer needs to be aware of and use as part of their creative process.

There are actual relationships between the body and the spaces the body moves through. Furthermore there is a tangible relationship between the body and the environment it is encountering. This is heightened when the environment allows for the dancer to evoke their cultural performance heritage.

Creating a performance space out of the landscape and then creating work which relates directly to that landscape and its people is what Kinaetma is about.

This crucial live being – the dancer then has to wear something. Well, they don't have to and in performance history there are numerous occasions when the performer has worn nothing but a smile or indeed a grimace depending. Frequently in dance pieces we see floaty, light materials or figure hugging lycra – nothing wrong with that, but in many cases the thrust of the design would seem to be what is practical, what allows the dancer freedom to move and therefore show, to make transparent, the technique and skill that we are there to witness.

Not so with my designs. The performers in The Silk Route wore traditional costumes. Kurtas, salwars and more importantly saris. "Why?" I hear you ask? Surely the worst thing a dancer can be asked to perform in is a sari. True. Contact improvisation, floor work, most movement does not come easily in a sari. But consider these points. Firstly, the connotations of the sari. In the western world it is surely seen as the very symbol of female, middle class Indian, in India the same is true. So, here we have, lying in the middle of an environment that so far has not given the audience cause for concern, quite the opposite, an Indian woman, on a bed of flowers dressed in a sari. "Ah" say the audience "Indian dance, we recognise this".

Secondly, and for me more importantly, think of the performer. Constrained, and that is a key word here, constrained within a national dress. That constraint representing for the performer the constraints of her cultural background, the constraints of her formal training, and the constraints of the society for whom she is about to perform. Does that dancer want to break away from these constraints? Does that dancer want to physically demonstrate that struggle of the emotional, creative self with the cultural heritage? I thought so – she thought so.

"Wear a sari then. Wear a sari and perform in the way that you know how – a fusion of eastern training and western technique"

"I can't move in a sari" she said.

"I know" I said. "How else do you want to convey the message of repression, conservatism and struggle to your audience?"

Furthermore; think of the environment created in the bamboo grove. Not one that is possible to create on the conventional stage. Inconceivable in a proscenium arch setting with a platform and rows upon row of distanced audience. Not to be done in lycra and silk. Not worth the effort in a safe environment.

Pamela Howard says that costumes become an extension of the actor in the space. I say that costumes often become the décor of the dancer – and only when the costumes themselves are a challenge to the dancer and a touchstone of their history can the dancer perform the challenge of emotional and cultural exchange.

In India, our audiences wanted, expected, were encoded to accept either a representation of Western theatre, Chekhov, Wilde, Shaw, portraying the good old Victorian values of the Raj, or, the classical dance of India with its routes in the classical literature of the Mahabharata and Ramayana. So, in order to make them comfortable, to lull the audience into a false sense of security, give a context in which to view this classicism, the environment that was the City of Desire, initially presented a comfort zone.

Cultural codes of attendance allow for comfort zones which in turn allow for detachment from form and content. Furthermore, dance design often enforces that comfort zone. The familiar dance floor, lighting that is mainly heads, mids and shins, or a variation of these, forms the performance environment, making for a recognisable and safe visual setting for the performance to take place. The focus then, of course, being on the body as the aesthetic that occupies the audience's attention, and the execution of technique within that framework. And right enough. However, in this scenario, the dancer creates within the space, not in reaction to the space. There is no synergy; there is no recognition of the emotional, physical or cultural reference to this rather sterile environment.

Lez Brotherston, Matthew Bourne's scenographer responsible for, amongst other things, Bourne's latest piece, *Edward Scissorhands*, in an interview for the Guardian Newspaper says:

Classical dance has painted itself into a corner. There's only so many times you can see *Swan Lake* or *The Nutcracker* before you start saying this is the same show and someone's just added a white tutu.....someone's got to take a risk (Brotherston, 2005).

"You what me to perform in this?" Said the dancer.

"Yes"

"Wearing a sari?"

"Yes"

"But why?"

"Because you can bring to this environment a beauty and emotional honesty that challenges the very notion of classical performance and cultural heritage. Because the juxtaposition and fusion of contemporary dance in a tradition environment will make an audience react in a way that no other performance environment can. Because the bamboo grove looks lovely, but it's a dead space until you get in there."

" But I can't dance in the sand in a sari!"

" Exactly."

And of course – she could.

The audience mirrored the shape of the ring of burning pots, forming a quadrant at what would traditionally be the front of the stage. There are of course echoes here of the Greek orchestra, the circle of life, the storytelling tradition of the round, but this was incidental, or perhaps influenced by some sub-conscious guiding force. The process of making performance only comes to fruition when the audience is in place and there is that mystical space in which it happens, what Meyerhold referred to as a liminal third space. In his book *Theatre, Performance and Technology*, Christopher Baugh expands upon Meyerhold's view of the audience-space relationship.

Meyerhold grew to consider the precise implications for the scenography and the entire *mise en scene*, of the "liveness" of his audience. He realised that theatre could not be completed by actors and scenographers on the stage and then offered "ready-made" to its audience.....The real, significant act of theatre therefore takes place in a third place, in the liminality of the space that serves as the meeting place between artist and spectator (Baugh 2005: 67).

Here, in India, the audience encompassed the action, they were part of the environment, but the burning flames denied intervention. There was a dangerous barrier – wasn't there always?

I was keen to ensure that we established a provocative performer-audience relationship. I often feel there is a problem when a dancer is on a platform onto which the audience is looking down, as opposed to when the audience, despite being in spectator mode, are part of the performer's environment. Does this privileged view from afar allow for the performer to close the gap? Can the dancer really communicate?

Perhaps western theatre is ego-centric. Perhaps barriers are constructed around "Look at me": "Look at me looking at them".

In the bamboo grove, the space lies silent and inert, waiting for the release into the life of the dancer.

In this space, a circle of fragrant flowers, enclosed by a ring of fire – a dangerous environment to play in at the best of times, the dancer looks down momentarily; her hand has red ants crawling over it. She moves, her first

move brings her bare feet into contact with the thorns on the roses. The pain is significant, but it jolts the memory, it brings into focus the reason for this performance, it is evocative of the pain of transition from classicism to modernism, from colonialism to, well to the not-so-different post colonialism. I admit, in my desire for fragrance and beauty I had ignored the fact that the thorns were still on the roses. I knew nothing of the ants, but at least, I had got rid of the snakes!

But we got to thinking, the dancer and I, are these added risks, no, not risks, discomforts, a means of realisation to the performer of their roots, of their culture? Is this environment an honest one and therefore the response to the environment an honest response? Does that therefore enhance the performance? Moreover, does that heightened response mean that the message the audience receives is an uncomfortable truism?

Of course, from an audience perspective, they wouldn't have seen the ants nor the thorns on the roses, but perhaps it begs the question did they see the performer, the scenography? Was the whole package simply an experience that denied deconstruction because their initial perception of comfort was subverted? Is that what made it uncomfortable – yes, not the ants, not the erotic nature of the performance, not the fact that there was no escape, no stage, lights, curtain, exit signs, comfort zone. It was the fact that the recognition of something that conformed to their cultural codes of attendance and to their cultural codes of acceptable theatre was suddenly thrown into confusion and brought to the point of confrontation with their own beliefs and cultural identities, and only because the dancer took a risk in an environment that wasn't safe.

Brotherston again:

When design is good you don't notice it, you take it on as an experience (2005).

The City of Desire cannot be replicated. With all the technology and money at my disposal, it couldn't be done. Why not? Well, put on a stage, the performer cannot have the same contact with the environment, and therefore cannot connect with her roots. Lie on a stage in a theatre, and there is nothing beyond the technology. How can a dancer mentally prepare for a cultural exchange in an environment that blocks that communication? However talented, there would always be an inhibition, an inability to contact the roots, to tap into the cultural heritage. And yes, even if from the outset the subversion of the cultural heritage was the aim of the performance, there has to be that contact in the first place.

I am not advocating pain and suffering as the only means to honesty in performance. I am advocating using an environment that forces risk that jolts the dancer out of the world of practiced conformity to style and technique and into an honest representation of their cultural performance heritage.

A Kinaetma space is a dead space without a performer – the environment must allow the dancer to tap into their cultural heritage and move that on to challenge dancer and audience alike by releasing contemporary technique into an historic cultural environment.

Forget the clinical heads, mids and shins lighting dancers on a polymer dance floor with, albeit brilliant, displays of technique. Take a risk, dance in an environment that taps into the soul of the dancer, no, that's been done; let space, body and heart conjoin in the dance of awareness, the dance of honesty – the dance of realisation.

The Silk Route – Memory of a Journey



The Woven City



The City of Reflection



Venice



Venice



The only surviving night (Performance time)-shot
The City of Reflection



City of (Under construction)

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environments can only come through active involvement in the devising process, working with Kinætma gives him the opportunity to engage in inter-cultural theatre practically and offers the opportunity to design for performances that draw on many cultural references.