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Site Specific Theatre

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Actors Theatre of Louisville was one of the early presenters of site-specific works, including this play produced inside a Lincoln Town Car during the 23rd Annual Humana Festival of New American Plays. The audience watched from the back seat as Trip Hope and Ginna Hoben performed in *What Are You Afraid Of?*.

SITE-SPECIFIC THEATRE

Producers Take Plays Into Real-World Settings and Invite Audiences to Join Them for the Ride

“Where should a play happen? The theatrical event always happens within a space, but only sometimes is space itself an event.”

- Arthur Sainer, *The Radical Theatre Notebook* (1975)

by David Wohl

Arthur Sainer wrote theatre criticism for the *The Village Voice* during the 1960s and 1970s and, because he reviewed so many avant-garde and unconventional theatre productions (in New York City lofts, churches, laundromats, bus stations and other settings) he became one of the first American critics to discuss and analyze site-specific theatre. Sainer realized that theatre that took place in nontheatrical spaces often required more involvement and interaction from audience members and, in such environments, life was “less capable than usual of protecting [them] from art.” In Sainer’s definition of site-specific theatre, space becomes an event.

Today, more and more theatres are finding that this type of production can attract new audiences not often found in traditional spaces.

First, A Definition: What is 'Site-Specific'?

As theatre organizations in the U.S. and abroad explore the possibilities of producing site-based plays, the term "site-specific" has been tossed about rather loosely to describe any performance that doesn't take place in a conventional theatre space. Over the past decade or so, the range of site-specific work has grown even more diverse and varied – and often difficult to categorize or pin down. Scholars and critics have different views about what "site-specific" really means.

Several years ago, the Scottish Arts Council, recognizing that site-specific theatre required some sort of operational description for their grant programs, defined a site-specific production as a theatrical performance that "fully exploits the properties, qualities and meanings of a given site." The Arts Council further noted that, "Even if it is feasible to stage a play in the traditional theatre setting, site-specific performance may be preferred as it reveals the complex two-way relationship between the person and the physical environment."

The recent resurgence in the use of nontheatrical space for performances may be attributed to a multitude of reasons – but it has certainly provided some very interesting opportunities for playwrights, directors, actors, producers and theatre organizations. Producers and directors have realized that site-specific theatre has the potential of attracting a "non-theatre" audience – an audience that might not ordinarily attend or enjoy traditional theatre.

Theatre in a Car and a Warehouse

Some of the most interesting site-specific work produced in the past two decades has been done in Louisville, KY, the site of SETC's 2013 convention. Between 1999 and 2004, Actors Theatre of Louisville's Humana Festival of New American Plays produced several site-specific pieces including Richard Dresser's car play, *What Are You Afraid of?* in 1999 and, five years later, Naomi Iizuka's *From the Vanishing Point*. *What Are You Afraid of?*, a 10-minute, two-character play, was performed in an old Lincoln Town Car parked in front of the theatre. Audience members sat in the back seat and watched the action unfold in the front. *From the Vanishing Point* was performed in a warehouse in Louisville's historic Butchertown neighborhood and was conceived during Iizuka's residency in Louisville. Former Actors Theatre Producing Director Jon Jory explained that "theatre does not have to exist within the frame of buying a ticket to a two-hour event. We



Patrick Pfister

Specific Gravity Ensemble produced a series of elevator plays at the Starks Building in Louisville, KY, from 2007 to 2009. At left, William Wells and Gina Theresa Cisto perform in Finishing the Beginning, by Todd Zeigler, part of "Elevator Plays: Ascent/Descent - Assent/Dissent."



Harlan Taylor

have to seek other venues, forms and time limits to remain part of the contemporary lifestyle."

Elevator Plays: Going Up or Down?

The Louisville experimental theatre company Specific Gravity Ensemble produced a series of elevator plays between 2007 and 2009 which consisted of several two-minute mini-plays that were set in four elevators in downtown Louisville's historic Starks Building on 4th Street. The elevator plays were performed simultaneously, with one production on the

Lou Sumrall appears in At the Vanishing Point by Naomi Iizuka, performed in a warehouse in Louisville and directed by Les Waters as part of the 28th Humana Festival of New American Plays.

The elevators plays were 'intended to provide an experience that changed our audience. We didn't feel that was always the case when they were sitting comfortably in a cushy seat in dark anonymity.'

way up and another on the way down. The initial run in 2007 included four performances over two weekends, which sold out almost immediately. The company extended the dates and, two weeks later, performed a second four-performance run which sold out prior to opening. The company's director and cofounded Rand Harmon explained how it worked: "In each, the elevator car was stopped on the ground floor and loaded with up to five audience members, and up to three actors. When the car was activated and the doors closed, a play commenced as it climbed to the top floor. The play concluded just before, or as the doors opened on the top floor. Audiences were instructed to remain in the car as the actors exited and a new cast of actors boarded. The doors closed, and another play commenced as the car returned all the riders to the ground floor lobby."

The company produced more elevator plays in 2008 and 2009, and all of the performances proved to be extremely popular with Louisville audiences. Harmon says the company "intended to provide an experience that changed our audience once they'd completed a performance. We didn't feel that was always the case when they were sitting comfortably in

a cushy seat in dark anonymity." Harmon, who is now in the process completing his doctoral dissertation on site-specific theatre at the University of Colorado, is looking at a possible return to production in 2014 with elevator performances in Chicago and/or Denver.

My Own Entry into Site-Specific Theatre

During my 19-year tenure as artistic director of the Charleston Stage Company (CSC) in Charleston, WV, we regularly produced staged readings and workshop productions of original scripts. With the assistance of small grants from the West Virginia Commission on the Arts, we tried to encourage and promote West Virginia playwrights and new plays. In 2006, board member and local playwright Arla Ralston suggested that we change our approach and begin to produce new site-specific plays in different locations.

Our intent was to push the boundaries of traditional theatre and offer audiences something different. We also wanted to explore new spaces so that, as Sainer suggested, the space itself might become part of the performance text. We found the experience to be both limiting and de-limiting. It was de-limiting because the performance was not restricted to the ar-



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Photo by Jessica Katz

tificial boundaries of a traditional proscenium, thrust or arena theatre. In some spaces (not all), we had the opportunity of reducing or eliminating the separation of performers from audience members. This significantly increased the interaction and involvement and certainly the sense of immediacy.

It was also limiting because we replaced imaginary theatrical boundaries (such as the transparent “fourth wall”) with real ones -- the real physical barriers and constraints that inherently existed in the sites we were working with. It took us a few years to begin considering these barriers earlier in the production process. How much noise does a trolley make in navigating downtown traffic -- how many people can you fit in a bank lobby or in an elevated walkway? Site-specific theatre also gives you less control over the audience -- they no longer are fixed immovably in a seat in a darkened theatre building.

CSC produced eight site-specific productions between 2006 and summer 2013 in various locations. The first was in a downtown former bank lobby on the corner of Virginia and Capitol Streets. There is a mural in the lobby that depicts the lobby itself (see photo at left). The painting includes four characters -- a

man in a camel’s hair coat and bowler hat at the teller’s window, the teller serving him, a man sitting in a chair by the wall with his feet outstretched, and a young woman in the middle of the lobby bending over to adjust her stockings. For years, Charleston residents engaged in an informal but often heated debate about what is actually going on in this scene. What is the sitting man waiting for? Who is the man in the camel haired coat? And why is the woman in the center of the mural lifting her skirt to adjust her stockings? Playwrights were asked to submit 10-minute plays utilizing all four of these characters. Three plays were chosen to be performed during Festiv-ALL Charleston, a weeklong downtown summer arts festival that also premiered in 2006.

Audience response was amazing. All performances sold out within minutes and we had to add more performances because of word-of-mouth and

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Gabriele Wohli

Audiences flocked to see plays based on the characters in this bank mural during Charleston Stage Company's Location Plays in 2006.

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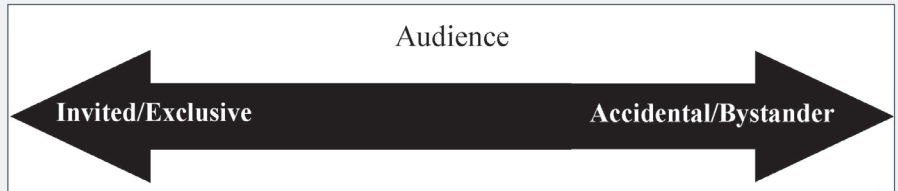


Models for Site-Specific Theatre

From his research on site-specific productions, David Wohl developed some continuum models that may help those who are interested in creating site-specific work.

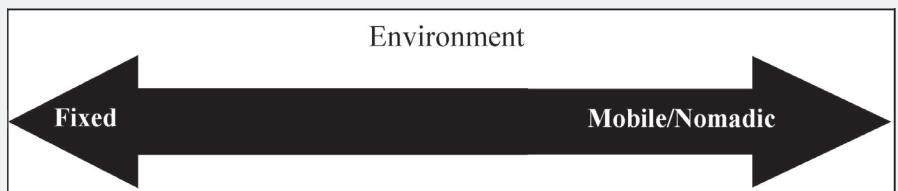
The Audience Continuum

Ranges from Invited/Exclusive to Accidental/Bystander. Invited/exclusive events are controlled. The site is undisclosed to the general public (similar to the model of the underground supper club), and the production is by invitation only. Conversely, there is no deliberate attempt to control the accidental/bystander model. Spectators may just be passing through a location during the performance. Flash mobs are the best example of this model.



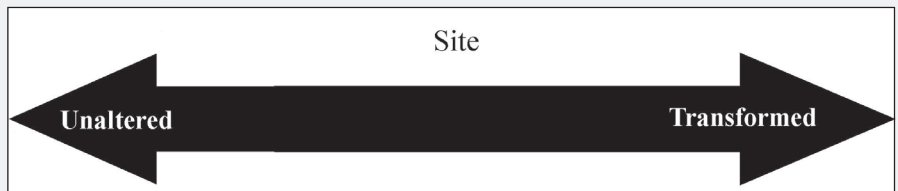
The Environment Continuum

Ranges from Fixed To Mobile/Nomadic. Fixed sites are located in one, unchanging space. Mobile/nomadic sites can move by themselves (car plays, trolley plays) or the audience can move from site to site.



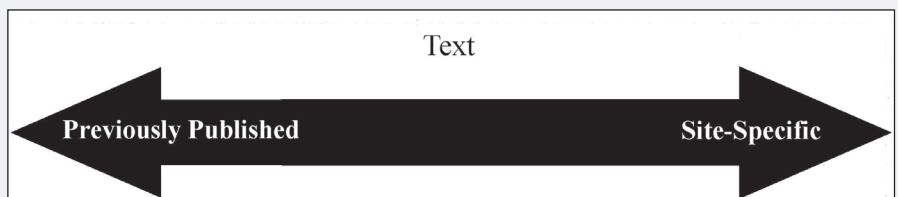
The Site Continuum

Ranges from Unaltered To Transformed. Transformed sites are usually altered in some way to mimic theatres (identifiable spaces for actors and spectators) while unaltered sites make no attempt to create a theatre space: there are no seats and no separated and distinct spaces for performers or audience members.



The Text Continuum

Ranges from Previously Published To Site-Specific. It's possible to perform a conventional, published play in an unconventional, non-theatrical space. (Hamlet has been performed in castles, graveyards and, in 2010, on Alcatraz Island.) At the other end of the spectrum, many, if not most, site-specific texts cannot be separated from the site itself and would not make sense if performed elsewhere.



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the buzz that was being generated around town. As soon as people couldn't get in, it became more popular. Why the reaction? The plays were new, interesting, engaging, short, and it was difficult to get a ticket. By day two, we had lines outside the bank 45 minutes before each performance.

We did a post-mortem afterwards and it soon became apparent that the productions were one of the solid hits of the festival. The city not only wanted repeat performances a year later, but also was interested in sponsoring a new one as well.

Challenges on the Road

For 2007's Festiv-ALL Charleston, we decided to go mobile. Utilizing one of two Charleston's trolley buses, we invited playwrights to submit plays that would be performed during the complete festival bus route beginning at the Charleston Town Center Mall, heading east toward the Capitol, through downtown, and back to the mall. We could only seat about 22 people on the trolley (including actors and the driver) and we had to time out the route in order to give guidelines to prospective playwrights. We estimated the journey to be about 20 minutes. The play that was chosen was a film noir parody and, again, was extremely

David Wohl



William Reardon and Jim Stacy appear in *A Streetcar Named Despair* by Gabriele Wohl, produced by Charleston Stage Company and performed on Kanawha Valley Regional Transport Authority's trolley car in Charleston, WV, in 2007.



popular. All advance tickets were sold out within hours and we had lines of people hoping for no-shows.

After the second summer of our location plays, it became clear that they had become a popular fixture of Festiv-ALL. From 2008 until this past summer, CSC and Festiv-ALL Charleston produced six additional site-specific plays – on a pedestrian walkway, in a coffee shop, in a hair salon, on a riverboat, in the county library, and in a former garage now used as an art gallery. Although each play was different stylistically, all were performed in nontheatrical spaces and drew large audiences.

A Growth Area or a Gimmick?

The popularity and frequency of site-specific theatre seems to be growing rapidly. Some of the work continues to be fairly experimental and edgy while other productions are unabashedly commercial.

In December 2011, Soho Repertory Theatre in New York City produced the off-off Broadway premiere of David Adjmi's play *Elective Affinities*, starring the veteran stage actress and four-time Tony

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Are You Ready to Create a Site-Specific Production?

Producing site-specific theatre means giving up a certain amount of control over the theatrical environment. The site selected for the performance may not have an actual stage (or if it does, the space may be extremely limited). In addition, it may not have lighting and sound capabilities, masking, electrical outlets, bathrooms, a box office area or any kind of "backstage."

Things to consider in your planning:

The Text: Can the play be separated from the site? Are you producing a conventional play in an unconventional site or creating a text will be written/scripted specifically for a specifically identified, non-theatrical space?

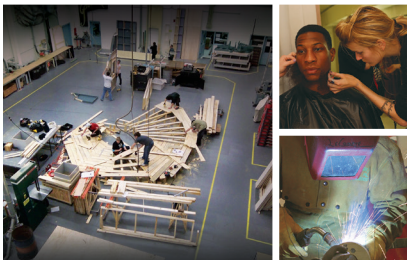
The Audience: Is this an exclusive event (invited audience, ticketed, publicized in advance) or inclusive (flash mob events are "planned" spontaneity to a certain degree)? Will the audience be accidental bystanders or have they come specifically to see a performance?

The Actors: Performing in a site-specific production can be very different than acting in a traditional play in a conventional theatre. The actors need to be flexible and cognizant of the specific characteristics of the site and the audience/performer spatial relationship.

The Site: Is it a fixed site or movable (car plays, walking tours, etc.?) Do you need to transform the site in some way to accommodate the performance or is it unaltered and fixed? Do you need seating or do the spectators stand?

The Elements of Production: How much control do you have (or need) over acoustics? Lighting? Scenic elements? Does the site accommodate (or need to accommodate) dressing room space? Sound effects or music? Do you need volunteer ushers or helpers? Do you need a box office?

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Award winner Zoe Caldwell. Only 30 “invitations” were sent to prospective ticket buyers for each performance – all held in an undisclosed Upper East Side apartment in Manhattan – and the show was reviewed by Ben Brantley, the first-string drama critic of *The New York Times*.

Still, some critics have cried, “Enough, give me a nice comfortable seat in a darkened, air-conditioned theatre!” One would hope that experiencing theatre in a non-theatre space would be special or at least more exciting than “conventional” theatre. However, this is not always the case.

Are site-specific theatre artists breaking down barriers and boundaries? Or is the increase in this type of work just one more gimmick to draw audiences? And, is there anything wrong with a gimmick if it can attract new audiences and provide interesting opportunities for theatre artists? Certainly, the more this type of work is produced, the more it will be written about, reviewed, critiqued and analyzed.

Challenges and Opportunities

Our experience with the genre at Charleston Stage Company was extremely positive. We found that the flexibility afforded by the relatively unstructured nature of the form encouraged a great deal of collaboration. Because of the nature of the setting, audience members tend to



Greg and Verena Sava

Andrea Perkins, Russell Hicks, and Terry Terpening appear in The Gallery Play by Jan Hoke at the Good News Mountaineer Garage Art Gallery in Charleston, WV, in a 2013 presentation by Charleston Stage Company.

be very involved with the performance. Rand Harmon, producer of the Louisville elevator plays, noted that, “when the audience is asked to engage with a dramatic presentation while also engaging in a conventional activity like riding in a functioning elevator, the aesthetic distance from the dramatic presentation slides to extremely intimate. It becomes difficult to differentiate between watching and being involved and as such the psychological and aesthetic distance they experience gets compressed and distorted, and possibly even gets erased.”

All of the selected playwrights we worked with were impressed with the production process and the final product. The challenges for actors and directors were multifaceted and often difficult and almost always inspired creative solutions.

Before theatre groups do consider site-specific productions, they should probably ask some basic questions: “Why do you want to do it?” And: “What’s the point?” There is really no need to perform in a nontheatrical setting if the site is *not* integral to the production. We’ve all had the experience of performing in bad theatrical spaces – why perform in an inferior non-theatrical space?

Harmon says his biggest advice for theatre companies considering site-based



Gabriele Wohl

This pedestrian walkway at the corner of Lee and Dickinson Streets in Charleston, WV was the site of Charleston Stage Company’s 2009 site-specific play, The Crossing.

work is to “resist doing so just for the novelty value.” He maintains that, “Without a compelling experiential component, one where the audience interfaces in unexpected and visceral ways with the contextual and empirical resonances of the site, they will lose interest.... The really successful site-based theatre productions

are the ones that develop an immersive experience for the audience.” ■



David Wohl is dean of the College of Visual and Performing Arts at Winthrop University and a past President of SETC. He served as artistic director of the Charleston (WV) State Company for 19 years.

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