Site-specific Performance: Place, Memory and the Creative Agency of the Spectator

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My major research interest for some years past has been the role of spatial factors in the process of making, communicating and experiencing meaning in the theatre. Central to this research has been the realisation that all the most important features of the theatrical experience function only by virtue of the fact that performers and spectators are physically present together in a given place for the duration of the performance. This preoccupation with the complex inter-relations between space, place and performance has led me, in recent years, to become increasingly fascinated by what happens when performance occurs in real places within the civic space of the community, rather than in the theatre buildings designated and reserved by the community for this activity.[1]

Of course theatres are themselves real places, and they are usually located in public space, and the design of the theatre building and its location are key factors in the performance experience for spectators and practitioners alike. In all theatre, the reality of the performance space impacts on the fictions that are enacted there, and in return these fictions transform the reality of the space, but theatres are buildings where this transformation is unremarkable. Or, rather, they are the places that our society has set aside where the magic can be wrought without risk of disruption to other public places and the activities they house. The history of theatre since the construction and licensing of the first public playhouses in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries can be seen as a process of institutionalisation, and this

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institutionalisation of the theatre can itself be seen, among other things, as a means of controlling the potentially destablising effects that may occur if fiction is allowed to contaminate the real. Over the past 30 years or so, in many countries including Australia, there has been a significant tendency for more and more performance activity to take place outside designated theatre buildings. Street theatre, happenings, large scale performances, performances in domestic spaces, site-based and site-specific performance are some of the genres of performance that have evolved over this period.

In the work I have been doing on site-based performance, I have been particularly struck by the ways in which such performance impacts on place—activating memories, enabling places to tell a variety of stories, and permitting the past to resonate in the present; and by the even more interesting ways in which places impact on performance—enhancing the creative agency of the spectators, who bring their own knowledge and memories of that place (and others like it) to the performance, thus unleashing a dynamic and volatile meaning making process. It is this dynamic process that I want to focus on, because it seems to me that something very significant is going on in relation to the spectator in the move by practitioners to work outside designated theatre spaces.

Baz Kershaw has compared traditional theatre to Biosphere II (that massive glass dome located in the Arizona desert and apparently containing examples of all the major climates on earth, maintained in existence by virtue of the glass dome separating the artificial micro-climates inside from the real desert outside), and his critique turns on the notions of enclosure and separation to which I have been drawing attention. For Kershaw, writing in the year 2000, the first step towards theatre developing a more 'responsive and responsible relation to nature' is for practitioners and spectators to move outside the traditional theatre spaces provided by official culture which, as he sees it, separate and seal theatre off from real life. Furthermore, it is the relation of the spectator to the work that needs to be changed, and he claims

that it is

> ... performative events which use an ethically principled immersive participation, transforming audiences into participants, [that] are most likely to lead to new ecological forms of performance.[2]

Twenty-five years earlier, in *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre contrasted what he called 'dominated' and 'appropriated' space. He defined the former as space transformed and mediated by technology and controlled by the institutions of political and economic power, while 'appropriated' space is natural space, modified to serve the needs and possibilities of a particular group in society. In his analysis he claims that ideally dominated and appropriated space ought to exist in a balanced relationship with each other, but that in contemporary society dominated space has become excessively dominant through the part played by the military, the state and political power. He goes on to say that

> Similar considerations apply to the body and to sexuality. Dominated by overpowering forces, including a variety of brutal techniques and an extreme emphasis on visualisation, the body fragments, abdicates responsibility for itself—in a word, disappropriates itself.[3]

I have found Lefebvre's analysis extremely compelling and, in particular, have often come back to what is almost a throw away line in this chapter:

> Any revolutionary 'project' today, whether utopian or realistic, must, if it is to avoid hopeless banality, make the reappropriation of the body, in association with the reappropriation of space, into a non-negotiable part of its agenda.[4]

This was written in 1974, but the appeal is no less pressing today than then, in fact it is probably more pressing in that the processes of domination are even stronger and more blatant now, assisted by the omnipresent reach of the mass media. Site-based performance is, at its least radical, a move by artists to reject what they perceive to be the dominated space of traditional theatre buildings in favour of found spaces in which new relations between performer and spectator can be explored, where the

spectator gains a new kind of creative agency, and where the place itself acquires a voice. At its most radical, it can even involve intervention into the most dominated of dominated spaces: Lefebvre's example of a dominated space *par excellence* is a motorway system, and there has been a whole current of work in the UK, for example, involving the illegal occupation of motorways for brief but dangerous street parties.[5] Site-based performance is perhaps a small step towards the revolutionary 'project' of reappropriation of the body and space that Henri Lefebvre envisaged, and it is certainly a move in the direction of ecological responsiveness.

In site-based performance, the site becomes the dominant signifier rather than simply being that which contains the performance, as the theatre building does in traditional theatre practice. Site-based performance engages more or less deeply with its chosen site and as a result tends to be drawn into engagement with the social and political issues that seem inseparable from place. Anyone setting out to make a site-based performance must of necessity enter into negotiations with the owners of the site, those who currently occupy it, and those who have control over it: the police, fire brigade, usually the local council or other municipal authorities and, nowadays, insurance companies. The reality of occupation—the people now occupying or inhabiting that place, the traces of people who have inhabited it in the past, the stories of partially erased or contested inhabitations—raises the issue of ownership. Here we have had to discover that there is legal or commercial ownership and there is also moral ownership, and these may be in conflict with each other. The distinction between legal and moral ownership has recently come to the fore in a number of countries in relation to issues concerned with intellectual property and copyright, but in Australia the distinction is even more politically fraught in that it is at the heart of the land rights movement. Ownership brings with it power, authority, rights, boundaries, the policing of boundaries, rights of exclusion, rights of inclusion. Our sense of who we are and other people's sense of who we are is deeply

bound up with where we are, and where we come from, so place is implicated in profound ways with both individual and group identity. It is evident even from this brief rundown that the serious engagement with place necessitated by site-based performance practice is likely to involve engagement with weighty matters which are themselves at the heart of major political conflicts in many parts of the world.

I have talked about site-based and site-specific performance, and I should clarify what I mean by this distinction. In reflecting on the site-based work I have seen over the past fifteen years or so, I suggest that the work can be described as falling into three main categories, only one of which is strictly site-specific. The first category is work that seeks in a non-traditional site certain formal and aesthetic qualities that are needed for a particular production which might be under development well before the site is found. Although it is the work that determines the kind of site that is selected, the relation between site and performance may remain purely formal, which was my experience with Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* performed some years ago in a quarry near Adelaide. The quarry seemed almost incidental to the performance, a physical platform consisting of levels, distances, textures, but in spite of all the effort, expense and discomfort involved in getting there and being there, it was a strangely 'placeless' experience for the spectator. Notwithstanding this example, however, it is evident that at its best there can be in this category of work a kind of symbiosis in the creative process whereby the site ends up marking and defining the work in complex ways.

The second category involves work that emerges from an engagement with community, and hence from the place or places that are central to that community. The dominant relationship is between artist and community, and the involvement with place emerges from that, but the performance is not tied to a specific place and can successfully be taken to other places, notably theatre festivals. Rachael Swain, artistic director of a city based physical theatre group called Stalker and co-founder of the Marrugeku

Company (a collaborative venture between Stalker and indigenous performers from Arnhem Land) proposes the term site-based rather than site-specific performance to describe her own creative process, which involves developing the work in a highly specific place with a view to transporting it to different sites at a later stage.[6]

The third category is site-specific in the strict sense of the word: the work emerges from a particular place and engages with the history and politics of that place, and with the resonance of these in the present. This kind of work cannot travel, it exists only in the site that produced it. Mike Pearson, co-founder of the Welsh company Brith Gof and one of the most persuasive theorists of site-specific performance, insists that the relation between place and performance needs to be defined in this rigorous way. As he puts it:

> Site-specific performances are conceived for, mounted within and conditioned by the particulars of found spaces, existing social situations or locations, both used and disused … They are inseparable from their sites, the only contexts within which they are intelligible. Performance recontextualises such sites: it is the latest occupation of a location at which other occupations—their material traces and histories—are still apparent: site is not just an interesting, and disinterested, backdrop.[7]

Nick Kaye makes a similar point, referring to a controversy that occurred in 1981 when municipal authorities in Manhattan attempted to move a site specific sculpture designed by Richard Serra. He recounts that Serra claimed memorably that 'to move the work is to destroy the work', and Kaye suggests very pertinently that this could serve as the definition of site specific art.[8] These quotations emphasise the centrality of the relation between place and performance, and the role of place itself in the meaning making process triggered by the performance. In relation to these definitions, it is evident that only my final category can be properly termed site-specific, which is why I have adopted Rachael Swain's suggestion of the term site-based to indicate the broader range of pertinent relationships that can exist between

place and performance.

Of course these categories are not completely distinct and in a given work there are often interesting slippages from one to another. A site chosen for its formal qualities can begin insistently to tell its own story (as I shall show in relation to Tess de Quincey and Stuart Lynch's performance entitled *Segments from an Inferno* at the Hyde Park Barracks; here the ostensible subject matter derived from Dante's *Inferno* but it was displaced for me by the stories that emerged from the past history of that place). It can also happen that a place chosen as a container works so strongly that it overwhelms the performance. I am thinking here, for example, of an installation/performance around Heiner Müller's *Medea*, put on in a disused factory in Pyrmont by Gail Rothschild and Ulla Neuerburg in 1994: even a text as strong as Müller's *Medea* seemed ineffectual in that cavernous, dark place, littered with the detritus of abandoned machinery, and the dominant experience for me as spectator was of the place itself.

It will be noted that the factor that has determined my categorisation relates to the work process that produces the performance. Another very productive set of categories is proposed by Fiona Wilkie, who establishes a continuum of practices relating performance to place. She suggests the following terms: in-theatre-building, outside-theatre, site-sympathetic, site-generic, and site-specific.[9] There are clear connections between her notions of site-sympathetic, site-generic and site-specific and the three categories I have proposed, which is interesting in view of the fact that her approach is via the performance itself in its relation to its chosen site, whereas mine comes from the other end, via the creative process that generated the work.

In my remarks so far I have referred frequently to 'space' and 'place' as well as to 'site'. These terms require some commentary as they are used with rather different emphases in writings emanating from disciplines such as geography, anthropology, cultural studies and philosophy. Doreen Massey, in stressing that space and place are 'incredibly mobile' concepts, says that the kind of questions the researcher is asking will determine their

'take' on the concepts. The opening sentence of her book, *Space, Place and Gender*, contains a salutary warning:

> The terms space and place have long histories and bear with them a multiplicity of meanings and connotations which reverberate with other debates and many aspects of life.[10]

In site-based performance, artists work with the reality of spaces and places and, as I have begun to show, are thereby drawn into an engagement with the meanings and connotations and reverberations that seem inseparable from place.

The dictionary definition of site is 'the place or position occupied by some specified thing' (OED), and it can also indicate an area that has been set aside for some specific purpose in the future or one that has served a specific purpose in the past. In popular usage, a site is not only a place occupied by a specified thing, it can also be a place where a specific event occurred (we speak of 'a bomb site' to indicate the place where a bomb has exploded, and in this phrase it is the event of the explosion that is foregrounded rather than the building that was destroyed by it). The element of prospectivity can also be involved in the connection between event and site (for instance, we might speak of 'the site for the next Olympic Games'). In Edward Casey's brilliant phenomenological studies of place and memory, he uses the term site to refer to mere position or location; for him, sites are 'manipulable positions in empty space', and the term comes to carry a very negative charge as part of his critique of Cartesian and modernist perceptions of the dominance of space over place:

> The triumph of site over place has continued from the Cartesian epoch until the present day. This triumph has crucial consequences for the memory of place. As essentially empty (its vacuity is expressed in a phrase like 'building site'), a site lacks the variegations or 'obtrusions' that aid in remembering unsited places. A site possesses no points of attachment onto which to hang our memories, much less to retrieve them.[11]

Leaving aside the bizarre notion of an 'unsited place', for surely all places must be located somewhere, it seems that Casey has,

for the purposes of his larger argument, emptied the term 'site' of the meanings that, as I have just indicated, have accumulated around it through popular usage. He does take an example of popular usage to support his choice, the building site, but I would question his sense of it as 'essentially empty'. The term has no connotations of emptiness for me (that would be a vacant lot) but is, rather, pregnant with the potentiality of the building to come or the activity of the workers. It is clear that the performance practitioners who refer to their work as 'site-based' are not using Casey's narrow definition of the term but something closer to the accumulation of popular usage. The common factor in this accumulation, as I see it, is the notion of intentionality. Site is not the opposite of place, it is rather a particular kind of place, a place with a purpose. Furthermore, through the working of intentionality, sites can reach back into time past or forward into time future as well as creating a nexus between locations, material traces such as buildings, and events or happenings, and all of this can be activated in site-based performance.

In saying, as I have done, that theatres are real places located in the civic space of the community, I am evidently making a distinction between space and place, and in commonsense terms, this distinction is well understood: space is taken to be a more general concept, and place a particular location within it. Indeed, the English language acknowledges the connection between the two and seems to permit a certain slippage between them insofar as it provides a single adjective, 'spatial', which must serve as descriptor for both space and place. The neologism 'placial' is used by some phenomenologists but this is when, like Edward Casey, they have already defined place in oppositional terms in relation to space and therefore cannot use the same adjective for the two nouns. For Edward Casey, 'to be in the world, to be situated at all, is to be in place' and he argues powerfully that place must therefore be logically prior to space, that there can be 'no Space without Place'.[12] He thus reverses the received wisdom of three centuries of philosophical and scientific thought, which has conceptualised space as a priori, infinite and empty, and

place as a compartmentalisation of this featureless infinitude. But as he sees it:

> We come to the world—we come into it and keep returning to it—as already placed there. Places are not added to sensations any more than they are imposed on spaces. Both sensations and spaces are themselves emplaced from the very first moment, and at every subsequent moment as well.[13]

The implications of this perception are far-reaching and, in his emphasis on the importance of the body as the means whereby place is experienced and known, extremely pertinent for theorists working in the domain of performance studies. There is, however, a slight problem because, in asserting the primacy of place over space and criticising the way place has been neglected and suppressed, he seems in turn to reduce space to a pure abstraction, and to empty it of any practical analytical force. If everything is place, we still need a term to refer to the larger domains within which individual places are located.

For a geographer like Yi-Fu Tuan, space is a more abstract concept than place, but it is nevertheless not a pure abstraction and, most importantly, it exists in a dialectical relationship to place. For him, space is open and undefined, while place is ordered, shaped, endowed with value, already part of the social. Writing in 1977, he says:

> Enclosed and humanised space is place. Compared to space, place is a calm centre of established values. Human beings require both space and place. Human lives are a dialectical movement between shelter and venture, attachment and freedom. In open space one can become intensely aware of place; and in the solitude of a sheltered place the vastness of space beyond acquires a haunting presence.[14]

There is a suggestion here that space is somehow outside the social, but other geographers, like Doreen Massey, insist that space, too, must be conceived in social terms. We must, she says, think of space

> ... not as some absolute independent dimension, but as constructed out of social relations ... what is at issue is not social phenomena in

space but both social phenomena and space as constituted out of social relations …[15]

In my book *Space in Performance* (1999) I propose a number of inter-related terms in order to explicate the role of spatial factors in theatrical meaning making. Building on the work of French semioticians like Anne Ubersfeld and Patrice Pavis, I distinguish between space and place, reserving the term place for the fictional location of the action ('fictional place') and for the physical location of the performance venue within the social space of the community. Most of the other terms I proposed involve use of the word 'space' (theatre space, performance space, practitioner space, audience space, presentational space, etc).[16] Reflecting on this terminology in the light of my subsequent reading of Edward Casey, I realise that what I was attempting to highlight through my choice of the word 'space' in all these terms is the quality of generality and mutability that is essential to the way theatre works. The term 'space' indicates that the places and relationships in question are in some sense open, and that it is through the work of artists and spectators that they will be particularised, shaped, used and endowed with meaning. My colleague, Lowell Lewis, has drawn attention to a related aspect of space emerging from its use in performance discourse, namely 'the way it underscores the potential for places to be other than they may seem'.[17] This is connected to the mutability and ability to be particularised to which I have just referred, but it also brings to the fore the inter-related roles of the perceivers and the shapers of these places that are other than they seem. It is not simply that space becomes place through the creative agency of actors, set designers, etc. but that the potentiality for otherness is always present, gently or not so gently undermining the stability of the sense of place created at any one time. This happens powerfully enough in traditional theatre buildings to have necessitated the development over the centuries of a range of conventional markers to separate performance from 'reality' and to return the spectators to 'reality' at the end (curtain, lighting cues, applause, curtain calls). When the performance is occurring in a 'real place' rather than a theatre,

and the conventional markers are missing, the stakes are higher, and the risk is greater.

I should like now to present a brief analysis of two pieces of site-based work in order to illustrate what I have been saying about the complex inter-relationship of place and performance, and about the spectator's enhanced role in the meaning making process in this kind of performance. [In the lecture, a video compilation of extracts from the performances was shown but for the purposes of this paper, a short verbal description, emphasising my own spectatorial response, together with some photographs taken from the video recordings, must suffice.] My intention is to give some sense of the places involved, the relationships between people and place that occurred, and the nature of the performances on which I have drawn in reflecting as I am doing.

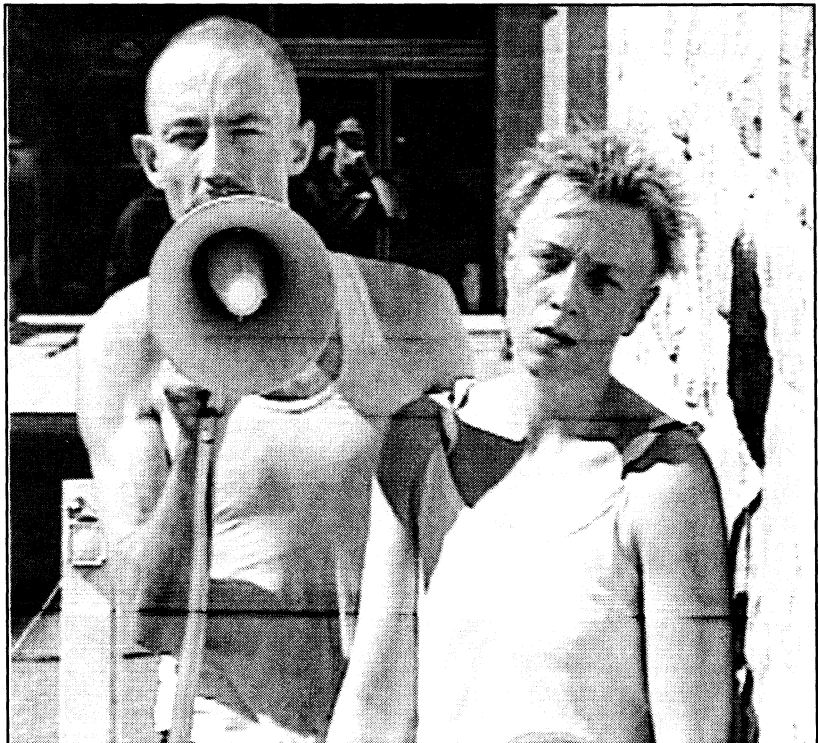## Dante's *Inferno* in Hyde Park Barracks

The first work is a piece based on Dante's *Inferno* that was performed at the Hyde Park Barracks in 1997. That year, Bodyweather performers Tess de Quincey and Stuart Lynch, working with two Danish performers Carmen Olsson and Heike Müller, created a number of works around the idea of Dante's *Inferno*, culminating in a six-hour performance in the parade ground of the Hyde Park Barracks called *Segments from an Inferno*. This work was not, in the first instance, a response to the place where it was ultimately performed. It was developed in the Rex Cramphorn Studio at the University of Sydney, and the university context is also significantly present in the finished work. It was only after the organisers of Sydney Dance Week had invited them to perform the *Inferno* work that they found the site at the Barracks but once they began to research the history of the site, they became more and more fascinated by the parallels that emerged between the work they had evolved and the location they had found for it.

The Barracks was originally built to house male convicts who worked during the day on government-assigned jobs but had to

return to prison conditions at night. After the transportation of convicts had ceased in the early 1840s the building was no longer needed for this purpose and in 1848 it became an Immigration Depot for unaccompanied female migrants, many of them orphans and refugees from the Great Irish Famine of 1845–1848. The young girls and women were housed at the Barracks until they were hired and taken by their employers to other parts of the colony, but from 1862 the top floor of the building became an asylum for sick and dying women who had no family to care for them. Some of these women were former convicts, others were doubtless amongst those who came to Australia to escape starvation in Ireland. The brochure published by the Historic Houses Trust, that now manages the building as a museum, says 'while shiploads of girls came and went, a matron and her small staff ministered to 300 or so destitute residents upstairs', and it was this idea of a cycle that resonated so strongly with the Bodyweather group. They were affected by the idea that the parade ground, where the performance took place, is a site upon which countless women have looked in misery and fear, and they thought that the cyclical progress of the women from starvation to flight to enforced service and finally back to the hospice and death echoed the cyclical structure of hell as Dante has imagined it in *The Inferno*.

The poem was very much present in the performance: on a table set up at the entrance to the parade ground there was a copy of Dante's *Divine Comedy* that had been sawn into three horizontal segments and then bolted to a frame, a barbarous wrenching of the book away from its normal usage that echoed the bodily wrenchings performed over the course of the six hours. In addition to the physical presence of the book, there was a group of students sitting around a long table, engaging in a six-hour 'tutorial' devoted to a detailed exegesis of the poem, and at the other end of the table a relay of readers took it in turns to read the poem aloud, creating a kind of incantatory murmur accompanying the voice of the 'tutor', the occasional sharp cries of the performers, intermittent music played through a speaker placed on the dusty ground, and the background sounds of the city and the other occupants of the

space. There was also a professor, in doctoral gown, sitting on another platform, writing notes about the performance unfolding in front of him. His notes were progressively pegged on a little washing line, where they fluttered in the breeze and were consulted by curious passers by. These elements can be seen to derive from the university context of the rehearsal process but as I watched the performers toiling in the heat and glare of the day, covered in sweat and dust, becoming increasingly exhausted as they counted the time, what came most strongly to mind was not Dante but the experience of the many convicts, refugees and other exiles who, in earlier generations, had inhabited the Barracks, mustered in the parade ground to be counted, and waited for the day of their liberation.

Photograph 1: De Quincey/Lynch, *Segments from an Inferno*, Hyde Park Barracks (images of this performance are taken from the video recording made by Russell Emerson, Department of Performance Studies).

Photograph 2: De Quincey/Lynch *Segments from an Inferno*, Hyde Park Barracks

In one sequence, the four performers walked up and down the parade ground, turning when they reached one end to walk back along the same track in a straight line, but the orderly parade was interrupted as one of them froze and fell to the ground, her body contorted, twisting and turning as it fell, ignored by the other marchers. Then she got up, continued doggedly to walk along her allotted path (Photograph 2), ignoring those who fell on one side or the other of her trajectory, until she froze, twisted, turned and fell again. As this sequence went on, I found myself thinking about the soldiers and convicts who had marched up and down and suffered in that place, and the extent to which the performers might have been affected by what the Prague School semioticians would have called the 'action force' of the place.[18] From then on, in sequence after sequence, what I saw evoked, not Dante, but the history of the Barracks itself. The man and the woman, both dressed grotesquely in shabby black petticoats, reaching agonisingly towards each other, approaching by centimetres with enormous effort and pain but never able to

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touch (Photograph 3); the two women twisting and turning, reaching for the sky, falling to the ground, while another, seemingly in authority, paced around them, constraining them spatially by her movement while barking orders through a megaphone; the woman creeping along the sandstone wall, her face a picture of misery, while the man followed with the megaphone, again barking incomprehensible orders; the man staring intently through the ornate wrought iron gates, seemingly trapped even though today the gates serve a primarily decorative function. In these sequences and many others, I saw surveillance, the arbitrary exercise of power, images of control and constraint, dumb endurance, the longing and yearning of people exiled far from home and loved ones, and the experience of imprisonment, separation and exclusion. The performance began to speak powerfully to me of lives lived in that place, of the experiences endured on that very ground, hearing the sound of that same clock tolling the passing hours.

Photograph 3: De Quincey / Lynch, *Segments from an Inferno*, Hyde Park Barracks.

Talking to Tess de Quincey about their creative process, I was surprised to find how closely the performance was structured around ideas drawn from Dante (the six hour duration of the performance was determined in part by the time it takes to speak the words of the poem). In my memory the strongest images were those emanating from the location: the incongruity of the neatly restored building, the café (located, I now know, in the building that once housed the solitary confinement cells), the passers by, the disruption created by the performance, the pain revealed in the twisting, turning, falling bodies that interrupts the orderly occupation of the place, the sense of unfulfilled yearning in the two dancers reaching out for each other but never connecting. When the clock chimes at the end of the performance, we realise with a slight shock that that same sound resonated through the lives of the prisoners, exiles and the women dying on the upper floor. All of this functioned for me, and lives in my memory still as drawing attention to the brutality and suffering of Australia's convict past that lurks beneath the manicured surface, indelibly marking the places that survive from the early days of European settlement. It was the performance that, as it were, cracked open the place, that permitted the past to surge into the present, and the history of the place became as important as the ostensible subject of the performance.

Segments from an Inferno is an example of the way performance can impact upon place, activating memories and permitting the past to resonate in the present, and of the way the spectator's experience may exceed what the performers intended. My other example, *The Widows*, highlights the disruptive power of performance when it occurs outside the safe framework of a traditional theatre and it again draws attention to the volatile and multifarious processes of spectator reaction.

The Widows in Marrickville

Sidetrack Theatre, a community theatre company based in Marrickville, devised *The Widows* in 1998 as part of a month long programme of performances and exhibitions called *Seeing Through Marrickville Eyes*. Performances of *The Widows* were designed to occur on a daily basis throughout the month, in different locations (in the street, the shopping mall, car parks, etc) and to be modified each time to suit the location and the responses of spectators.

Photograph 4: Sidetrack Theatre, *The Widows*, Marrickville

The four 'widows' (photograph 4), were elaborately and glamorously dressed in black, and were accompanied by a man also dressed in black. The performance required them to walk around in various places in the municipality: parks, carparks, the shopping mall, the central square outside the post office, so that people going about their normal daily business would come across them at unexpected moments. The Fellini-esque figures moved

Photograph 5: Sidetrack Theatre, *The Widows*, Marrickville

slowly and silently in single file along the streets or in the shopping mall (photograph 5); they would sit at a table in a café, not speaking, or dance slowly under the trees in the local park; on some occasions they would sing (mourning songs from different cultures) and, where the occasion arose, perform these as a more obviously choreographed set piece (photograph 6). The group had intended to perform on a regular basis in the shopping mall and had gained permission to do so, but the emotional response they received from the shoppers was so extreme that they were banned by the management from appearing. The manageress of the centre in fact interrupted them in the middle of a song to ask them to leave, and the director, Don Mamouney, said that the first time they performed in the shopping mall some customers were in tears, others complained, someone left his lunch unfinished on the table. One customer said angrily to them 'we're here to shop' and another said 'death shouldn't be here'. When

they walked along the street, people asked insistently 'who are they?', 'what are they doing?', 'why are they here?'.

Photograph 6: Sidetrack Theatre, *The Widows*, Marrickville

On the day the recording was made there were two video operators and a still photographer present. It seems that the presence of the cameras framed the performance, providing a strong indication that it was performance, and this had the effect of defusing the anger and bewilderment, but the video recording nevertheless contains numerous examples of passers-by urgently wanting to know what was going on. On one occasion when the widows sing in the local park, people attending a barbeque gather around in a fairly conventional audience, and applaud at the end of the song. But there is a little girl who, notwithstanding these conventional signs, seems to require further reassurance. She waits until the grown ups have finished their conversation with the stage manager, and then asks what is happening. When she is told 'it is theatre, not real', she says 'Oh, I thought someone had died' and only then skips off happily. *The Widows* is a very telling

example of the power of performance to disturb, disorient and raise questions, and it also suggests the extent to which this power is blunted when performance is kept in its place, in designated theatre buildings. It demonstrates the volatile situations that can be provoked when performance gets out of place, or enters places it is not expected to be, and it provides more evidence of the way spectator response to site-based performance can exceed practitioner expectations.

To draw together the threads of what I have been saying, I should like to stress the fact that theatre is both an art form and a social practice. The aesthetic experience of the performance is always, for good or ill, embedded within a social reality: the individual spectator has to make a journey to get to the performance venue and must experience the performance in company with others, becoming part of a larger social group for the duration of the performance. This hugely important fact is a consequence of the spatial reality of all forms of theatre: *being there* is a major part of the performance experience, the aesthetic is enmeshed in complex ways within the social, the fictional within the real; but in site-based work of the sort I have been describing, the social reality is foregrounded. The shift in emphasis towards the creative agency of the spectator that I see occurring in site-based performance emerges from this foregrounding.

There is a lot to be said about the way ostensibly site-specific works function when uprooted from their originary places and taken on tour, sometimes being diminished by the 'placelessness' that follows (as was my experience with the *Mahabharata* in the quarry outside Adelaide), sometimes finding a new lease of life as they engage with the different history and different memory system of the new places in which they are performed. The point is that these histories and memory systems are what the spectators bring with them and so the meanings that are created are predominantly the responsibility of the spectators. The deep and lasting experience is that of the spectator for whom that familiar place is thereafter marked by the performance.

Forced Entertainment devised a piece called *Nights In This City* in which spectators were taken on a tour bus around places in their own city of Sheffield, but the piece was later reworked in order to perform it in Rotterdam, a city with which Forced Entertainment had no close ties although they obviously sought advice from locals in planning the new piece. It is evident, however, that the experience of the performance for inhabitants of the city would be vastly different from that of the visiting performers. This is also the case with Deborah Warner's *Angel Project* as it was performed at the Perth Festival in 2000. This performance, according to the accounts I have read of it, involved spectators walking around out of the way places in the city, looking for angels (and sometimes catching a glimpse of one or a trace of where one had been). I suggest that what both these works did was to make the spectator/participants see their own city differently, to experience their city in a new way. So, while neither piece was site-specific in Pearson's terms, for both functioned extremely effectively when transplanted to a completely different place, yet the experience of any given spectator was utterly site-specific, and the meanings that emerged were dependent on that spectator's relationship with that place. This is what I mean about creative agency shifting to some extent to the spectator, for in performances like this, the deep engagement with place is part of the spectator's experience rather than the creation of the producers.

Meanings perceived in traditional theatre are, of course, also conditioned by the background, prior knowledge, sensibility, etc. of the individual spectator, but the meaning making process in site-based performance is even more open and volatile. Spectators come to a given place with their own experience and knowledge of its historical and cultural resonance for themselves personally and for their community, and this may differ from that of the performance makers. Furthermore, any community is made up of multiple groups, multiple communities; the public domain contains multiple publics. The performance may, thus, create different meanings for some spectators from those intended, or

the meanings created may significantly exceed the intentions of the performance makers. It is this element of unpredictability, the openness of the meaning making process and the shift of creative agency towards the spectators that gives site-based work its risky edge and make it such a source of fascination.

Place is a powerful stimulus to memory, and places seem to function as a kind of palimpsest, retaining traces of different periods, different occurrences, and the overlapping histories of occupation that characterise modern societies. Site-specific performance, engaging with place, activating memories and ghosts, permitting stories to be told and voices to be heard, is part of a cultural act of recognition of who we are. Telling and re-telling stories of our own lives and of the lives of our forebears, telling the stories official society does not want told, listening to other people's stories, are foundational acts in the creation of personal and social identity. The political consequences of such story telling are profound, as has been demonstrated in Australia with the enquiry into the Stolen Generations, or in South Africa with the Truth and Reconciliation process. Another example can be seen in the recent furore over the Anzac Day commemoration in Gallipoli, which suggests that governments and military authorities are anxiously trying to channel and contain a popular movement, aware that something important seems to be happening and unwilling to let it find its own level.

Finally, I should like to stress the importance of the liveness of live performance and site-based work in the story telling that activates memory and assists in the construction of identity. Artists have traditionally played an important role in helping us to see the place we live in and in making us aware of the past and its resonance in the present. Painting, film, television and photography bring us powerful images of places, and open up discourse about place in sometimes defining ways, but live performance does something else as well. Even in traditional theatre, by virtue of the liveness, spectators have an embodied experience of place, and the fictional places that are evoked in performance are experienced through the material reality of the

presentational space, thus opening up a self-reflexive awareness of the representational process, of the relationship between real and unreal. In site-specific and site-based performance, however, this feature is even more powerfully deployed, for the performative experience of place necessarily involves being there, the performers are present in the place and they have a lived, embodied experience of it. Even more importantly, the spectators have to be there too; they, too, are *in* the place rather than looking *at* it, or consuming it as pure image, and theirs, too, is a lived and embodied experience. This fact emphasises the inadequacy of the term 'spectator', when so much more than looking is being done and when all the senses are in play. The power of performance as an expressive practice, for both performers and spectators alike, is that it produces more lived experience, rather than images or artefacts. And in the society of the simulacrum, the society of spin where countries can be manipulated into going to war on the basis of doctored evidence, it is such lived experience that might, just might, make a difference.

Notes

1 See for example my articles 'Place in the performance experience', *Modern Drama* 46.4 (Winter 2003): 598–613, and 'Body Weather in the Central Desert of Australia: Towards an Ecology of Performance', in Christine Hamon-Siréjols and Anne Surgers, eds *Théâtre: Espace Sonore, Espace Visuel*, Lyon, 2003, pp.231–42.
2 Baz Kershaw, 'The theatrical biosphere and ecologies of performance', *New Theatre Quarterly* (May 2000): 124.
3 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith, Oxford, 1991, p.166.
4 Lefebvre, p.167.
5 Bronislaw Szerszynski, 'Action's Glassy Essence: the Dramatics of Environmental Protest', paper presented at the conference of the Royal Geographical Society in 1998 (www.lancs.ac.uk/users/csec/docs/BS.html).
6 Rachael Swain, unpublished paper delivered at 'Site', a forum organised by The Performance Space, Sydney, in August 2001.
7 Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology*, London, 2001, p.23.

8   Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation*, London, 2000, p.2.

9   Fiona Wilkie, 'Mapping the terrain: a survey of site-specific performance in Britain', *New Theatre Quarterly* (May 2002): 140–60.

10 Doreen Massey, *Space Place and Gender*, Cambridge, 1994, p.1.

11 Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: a Phenomenological Study*, Bloomington, Indiana, 1987 (re-issued 2000), pp.185–86.

12 Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*, Bloomington, Indiana, 1993, pp.xv and 63.

13 Edward S. Casey, 'How to get from space to place in a fairly short stretch of time', in Steven Feld and Keith Basso, eds, *Senses of Place*, Santa Fe, 1996, p.18.

14 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: the Perspective of Experience*, Minneapolis, 1977, p.54.

15 Doreen Massey, *Space Place and Gender*, Cambridge, 1994, p.2.

16 Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*, Ann Arbor, 1999, pp.24–35.

17 Lowell Lewis, unpublished paper delivered at Place and Performance research seminar, Department of Performance Studies, University of Sydney, February 2002.

18 Jiri Veltrusky, 'Man and object in the theater', in Paul L. Garvin, ed., *A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary Structure and Style*, Washington, 1964, p.88.