

**THE REAL DEAL:**  
**Interrogating the Paradoxical Co-existence of**  
**Reality and Construction in Contemporary**  
**Theatre**



Candidate: Daniel Gough  
Principal Supervisor: Mr Sean Mee  
Associate Supervisor: Dr Bree Hadley

Institution: Queensland University of Technology  
Creative Industries Faculty, Drama

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*"Art is not a mirror to hold up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it."*

(Attributed to Brecht and Mayakovsky)

## **1.0 ABSTRACT**

This study investigates how the constituent elements of theatre can be calibrated to disrupt perceptions of reality within the theatre event. The study also sought to characterise the experience for the audience within a the field of the Postdramatic. The study is practice-led, the foundations of which are the creation of a new work that was collaboratively devised in ensemble and finally called *The Reality Event: Suicide*. This work underwent a formative process and then one research cycle during which data was gathered and evaluated in order to inform a final cycle, which was performed for the Anywhere Theatre Festival in Brisbane. The work was informed by the theoretical investigation carried out during the course of this research, and in turn, became the basis of this research. It is through the collaboration of creative practice and the complementary research that a 'System of Calibration' has been devised. This system potentially enables a theatre maker to articulate the organisation of theatre phenomena to disrupt the relationship between construct and reality.

## **i. KEY WORDS**

For cataloguing purposes, below are a series of key words and phrases that feature in this document and are associated with its content:

Audience Experience, Audience Perception, Calibration, Liveness, Performance, Practice Led, Proximity, Real, Reality, Risk, Suicide, Theatre, Theatre Event.



## **ii. STATEMENT OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP**

This work contained in this document has not been previously submitted to meet the requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, the document contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made.

QUT Verified Signature

Signed:

Name:        Daniel Gough .....

Date:         11/07/2016 .....

### **iii. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## 2.0 INTRODUCTION

### 2.1 CONTEXT

A long-held dream of mine was fulfilled as, in the front row of the Berlin Philharmonie, I sat to witness the eponymous Berliner Philharmonic play Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*.

It was, as I expected, perfect. Strangely, as visual an experience as it was aural; not quite what I'd expected from a concert of orchestral music. Both as a group and individually, they told a rich and detailed story, filled with secrets that hid in their uniquely expressive faces. The tale of their lives appeared to me vividly across a backdrop of seasonal imagery. I built characters for each of them and the soloist: the protagonist in this yearlong story of the *Four Seasons*. It was glorious. Each bow rose and fell with perfect synchronicity and the lead violinist told Vivaldi's tale with immaculate and beautiful precision - right up until the moment that he sneezed.

*Ah-choo.*

This simple, split-second eruption of unavoidable human function somehow caused every single person in the auditorium to reappear in the periphery of my mind. The story that danced before me in a luminous projection was immediately vacuumed back into my head with an echoing *CLAP*. It was as though my system needed to reboot and in order to do so, it needed to be turned off first. There was something about the atmosphere in the auditorium that let me know every other person was experiencing something similar.

This inexplicable moment of readjustment to 'real life' lasted only the eight and a half seconds it took for the soloist to sneeze, the orchestra and audience to realize he had, smile and laugh before suddenly getting on with it again. Before I had a chance to revel in the incredulity of the experience, the Philharmonic were playing as though it had never happened and suddenly, I was trying not to crawl out of my skin. The physical sensation of 'dealing' with this event was not unlike having hundreds of balloons popping rapidly inside my body. It was this experience that led me to a theoretical fixation, which I needed to explore: the function and appearance of reality within a performed context. What I learned at the Philharmonie was that reality in performance doesn't merely *happen*. Reality in performance is *experienced* by an audience and has a notably visceral effect.

Elinor Fuchs references a similar process of academic awakening in *The Death of Character*. She calls it, "The mental swoon of postmodernism," where a sudden wave of ontological fascination sets upon you like some kind of disease, both liberating and restrictive all at once (1996, 2). She describes its realization, identifying its origin, "in the breakdown of formerly distinct styles and disciplines, and in the vanishing boundaries between high and popular culture" (1996, 2). From within this distinct orchestral form, to evidence the undeniably weak fabric that separates virtuosity from the everyday and collapse the practice of culture entirely, this breakdown would take the form of a sneeze.

The characteristics of postdramatic theatre, as described by Lehmann in his landmark text, strive towards breaking down performative and everyday worlds by eschewing them of narrative totality and theatrical hierarchies (2006). The construct of orchestral performance doesn't consciously engage these concepts, so no amount of familiarity with postdramatic tools could prepare me for such a rare experience as this; the co-existence of reality and construction. This research is about the creation of a performative environment in which the same experience can be facilitated again. It is motivated by contention that the experience of reality can take place as a part of the constructed theatre event.

## **2.2 LIVENESS: BOOKENDING THE DISCOURSE OF REALITY AND THEATRE**

I feel that contemporary theatre emergent from Western, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century contexts, owes its profound relationship with reality to the notion of liveness, which sets the form apart from film and maintains its agency in contemporaneity. Across the last hundred years there has been an observed evolution of this relationship that has to do with the way that theatre engages liveness. The reign of realism and the establishment of theatre modernism foregrounded a passive relationship between theatre and audience, *during* the act of theatre. Though there are examples of realism that have torn holes in the social fabric of their historical contexts, as a matter of form, realism calls for the rehearsed simulation of reality on stage. In this regard, I would argue that while realism exploits liveness, it does not engage its fullest potential in the moment of theatre's undertaking. On the other hand, the practices of Performance Art serve to oppose modernist practices, depending entirely on the agency of liveness to be complete<sup>1</sup>. In arguing that Performance Art constitutes a kind of theatre (by virtue of its condition as performed), a binary emerges. At one end, theatre practice does not engage the potential

of liveness and is completely repeatable. On the other, theatre engages liveness to its fullest. This section investigates the territory at either end of this binary.

Realism and the establishment of modernism represents the start of a relationship with audiences who sought a social function from theatre<sup>2</sup>; it was important that theatre should *affect* reality. As a leader in theatre practice, Stanislavski's influence (accompanied by writers like Ibsen and Strindberg) instigated a paradigm shift toward Realism, which Benedetti describes as a matter of "asserting the primacy of the human content of theatre over other considerations, of content over form" (1988, 16-17). Stanislavski believed that theatre best served a social function when it was inherently ignorant of its social or political purpose and instead, meaning was coalesced through the thorough and profound integrity with which characters and events were reproduced on stage. These reproductions, however, were highly rehearsed and replicable. Here, theatre began to reinforce the tropes we expect from traditional performance modes today, establishing a standard for distant, still and silent audiences to watch linear narratives with sets, lighting and sound designs.

On the other end of the spectrum resides the practice of *Performance Art*. Later referred to as live art (in the UK), Performance Art came to prominence in the 1960s (Russell 2005, 72), and teeters on the outer edge of what is called 'theatre' or 'performance'. What is fundamental to the practice of live art is that an experience is engaged and 'real' things are encountered as a result of that experience. In a video introduction to these practices, Joshua Sofaer states that Live Art is engaged "when an artist chooses to make work directly in front of the audience in space and time... live art comes into being at the actual moment of encounter between the artists and spectator" (2002). These artists are primarily recognised for the use of "their own awkward stories, their own endurance and spiritual strength" (Russell 2005, 72), often meaning that their physical bodies are heavily implicated in and by the exercise. In their paper on live art and risk, Hadley, Trace and Winter state that "what is distinctive ... is its emphasis on staging risky actions in public spaces and places" (2010, 139). It is not uncommon that live artists use their bodies as temporal constituents of the 'real' world to carry out actions or place themselves in situations where 'real' things happen as a result of organised scenarios. This usually results in some kind of biological or physical inevitability; something that cannot be 'enacted'. In these instances, it can be discerned that Live Art is named thus because of its dependence on the unity of performer and audience within space and time to achieve artistic significance.



It may be assumed that theatre's relationship with reality is one that is subject to the engagement of the potential of liveness<sup>3</sup>. On one end of the spectrum, liveness is only engaged in the sense that action occurs live. In this case, liveness is not as important as repeatability. At the other binary, liveness is engaged as the central agent of a work, where singularity is of the utmost importance. In the space between these two forms of practice, theatre has been bent, stretched and broken to reinvent audience engagement and confuse the theatrical hierarchies that constitute 'drama'.

### **2.3 MY PRACTICE**

The following is a subjective review of the qualities of my work. It is from this subjective standpoint that I have attempted to discuss my theatre practice in terms of the spectrum described above. Since 2011, I have produced theatre work primarily in academic and independent contexts and predominantly (but not exclusively) in unconventional performance spaces.

My works have been consistently violent with fluid text and highly political or controversial content. Some of these include; *This That Nothing* (2010, Woodward Theatre; 2012 La Boite Roundhouse) a violent work of über-realism that sees a group of 20-somethings who exist only in a room where time doesn't pass; *Mallum* (2013, Northshore Shed), in which the 'three monkeys' occupy a battle arena to engage games of wit and aggression and; *Monster* (2014, Blackwall Studios; 2015, Revolt Studios), the story of a 'transgender' person who slowly undresses themselves. In these works, audience are exposed to realistic violence (beatings, rape) and gory content (singing and dancing in a blood bath). The visceral qualities of my practice have caused me to realise that audiences develop a heightened awareness of performers as everyday people when they appear to be at risk. This awareness causes audiences to urgently challenge the perceived boundaries that separate audience and performance. Audiences are seemingly cornered into acknowledging that performers are also people whose bodies cooperate with the limitations of our physical world. As a practitioner, my fascination has become how to engage audiences with this truth as a matter of uncertainty. On the spectrum established in the section above, I feel that my practice occupies a position that exploits both a knowledge and understanding of liveness that can inspire *uncertainty* about the degree to which a work is constructed.

My practice is situated within the dissolution of theatrical hierarchies that emerge to form the Postdramatic Paradigm (Lehmann, 2006). The purpose of this dissolution is to ensure the openness of an audience's perception to a broader landscape of meanings, where in fact, meaning-making is postponed, "to store the sensory impressions with 'evenly hovering attention'" (Lehmann 2006, 87). Lehmann attests that Postdramatic theatre sees the unison of the 'real' world and the world of aesthetic organisation. Here, interpretations and reinventions of human experience are constructed as theatre to unfold within and around the audience (Lehmann 2006, 17). The give and take of the everyday and the performed has advanced to a point where the give and take itself has become the subject of the theatre. As such, Postdramatic theatre is concerned with ways to disarm performance and audience alike to re-invent their relationship. The work that I make draws on the tools and strategies that inform Postdramatic practice.

The Postdramatic tools of simultaneity (Lehmann 2006, 87), hypernaturalism and the use of event and situation are used in my practice to create environments that ensure a multiplicity of perceptions and emphasise the importance of audience experience. The principles of simultaneity determined by Lehmann suggest that, "the concentration on one particular aspect [of performance] makes the clear registration of another impossible" (2006, 88). I have paired this practice with hypernaturalism to replicate everyday environments in which overlapping speech and action inhabit performed space. The Postdramatic notion of hypernaturalism, however, places an emphasis on 'that which [has] been repressed by 'respectable society'" (2006, 117), which I have embraced to facilitate gritty and often violence scenarios through the lens of a seemingly non-theatrical, everyday environment. Engaging event and situation merely aids in this process, insisting that actions "find their fulfilment in the very moment they happen..." (Lehmann 2006, 104). In these environments, potential experiences and meanings are plural, but necessarily, not all are accessible.

Further, I have become fascinated by the capacity for theatre to facilitate action that cannot be identified as belonging to the world of the theatre piece or the world of the audience. Incidentally, we understand that performers, even when they aren't performing, lead lives that operate according to the same everyday rules as our own. By this, we are led to compare performers with ourselves. We measure the degree to which performance has been engaged by interpreting how the rules of the everyday have been rewritten. In the face of virtuosity, we ask, 'could I remember that many lines?' or 'does my body bend that way?' It is with an acceptance of these rules that audiences then

engage and forget the everyday world that supports their existence. As such, audiences are fascinated when performers (particularly professionals) make mistakes. Such instances invite the rules of the audience's everyday world to become evidenced in a constructed environment.

I am motivated, through my own practice, to understand how to engage this fascination as a matter of uncertainty. My existing works have clarified that audiences become highly active during moments of risk, when the predominance of either theatre or everyday rules is unclear. I remember that in one particular performance I had directed, titled *This That Nothing* (2011, La Boite Roundhouse), a female character is asked to thread a length of rope through her underwear and out the other side. The rope was then pulled very hard and fast from the front, freshly coated in blood. The audience burst into cries and chatter that were not calmed for over 60 seconds (as per a video recording of the event). Subsequently questions like 'is she okay?' and 'how was it done?' suggested to me that there was, in the moment, some sincere confusion about whether the rules of the theatre world had been abandoned. The liveness of the action meant that its undertaking could not be reconciled as a matter of whose 'rules' were being followed – the audience was asked to either place their trust in the safety of the theatre's rules or confront the possibility that everyday rules meant that the performer had been hurt.

The Postdramatic paradigm is the first to embrace disruptions to a theatrical 'diegesis' with events of the real (Lehmann 2006, 99-100) such as the one perceived above. Lehmann describes that the irruption of the real generates an "*aesthetics of undecidability* concerning the basic means of theatre" (100). He continues characterising reality's irruption, saying "...the main point is not the assertion of the real as such ... but the unsettling that occurs through the *undecidability* whether one is dealing with reality or fiction; the theatrical effect and the effect on consciousness both emanate from this ambiguity" (2006, 101). For Lehmann, the importance of engaging reality in and through theatre practice is that its self reflexive use, "allows us to to contemplate the value, the inner necessity and the significance of the extra-aesthetic *in* the aesthetic and thus the displacement of the concept of the latter" (2006, 103).

A potential extension to Lehmann's discussion on the irruption of the real is identified here. It responds to a lack of clarity surrounding its creation in theatre practice. Lehmann states conclusively that,

“The questions of where exactly the moveable border between ‘theatre’ and everyday reality runs in the course of a performance appears often enough as a *problem* and thus an object of theatrical design in postdramatic theatre – it is far from being a known factor secured by the definition of theatre” (2006, 104).

It is through this research that I seek to pin down the elements of theatrical design that contribute to a definition of theatre in which the real is perceived as an instrumental part of its undertaking. As demonstrated above, I have identified instances within my practice where the real has irrupted in audience perception. Evidently, my practice is in need of a system through which such occurrences can be observed and measured for both retrospective and prospective application to practice. Within practice, I am concerned with gauging the configuration of circumstances that lead to perceived intersections of what is commonly accepted as real and what is commonly accepted as constructed. Such a system should not be as concerned with what literally occupies the stage as it is with the form that is engaged and the way it situates space, performers and audience around each other.

It is through the creation of this system that I seek to answer the following questions:

**How can the theatre maker manipulate the constituent elements of the theatre event in order to cause an intersection of the real and the constructed?**

**How is an audience’s experience of this occurrence characterised?**

## **2.4 KEY TERMS**

**REALITY:** For the purposes of this research, reality is that which occurs in the world naturally, without or despite human intervention. The unfolding of such occurrences is accepted as having some degree of significance to individuals and their passage through time. The ‘natural world’, which constitutes reality, also informs the limitations of human actions by defining what is and is not possible within the realms of the social. Natural occurrences also take place within the body as biological, sensate or resultant of impulse and are, by this definition, ‘real’. In most circumstances, people widely (without any conscious effort) recognise their existence as transpiring within a commonly inhabited

spatiotemporal world that is shared by one's own consciousness and that of others. Husserl affirms this, writing, "in the different ways of of sensory perception, corporeal things somehow spatially distributed are *for me simply there*" (51, 2012).

**CONSTRUCTION:** Construction is all that is intended toward the *representation* of a spatiotemporal world. These are actions and objects that people choose to interact with, that bear no significance or consequence to everyday spatiotemporal existence. Constructed actions and environments can be reproduced in some capacity, whether through the replication of their material qualities or the re-implementation of the frameworks that support them. Language, written forms, film, theatre and all the subsequently associated practices may be widely considered constructions, as with all the social behaviors of humans.

**THEATRE:** This enquiry takes its definition of theatre from Brooke's famous statement, "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (1925, 9). In this research, theatre is manifested through the conscious organization of performers, audience members and space. This definition positions the research enquiry to engage with any organization of these elements as though it were a form of theatre. With this in mind, it is understood that there are distinctions to be made between forms using these elements that are not 'theatre' per se, for example, music events, live/performance art and sporting events. Though examples of these transactions between performer, space and audience have been used in this research, their distinction from theatre is wholly acknowledged. It is generally considered that theatre conducts some kind of thematic, narrative or artistic exploration and engages liveness. Synonymous terms like 'theatre event' and 'performance' are also used in this document.

## 2.5 DOCUMENT OUTLINE

**CHAPTER THREE:** *Methodology* identifies and describes the practice-led strategies that have been deployed in the undertaking of this research. It discusses the framework

deployed for the analysis of existing theatre work to identify useful theatre making practices. The implementation of these practices is discussed as belonging to cycles of action through which they are tested for efficacy. Practices of data collection and analysis are also outlined.

**CHAPTER FOUR:** *Literature and Contextual Review* engages methodological tools and frameworks in order to analyse examples of existing theatre practice. Each analysis is concluded with a set of practices and principles to implement in my own practice.

**CHAPTER FIVE:** *Formative Process and First Creative Cycle* discusses the creative element of this project, an original work called *The Suicide Show*. It outlines the implementation of practices identified in the previous chapter to create the work and changes made to it between iterations. Outcomes of the first cycle are detailed in tandem with data gathered from audiences.

**CHAPTER SIX:** *Final Creative Cycle* details the presentation of the final action cycle, renamed *The Reality Event: Suicide*. It relays the changes made to the work, discussing how the notions identified in the previous cycle were accommodated.

**CHAPTER SEVEN:** *Findings* articulates the findings of this research project. It makes clarifies the principles and practices that underpin the organization of the theatre event into one where construction and reality are perceived to exist concurrently. It also characterizes the experience of audiences who encounter such work.

## 3.0 METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 APPROACH TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This is a practice-led investigation that seeks to answer two questions. The first question concerns a theatre work and the second concerns the audience's response to it. A Phenomenological framework was employed for positioning the researcher to respond to each question effectively.

The first question is:

*How can the theatre maker manipulate the constituent elements of the theatre event in order to cause an intersection of the real and the constructed?*

A Phenomenological lens was employed by the research (see section 3.3) to observe practice methods and principles of practice utilised in relevant examples of performance work. This was carried out with the aid of video recordings of performances, academic texts and journal articles, reviews and personal attendance at performance works. Practice methods and practice principles were identified and then repurposed to create an original work that would lead the research enquiry: *The Suicide Show*.

Audiences were invited to view the work in order to generate data about a) the efficacy of the practice and b) their experience. This data was captured using focus groups. The data was used to inform a response to the first research question and prepare a final action cycle for examination. The data was also used to inform a response to the second question:

*How is an audience's experience of this occurrence characterised?*

Following the period of data collection, a second framework was emergent. Frame Theory gave way to a 'system of calibration' that enabled the researcher to most effectively group sets of data and record, measure and predict the outcomes of each action cycle. It was using this tool that the final action cycle, *The Reality Event: Suicide*, was made.

### 3.2 PRACTICE LED RESEARCH:

This research has been guided primarily by practice, specifically, the creation and presentation of a performance work called *The Suicide Show*. The practice itself emerged as immersive, providing audiences with an element of control over the work. The emergent positioning of viewers as audience-participants distinguishes the practice as experimental; there was never an instance in which the outcome of the performances were certain. In his paper, *Bewildering Behaviour: Practice as Research for Audiences and Other Creators of Immersive Performance*, Robert Walton qualifies how “open and relational immersive works” operate to generate findings. He does so by describing the relationship shared by a researcher, audience and performance work where all three constituents are able to embody each other’s roles. I have adopted his perspective:

“... it is necessary to examine open and relational immersive works from a [practice as research] perspective twice: once to understand the artist-researcher’s work in the construction of the event of encountering the artwork, and then again to understand the experience of the audience-participant, positioned as researcher, who makes the work happen and imbues it with meaning” (2014, 124).

Walton goes on to articulate how what is presented as research is not final, but instead the framework of an experiment that is only completed and important as a result of participatory engagement (ibid). He concludes that the researcher engages practice in “a form that does not present complete ‘truths’ as findings, but gives rise to findings that the individual will complete as lived ‘truth’ realities by means of sensory emplacement” (ibid.)

I am also adopting Fels’ perspective on practice-led research. In her paper on data collection through performative inquiry, she states,

“Performative inquiry calls our attention to those moments that invite us to pause and reflect on the pedagogical significance of such moments for our work, for our relationships with others, for who we are in the world. Performative inquiry does not provide a method nor steps to follow, but rather offers researchers and educators a way of inquiring into what matters as we engage in



drama or theatre activities...” (2012, 51).

This last statement is particularly reflected in this research. As the practice leading the enquiry is immersive and experimental, it has sought to incorporate what is seen to matter as it emerges, though it is sometimes unpredicted.

### **3.2.1 ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER WITHIN CREATIVE PRACTICE**

In his paper on the subject, Pelias describes that “[p]erformative inquiry cannot be accomplished from an observational stance; it demands participation” (2008, 187). This has been true of my role as facilitator of *The Suicide Show*. Though I led the creative process, content was generated through a collaborative approach. In Gray’s paper on practice-led research she states that with collaborative projects, creative participants are “self-observer[s] through reflection on action and in action” (1998, 13). In being so, the creative team and myself are positioned always to question practices and processes even while they were underway, enacting changes with either immediacy or deference.

### **3.2.2 PROJECT DESIGN**

Conducting this research involved a formative process and two action cycles. The formative process tested the creative practice to see if it effectively responded to the first question and would generate significant data. The first cycle responded to unofficial feedback and was presented to audience participants for subsequent data collection (through focus groups). A final cycle was then developed, responding to data gathered in the previous cycle to be presented for a public audience and examination.

## **3.3 ENGAGING A PHENOMENOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

Phenomenology has, in this research, been deployed as a framework through which to examine the construction of a theatre work. In this research it provides a way of thinking about the constituent elements of the theatre work as a matter or temporal organisation. That is, the way that ‘things’ have been arranged to create a work of theatre that, in this case, confuses what is real and what is constructed. Husserlian phenomenology describes that, generally speaking, people perceive their relationship to reality as an experience of temporality. Husserl asserts summarily,

“I find continually present and standing over against me the one spatio-temporal fact-world to which I myself belong, as do all other [people] found in it and

related in the same way to it. This “fact-world”, as the word already tells us, I find to be out there, and also take it just as it gives itself to me as something that exists out there.” (2012, 55-56).

Further, the theory of Phenomenology suggests that we perpetually intend our awareness of the spatio-temporal world toward certain ideas and principles. In this way, “...phenomenology provides the meaning of experience in a complex web of significations for subjectivity itself...” (Haas 2003, 73). In effect, Phenomenology determines that “objects are constituted as correlates of consciousness” (Heidegger in Haas 2003, 74) and meaning is made on the basis of our understanding of their impact. Consequently, this research methodology is positioned to consider an understanding of the notions within Phenomenology that pertain to temporal organisations. It follows that the method engaged in this project is one that allows me to identify and evaluate the temporal composition of existing theatre works. Such an evaluation would shed light on the practices engaged in existing theatrical discourse to inform the creation of an original work. I have devised a framework for the analysis of theatre practice that identifies the key temporal constituents of theatre and a system of questions for considering they way they have been organised to achieve significance.

### **3.3.1 IDENTIFYING PRACTICE METHODS IN EXISTING THEATRE WORK**

In order to determine practice methods to later inform a creative product, there are three key constituents of theatre that this analytical framework sought to interrogate:

- 1) The predominant and any secondary positioning of the audience
- 2) The kind of space employed and its design
- 3) The kind of action and text presented by performers

In the Literature and Contextual Review, these key constituents are investigated with particular reference to four performance works that have emerged from a Western, 21<sup>st</sup> Century context, noted for destabilising the distinction between what is real and what is constructed.

Below is the framework designed for this research which is respondent to the key constituents of theatre which I feel are in need of interrogation:

*Predominant positioning of the audience:*

- What is the literal distance between the audience and performers?
- Are the audience seated, standing or roaming?
- How does the audience move through the space?
- What are they invited to touch or interact with?
- Is this arrangement traditional or unconventional?

*Secondary positioning of the audience:*

- Are there any changes or variations to the predominant positioning of the audience?
- Are some audience members positioned differently to the majority of the audience?

*Space employed and its design:*

- Is the performance space a traditional theatre space?
- What parts of the performance space have been built to facilitate the performance?
- What parts of the space have been used by the performance that are natural to it?
- Does the performance engage any traditional theatre design practices such as lighting, set-pieces or variations thereof?

*The kind of action and text that is presented:*

- Is the action virtuosic or everyday? What about the action makes it one or the other?
- What are the virtuosic or everyday actions?
- What sequences of movement are engaged, if any?
- What text is spoken and how?
- Does the action adhere to recognised theatre forms and styles?
- Is the action rehearsed?
- What else constitutes the 'content' of the performance?

### **3.4 EMERGENT FRAMEWORK: FRAME THEORY**

Irving Goffman's Frame Analysis addresses the two primary frameworks - social and natural - that govern the way that people organise their experience of the world (1986, 21). These are oppositional concepts that have been reconsidered and repurposed in this research to form a binary system that identifies 'reality' and 'construction' as frameworks that can be manipulated through theatre.

Goffman describes a social framework as one that "provides background understanding for events that incorporate ... the controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency, the

chief one being the human being” (1986, 22). Social frameworks function as a guide for existing and behaving in society. Acknowledging social frameworks in this way positions me to consider the frameworks audiences engage with when undergoing a theatrical experience. The theatre transaction is one that thrives on coercive guidance, causing the audience to think and feel according to what is presented. The research is positioned by frame analysis to decipher the qualities of a ‘theatre-going’ frame.

On the other hand, natural frameworks “identify occurrences seen as undirected ... unguided, ‘purely physical’” (ibid). Under a natural framework, it is determined that no part of an action or occurrence is taking place *wilfully* (ibid). Events that take place within natural frameworks are ones that are involuntary and cannot be controlled through the powers of human decision. Through the lens of Frame Analysis, I am positioned to consider that actions operating within natural frames constitute ‘reality’.

Frame Theory is engaged to establish the following clarity:

Theatre is a guided doing that is constructed by an artist and approached by audiences through a social framework.

In this research, the practice of theatre must be calibrated to offset or challenge the social frame(s) employed by the live agent of the audience as spectators.

The ideal result is that the theatre work is perceived to be predominantly constituted by actions governed by a natural frame.

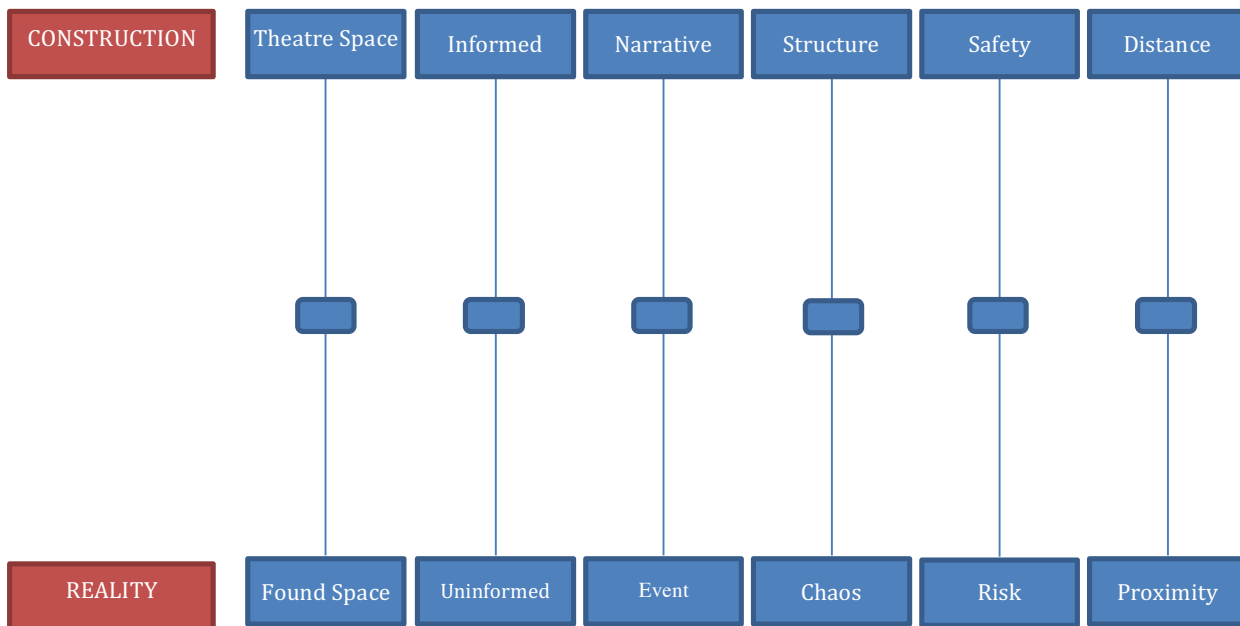
This would indicate the success of certain practices, thereby answering the first question. The description of this encounter by an audience and the sensations therein would indicate responses to the second question.

### **3.4.1 THE FRAMEWORK OF FRAME ANALYSIS: A SYSTEM OF CALIBRATION**

As a framework, Frame Analysis is employed to form a system that organises the fluctuating elements across theatre practice into an observable and examinable visual representation. Both social and natural frames are visually represented as connected, yet distant. Comprised of poles with a binary term representing either reality (natural frameworks) or construction (social frameworks), the system uses markers to indicate

the manipulation of practice. The name for each pole was devised subsequent to analysis of data, collected after the first cycle.

Though devised late in the process of this research, this tool has been used retroactively to analyse practice (both *The Suicide Show* and the work of others) and in the final action cycle to make strategic practical decisions.



**Figure 1**

The terms used on either end of the binary poles are simplistic, though chosen carefully to represent either construction or reality. Below are listed clarifying statements about what is meant by the extreme of each binary pole.

*Theatre Space / Found Space:* The term 'theatre space' here implies the use of a traditional theatre venue (in the Western sense), as a traditional theatre venue. Movement toward the term 'found space' is calculated on the basis of a space's incongruity with the event of theatre in comparison to the use of traditional theatre spaces in a traditional way.

*Informed / Uninformed:* The term 'informed' refers to an entirely holistic knowledge of a performance in terms of its content, cast and mechanics (for example, how it's special effects are achieved). Where audiences have absolutely no knowledge of these things, they are 'uninformed'.

*Narrative / Event:* Here, 'narrative' refers to the use of a set of written characters, setting and plot to create a story. Where the interactions of people, places and actions are not considered orchestrated with the aid of any kind of 'writer', and 'event' has been constituted.

*Structure / Chaos:* 'Structure' refers to the perceived implementation of a system or framework, which holds together actions on stage (for example a script that has been rehearsed and recited). 'Chaos', however, is constituted when no event can be predicted as a result of the absolute absence of such systems or frameworks.

*Safety / Risk:* 'Safety' refers to the inability for a theatre work to cause harm of any kind to any person involved in its undertaking. Movement from this binary extreme is constituted by the prospect of some kind of harm coming to a person present. 'Risk' implies the perceived prospect of grievous harm coming to a person as a result of theatre.

*Distance / Proximity:* In this case, 'distance' indicates that there is absolutely no relationship between performance and audience, where the audience is sat, inactive and facing the action. 'Proximity' refers to a relationship between the performance and audience, the extremity of which implies an entirely shared sense of time and space.

### **3.5 DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS: GROUNDED THEORY**

Audiences of the *The Suicide Show's* first cycle were invited to participate in a focus group directly following their attendance. Recordings and subsequent transcriptions of these focus groups constitute the qualitative data gathered. The titles which occupy either end of the binaries in the above system were acquired by a process informed by Grounded Theory.

The application of Grounded Theory involves breaking data into manageable pieces. Those pieces are then subject to an interpretive process whereby they are explored for ideas contained within them. Once identified, ideas are given conceptual names (Corbin and Strauss 2008). It was these names that arose from the data which became the labels for the system of calibration above. Grounded Theory is, in part, responsible for the transition to Frame Theory. This method of data analysis, "means putting aside preconceived notions about what the researcher expects to find in the research, and letting the data and interpretation of it guide analysis" (Corbin and Strauss 2008).

Having appropriated these notions from Grounded Theory, it became possible to shift to a system wherein the key ideas emergent in the data could become the focus of analysis.

## 4.0 LITERATURE AND CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

The following section discusses four unique works; Forced Entertainment's *Tomorrow's Parties* (2011), La Fura Del Baus's *SUB* (2008), Marina Abramović's, *Rhythm 0* (1974) and the National Theatre's *One Man, Two Guvnor's* (2011). These works have been selected as texts for this literature and contextual review on the basis of their repute (whether academic or cultural) for 'pushing boundaries' with their audiences or their form. In terms of this study, these works were identified for employing methods that, in diverse ways, disarm audiences and challenge the frames with which they consume or experience performance. It can be considered that each, in their own way, make interventions on everyday reality and it is an analysis of the means by which this has been achieved which is discussed below for each work respectively.

### 4.1 FORCED ENTERTAINMENT'S *TOMORROW'S PARTIES*



Image Removed for Copyright Reasons

**Figure 2** (Glendinning 2011)

*Tomorrow's Parties* by internationally acclaimed company Forced Entertainment was originally devised and presented in 2011. The work interrogates performance's ability to interact with the present moment while creating a problem in audience perception. To do so, Forced Entertainment investigates what the future holds via a form that is uncertain in its engagement of the present moment. Two performers are perched upon a small, makeshift stage with a single string of fairy lights hung not far behind them in the dark distance. Both performers gaze out to the audience with a careful thoughtfulness and in turns, they attempt to describe an imagined future. These hypothetical futures vary in plausibility and describe familiar science fiction scenarios, single-gender societies and radical social evolution (Forced Entertainment, 2011).

It is evident in a video recording of the work that the relationship between the audience and the performance is physically distanced; the audience sits in front of the action,



which is presented outward (NASA, 2013). The audience can be aware of theatrical lighting and a separation between stage space and audience space. Through these things and with the aid of its minimal design, the work builds barriers to separate itself from everyday life. Perhaps spectators are drawn to the central act of speaking, which is where the work makes itself uncertain. We have in our minds multiple understandings of how people might speak, however, Forced Entertainment have capitalized on our temporal awareness of 'ways of speaking' in order to be manipulative. There is a certain tension and thoughtfulness engaged by the performers as they speak that creates a confusion and uncertainty about the origin or centrality of the delivered text. Audiences are immediately perturbed by the refusal of this 'way of speaking' to adhere wholly to the everyday or the theatrical. There is no way of knowing the extent to which the work is planned and artificial. In effect, Forced Entertainment have developed a way of speaking that is not immediately complicit with an audience's understanding of 'ways of speaking' in theatre contexts; nor is it relatable within a familiar social frame of everyday communication. Temporally speaking, that which is 'of the theatre' (rehearsed or narratively guided speech) and that which is 'of reality' (speech that occurs naturally) is not clear.

Each moment of uncertainty, as it disappears through time, is made either more or less certain as we enter into the next moment. Jurs-Munby describes, of Forced Entertainment's work, that "the turn of the performance is thus at the same time always a turn towards the audience, as well" (in Lehmann 2006, 4) and as such, the theatre event is manifest as a dialogue. As each moment passes and another speculation about the future is put forward, an audience makes another attempt to resolve the work's uncertainty. It is the goal of the work and the job of the performers to maintain that uncertainty across time. When this is the case, the work ceases to be simply witnessed and instead a *process* is engaged where the compartmentalisation of experience becomes the primary exercise in the event of theatre. Both the everyday world and the theatre world are playing a hand in forming audience's decisions of "truth." As such, that which 'is' and that which 'isn't' is *not* concrete and the process of this negotiation is a dialogic experience.

In *Tomorrow's Parties*, reality cannot be evidenced by its temporal orientation. Temporality is transcended and reality is negotiated. The audience must consider a variety of possibilities for how *Tomorrow's Parties* is carrying itself out: are they reciting rehearsed lines? Is everything completely off the cuff? Does the seemingly deliberate, poetic and resolute conclusion of the work mean that the performers are adhering to a

memorized structure and ‘the general idea’ of what was said had been previously foregrounded? What is most ‘real’ about experiencing *Tomorrow’s Parties* is that both performers and audience are necessarily present in the discovery of the work. Any sense that the audience and the performers are in a shared space, with a shared sense of time indicates that the work may be operating *both* within and without the structures of theatre. The matter of ‘reality’ is transformed because the spatio-temporal world does not contribute to resolving this uncertainty.

Through *Tomorrow’s Parties*, Forced Entertainment invites its audience to qualify their experience of the work. As such, we can engage in conversation about personal conclusions or even conclude (personally) that which we are unable to conclude. In each instance, we attempt to lay out the evidence we used to reach these conclusions, including that which proves the inability to draw a conclusion. The temporally grounding qualities of *Tomorrow’s Parties* cease to be of any importance because if we cannot understand the temporal origin of the text, we can no more argue that the string of lights in the background has any theatrical dramatic value except to remind us that someone put them there.

*Tomorrow’s Parties* is relevant to this study because it highlights a process of interaction with audiences which causes them to question how a work functions. In other words, it exposes itself as a work of construction and in doing so, activates an audience’s awareness of their qualities as every day people and causes them to search for these in the theatre work. The work allows the researcher to observe practices that destabilise meaning-making processes for audiences so that what is real (or where it’s distinction from construction is marked) cannot be easily identified.

#### **4.1.1 PRACTICE METHODS OF *TOMORROW’S PARTIES***

It can be observed in Forced Entertainment’s *Tomorrow’s Parties* that the following methods of practice have been engaged:

<b>Practice Method</b>	<b>Forced Entertainment</b>
<b>Predominant placement of audience around action</b>	Traditional; Audience seated opposite the action observing, though in close proximity to it.
<b>Secondary placement of audience</b>	N/A; no secondary placement of audience.
<b>Performance space</b>	Art spaces; not predominantly theatre spaces.

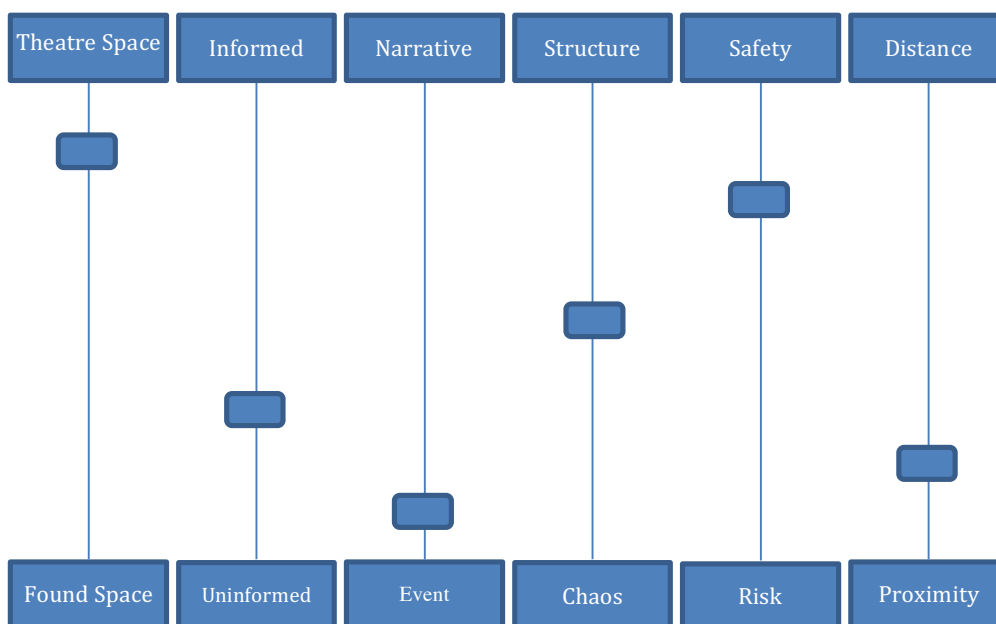
<b>Design elements</b>	Small platform stage, one string of fairly lights, performers lit in spotlight, surrounding darkness. Performers appear not to be costumed.
<b>Design Qualities</b>	Design is sparse; indication of theatrical environment kept minimal.
<b>Performed Content</b>	Spoken text delivered in a polished but thoughtful improvisational tone.

**Table 1**

#### 4.1.2 KEY PRINCIPLES OF *TOMORROW'S PARTIES*

- ❖ Prolonged destabilization of textuality turns theatre work into a dialogue that increases in complexity as it continues.
- ❖ Sustained/Durational employment of textual destabilization disables perceived traction with construction or reality and can potentially cause sensory displacement.
- ❖ Positioning the audience outside the awareness of 'how' the work is made complete (through phenomena) stunts an individual's passage through time; what is coming into the present to form the recent past cannot be reconciled with a certain knowledge of practice.
- ❖ Highly focused periods of uncertain action/text indicates a kind of arbitrage where the exchange of 'theatre event' for audience speculation is of equal (but entirely subjective) worth.

#### 4.1.3 CALIBRATING TOMORROW'S PARTIES



**Figure 3**

The calibration of *Tomorrow's Parties* is the most unique of the exemplars in this contextual review.

*Theatre Space/Found Space:* A marker is placed quite close to 'theatre space' because, although it doesn't necessarily take place in a theatre, the work is presented in a traditionally theatrical way.

*Informed/Uninformed:* Though we can explain to any person what they will encounter watching *Tomorrow's Parties*, there is so much about the work that audiences cannot be sure of; namely the operative qualities of the work and, assuming the work is improvised, what the spoken content will be. For that reason, a marker is placed closer to the 'uninformed' binary.

*Narrative/Event:* The 'event' binary is placed thus because the work does not tell a 'story' nor provide a strong indication of character. Predominantly, we are aware that a task has been set which performers carry out. We do not feel guaranteed that the work could be the same again; even if narrative is constituted here, it is singular and unrepeatable.

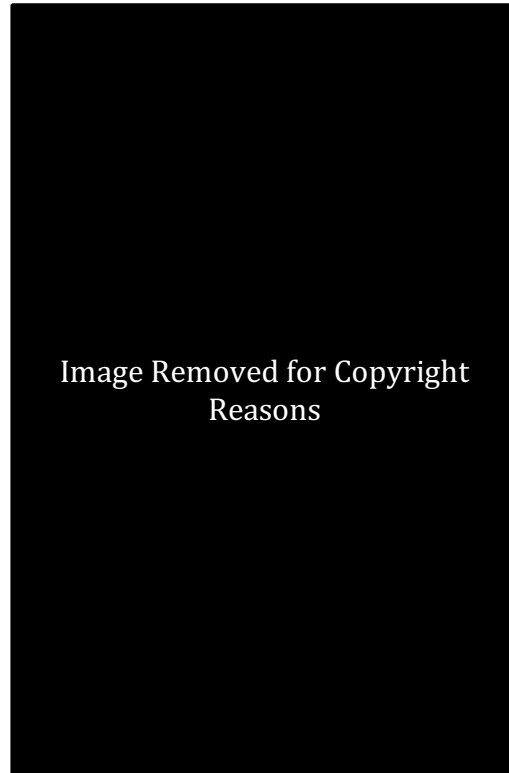
*Structure/Chaos:* This marker is placed at the centre of its binary. To some extent, it seems certain that there is a structural scaffolding through which the performers keep the work tonally consistent. However, an awareness that a structure exists is not comfort enough to ensure that the work is completely fool-proof.

*Safety/Risk:* The work risks 'failing' because, as an audience, we have no way of knowing what is certain. The risk is not dangerous but the absence of textual certainty constitutes 'stakes' enough to be engaged in the work. For this reason, a marker is placed on the 'safety' side of the 'safety/risk' binary. Risk exists in the work, but not the risk of any substantial loss.

*Distance/Proximity:* These calibrations are all implemented by Forced Entertainment to create significant intellectual proximity. Audiences are positioned by this calibration to invest in clarifying what is uncertain about the work and are, in a way, a co-creator of the work.

The general shape of this calibration indicates an average calibration somewhere through the middle of all binaries; perhaps a place at which audiences are responsible for making connections between what is and is not constructed – an authority as well as a witness to action.

## 4.2 LA FURA DELS BAUS' *SUB*



**Figure 4** (Perez 2011)

La Fura Dels Baus is a Spanish theatre company operating out of Barcelona. Their large scale, highly elaborate and sensory work engages enormous audiences in spaces that are always, if they are not already, made unconventional by intricate design (La Fura Dels Baus, 2015). Commonly, their theatre “involves the spectator not just on a voluntary basis: herd-like, people repeatedly dash to the sides when clunky big wagons rapidly roll through the crowd who are huddled together in a tent. One moment the audience is shoved together into a tight space, the next it is abandoned without orientation” (Lehmann, 2006). The company are ideal for observation in this research because of the unique way they situate their audience around often highly graphic and violent content, asking them to place a marker on the spectrum between performance and real life<sup>4</sup>.

To make their works complete, La Fura Del Baus draw on what an audience considers necessary to be *their* temporal surroundings, ensuring that other audience members factor into this consideration. This is consistent across many of their works, which destabilize theatrical hierarchies between performer, audience and theatre event by closing the spatiotemporal distance between them. For example, environments employing the presence of audience and absence of performers (such as in *Sub* and *M.T.M* and more), often begin these performances to create “an allegorical rendering of

the world in its primordial amorphous state, prior to the fabrication of sociocultural order” (Feldman, 1998, 467). As Lehmann iterates, this is a result of “[t]he body of the spectator becom[ing] a constitutive part of the staging,” and for the spectator, it is thus apparent that the event of theatre is being engaged (2006, 125). Further, the intrinsic situation of the audience within the work *as spectators to spectacle* requires a kind of conscious self-reflexivity. The audience’s role is both dual and singular in that they are spectators *and* in role as spectators; they are inhabitants of the everyday and the represented.

One of their particularly visceral, though poorly documented works is SUB, performed in various locations around the world in the hold of a repurposed Norwegian ship (Catalunya Radio, 2008). A review of *Sub* describes that audiences (women and children first) are cramped into a warehouse two meters under sea level (Lieser-Moore, 2008). What transpires is a grisly spectacle that sees its audience split down the middle, with audience members pulled out at random to be violently humiliated and belittled by what look like post-apocalyptic soldiers (Padrissa, 2009).

It seems that La Fura Dels Baus’ performances play on an audience’s relationship with their own physical selves by emphasizing the body’s capacity to achieve extremes in performance. This is seemingly achieved through the exhibition of exceptional technical skill (opera and dance) in juxtaposition with violent and sexual acts, as is evidenced through their expansive body of work (La Fura Dels Baus 2015). This juxtaposition emphasises the extent to which certain actions (particularly violent or sexual) can be *enacted* and through this, a La Fura Dels Baus spectacle becomes something its audience must negotiate as either ‘real’ or performed. SUB appears to engage whole and explicit acts of violence, indicating no measures of safety. For example, one man (among others) is strung inside a human sized plastic bag, in which he is then entirely vacuum-sealed with no apparent source of air or movement of the chest to indicate breathing (Padrissa, 2008). Audiences may find the performance problematic because in addition to removing the deniability of violence, uncertainty abounds.

Were it not for the exceptionally large audience that fills the SUB space and the purchase of tickets prior to arrival, it may have been very difficult for an audience to determine that ‘theatre’ was taking place. Perhaps La Fura Dels Baus carefully positions their audience around space and action to emphasize liveness and startle spectators with how uncertainly their productions’ content is truly ‘performed’.

This particular work has a great deal of relevance to this study because it exhibits highly graphic or violent acts involving people who may or may not be audience members and questions whether or not they are genuine. *SUB* demonstrates practices that cause audiences to become uncertain about the safety of audiences and performers on an everyday level without ceasing to be theatre. In this way, it could be argued that the work manifests an interplay between the real and constructed by pulling the two into question with violent and graphic content which appears to be authentic.

#### 4.2.1 PRACTICE METHODS OF *SUB*

It can be observed in La Fura Dels Baus' *SUB* that the following methods of practice have been engaged:

Practice Method	La Fura Del Baus
<b>Predominant placement of audience around action</b>	Audience gathered <i>en masse</i> and placed in close physical proximity to action. No seating, free roaming. Audience and performers share same space. Audience members intermittently invited into action.
<b>Secondary placement of audience</b>	People appear to be pulled from audience to take part in action.
<b>Performance space</b>	Unconventional performance space; in hold of ship.
<b>Design elements</b>	Some machinery and embellishment built to look like part of ship. Performers are costumed.
<b>Design Qualities</b>	Qualities of design appear innate to performance space; Atmosphere is dark and sinister.
<b>Performed Content</b>	Multiple and successive acts of extreme violence; highly risky scenarios (people underwater, being strung up and vacuum sealed); exhibition of bodily functions; acts of virtuosity (opera singing).

**Table 2**

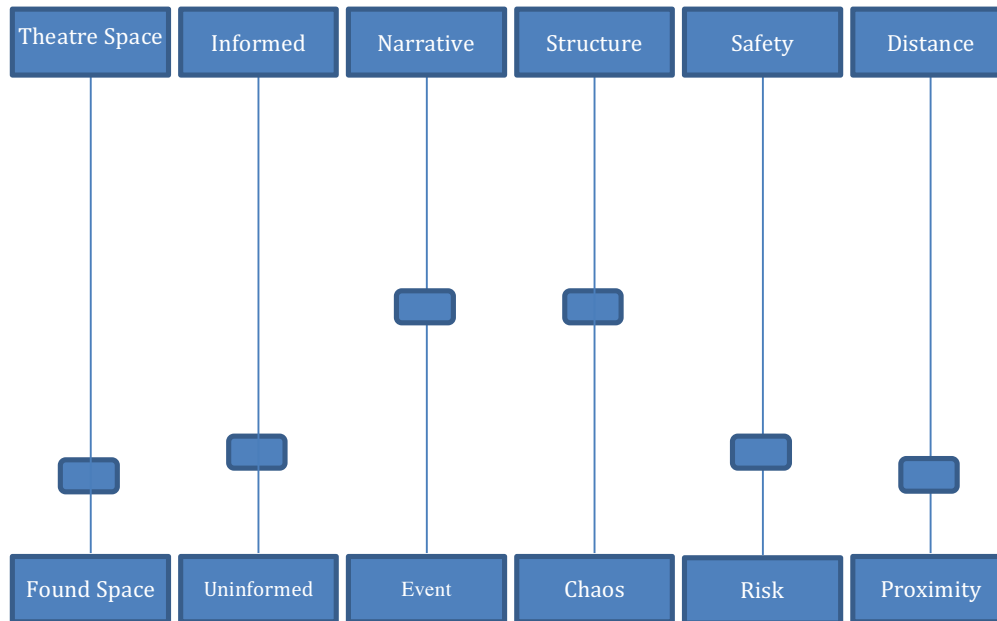
#### 4.2.2 KEY PRINCIPLES OF *SUB*

- ❖ Placement of large-scale spectacle within an uncertain or unfamiliar environment manifests a plurality of roles for the audience member; one as everyday spectator and one as enrolled spectator, causing a dialogically reflexive relationship within the individual.
- ❖ In theatre, bargaining the outcome of a risk destabilizes theatricality and suggests that all action is engaged in the present and in a shared space.



- ❖ Making the body of the performance subject the site of action emphasizes liveness and presence.

### 4.2.3 CALIBRATING *SUB*



**Figure 5**

The majority of *SUB*'s calibration markers are placed towards the reality binaries.

*Theatre Space/Found Space:* The marker is placed close to the found space binary without touching it. *SUB* is performed in a highly unconventional performance space, modified to facilitate a performance event. The space does not clearly delineate between performer and audience spaces; a more promenade-style performance is engaged. The performance does, however, make use of theatrical lighting and sound.

*Informed/Uninformed:* Based on *SUB*'s few reviews and limited public discourse, it seems that audiences knew little about the performance before they entered. Knowledge of the performed content could only have been assumed based on previous experiences with the company, who are reputed for working with the grotesque and horrific. *SUB* does not appear to have been heavily promoted, though a press release for the performance gives an indication that bodily fluids are a feature in the work. For these reasons, the *Informed/Uninformed* marker is closer to *Uninformed*.

*Narrative/Event:* What cannot be ascertained is the degree to which the action in the work is connected to a story-like narrative. Reviews indicate that the work is accompanied by text with contentious and controversial environmental themes

delivered by costumed characters. There is some doubt in the audience's experiences about who is and is not a character in the work, with audience members pulled into the performed world to be stripped and tortured. Unperformable actions like public urination or bleeding, while potentially contributing to a narrative, are also natural events that are recognisably separate from 'performance'. For these combined reasons, the marker on this binary is centred.

*Structure/Chaos:* This binary is also difficult to measure as a calibration. There is no way to know how several hundred people are managed in such an unconventional performance space. In addition, the circumstances of the space seem to encourage audience members to feel entirely out of control. It could be easy to expect audience members to respond to this kind of uncertainty in a chaotic fashion. There is no evidence of this however; documentation indicates that audiences are mostly acquiescent and the chaotic violence. As such, the marker for this binary is centred; the structure of the work invites and enables chaos and as such, each has the same capacity to be predominant.

*Safety/Risk:* *SUB* very clearly wants its audience to perceive risks. It frequently exposes and exploits the body's natural limits by, for example, submerging performers in water, suspending them or vacuum sealing their bodies in plastic. These actions bring the safety of the performer into question and life-threatening risk can be perceived. As such, the binary marker is quite close to risk. Audiences might perceive safety in the volume of other audience members and the highly technical approaches to violent risks.

*Distance/Proximity:* The marker on this binary is close to Proximity, though not touching it. This particular set of calibrations appears likely to cause a very visceral audience response. Without the comfort or familiarity of a theatre and without any concrete awareness of what may transpire as a part of the work, an audience is likely to feel very aware of their own presence. Without any guarantee of a story or evident performance structure, the suspension of disbelief is not a likely practice for audiences in *SUB*. Perhaps the only creator of distance between audience and performers are the costumes, which seem to indicate 'character'.

### 4.3 MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ'S *RHYTHM 0*



**Figure 6** (Rhythm 0, 1974)

Marina Abramović's prominence as a performance artist cannot be understated – within the discourse of academia and postdramatic theatre, her work exemplifies provocative innovation in audience positioning<sup>5</sup>. Operating primarily out of New York, Abramović is renowned for her various challenging works that make use of her body to explore the limits of her physical and emotional endurance. Abramović's 'Rhythm' series enabled her escalation to something between fame and notoriety during the 70s (Abramovic in MIA, 2015). This work pulls the notions of presence and absence into conflict through scenarios in which her own body is made to constitute both subject and object. Renzi asserts that uniting these two states "can lock the viewer and the viewed, artist and interpreter, into relation," (2013, 122 – 123), where time and space are shared.

In one of her most iconic works, *Rhythm 0*, Abramovic laid out 72 objects for a group of participants, ranging from feathers and pens to nails, knives and a loaded pistol (Abramovic in MIA, 2015). The audience were instructed, that for six hours, they could do whatever they wanted to her with the promise that she would take responsibility for the result. She describes that through this exercise she is pushing boundaries in two directions. In one instance, she explores "how far you can push the energy of the human body," but also "how far the public can go if the artist [*her*]self doesn't do anything"

(Abramović in MIA, 2015), having stated quite famously that “the hardest thing an artist can do is something that is close to nothing” (Abramovic in Akers, 2012).

Abramović’s practice is engaged on the threshold between artist and audience, blurring the two roles. Indeed, when the event is regaled in retrospect, it is not the artist who is described: it is the actions of the ‘audience’. Abramović shares that “they cut my clothes, they put the thorns of the roses in my stomach, they cut my throat, they drank my blood, one person put the gun in my head and then another took it away” (in Renzi 2002, 30). Abramović’s own recount does not even frame the quality of her own experience outside of describing it as a “violat[ing]” (ibid). *Rhythm 0* is a work that cannot exist without its audience, whose intrinsic involvement causes its unfolding and makes it significant. It is a kind of event that exists both within and outside of reality. ‘Within’ in the sense that to lacerate someone and see them bleed or undress them to reveal their naked body with one’s own hands cannot be a performed action; it is engaged in one’s own time and with the effect that one anticipates in their everyday life – we understand that pain (for example) is impossible to represent (Demaria 2004, 302). It is outside of reality in the sense that there is not an ‘everyday’ environment which facilitates these actions; their undertaking is completely contrived and accessible only through a set of artist-constructed circumstances. The event is, at its core, art. As Renzi articulates, “Abramović radically suggests a mode in which the body, evacuated of consciousness and subjecthood, at once can only represent (because it is the substance from which art is made) and can, literally, represent nothing (because it can no longer be read as a conduit through which the self of person is known)” (2013, 132). Further to this, in *Rhythm 0* Abramović is undoubtedly defying her natural impulse, indicating with certainty that ‘control’ and ‘wilfulness’ exists. This is recognizable, even in images, but only because of the control and wilfulness she has *failed* to demonstrate. In situ, I can go to her and do whatever I want. The effect, I know, will be real, in that I have ensured its cause. An absence of the ‘real’ is constituted by her affect in which the demonstration of proportionate realness is forcibly restrained. Paradoxically though, I can never be certain of the degree to which she is internalizing a response – therefore, one cannot know the extent to which her lack of response is an affect. Through her performance, Abramović enables a space where what is real is made apparent through what is not real by weaving a careful web of both acknowledged and unacknowledged conceit. She has, in effect, married the certainty and uncertainty of reality through the activation of her audience as artist and the activation of herself as both subject and object.

The relevance of her work to this study is that it demonstrates many of the (possibly vital) aspects of a constructed situation that cause it to make use of ‘reality’ to become complete. Abramović positions her audience to manufacture a constructed outcome using the tools of an unarguably real outcome. If this study wishes to shift what is clearly construction and reality out of balance, there is something to be learned from Abramović’s work.

#### 4.3.1 PRACTICE METHODS OF *RHYTHM 0*

It can be observed in Marina Abramović’s *Rhythm 0* that the following methods of practice have been engaged:

<b>Practice Method</b>	<b>Marina Abramović</b>
<b>Predominant placement of audience around action.</b>	Audience share same space as action. Free roaming, participating in action freely.
<b>Secondary placement of audience.</b>	Audience members are invited to participate in performance action at their will.
<b>Performance space.</b>	Unconventional performance space; bare room in gallery.
<b>Design elements.</b>	Table with various objects. Performer appears not to be costumed.
<b>Design Qualities</b>	Design is sparse; some dangerous implements are placed on table indicate the possibility of violent action.
<b>Performed Content</b>	Action is unplanned though was eventually constituted by the manipulation of an inactive and acquiescent subject with a variety of both safe and dangerous tools.

**Table 3**

#### 4.3.2 KEY PRINCIPLES OF *RHYTHM 0*

- ❖ Binding subject and object, implicates audience in performance action (whether enacted or not) and unifies them in time and space.
- ❖ Positioning the audience as performer or dismantles the social constructs of attending performance and makes all participants hyper-aware of their own presence.
- ❖ Exhibitions of sensation and viscera are engaged within the body can be engaged without texted translation. Since affect cannot be measured or accurately assumed, the degree to which text is engaged cannot be ascertained.

### 4.3.3 CALIBRATING RHYTHM 0

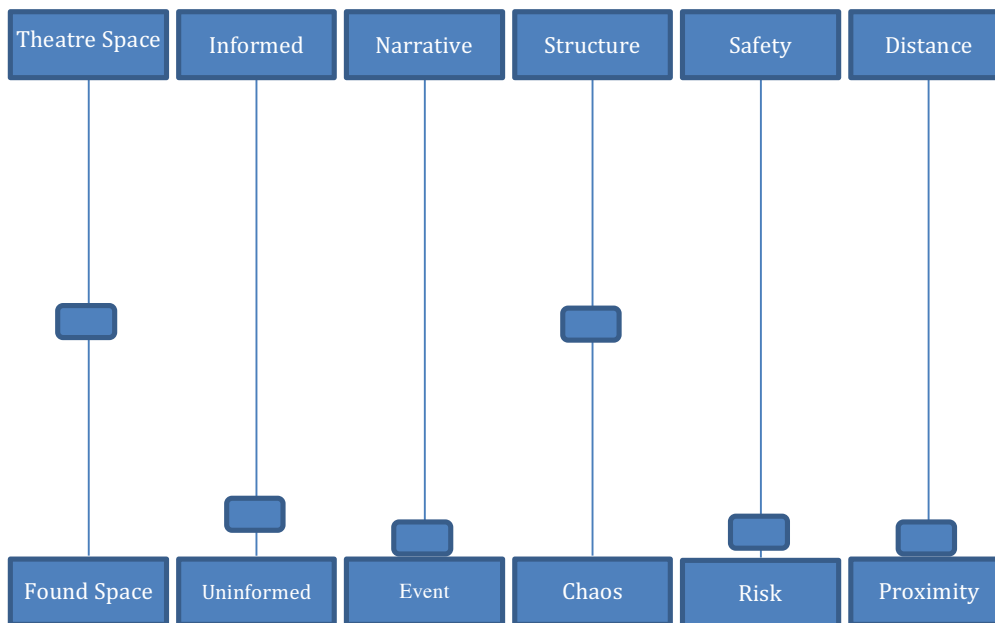


Figure 7

*Theatre Space/Found Space:* Rhythm 0 took place in a gallery space. The work, which is live or performance art, is not necessarily theatre and so understandably did not take place in a theatre. With this in mind, it is not unconventional practice to situate live/performance art in galleries; when we consider the work as a piece of theatre we are, however, forced to acknowledge that a gallery space is a space where art or ‘the theatrical’ could foreseeably take place. Essentially, it is not a theatre and it facilitates none of its technical operations or seating, but neither is it a found space. Abramović has engaged a space that declares that her work is an event of art and nothing else. As such, this marker is at the greatest possible distance from either binary.

*Informed/Uninformed:* Audience are as aware of what will transpire as they can possibly be the moment they read Abramović’s placard explaining the rules of the event. Paradoxically though, this awareness extends only to the possibility of what could transpire; not what will certainly transpire. Since there is no limit to this possibility, we can only be aware of our own decisions, a mere fraction of the total possible resultant certainties. Individuals may (and did) decide to limit the outcomes of the work and can possibly resolve to do this for any imagined outcomes of the work. For this reason, this marker is placed quite close to the *Uninformed* binary, but not touching it.

*Narrative/Event:* *Rhythm 0* requires the activation of the audience to constitute its content. There is no story-like structure to speak of in the work; characters and setting are constituted by whoever is in the room. The actions of the audience constitute an event that can only be recounted, not repeated. For this reason, the marker is touching the *event* binary.

*Structure/Chaos:* This work lays the foundations for limitless chaos, though there is a visible framework through which it is made available to an audience. The kind of chaos that brings the performance to form could not exist without the structural foundations that Abramović has laid. For this reason, the marker is placed at the centre of the spectrum.

*Safety/Risk:* *Rhythm 0* demonstrates a very high level of risk. Whether or not an audience is readily prepared to cause Abramović harm, in laying out so many dangerous implements she has enabled the potential for life-threatening harm. The work, as it transpired, indicates that such risks were realised and Abramović's body was harmed. For this reason, the marker is placed very close to the risk binary.

*Distance/ Proximity:* Because it can be easily argued that the audience, performer and space are one and the same, in *Rhythm 0* absolute proximity is achieved. This is reflected by the placement of the marker.

#### 4.4 NATIONAL THEATRE'S *ONE MAN TWO GUVNORS*



**Figure 8** (Marcus 2012)

This production by the National Theatre was directed by Nicholas Hytner and written by Richard Bean. It is one that I had the pleasure of seeing at the Royal Haymarket Theatre in London, late 2013. *One Man, Two Guvnors* is based on Goldoni's *The Servant of Two Masters* and confronts its audience with a surprising intersection of reality and construction in a distinctly traditional theatrical setting.

This observation refers specifically to a moment at the end of the first act, right before interval. The colourful cast of this Commedia Dell'artè had engaged in just about all of the tropes of this particular style and form; the central character, Francis, had even addressed the audience to make them aware of the typical Dell'artè formula. In the final scene of the first act, Francis pulled a timid and disinterested female audience member on stage, just as the act entered its farcical climax with the rapid-fire entrance and exit of characters. The character of Francis had the self-set task of managing this onslaught while keeping the audience member, Kathryn, hidden from sight, resulting in her accidentally hitting her head on an opening door. Later, she was hidden under a table upon which Crepes Suzette were being prepared. When the table accidentally caught fire, startled, the woman came climbing out from underneath and was sprayed from top to bottom with cream. A stage manager quickly ran on and collected the woman, scolding the performers along the way. Many audience members screamed in shock and collectively, they could barely be calmed.



It is important to note that the majority of the audience (including myself and those I overheard talking in the foyer) believed that she was not a planted actress. At the time, I felt that an actress could not possibly have appeared so organically 'out of place' and so it was very significant that she had been treated as though the rules of the staged world applied to her. Though in the end, she was dancing a choreographed dance with the cast and took a bow. We had all been fooled and I later read the script to find the following passage:

*"KATHRYN backs out from under the table. FRANCIS chucks a jug of water over her. STANLEY gets a fire extinguisher and drenches KATHRYN from head to toe with foam. She stands there covered in foam like an iced cake."* (Bean 2011, 59)

This is an example of a performance that has been able to 'trick' its audience into thinking they saw something real. It appears to have done this simply by emphasising the theatrical conventions that have contributed to its formation. It then completely undercut the audience's familiarity with and dependence on those conventions by enacting the enforcement of the rules of their created world on a person the audience believes is from the everyday world. The Commedia Dell'arte form is intentionally convoluted and so reinforces its own theatricality through obvious efforts to remind its audience how the story is progressing (i.e. repetitive exposition and addresses to the public). For the work itself, these asides are an "acknowledgement of the presence of the audience by the performer [that] functions as a way of allowing a character to claim complicity with the audience, on the basis of superior shared knowledge of the reality of the fictional situation" (Ridout 2006, 70). It is through this that *One Man, Two Guvnors'* fictional constructs are strengthened to the degree that the audience and particularly the character of Francis, share complicity so strong that a foreign element – an audience member, though planted, is able to appear genuine by contrast. We perceive, as White describes in his text, *Audience Participation in Theatre*, that the invited audience member is at risk of contradicting the author, director and other performer's awareness of planned procedure (2013, 74). The audience is positioned to believe that she will cause damage to the rules of the fictional world, but not that the fictional world will do any damage to her. Though it is a simple observation, it could be resolved that the more evident the stage's rules are, the more readily they can be broken. It seems engaging and exciting when the circumstances created by these rules are placed in the hands of the audience, but it was troubling, confusing and ultimately rattling when the audience was thought to have had their everyday world invaded by the task of the theatrical.

Furthermore, it is consistent with other exemplars that this example dances upon a liminal ‘in-between’ space - the space between the realm of the everyday and the realm of the theatrical. Inconsistently, however, it is accompanied with a reveal that that uncertain space never really existed. Interestingly, the tension between the real and the constructed is constituted by a state of mind even though it can be attributed purely to the organisation of phenomena. The performance’s operation on the space between audience and performer was only ever something that was perceived.

The value of interrogating this example of performance is to understand how theatre practices can be arranged in more traditional, European theatre environments to destabilise a clear distinction between reality and construction. *One Man, Two Guvnors* demonstrates (at least in the instance where I was present) that an entirely constructed environment has the capacity to cause an audience to question what does and does not have a bearing on the natural world of audience members. In this case, it could be concluded that the reinforcement of performance practices provides a holistic sense of performance ‘rules’ that operate as a counterpoint to instances of a contradictory nature.

#### **4.4.1 PRACTICE METHODS OF *ONE MAN, TWO GUVNORS***

It can be observed in the National Theatre’s *One Man, Two Guvnors* that the following methods of practice have been engaged:

<b>Practice Method</b>	<b>National Theatre</b>
<b>Predominant placement of audience around action.</b>	Traditional; Audience seated opposite action observing. Audience members intermittently invited on stage.
<b>Secondary placement of audience.</b>	Some audience members are pulled from seating bank to participate in stylised action; appear to have ‘pranks’ played on them.
<b>Performance space.</b>	Traditional theatre space; Royal Haymarket Theatre.
<b>Design elements.</b>	Highly stylised design and lighting, performers are costumed.
<b>Design Qualities</b>	Flats and set pieces used to create cartoon-like replicas of 1960’s environments; highly theatrical.
<b>Performed Content</b>	A piece of comedic, linear, text based work is engaged; audience and theatrical constructs are acknowledged; an audience member is taken on stage and placed in risky circumstances where she comes to some harm and is covered with

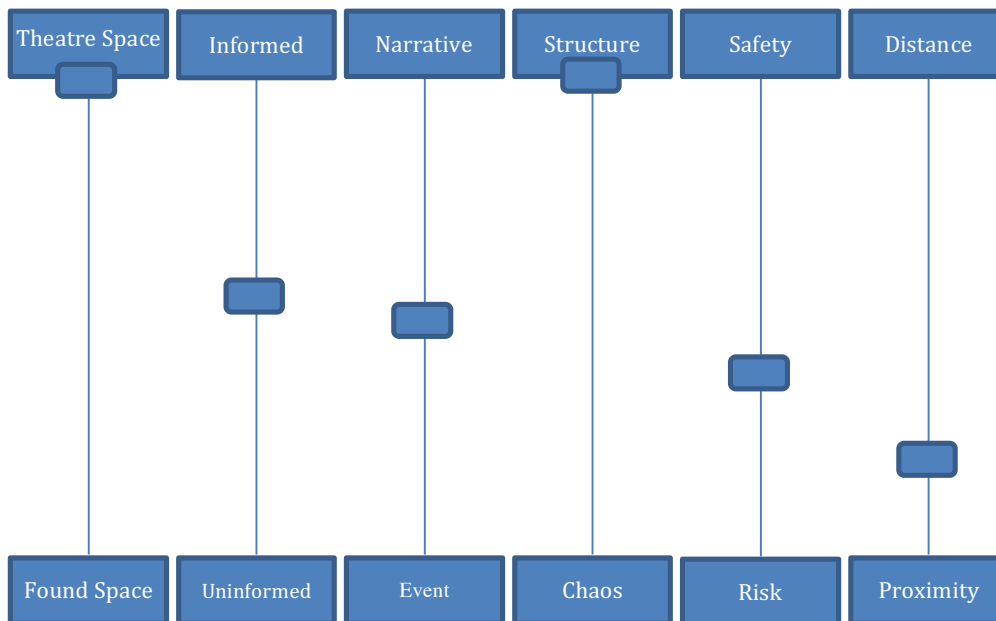
	cream. Audience member is revealed to be a planted actress.
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**Table 4**

#### 4.4.2 KEY PRINCIPLES OF *ONE MAN, TWO GUVNORS*

- ❖ Reinforcement of theatrical rules during a work establishes clearer boundaries that can later be broken.
- ❖ Audiences are unable to reconcile the real and the represented when the outcome of a risk is unexpected or does not privilege the safety of the audience.
- ❖ Audiences are troubled and disoriented when audience is perceived to have their everyday world invaded by the task of the theatrical.
- ❖ Audiences can be tricked into believing that staged action is real.

#### 4.4.3 CALIBRATING ONE MAN, TWO GUVNORS



**Figure 9**

*Found Space/Theatre Space:* As the work took place in a highly reputed theatre and made extensive use of theatre conventions, this marker is set very close to the Theatre Space binary.

*Informed/Uninformed:* Audiences are at their most uninformed when there are other audience members on stage. These moments are perceived to be unpredictable; the performer and the on-stage audience cannot be wholly aware of the other's expectation.

Though the moment in question was staged, we are unaware of this truth either way. These moments are highly uncertain, though they are short moments among a larger work, which has a well-known story that audiences can easily discover prior to viewing the work. For this reason, the marker rests off-centre, favouring the *informed* side of the spectrum.

*Narrative/Event:* The work's use of character, setting and story indicate that narrative has been engaged quite heavily. However, the moment in question during which reality and construction become uncertain, the narrative turns outward and invites who we believe is an audience member into the narrative. They do not become a part of the narrative world; they merely remind the audience that a narrative is taking place around them. Audiences feel that they are witnessing the event of a person being thrust into a narrative. The narrative that forms the foundation of the work adds value to the perceived 'event' within it. Both exist, never at the same time, but within each other. The marker has been calibrated at the centre of the binary.

*Structure/Chaos:* This marker is placed at the *structure* end of the spectrum. This is because the entire work has evidently been planned and rehearsed. The National Theatre has engaged structure completely in order to facilitate a perceived 'real-life' event. The event that is perceived is not 'chaotic' either, in the sense that the prank played on the audience member seems very meticulously planned the moment it takes place. The work appears to have been structured to target the audience though it is revealed that the work has been structured to target the entire audience.

*Risk/Safety:* This marker is placed off-centre, favouring the risk binary. This is because the audience perceive risk though it is only minor. Audience perceive that the audience on stage may embarrass, injure or perhaps burn themselves, though the danger is never life-threatening. Audiences are alarmed when the risk takes effect.

*Distance/Proximity:* Though we are physically distanced, in the moment when the on stage audience is sprayed with cream, the space is truly shared. The action itself cannot be argued with. Since the audience feels represented on the stage, the theatre world ceases to be of any importance when 'we' become its subject. Performer and audience no longer acknowledge the boundary that separates them and proximity is achieved for anyone who was convinced that the on stage audience was not planted. For this reason,

the marker is placed half way between the half way mark and the *proximity* end of the binary.

## **5.0 FORMATIVE PROCESS AND FIRST CREATIVE CYCLE – *THE SUICIDE SHOW***

### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

The performance piece made for this research was called *The Suicide Show*. It was devised by responding to the practices methods and principles identified through the literature and contextual review. First, an experimental formative process was engaged which developed content for a formal action cycle. Subsequently, as a practice-led enquiry, this study generated and analyzed data from one preparatory action cycle presented to audiences, which informed a final assessable outcome. At all stages in the research process, *The Suicide Show* engaged the same premise, though each was a conduit of my evolving theoretical understanding of how certain theatre practices could be engaged to create the co-existence of reality and construction in the theatre event.

*The Suicide Show* had a simple premise; five performers introduce themselves to an audience and prelude that they are looking to explore the boundary between performance and ‘real-life’. In order to conduct this exploration, they will each kill themselves in an order and through a method decided by the audience. Before each suicide, a short scene will take place: an introduction, a deconstruction, a conflict, a love scene and a goodbye.

It should be acknowledged that I am aware of the sensitive nature of ‘suicide’ as a theme in performance work. People often ask me why I chose suicide for the content of practice in this research, usually indicating some kind of dissatisfaction that my investigation could (and should) have used alternative content. As the task of this work is to ensure the destabilization of the boundary between what is ‘real’ and what is constructed, it was important to consider that there is not much that audiences have not already seen constructed, represented or enacted on stage. Additionally, the literature and contextual review attempts to suggest that what is ‘real’ is of the highest concern when the potential for physical harm is being risked. An audience may not be so concerned about arguing ‘the real’ if it has no bearing on their personal world. Hadley, Trace and Winter observe also that “Risk and confrontation in Live Art practices is embedded in a relational aesthetic, which calls on spectators to respond” (2010, 141). I feel it is apparent that the same principle applies in theatre practices. The work I created needed present risks and those risks would need to be confronting. In its

creation, much care went into ensuring that the work itself made no direct statements about the ethical or emotional processes associated with the practice of suicide.

## **5.2 ENGAGING PRACTICES METHODS AND PRINCIPLES**

The practices and principles extracted from existing practice were collated and reviewed. The predominant or primary methods of practice were identified and deployed to lay the foundations for creative practice. The following practice methods were engaged to create *The Suicide Show*:

### **Practice Method ONE: Primary Positioning of the Audience**

The most common observed practice was placement of the audience very close to the action, either seated opposite or roaming around and through it. For *The Suicide Show* the audience would be seated around and very close to a central performance space.

### **Practice Method TWO: Secondary Positioning of the Audience**

Commonly, observed practice sought to include the audience in the action, or have them in some way participating in the work as either physically or intellectually active. In *The Suicide Show* the audience would be positioned to influence the series of events in the work. Though seated, the audience are both spectators and instigators of the action.

### **Practice Method THREE: Performance Space**

Exemplars demonstrate disparity between the kinds of spaces engaged for performance, ranging from a highly traditional performance space to an entirely 'found' space. The formative process took place at *Cüpo*, a dance studio located in Fortitude Valley; one where performance and performing is not an unusual practice, but that is not strictly a theatre. The first action cycle took place at 'The Studio' at QUT, Kelvin Grove.

### **Practice Method FOUR: Design Elements**

The use of design elements such as light, sound and set pieces varied from example to example. As the performance concept in *The Suicide Show* is task-led like in *Rhythm 0* and *Tomorrow's Parties*, it would follow their example. *The Suicide Show* would engage a simple set; two flats separated by a tarp curtain, props hung on the flats. A singular moment of designed lighting would be

permitted; otherwise house lights or static light would be used. No designed sound, only existing or well known music.

### **Practice Method FIVE: Design Qualities**

Exemplars indicated design qualities that appeared either incidental, necessary or deliberately exposed themselves as design elements. *The Suicide Show* would engage the same practice. The set pieces would appear to be homemade and deliberately indicate theatricality. All other elements of design would only be deployed if their deployment could be witnessed. For example, the placement and turning on of a light.

### **Practice Method SIX: Performed Content**

While performed content varied, there were some commonalities among analyzed examples. Most works demonstrated some kind of risk that was either violent or could result in the failure of the work. Most works demonstrated some form of audience participation. Action, in most examples, appeared to be improvised, with performers responding to impulse. Most works avoided clear establishment of character and acknowledged the existence of the audience. *The Suicide Show* would involve actions indicating a high level of risk through the exhibition of highly realistic violence. The work would be improvised, the performers would not play fictional characters and would acknowledge the audience by speaking directly to them and involving them in the work. All actions would be task based.

Based on the selected practice methods for *The Suicide Show*, it was felt that the following performance principles (identified in the Literature and Contextual Review) could be engaged. These were separated into primary and secondary categories. Some were deemed unachievable by the resources available and others were omitted for requiring practices that contradicted other principles.

#### **Primary Principles**

- In theatre, bargaining the outcome of a risk destabilizes theatricality and suggests that all action is engaged in the present and in a shared space.
- Audiences are troubled and disoriented when they perceive their everyday world to be invaded by the task of performance.
- Audiences can be tricked into believing that staged action is 'real'.



- Positioning the audience outside the awareness of 'how' the work is made (through phenomena) stilted an individual's passage through time; what is coming into the present to form the recent past cannot be reconciled with their awareness of practice.
- Making the body of the performance subject the site of action emphasizes liveness and presence.
- Positioning the audience as controller of the work dismantles the social constructs of performance and performance attendance.
- Exhibitions of sensation and viscera are engaged within the body and can be communicated without decision or texted translation. Since affect cannot be measured or accurately assumed, the degree to which text is engaged cannot be ascertained.

### **Secondary Principles**

- Highly focused periods of uncertain action or text indicate a kind of arbitrage where the exchange of 'theatre event' for audience speculation is of equal (but entirely subjective) worth.
- Binding subject and object implicates audience in performance action (whether enacted or not) and unifies them in time and space.
- Audiences are unable to reconcile the real and the represented when the outcome of a risk is unexpected or does not privilege the safety of the audience.

### 5.3 FORMATIVE PROCESS



**Figure 10:** (Vena Cava, 2014) - Remi, Julia, Silva, Esther and Pavle introduce The Suicide Show

This formative process constituted a very early part of the as a part of Vena Cava Production's 'Fresh Blood Festival 2014' at a dance studio named 'Cüpo'. 'The Suicide Show' was presented two times in the same day, one matinee and one evening performance.

This process was experimental, as it sought to qualify some of the uncertainties that we had about the efficacy of what had been created thus far. The goals of this iteration were primarily to gather unofficial feedback about the work we had done thus far in order to informed official, ethically cleared action cycles for data collection.

The result of this experiment was nothing short of explosive. Unfortunately, the events of the formative process are not well documented. Ethical clearance for the collection of qualitative data had not been planned for this initial process. It was not anticipated that the findings would be as significant as they were. What follows here is a recount of what unfolded during the experiment from the subjective standpoint of the researcher. It is vital to note that all details below are reflected upon in future chapters as a counterpoint to the data gathered in official cycles of practice, but remain my subjective recount of the events.

The performance was about 25 minutes through; two suicides had taken place and the third was about to begin when someone in the audience raised their hand and said that they felt encouraged by the work to speak up if necessary. A number of people had

gotten up to leave at this stage, some of them crying. I stepped up to the stage from my seat in the front row and encouraged the intervener to speak. The audience in question stated quite plainly that they saw no reason for the performance to continue; it had made its point and achieved its goals. Immediately, this audience was joined by a number of others who felt that the work was making light of suicide and quizzed me vehemently about my motivations for making the performance. At one stage, an audience member equated the severity of what they had seen to being forced to watch pedophilia. It was then that a number of other audience members contested the views of those who were opposed to the work, attempting to justify it on my behalf; they felt that the work should continue. An argument broke out in the audience, the length and intensity of which constituted the remainder of the performance. When I brought the work to an end and thanked everyone for their attendance, bravery and input, nobody moved. It emerged that they were not willing to leave until they saw that all the performers were alive. The initial intervener requested a bow so that the performers could be applauded.

In the second performance, word of mouth brought a much bigger audience and the venue went beyond capacity. Audience members lined the edges of the seating bank and crowded around behind it. During the first suicide a loud, "STOP!" was shouted from someone in the standing row and the audience erupted into chatter. The performer at the time had covered their entire face in duct tape, sealing off her mouth and nose. The audience could not fathom how it was that the performer was breathing and, in a clumsy solution of words, said that they were happy for the performance to continue but wanted to intervene to ensure the safety of the actor. This was, in a sense, the beginning of the end. The barriers between the stage and the audience had been broken and the demands from the audience from that point were relentless. People would shout out questions asking if a performer was okay, I was to step up a number of times to resolve audience enquiry and at one stage someone asked if I would commit suicide myself (which I did). The audience independently engaged in a countdown for one of the performers to stab themselves. That particular scene was cut short by someone who later described to me a case of synesthesia, where the sound of the performer's screams caused them physical pain. The performance did end this time, albeit by the skin of its teeth. The audience slowly dispersed but the performers and I were confronted by a barrage of questions and comments from a range of people. There were reports of people who left crying. Others made emphatic assertions that the researcher *would* interview them. Many people praised the work for the experience it gave them though it was also reported to me that someone had left to vomit.

It seemed that the work had succeeded in creating a genuine intersection of reality and construction during a theatre event. The practice methods employed for the work, even at a formative stage, had manifested the principles indicated by existing practice. The audience's response to the work evidences that the uncertainty created by it was meaningful and important. Their interventions are an indication that the work presented insufficient evidence to support belief that 'drama' was in fact a controlling force over the actions taking place. The significance of the staged phenomena ceased to be a matter of theatre and became a matter important to everyday experience. Evidently, there is potential in these instances for performed structure to become abandoned and redefined. Audiences seized the power the work offered them and from that point, their own contributions constituted the work. This indicates that the theatre event was perceived as unfolding in the same space and time as its audience, who in this instance, share roles with the performers and are also the site upon which the artistic significance of the work is realized. It was described by many people that the process of being unable to harness this experience resulted in the shakes, crying, extreme tension through the body and, as mentioned, synesthesia and illness.

A particular audience had been affected by the moral questions raised by the work. In this regard, *The Suicide Show's* first iteration is functioning proof of Lehmann's conclusion that theatre "attain[s] its political, ethical reality ... [as a result of] its constitution to hurt feelings, to produce shock and disorientation, which point the spectators to their own presence precisely through 'amoral', 'asocial' and seemingly 'cynical' events" (2006, 187). Lehmann speaks to this event with particular reference to theatre that, like *The Suicide Show*, deals with the "aesthetics of risk" where, "safe distance is no longer given, which the aesthetic distance between stage and auditorium seemed to safeguard. Precisely this reality of the theatre, that it can play with the border, predestines it for acts and actions in which not an 'ethical' reality or a thesis is formulated but in which a situation develops that confronts the spectators with abysmal fear, shame and even mounting aggression" (2006, 187).

## 5.4 CYCLE ONE



**Figure 11:** Emma, Melina (stage managers), Esther, and new cast member Finley relax on stage. Photo by Daniel Gough.

Hoping to replicate the success of the formative process, *The Suicide Show's* content did not change for Cycle One. However, there were a number of incidental changes that took place:

- Change of venue; work was relocated to QUT's Studio Theatre – a black box venue.
- One performer decided to leave the production and was replaced.
- Audience was placed at a greater distance from the action and in a seating bank.
- Performers had an awareness of how work can be responded to; entered into cycle one with an expectation that altered their performance.
- Audience were provided with ethical clearance forms and disclaimers that described the function, content and purpose of the performance.
- Focus groups were facilitated after each performance and surveys were available for completion.
- There were three showings across two nights (one matinee and two evening performances) as opposed to two showings within 6 hours of each other.

Throughout the transition from the formative process to cycle one, it was difficult to recognize the extent to which the work was changing. These changes had surprisingly significant effect on *The Suicide Show*. The success realized in the formative process was

not realized again in Cycle One. However, the clarity of the formative process's outcomes were such that with the help of collected data after Cycle One, an enlightening comparison was made accessible.

## **5.5 OUTCOMES OF CYCLE ONE**

The product of data analysis (after Cycle One) was the identification of a series of key notions. On one hand, these notions shed light on how the constituents of the theatre event should be arranged to cause the co-existence of reality and construction. On the other hand, some qualifying statements about the experience of this effect were also evaluated.

As for the former, the data could be separated into discussions about six key elements that have been configured here to form binaries. These binaries are:

- Theatre Space / Found Space
- Informed / Uninformed
- Narrative / Event
- Structure / Chaos
- Safety / Risk
- Distance / Proximity

### **5.5.1 THEATRE SPACE / FOUND SPACE**

**Notion ONE:** *While the theatre space encourages the suspension of disbelief, it does not encourage the suspension of conceit.*

It seemed very clear during all the performances in Cycle One that the decision to situate the work in a theatre space was detrimental to achieving the work's goals. To affirm, one participant shared,

“...the moment you're in these walls ... it's a construct as far as I'm concerned. So I was able to view it from that point of view from the very beginning...” (Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance One,)

The theatre's repute for theatrical practice seemed to inhibit the audience's ability to identify content within a theatre space as real. The conditions of the theatre space are commonly assumed to be, “normative: silent audience, darkened auditorium, clear boundaries between stage and audience, acting and behavior, onstage and off stage”

(Worthen in Ridout 2006, 73). Even when these conditions are contravened by the theatre experiment, other tangible indicators of the theatre environment cannot be taken away. For example, a separate foyer, a lighting rig and desk, the seating bank and high ceiling are not easily disguised. It is an environment that triggers the suspension of disbelief as an idiosyncratic practice.

**Notion TWO: *A theatre space cannot be made like a found space; it can only be made less like a theatre.***

After learning how deeply detrimental a theatre space was to *The Suicide Show* in performance one of the first cycle, it was important to immediately recalibrate in the theatre space to liken it to a found space. The seating bank was removed and replaced with stacked chairs, which the audience picked up and placed themselves. It was hoped that this would demonstrate a dismissal of the theatre's traditional conventions, particularly because the retracted seating bank was still in view. This was to cause the audience to reconsider the space's purpose as a host for performance and enable an audience to regard it the same way they might regard a found space. It was stated regardless that,

“...I think it'd be interesting to do it in like a place where typically a suicide would occur like just in like a lounge room or whatever and we're all just like sitting around.” (Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance Two).

and;

“... in a conventional space, like ... at this university, this to me is like a theatre space so I guess being in that environment you're in the scenario, the location, where you sit down you watch things...” (Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance Two).

Modifying the theatre space was not enough to do away with the theatre 'enchantment' altogether.

**Notion THREE: *Audiences must feel that all inhabitants of a performance space are operating within the same spatio-temporal logic and rules.***

The focus group after the second performance also demonstrated an infatuation with a line of tape that had been put on the floor to demarcate where the audience could and could not seat themselves when laying down their chairs. For the audience, the tape represented a division in not only space, but also logical and intellectual positioning. The tape was initially placed as a safety mechanism to be ignored by directors and stage managers who would walk over it when necessary. This seemed to deeply bother some audience members.

“I thought it was interesting that although there was a line ah like you guys were kind of happy to cross it any time ... It was like you guys were obviously running back and forth over the line like you didn’t have any respect and I know yeah, they were all kind of standing in the line and I was like, ‘You shouldn’t be in that space.’”

This statement demonstrates either an uncertainty or dissatisfaction with how to understand the relationship to the space. The line was perceived as a very flimsy way of dividing audience and stage, audience and action, as well as audience and performer. The work “didn’t have any respect” for the way the audience might measure their proximity to the space against that line.

### **5.5.2 INFORMED / UNINFORMED**

***Notion: An awareness of context, content or involved artists can limit the possibility of perceiving reality in a theatre work.***

A key difference between the formative process and first cycle was the level of awareness that each audience had of the work before viewing it. It was evidenced in focus groups that as a result of having been informed about the work, there was a sense of disconnect. One focus group participant said,

“For me, I was, I guess distanced from it in a sense that, I guess the way in which the show was framed I guess your framing is a piece of research I guess, “it’s my Masters show,” so essentially I was looking into a Petri dish or something, and I was kind of just observing the results. So by framing it in such a way I think that you created distance, for me anyway.” (Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance Two).



This participant indicates that being informed of the work's context as embedded in research was something they could escape. The result was a feeling of distance and emotional disengagement from the events of the theatre work because of an inability to disconnect from an awareness of the constructed pretence of theatre. This may have been the case for anyone who had read the disclosure statements distributed prior to viewing the work.

A personal connection to the performers or the team creating the work also evidenced a barrier between audience and theatre work. One participant states explicitly, "...because I know everybody it's hard to you know really dive head first in" (Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance Two). There is a demonstrated inability to strike a personal connection with the artists to form a new and genuine connection with the theatre work. Further, being informed of the staged content also impacts on levels of audience engagement. Another participant shares,

"I think that the more you know about the show itself you lose the impact. You're obviously [someone I know] so I hear all about the show. I also know the show from previously so you die, the cast, every day so do you think that perhaps that's what put me off it, the way, I personally wouldn't feel any empathy or sympathy or anything like that. It was really just kind of, it was just really practiced." (Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance Three).

Being informed that all the actions in the work can be undertaken without any risk causes a deterioration of the uncertainty required for perceiving reality. White attests to this, stating that in theatre, "familiarity ... has a great influence on the perception of the difficulty of an act" (2013, 81). *The Suicide Show* seeks to unhinge the audience from their understanding of theatre to perceive that something real is being presented. It is evident that being informed *before* attending this kind of theatre work limits the possibility of perceiving reality within it, though sometimes disclosure is necessary.

### **5.5.3 NARRATIVE / EVENT**

**Notion ONE: *Audiences invent narrative to either;***

***a) create distance from perceived reality in the theatre event, or,***

***b) cater for existing feelings of distance from the theatre event.***

**Notion TWO: *Perceiving narrative within theatre work limits the perception of reality.***

Audience members were documented as attempting to forge a story-like narrative for themselves to create an emotional distance from the work. For example, one focus group participant states,

“I think we try really hard not to make emotional decisions. I’d be like, “no no no, I’m doing it like to pick the most interesting storyline. I want to see the most interesting death.” Like we try really hard to be like, “I did it because I didn’t particularly want to hear that person talk,” you know, it’s just like we justify it to ourselves with like the narrative of the you know the overarching experience for us as opposed to our emotional involvement in the thing” (Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance Two).

The audience’s involvement in the work (selecting the ensemble member who will kill themselves and how) is here perceived as something callous and the individual demonstrates a fear of being judged for the application of their input to a ‘real-life’ context. It is as though they are afraid of hurting someone’s feelings with their decision. To make the action easier and more accessible, the audience has tried to make their decision a creative one, forming “the most interesting storyline.” But in claiming to employ this method as a distancing mechanism, one only demonstrates a belief in the pertinence of their decision to the everyday, which does not constitute narrative. This participant confesses to pretending that their decisions are of narrative importance to create distance, which merely speaks to the level of proximity being created by the work. However, statements indicate that perhaps that audience-asserted narrative can be engaged because of extant feelings of distance, as opposed to proximity. For example,

“...I was choosing like my um who, who I wanted to die based on who I thought would be narratively most interesting you know so cause like I wanted to see different interaction between different characters...” (Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance Two).

In either case, it may be that story-like narrative does more than indicate distance; it enlarges distance.

#### **5.5.4 STRUCTURE / CHAOS**

**Notion ONE: *Chaos should be instigated by the audience as an exploitation of liveness.***

The formative process seemed to indicate that a sense of chaos was an indicator that the theatre event had conjured perceptions of the real. It was evidenced by the first action cycle that this was not the case. While the performers and the performance strived to achieve this level of chaos again, it became clear that chaos need to be instigated by the audience. Upon reflection with the performers, it was realised that what we called 'chaos' was actually the audience's exploitation of liveness. Following a performance in the first action cycle, a focus group participant stated,

“...if someone [in the audience] said something or if someone made a sound, you could see them looking out to see who it was, but they couldn't always pinpoint who it was, so it felt like because of that, there was a bit of a separation there.”  
(Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance One).

It seems that the audience perceived a kind of desperation from the performers for the audience to engage in the liveness of the theatre work. The effect of this desperation was counterproductive and garnered an unwanted kind of chaos. It seemed that in the formative process, an adherence to the predetermined structure of the work, which was open and flexible but also confronting and violent, indicated the potential for audience-instigated chaos.

**Notion TWO: *The work should have an established structure through which audiences can access opportunities to engage with liveness.***

It was evidenced that establishing the structure of the work provided the audience with a way to measure any reality. Describing the boundaries of the work cultivates an awareness of what boundaries exist to be bent or broken. A focus group participant verifies this, saying,

“...you tell us in the beginning like we'll have a fight scene then a suicide then a love scene then a suicide it's like, so I know this is going to happen but also there are certainly variables in it as well and so when we see something like, mess up,

well it's like, 'is that a controlled variable..?'" (Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance Two).

The audience are the controllers of structure and chaos. They must be provided a structure in order to understand how it can be done away with and feel invited to do so. To achieve perceived reality, a work should offer the potential for chaos; it should not indulge in it independently.

### **5.5.5 SAFETY / RISK**

**Notion ONE:** *Risks in theatre are important if their engagement threatens to affect the everyday.*

**Notion TWO:** *In theatre, risky actions engage a bargaining process. This bargaining process is constituted by a dialogue with the theatre event about deciding the truth of the risk.*

**Notion THREE:** *The sustained inability to evidence safety makes perceived boundaries between space, performer and audience permeable.*

The effect of the evidence of risk in the performance of Cycle One (while it was evident) was such that it over-rode the social frame in which the audience should share some form of distance from the work. This has emerged as a defining characteristic of risk in performance. In focus groups, it was identified that moments of high risk bore holes in the barrier between stage and auditorium where audiences "no longer felt that the actor was safe" (Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance One). This participant struggled to translate their experience coherently, stating,

"...it's like, you know, because he's sealed over his, he's... gone really far, you know, so it sort of, it's interesting because I think it felt a bit like reality, reality, triple zero. Dangerous." (Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance One).

These statements refer to one particular suicide (in the first showing) where a performer placed large pieces of thick black tape over their mouth, nose and eyes, leaving no visible holes or evidence that they could breathe. He then handcuffed himself behind the back and proceeded to suffocate.

Because the only evidence of the performer's condition indicates that he should not be able to breathe, an audience must necessarily confront the amount of theatrical construction being employed. The audience faces a decision: should they choose to put

their faith in the constructed nature of theatre, or should they trust the evidence that stands contrary to the safety of a constructed environment? Assumedly, the rules of the respiratory system are not negotiable. What is evident here is that the greater the evidence of risk, the greater the search for safety becomes. The audience seeks out *the reality of the theatrical event as a construction* to be played out before them, insistent that (regardless of contrary evidence) we can depend on the institution of theatre to ensure that a performer will not die. Phenomenological understandings of reality take hold here and are challenged by uncertainty. The marker on the *Safety/Risk* binary therefore begins to move toward risk when the bargaining process begins. It is closest to risk when an audience is not willing to bet in favor of the safety promised by theatre, causing an acknowledgement that there is no theatrical relationship between space, performer and audience.

Interestingly, it was commented that,

“You do not want to be the one person that’s tricked. Like, you don’t want to be like the loser who thought it was real or whatever” (Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance Two).

Here is documented an example of decided behavior, which is reactionary to the presence of other audience members. As though to reinforce this point, another participant shares,

“...here’s us sitting here, trying so hard to just like be blasé about the fact that there’s someone dying in front of us like it’s this constant competition to be the least phased...” (Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance Two).

It is established here that we are, “more likely to associate ourselves positively with an action that we see a number of other people undertaking” (White 2013, 81). In this case, that action is ‘not being phased.’ It can be gathered from this that a risk must be so pressing that the individual is willing to act against the consensus of the entire audience in order to intervene. The most common compromise for an audience member in this case is to leave. It is important to mention, though, that the first cycle did not inspire any notable interventions beyond leaving the space.

Evidencing itself in focus groups was the option to refuse the bargaining process entirely, which emphasizes a decision to disconnect from the work emotionally.

“I think I actively fought against feeling anything. All the way through. I think that something in me that ... felt that it was a manipulation, because there were people in the room who knew or had the answer or the key to what’s real and what’s not quite real, and feeling kind of disempowered by that I think I just kind of fought whatever kind of sympathy or consideration, or could it be real, even if something felt like it could have been a little bit real, I’m like NUP! And now I’m like fifty percent sure that she’s not really at the hospital, that’s all part of it” (Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance Three).

It can be gleaned from this statement that the decision to disconnect is related to a number of things,

- a) There is an understanding that a bargain should take place.
- b) The conceit is too apparent.
- c) The audience can actively reject engagement with the bargaining process.
- d) The audience can re-open negotiation with the work at any time.

It is also evident also that if the force of the bargain is sufficiently strong, it has the ability to constantly re-challenge disengaged audience members in moments of lapsed concentration or vulnerability. This is supported by a comment from an audience member who had seen the work before. They said,

“It was, it was, like an emotional point that was that almost a tear welled in my eye and I admit, I almost crushed it immediately because it was fictional and I reminded myself immediately of that.”

**Notion FOUR: *The sustained inability to evidence safety causes a physical response.***

It is evidenced that the bargaining process (caused by intense levels of perceived risk) is managed in some kind of involuntary emotional or physical way. Evidence is provided by a number of audience comments that describe a sincere physical or emotional struggle for the audience:

“When I was watching (unknown) I was like, digging my fingernails into my legs and stuff.” (Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance Two).

“I just felt an overwhelming empathy and a desire to help” (Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance Three).

“I had to get up and leave; I was feeling very faint ... during that, Esther’s suicide, I couldn’t escape the noise...”(Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance Three).

Many people described the physical sensation of realizing they had become very tense. Watching the audience, people were seen closing their eyes and some cried silently. However, physical expressions are difficult to qualify; they are either decided physical activity for the purpose of quashing emotional strain or involuntary physical expressions that have leapt forward, ahead of decided behavior.

## **5.6 CHARACTERISING AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE: DISTANCE / PROXIMITY**

**Notion ONE: *An audience’s inability to perceive reality in the theatre event is characterised as ‘distance’.***

It is evident that when an audience does not feel that the work is achieving its goals in causing the perception of reality in the theatre event, ‘distance’ is the term that best characterises their relationship to it. There are also examples of audiences who *have* experienced perceived reality within *The Suicide Show*, but are confronted to the degree that they feel compelled to put distance between the performance and themselves. For example, one participant stated, “I had to get up and leave ... I guess I would close my eyes and not really know what was happening, but ... I couldn’t escape the noise” (Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance Three). It has been noted that leaving the theatre event, blocking sensory receivers and imagining a narrative scaffolding for the work are all mechanisms that the audience employ to create distance. In either case, distance refers to the quality of the audience’s relationship with the other constituents of the theatre event; the space and the performers.

**Notion TWO: *The audience’s experience of perceiving reality in the theatre event can be characterised as ‘proximity’.***

Where reality was perceived in *The Suicide Show*, it is evident that audiences felt that there was no distance between them and the unfolding action. The suicides in particular are described as evoking an urgency that made any active theatrical constructs impertinent. For example, one participant states, “He’s ... gone really far, you know ... it felt a bit like reality, reality, triple zero. Dangerous.” (Focus Group Participant, Cycle

One, Performance One). Though the term is not specifically stated, all accounts of this particular experience can be characterized as 'proximity'.

A second kind of proximity was exposed by the gathered data. Some audiences described that they did not perceive reality but explained that they were "... looking for that reassurance that you, you're in control like you're in control of what you're seeing ... that you have the power to be able to identify the situations and what's happening..." (Focus Group Participant, Cycle One, Performance Two,). While there may never have been a belief that the unfolding action was real, as the action suggests risk, this audience was forced into proximity with the work simply to identify what negates the importance of the risk. This may have been, for example, by looking for a hidden blood pack or air hole during any given suicide. It is evidenced that an audience member must actively penetrate the spatiotemporal aspects of the theatre event in order to determine how (real)ly, the work is achieving its effect.



## 6.0 FINAL CREATIVE CYCLE – THE REALITY EVENT: SUICIDE

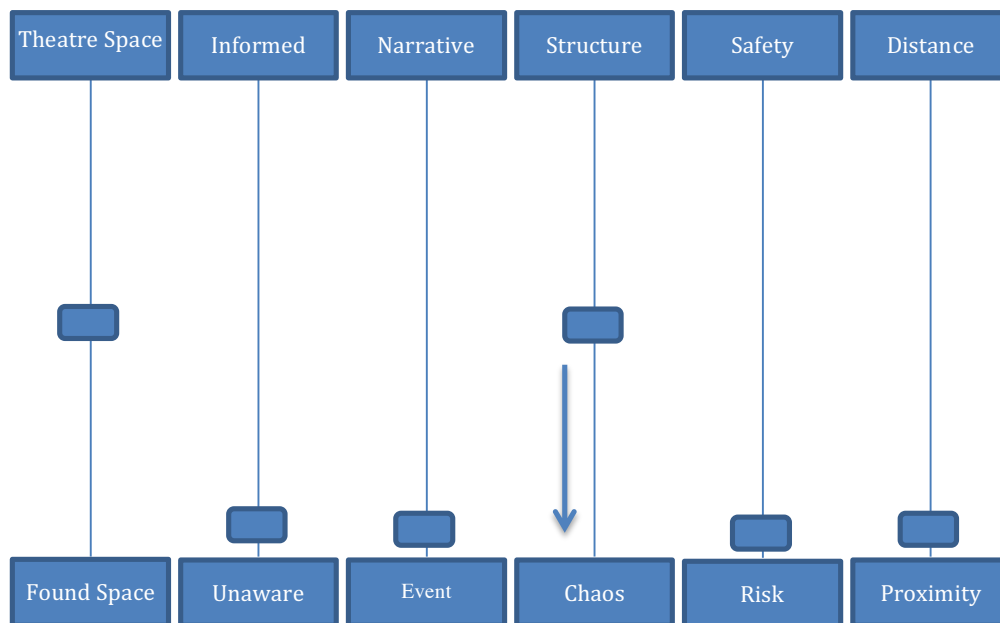


**Figure 12** (Newport 2015) – A wrapped body is removed from the space.

The notions established as preliminary findings from the first cycle of practice necessitated a redevelopment, which was renamed *The Reality Event: Suicide*. This section describes the result of implementing these notions and the subsequent changes made to *The Suicide Show* to do so.

During this development a device realised through the emergent framework of Frame Theory, the calibration system, became a tool in the creative process. The formative process and first action cycle garnered a series of praxes that could be represented as binary poles, which enabled the visualisation of each performance iteration by placing markers on these poles to form a ‘calibration’. Further, by taking into account the notions extrapolated from the collected data, a new, ideal calibration could be imagined to configure a system through which the redevelopment of *The Reality Event: Suicide* would aspire.

The ideal calibration is as follows:



**Figure 13**

The changes made to the work are described in terms of the binaries on this calibration system with the exception of the final binary, Distance/Proximity. It was found, as per the extracted notions, that:

- a) An audience's inability to perceive reality in the theatre event is characterised as 'distance'.
- b) The audience's experience of perceiving reality in the theatre event can be characterised as 'proximity'.

It is integral to note that the first five binaries on the calibration system are set to minimise the characteristic of distance and maximise the characteristic of proximity for audience members who viewed the work in its final action cycle. There is evidence that overall, this was achieved for audiences of this cycle, with many people seeking to put distance between themselves and the work by leaving (many coming back later) or asking questions to halt the action. The work was certainly able to achieve instances in which the audience were not able to discern reality from construction and it is the confrontation of this characteristic that manifests itself for the audience as proximity. Lomas states plainly that "...it's difficult to distance yourself from each violent act as it takes place..." (2015). Kern precursors her review by saying the work was "incredibly intimate; which is a word that I will be using a lot when it comes to this piece, because it truly came across as the embodiment of this production" (2015).

## 6.1 THEATRE SPACE / FOUND SPACE

Notion ONE: *While the theatre space encourages the suspension of disbelief, it does not encourage the suspension of conceit.*

Notion TWO: *A theatre space cannot be made like a found space; it can only be made less like a theatre.*

Notion THREE: *Audiences must feel that all inhabitants of a performance space are operating within the same spatio-temporal logic and rules.*

It is apparent that all three of these notions were accounted for by moving the work outside of a theatre space and into a more public space. Here, Notion One indicates that achieving the suspension of conceit is not possible in a theatre space. Notion Two indicates that attempting to modify the theatre space is not a remedy to the effect that it has on the audience's response(s). Resultantly, the location of *The Reality Event: Suicide*, changed to a small inner city café called 'Bean', which had full public access and a bar with coffee and alcohol services. It was hypothesised that this kind of space might aid in addressing Notion Three. There was nothing about Bean as a space that indicated a separation between audience and performers. The set used in prior iterations of the work was discarded in favour of a plain table took its place. It had been hypothesised that a space such as this, with no backstage area or theatre equipment, would enable the audience to feel a sense of shared ownership over the space. During the introduction scene, audiences were also made aware of their right to occupy the space in whatever way they pleased, so long as they did not interrupt the violent action with a physical intervention for the sake of their own safety.

The result of this venue and set changes were highly significant. This was evidenced in published reviews, which expressed that many of the proximity-causing effects of the work were owed to the choice of space. One review states that "...this gripping piece of provocative theatre ... is sure to elicit responses from even the most jaded of audiences. In part due to the intimacy of the venue... [A] clever design makes a hard task of separating the real and the fabricated" (Lomas 2015). Reviews also valued the qualities of the space to reinforce the audience's ownership over it, emphasising that,

"... the house lights were not dimmed ... The audience was able to file in and chose from a small number of seats and even were given the choice to get up and order drinks at the counter during the duration of the show. This, again, added a

very casual element to the production, which created an unusual layer to the piece which I cannot quite name...”

## 6.2 INFORMED / UNINFORMED

Notion ONE: *An awareness of context, content or involved artists can limit the possibility of perceiving reality in a theatre work.*

To address this notion, *The Suicide Show* was both renamed and paired with a second performance with much more playful themes (performed on an alternate night) in order to attract a new, broader audience. *The Reality Event: Suicide* was also programmed in the Anywhere Theatre Festival, again, to access a broader, uninformed audience. Promotional material was kept vague and, in some ways, misleading.



Figure 14

The content of posters such as these, for example, are of purely aesthetic value and make no indication of the kind of performance it represents. It is understood, however, that there are limitations to calibrating along this binary; with each performance and the release of reviews, audiences can only become more informed. It seemed that while many audiences were able to approach the work completely uninformed, many may have had an awareness of my previous work. One reviewer made note of an expectation they had which was informing their approach to the work, saying, “I admit I was anxious

about seeing this event not just because of its theme, but how real Daniel Gough's work is (I saw his work *Monster* at last year's festival [the imagery of which] still plays on my mind)..." (Hayes 2015). The same reviewer indicated later that her anxiety disappeared to be replaced with feelings of empathy and pity for the actors, but never that her feelings of anxiety were justified.

### **6.3 NARRATIVE / EVENT**

Notion ONE: *Audiences invent narrative to either;*

- a) create distance from perceived reality in the theatre event, or,*
- b) cater for existing feelings of distance from the theatre event.*

Notion TWO: *Perceiving narrative within theatre work limits the perception of reality.*

It is indicated by the previous processes that *The Suicide Show* demonstrated optimal content for eschewing narrative qualities. Ensuring that each event in the work was clearly task-based seemed to achieve this result. This is evidenced by Kern, who in her review states that the, "Plot," was so simple, "that is was almost completely lost, and didn't seem to exist at all," referring to the audiences role of selecting performers to commit suicide as opposed to the scenes that took place between them (2015). These scenes were mentioned by a reviewer who said,

"...each suicide followed by a theatrical standard (a romance, a conflict) and it's these interjections that ... serve well as reprieves, even if only to then remind you that there can be no true relief in this theatre designed to provoke, to agitate, almost tortuously so." (Lomas 2015)

Lomas evidences here that there is respite – a distancing quality – to be experienced through the narrative aspects of the work. Additionally though, he indicates that distance was not entirely possible through the configuration of the work.

This final cycle strove to create obstacles with the work that made it difficult for audience members to create narrative. Such an obstacle was the use of Bean as a performance space, which was substantially smaller than either of the spaces used prior. It was hypothesised that the increased physical proximity created by the space would make it harder for audiences to create distance from the content's confronting nature with contrived, audience-created narrative. This hypothesis was proven accurate in the case of Kern, who both characterises the work with the term 'intimacy' and goes on to

say that the ambiguity, “as to whether they were actually committing the act, rather than acting ... sent frissions [sic] of fear crawling down my spine” (2015). She continues, stating, “The audience was also seated quite close to the edge of the performance space which made the content all the more confronting” (ibid).

#### **6.4 STRUCTURE / CHAOS**

Notion ONE: *Chaos should be instigated by the audience as an exploitation of liveness.*

Notion TWO: *The work should have an established structure through which audiences can access opportunities to engage with liveness.*

Structure from previous iterations of the work was not changed dramatically for this final action cycle. The existing structure had evidenced in preliminary exercises that it was able to engage both of above notions. It was felt, however, that the performer’s approach to engaging the structure was in need of re-evaluation. Performers were made aware of how expecting or anticipating audience intervention was visible and disruptive. This could not be ‘rehearsed out’ of the performers, but was part of the ensemble’s performing consciousness in *The Reality Event: Suicide*. This change was seen to result in a positive outcome; reviews garnered only praise for the work of the ensemble and their commitment to the action.

To encourage the exploitation of liveness, the introduction of the work made audiences aware of their right to intervene and engage with the performers at any time. These combined changes were engaged to reinforce the possibilities of liveness as something the audience should feel encouraged to exploit. This took place in several forms throughout the season of the final cycle, with people frequently standing to leave the performance, crying or covering their eyes from the audience, several notable instances of audiences asking clarifying questions and one particular instance in which an audience member wanted the action to stop entirely.

#### **6.5 SAFETY / RISK**

Notion ONE: *Risks in theatre are important if their engagement threatens to affect the everyday.*

Notion TWO: *In theatre, risky actions engage a bargaining process. This bargaining process is constituted by a dialogue with the theatre event about deciding the truth of the risk.*



Notion THREE: *The sustained inability to evidence safety makes perceived boundaries between space, performer and audience permeable.*

Notion FOUR: *The sustained inability to evidence safety causes a physical response.*

Much was learned about the role that risk plays in achieving the co-existence of reality and construction in a theatre event. That said, no indication was made that the risks presented in *The Suicide Show* (in the form of suicidal acts) should change for the next iteration. Thus, there were no significant changes made to risks presented in *The Reality Event: Suicide*. While bringing the audience much closer to the action was viewed as an opportunity to emphasise presented risks, it became very important to ensure that up close, the actions still seemed risky and the mechanisms that made them safe were not exposed. For this reason, drowning and drinking liquid nitrogen were removed from the audience's selection of suicides. Also, a more sophisticated device was used to achieve the effect of the suicide via gunshot. The enactment of the risks received attention in reviews as presenting genuine danger. One said, "Is this really just a performance, or have I just witnessed a crime?" (Lomas 2015). Another said, "The Suicide Ensemble were each incredibly realistic to the point where it became ambiguous as to whether they were actually committing the act, rather than acting." (Kern 2015). It was evidenced by this cycle that audiences are most active at the height of risk; commonly audiences left the space or intervened during these moments.

## 6.6 THE CLOWNS



**Figure 15:** (Newport 2015)

An entirely new element was introduced for *The Reality Event: Suicide* that catered to a number of the binaries in the calibration system. To open the theatre event, five performers dressed in blacks and wearing sad, black and white clown paint were dotted

across the space as audience members entered. On a sound cue (ten minutes before the performance commenced), they approached the table (in front of which all action took place) and revealed a bag. In slow movement sequence, the clowns unpacked the bag, which was full of the implements required to complete the suicides. Once unpacked, they stowed the bag and took their places around the audience, proceeding to wipe the makeup from their faces.

In justification it seemed that the formative process had establish a nervous reverence for the theatre event which it then destroyed with its own undertaking. This was not the case for Cycle One, which was more cocky and self-assured tone. The Clowns, an homage to the Grand Guignol form (a form a gory, violent theatre popular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century), were an attempt to restore this sense of reverence and respect to the act of theatre. Their presence was a symbol of theatricality designed to establish something performative that is destroyed as their makeup is removed and juxtaposed by the remaining anti-theatrical performance content.



## 7.0 FINDINGS

When I began this research enquiry over 18 months ago, I sought to find a system that would enable to me manoeuvre the constituents of the theatre event in order to coalesce the co-existence of reality and construction. My secondary concern was to investigate and understand the way that audiences respond to such an occurrence, thereby broadening the discourse around audience/performer/space relationships. In doing so, I was guided by two research questions:

*How can the theatre maker manipulate the constituent elements of the theatre event in order to cause an intersection of the real and the constructed?*

*How is an audience's experience of this occurrence characterised?*

In order to answer these questions, I created an original theatre work, developed across a formative process and two action cycles. Each iteration represented the accumulation of my theoretical understanding and responsiveness to the principles and notions determined by and between them. The research findings are expressed by describing and justifying the placement of markers on a system of calibration, which was devised after the first cycle of *The Suicide Show*. The first five binaries respond to the first research question, while the sixth binary responds to the second research question.

### 7.1 MANIPULATING THE CONSTITUENT ELEMENTS OF THE THEATRE EVENT

It was found through the creation and presentation of the project titled eventually titled *The Reality Event: Suicide* that the following principles best manifest the co-existence of reality and construction in the theatre event.

#### 7.1.1 THEATRE EVENT SHOULD BE UNDERTAKEN IN A PUBLIC SPACE

It was found that situating work within a theatre space inhibits an audience's ability to perceive reality within a theatre work. The theatre space brings with it the spirit of the theatrical, which is not easily removed from the surface of a theatre work. Situating the theatre event in a public space helps to sever these connections with the theatrical and assists the audience to feel an equal amount of ownership over the space and the work itself. Audiences are able to establish personal connections to a work in a space that maintains these qualities, improving the likelihood of perceiving an event of the real. Sparse or non-existent use of theatre equipment and design elements, which are often attributes of public spaces, also contributed to this effect. These conditions are

evidenced in the use of Bean Café as a performance space. Its contribution to the overall effect of the work is made clear in reviews who praise the venue for the intimacy and proximity it provided.

### **7.1.2 AUDIENCES SHOULD HAVE VERY LITTLE AWARENESS OF THE WORK**

In any regard, the greater an audience's awareness of a theatre work in any regard, the less likely they are to engage with the experience of reality within it. It was found that the less informed an audience member was of the theatre work, the more susceptible they were to the accumulative effect of the remaining calibrations in causing the perception of reality. Newer and broader audiences were accessed by the framework of the Anywhere Theatre Festival, which facilitated a majority of attendees with no previous experience of the work. Resultantly, responses to *The Reality Event* were greatly heightened by comparison to the first cycle, where all audiences had been briefed in detail on the premise and purpose of the work.

### **7.1.3 WORK SHOULD ACTIVELY SEEK COUNTERACT THE QUALITIES OF NARRATIVE**

Narrative is counter-effective in causing perceptions of reality in theatre as it provides a familiar and logical structure through which audiences understand 'story'. It was found that audiences employ narrative frameworks to create distance from theatre work, providing themselves with an alternative means of engagement. This intrusion of narrative was combatted by presenting task-based content completed in tandem with or involving the audience. It was also combatted by placing audience members within very close proximity of the performed action. Consequently, the work counteracted the qualities of narrative, forming only a 'plot' which was constituted by audience involvement (Kern 2015).

### **7.1.4 AUDIENCES SHOULD BE ENABLED TO ENGAGE CHAOS THROUGH THE OPENNESS OF STRUCTURE**

The most ideal form of chaos for causing interplay between reality and construction is one engaged by the audience as an exploitation of liveness. This may take the form of some kind of unplanned interruption or intervention during which the direction of the established structure of the work is led in a new direction. This kind of chaos is best enabled by an open and flexible structure that defies exact repeatability by nature of its undertaking. The examinable product guarantees a kind of chaos in that the enactment

of certain events by certain people changes based on the audience's decisions. In addition, audiences engaged with the work through its liveness by interrupting structured action with questions and objections.

#### **7.1.5 WORK SHOULD PRESENT IMPORTANT RISKS THAT THREATEN 'REAL WORLD' OUTCOMES**

It was found that performed content should present important risks, the outcome of which must be important enough to have effect beyond the theatre world and into the everyday world. Dangerous risks engage audiences in a bargaining process through which the safety of the theatre construct is challenged. Reality is perceived when this bargain is lost; an audience considers that the action is not being veiled by the safety of the theatre construct. It is at this point that audiences are most likely to be confronted by and engage with theatre's liveness. In the examinable work, it was at the height of each presented risk that audiences demonstrated the most action, leaving the space, exhibiting a physical response or interrupting the action. By presenting important risks in *The Reality Event: Suicide*, audiences were seen to engage in either a silent (crying, fidgeting, tensing) or literal dialogue through which they were trying to deal with the perception of these risks' reality.

#### **7.2 THE EXPERIENCE OF PERCEIVING REALITY WITHIN THE THEATRE EVENT**

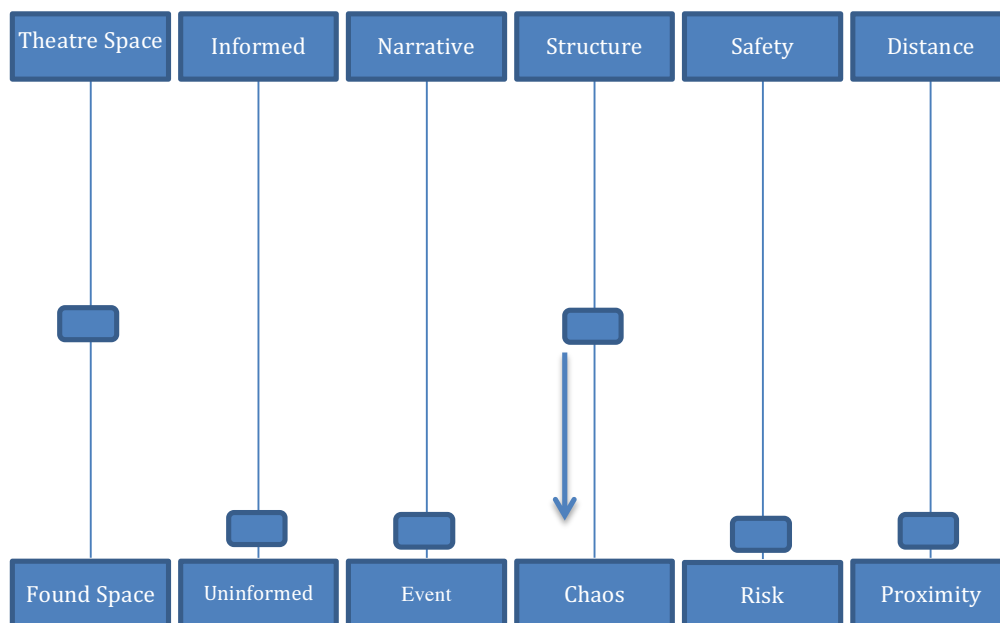
It was found that an audience's experience of the intersection of reality with construction is best characterised by the term, 'proximity.' As a matter of audience experience in the theatre event, proximity refers to the perception that the audience, the performers and the space – also the key constituents of theatre – share absolutely no distance. It is perceived that audiences and performers make an equal contribution to the event of theatre. Subsequently, both occupy the space in the same capacity, operating within the same logic and engaging actions in the same passage of time. This is evidenced in the examinable product by behaviours of the audiences that contravene traditional codes of theatre attendance to form a new code. In particular, talking, chattering and moving about the performance space freely are practices indulged by performers and audience members alike. The actions of the performance itself were determined by a collaboration between performers and audiences who felt welcomed to adopt a role within the performance construct. With some audiences, the experience of proximity is evidenced with attempts to counteract it by leaving the space. Audience members who seek to intervene also evidence the experience of proximity in their

attempts to redirect action; however, such behaviours also reinforce the relationship between the key constituents of theatre and redefine the theatre product without necessarily causing its dissolution. These responses in audiences hark back to Lehmann’s final musings in his text *Postdramatic Theatre*, as he concludes his discourse about the importance of a theatre which is disrupted by its own organisation. He states that rational theatre making,

“Risk[s] the following simplification: there is nothing, or nearly nothing, in contemporary society that cannot be rationally discussed. But what if such rationalization also anaesthetizes the equally urgently needed human reflexes, which at a crucial moment could be the condition for a quick, timely reaction?” (2006, 186).

### 7.3 SUMMARY

It is concluded that a possible calibration for achieving the co-existence of reality and construction in the theatre event is as follows:



**Figure 16**

The findings of this research characterise the co-existence of reality and construction in the theatre event as:

**The presentation of important risks**  
and  
**The deliberate evasion of story-like narrative**  
to

**An uninformed audience**  
in  
**A space that situates audience and performers as equals**  
unfolding through  
**A structure that permits audiences to exploit liveness**  
in order to  
**Manifest proximity.**

## 8.0 CONCLUSION

This project began with a sneeze; something seemingly insignificant but powerful enough to shatter the bonds of an auditorium full of performers and audiences at the height of their performative strength. Every measure of pretence melted from the event and to my way of thinking, we became a part of the same world. There was no audience and there were no performers; just people gathered in a big room in the name of a performance. The performance construct, which operated still, yielded to the truth it sought to disguise; that we all are still flesh and blood and bone. We are all people with individually complex lives that are bound by the limits of the natural world. In this moment, I understood that the performed construct *is*, only because a real, natural world *is* as well. Ever since, as an artist I have done nothing but ponder the rich and sophisticated web of ideas that connect the real world with the constructed world.

Through this research, I engaged the perplex connections of real and constructed worlds, seeking a framework which characterised their co-existence in the theatre event. Through the careful observation of existing theatre works and an investigation of my own practice, I was able to identify methods of practice which resulted in three iterations of an original work finally called *The Reality Event: Suicide*. Through these iterations, a system was devised through which the constituent elements of theatre can be manoeuvred to disrupt audience perception. *The Reality Event: Suicide*, which became a viable piece of theatre, provoked discussion beyond that of suicide and became about the nature of theatre itself. Audiences encountered the work viscerally, experiencing a range of positive and negative emotions and evoking extreme reactions. Some audiences cried and shook, others left (some returning) and several felt pushed to the point of intervention. It was successful in causing uncertainty about the safety of performers and the limits of theatrical forms, to the extent that performer, space and audience were thought to share no theatrical distance whatsoever.

In terms of academic outcomes, this project has contributed to filling a gap in Lehmann's Postdramatic discourse. Within the context of my own practice, it has identified a system through which theatre phenomena can be organised to cause an irruption of the real. The system facilitated a practical approach to accessing audience perception, enabling the resetting of theatre hierarchies. Through this project, the engagement of the real has been transformed from a conceptual discussion to one in which vital

elements of theatre practice form its foundations. It is upon this foundation that pathways to accessing and understanding Postdramatic practice are enabled.

While the findings and framework emergent from this research centre around a single work, it is one that may be relevant for all theatre. Further study could be generated to understand the power of these findings, including the framework, as a proactive tool for theatre making or a retroactive tool for the analysis of Postdramatic work. The system of calibration has the potential to characterise the collective works of certain theatre makers and theatre making cultures or recognise patterns in performance work that achieve similar effects and aid in the reproduction of these effects.

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## 10.0 APENDICES

1. Performance Framework
2. Cycle Two Focus Group Transcripts
  - a. Ethical Clearance Forms
  - b. Focus Group Transcript – December 3, 2014
  - c. Focus Group Transcript – December 5, 2014 (Matinee)
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    - i. Review – May 7, 2015 – Natasha Hayes
    - ii. Review – May 10, 2015 – By Nahima Kern
    - iii. Review – May 10, 2015 – By Jason Lomas
    - iv. Review – May 22, 2015 – Jonathan O'Brien\

## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> Sofaer states that live art's distinction is that, "the notions of presence are key to the concerns of the work," (2011) which, it seems, is not the case for practices of realism, the outcomes of which are likely rendered repeatable by virtue of their rehearsed nature. Toril quotes Diamond who says that realism, "depends on the stability of reference" (2004, 248). Toril reflects, saying that, "realism becomes *intrinsically* reactionary," to politics and culture (2004, 249).

<sup>2</sup> Spender in Brooker, provides an assessment on the function of modern art in general (particularly from a Western perspective) saying, that it, "reflects awareness of an unprecedented modern situation in its form and idiom" (1992;2014, 1)

<sup>3</sup> The notion of liveness is one of contention between academics, particularly as documented by Meyer-Dinkgrafe, whose discussion seems to dart between the standpoints of Phelan and Auslander primarily. The notion of liveness, he writes, is contextualized by the emergence of mediatisation, which enabled and emphasized the repeatability of performed actions (2015, 69). Tannahill characterizes the value of liveness within theatre as a performance event that, "could not exist without [the audience's] collective presence feeding into it" (2016, 36).

<sup>4</sup> La Fura Del Baus present a wide range of works, some operatic and traditional, while others are far more unconventional – postdramatic in nature. Within the broader theatre discourse, the work of La Fura Del Baus has provided foundations for an understanding of a theatre of 'shared' space. This is a practice essential in postdramatic theatre, where a shared relationship with the site of performance (between audience and performers) causes the event of theatre to toe a line with situation (Lehmann 2006, 125).

<sup>5</sup> In Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre*, he refers to Abramović's work as exemplifying the qualities of postdramatic performance for their ability to shape audience experience in a unique way. He says an audience's "perception had to turn into the experience of a responsibility," where a scenario without boundaries or limits elicited unconventional behavior in audience members (2006, 140). Abramović's work is the anchor of many academic explorations; the work of her past may still pose questions about the presentation of real danger and pain in contemporary performance.