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Researching Scenography

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ETYMOLOGY TO METHODOLOGY

As a developing field, a central project of scenographic research from the 1990s to the present has been establishing its identity and scope. Research methodologies in scenography can be viewed as active responses to the issues that have been figural in its emergence. Although not a new term in itself, 'scenography' has served to effect a reappraisal of the role of design in relation to the expressive and communicative possibilities of the material stage, its interaction with the text and the performers, and audience engagement. The origins of the term 'scenography' are associated with scene painting and with architectural perspective drawing (Hannah and Harsløf 2008: 111 and Rewa 2004: 119 n.1). But during the twentieth century the term gradually gained currency by drawing attention to the way stage space can be used as a dynamic and 'kinaesthetic contribution' to the experience of performance (Rewa 2004: 120). Emphasising the spatial and sensory aspects, contemporary use of the term moves away from thinking of design as decoration of the stage and locates scenography as an integral component of performance or as a mode of performance itself. This chapter will address some of the methodological questions raised by researching scenography as an integral and significant part of performance.

Although an interest in researching scenography can be traced back to Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, the Czech designer Josef Svoboda, working through the second half of the twentieth century, has been particularly influential. His insistence on scenography as performance has helped shape contemporary definitions:

Theatre is mainly in the performance; lovely sketches and renderings don't mean a thing, however impressive they may be; you can draw

anything you like on a piece of paper, but what's important is the actualization. True scenography is what happens when the curtain opens and can't be judged in any other way. (Burian 1971: 15)

Beyond productions themselves, the professional practice of scenography has been preserved and examined mainly through retrospective exhibitions and associated publications. The largest and most influential of the exhibitions has been the Prague Quadrennial (PQ), a four-yearly exhibition of international theatre design and architecture which aims to represent the best of contemporary work. Traditionally, models, drawings and photographs along with artefacts from the original production (especially costume) have been the principle means of conveying the work of design practitioners, but as more holistic notions of the designer's work and concepts of scenography have taken hold, it has become important to find new ways to show the work. In more recent PQs video recordings, computer simulations and live performances have allowed representations of scenography which reflect the way design performs both on its own terms and in relation to other aspects of theatre and performance. The UK exhibit for PQ2007, for example, was structured around the consideration of definitions of collaboration (Burnett 2007).

Contemporary uses of the term scenography do not define a particular set of processes or materials; rather they cluster around approaches which prioritise 'the dynamic role design plays upon the stage, orchestrating the visual and sensory environment' (Dorita Hannah, in Howard 2002: xv). Portuguese designer and architect João Mendes Ribeiro identifies the spatial dimension as a defining feature:

The scenographic concept, as currently understood by the majority of artists, is a far cry from the pictorial two-dimensional aspect that traditionally characterizes scenography and focuses much more on the three-dimensional (architectural) nature of the space or the scenic objects and its close relationship with the performers. (Ribeiro 2007: 109)

The spatial nature of scenography opens up questions about what it is and how it is that scenography might express. Svoboda aimed to create 'psycho-plastic' space or 'transformable space that is maximally responsive to the ebb and flow, the psychic pulse of the dramatic action' (Burian 1971: 31). As well as articulating 'the visual-spatial construct', scenography is concerned with 'the process of change and transformation' (Aronson 2005: 7). Using a variety of technologies and techniques, including projecting film onto multiple surfaces in conjunction with live action, Svoboda intended to bring about 'a confrontation between the spectator's experience at the moment of performance with his

experiences in the past, now awakened by the performance' (Svoboda 1993: 67). The audience is encouraged to engage imaginatively and subjectively with the performance through the medium of the visual-spatial construct of the stage. This 'apprehension of space', although often registered subconsciously, 'may be the most profound and powerful experience of the theater' (Aronson 2005: 1).

Increasingly, scenography is also practised outside theatre buildings. Site or context-specific performance draws on the histories, practices and inherent spatial qualities of real places and often relies on an active engagement from spectators. Cliff McLucas's design for Brith Gof's *Tri Bymyd*, a performance which took place at the site of a ruined farmhouse in the middle of a Welsh forest, used a skeletal scaffolding structure to create spaces for performance within and above what remained of the original site. The site itself was conceived as the 'host', resonant with the lives of past inhabitants while the scaffolding structure allowed other stories to be layered over the host site, creating a 'ghost', that is the performance, and its temporary architecture that haunts the host site for a short time. The third active component for McLucas is the 'witness', that is the audience, which constitutes the event (McLucas 2000: 134). Kathleen Irwin explores site-specific performance to investigate how scenography activates new modes of spectatorship. Her practice-based research investigates site-specific performance as a form of theatre which reveals and unsettles 'the complex and ongoing relationship between our physical environment and ourselves' (2008: 55). The *Weyburn Project* was based in a disused mental hospital and used scenography and performance to recover the stories of former patients, workers and the wider community. Irwin is interested in how physical surroundings affect mood and behaviour and how particular sites resonate with 'a dense and contested past' revealed through their physical presence (ibid.: 54). The *Bus Project* used specially designed interactive computer games and customised bus seats to enable journeys between Regina and Saskatoon in Canada to involve passengers as spectator-participants. The games revealed stories of women's experiences of departure, immigration and displacement, encouraging the spectators to see 'their immediate surroundings in a global context' (ibid.: 54).

CONTEMPORARY METHODOLOGIES

Contemporary definitions of scenography point towards multiple lines of enquiry for research. They suggest the need for methodologies which address the spatial and material nature of the stage, the interaction between scenography, text, site and performers' bodies, the signifying capabilities of scenography, the nature of the audience experience and its potential effects and also the

processes of scenography and how to document them. Research methodology in scenography needs to accommodate the means of investigating complex interactions of elements and it needs to be responsive to the experiential and fluid nature of scenography.

An important strategy in developing approaches to scenographic research and reflecting on effective methodologies has been to utilise forums for dialogue in national and international settings. These have, in turn, contributed to the establishment of the field in the UK and its engagement with international peers. The Organisation Internationale des Scénographes, Techniciens et Architectes de Théâtre (OISTAT) established a History and Theory Commission in 1993, the Scenography Working Group of the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) was formed in 1994 and in the UK a scenography working group came about through the auspices of the Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) in 2005. These forums provide useful space for reflection upon role and identity, particularly where many of those currently engaged in scenographic research have joined higher education with extensive and often continuing experience within the professional sphere. They have also provided valuable opportunities for peer-review and publication: for example, IFTR's Scenography Working Group has published peer-reviewed papers (Eynat-Confino and Šormová 2000) and *Scenography International*, an online journal, is a forum for discussion and dissemination of scenographic research (<http://www.scenography-international.com>).

A persistent subject for debate surrounds definition – both of the field and of the role of the professional scenographer. This was evident in discussion at the early meetings of the TaPRA Scenography Working Group, which now defines the scenographic as 'a particular perspective from which to research theatre and performance' which resonates across dramaturgical, critical, design and directorial approaches to practice and analysis.

- It addresses the visual, sonic, and musical languages of theatre and performance.
- It explores the dynamic relationships between these elements in terms of the sensory experience of audiences.
- It considers ways of scoring, documenting, archiving, and analysing, scenographic practice.

(<http://www.tapra.org/working-groups-mainmenu-41/scenography-mainmenu-33/30-scenography.html>)

So, while practitioner processes form an important part of this field, there are wider perspectives, some of which overlap with other areas of research in theatre and performance. The reach of the scenographic as a research

methodology can usefully draw on and extend the methods of artists, theatre designers, theatre theoreticians and historians.

This chapter reflects the emergent nature of scenographic research: although we discuss the work of established researchers in the field, many of the methods discussed here have come about through recent PhD study and the work of early-career researchers. From a survey of recent research, we have identified five strategies which have been adopted across a wide range of scenographic research for discussion in this chapter. These strategies include retrospective reviews of past practice which use scenographic archives, uncovering the tacit and embodied knowledge used in scenographic practice, strategies of spatial thinking, practice-based approaches to investigating audience response and scenographic writing. Some of the strategies involve adapting methods established elsewhere in theatre research, for example historiography and performative writing. In other cases new methods are emerging to address the specific research problems of scenography, for example using scenographic techniques to investigate and document research and developing ways to capture the spectators' experience of scenography. Methods can also be seen to be useful across these strategies; for example, scenographic writing may form a valuable component of reflecting on practice-based research.

RETROSPECTIVE REVIEW AND THE SCENOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE

A central plank in the development and construction of scenography as a scholarly field has been the identification and analysis of pioneering practices which make manifest key scenographic principles. Several researchers have found it valuable to use historiographical methods and apply them to the scenographic archive in order to re-evaluate the role of scenography or to trace the development of scenographic concepts.

Christopher Baugh's research combines working from historical accounts and archives with his sensibilities both as a practitioner and as a theorist of scenography. Materials from theatre history are, in this way, revisited and re-presented from a scenographic perspective. His study of the collaborations between actor manager David Garrick and painter and designer Philippe de Loutherbourg (Baugh 1990) closely examines the sketches, paintings and models that Loutherbourg produced and also draws on eye-witness accounts of the productions and letters which passed between Garrick and Loutherbourg. Baugh draws on his knowledge of the history of theatre technology and on his own practical experience as a designer to make sense of the fragments of Loutherbourg's designs and models (*ibid.*: 76–7). This methodology clarifies the extent to which Garrick's innovations as a performer and director were

informed and aided by the scenographic developments. Baugh has used a similar approach in investigating Bertolt Brecht's collaborations with designers, particularly Caspar Neher (Baugh 1994).

Elsewhere Baugh revisits familiar names and practices, particularly those of Adolphe Appia, Edward Gordon Craig and Josef Svoboda, and uses the context of technological development to construct a history of the emergence of scenography through the last century (Baugh 2005). Conscious that there can be no definitive truth, he sorts, sifts and selects from what remains – images, models, photographs, letters, books, documents, anecdotes, witness accounts and memoirs – to create arrangements which 'represent what *might* have happened' (ibid.: xvi). Baugh compares the process to the games he played as a child arranging and rearranging his mother's button box: 'buttons of every description, shape and colour, a treasure house of disordered, random pleasure' (ibid.: xiii). Each rearrangement is an archive which tells a slightly different story. The historical material we encounter has usually already been archived; historical significance is accrued to the 'buttons' of scenography from the past by their selection and inclusion in other archives. Images of work by Caspar Neher, for example, have been widely included in archives of Bertolt Brecht's work and Lyubov Popova's designs for Meyerhold have been used as emblems of Constructivism and Soviet theatre. The scenographic dimension of theatre history may have been overlooked or subsumed by competing claims for the dramaturgical, the directorial and the cultural dimensions. But Baugh's arrangements uncover significant ideas and energies in the development of scenography and contribute a new history of theatre and performance.

The analogy of the button box might be applied to any form of archiving, but in the context of scenographic archives, it seems particularly apt. There is a scenographic sensibility at work in the selection and arrangement of material that relates to the attempt to make sense of aesthetic experiences of the past. In his discussion of Grotowski's apparent rejection of scenography, Baugh recalls his own experience of a performance of *The Constant Prince* in Manchester in 1968 which featured a wooden floor stripped of varnish:

Sanding the entire floor harmonized its surface with the palisade and the rostrum, and created a surface that almost dazzled in its cleanliness. To anyone walking through the studio door, the smell of untreated wood was intense. The gentle and repetitive creak of the steps and platforms as the audience filed silently into the place of performance gave the sense that its members were combining to become part of a machine... (Ibid.: 194)

Baugh's attention to the scenographic aspect of the experience uncovers the material and the sensuous in the performance. The physical manifestation of

scenography: the construction and nature of materials, the quality and nature of the sound, the movement and texture of a costume, the atmosphere induced by the light, the manipulation of the stage space – all these conditions resonate with possible meanings.

Dennis Kennedy uses scenographic archives to understand the way Shakespeare has been staged and viewed in the twentieth century. The scenography of past productions offer 'revisions of the visual' and reveal the social and historical contexts in which those productions were made (Kennedy 2001: 12). His account of his methods contain valuable insights for scenographic researchers because it offers a clear articulation of the richness and the limits of archival material.

Kennedy considers the detail of the evidence that designers' sketches can provide. Costume drawings, for example, do not just show what was intended to be worn. They 'suggest characterization, indicate color and tailoring details, and even show fabric samples' (ibid.: 17). They may also suggest qualities of movement and gesture. Baugh's research reveals that Caspar Neher's drawings responded to the actors' physical characteristics and movements, developing what Neher saw in rehearsal. The drawings suggested how items of costume or selected scenic elements could extend or comment on the actors' work. Neher's drawings arise from 'confrontations between actors and scenic material' and, as such, create instances of 'scenography standing side by side with dramaturgy' (Baugh 1994: 243).

The visual material needs to be considered in the context of modes of production which operate in the theatre. Design sketches are expressive but often show scenographic intentions for a production rather than what actually happened. Models and technical drawings ought to provide an accurate record of what appears on stage, but they do not always survive the production process. In any case, practicalities and 'aesthetic reconsiderations' may mean that scenographic proposals can evolve beyond the point of the model being delivered (Kennedy 2001: 18). Many of the models that are displayed at exhibitions like PQ are reconstructions after the event. Photographs appear to offer themselves as the most accessible evidence of a historical performance, but here, too, there are limitations. 'Despite their apparent veracity', Kennedy says, 'photos need at least as much analysis as other historical documents' (ibid.: 24). Photographs are often produced as publicity rather than to archive the performance. They may have been commissioned by a press agent and set up separately from the performance, supplemented by additional lighting and artistic effects by the photographer (ibid.: 21). Even where photographs are made during a performance, photographers make their own aesthetic judgments in framing and selecting the images. Another major drawback is the static nature of the photographic image which can only infer the time-based aspects of scenography: shifts in lighting, transformations of the stage space,

the movement of costumes and materials. Film and video have helped in this regard, but they, too, are limited. Video recordings do not replicate 'the perceptual discourse of the spectator's eye' (Auslander 1999: 19) because the camera determines the limits of what the viewer can see. In recordings, the multi-sensory experience of live scenography is altered. The auditory and visual are prioritised while spatial aspects (depth, scale and proportion) are condensed and flattened. Reference points which are crucial to the live reception of scenography such as the dimensions and dynamics of the performance venue and the sensing body of the spectator are all downplayed, if not lost, as the live event is transposed to the screen.

Kennedy considers scenography a 'language of the visual', or a text which 'requires a separate reading' (Kennedy 2001: 12). To this end, he has employed a broadly semiotic approach to analysing the ways scenography and visual approaches have interpreted Shakespeare's texts. Specific consideration of scenography as a signifying system has been developed through semiotic analysis (Pavis 2003; Ubersfeld 1999; Fischer-Lichte 1992; Aston and Savona 1991). In general, semiotic approaches have been helpful in identifying component parts of the contribution that scenography makes to the experience of a performance. Veltruský's declaration that 'all that is on the stage is a sign' ([1940] 1964: 84) opened up new ways that the stage spectacle, sometimes considered 'too ephemeral' for systematic study (Elam 2002: 4), could be considered as part of the network of signs within which theatrical meaning is generated. In particular, Kennedy distinguishes between the metonymic design, based upon 'the contiguity of the presence on stage to the absence it represents', and metaphoric design, based on 'the similarity between the signifier and its reference' (Kennedy 2001: 13). Scenographic metaphor often requires a more conscious effort for interpretation and comprehension and this is particularly helpful in pinpointing and analysing, from a retrospective position, the advent of new scenic vocabularies. Summarising the impact of Sally Jacobs' design for the 1970 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by Peter Brook, Kennedy writes:

What Jacobs provided, then, was a simple but semiologically rich environment in which the transformations wrought by love could be investigated inside a visual metaphor that liberated performance. Unlike many of the imitations that followed, the design did not establish a simile between the play and the circus; the secret of the white box was its emptiness, its power to call forth the imagination, not its ability to invoke a specific set of cultural responses. (Ibid.: 184-7)

A semiotic approach to the analysis of scenography seems particularly useful as a way of reflecting on scenographic practice within a wider social context.

Anna Birch, whose research is discussed later in this chapter, uses social semiotics to think about representations of gender in scenographic performance and Helen Iball considers the signing potential of a single element of scenography, a shoe, in her scenographic writing. Kennedy uses it to distinguish between 'sure signs and sham signs' (ibid.: 357) and to identify practice which demonstrates a synergy between scenography and the wider social context from which it arises. But the limitations of semiotic analysis, particularly where interactions between scenography and other elements of performance are under consideration, have been identified (Pavis 2003; States 1985). A too rigid approach to decoding scenography risks underplaying the subtle interaction of signing systems and the 'obtuse' level of meaning operating outside articulated language (Barthes 1977: 52) that is often conveyed by images.

TACIT KNOWLEDGE AND EMBODIED UNDERSTANDING

Much of the existing knowledge and understanding about scenography is bound up with its practice and with the tacit knowledge of scenographers, and for this reason practice-led research is now being widely adopted and developed specifically for scenographic research. Tacit knowledge is developed through experience where 'we know more than we can tell' (Polanyi [1966] 1983: 4) and 'we are unconsciously aware of things before we can consciously attend to them. Embodied knowledge of this kind may be 'incommunicable' through words but, nonetheless, affords the basis of 'knowledge-creation' (Nelson 2006: 107). Donald Schön says skilled practitioners habitually move between modes of tacit 'knowing-in-action' and 'reflection-in-action' (1983: 49, 54) in order to further develop their practice. But although the embodied knowledge of practice might be considered as being 'necessary and sufficient' in a professional context (Nelson 2006: 112), a more explicit articulation is needed for research purposes. The challenge for practice-led scenographic research is to find ways to make tacit knowledge accessible to others in the research community and open, therefore, to further examination and question.

Dorita Hannah, working as a practitioner-researcher, draws on tacit knowledge while working outside the usual constraints of professional commissions. In *The Heart of PQ*, Hannah investigated how performance space can contain simultaneous performance events and multiple audiences. This 'performance landscape' (Hannah 2007: 137) installed at PQ 2003 used five scaffolding towers between seven and eleven meters high connected by stairs and undulating, planked walkways. The towers were conceived to appeal to one of the five senses – smell, hearing, touch, taste and sight – and to provide a base for five performance companies who were commissioned to become part of this

'architectural sensorium' (ibid.: 137). Hannah attempted to create a single structure which would be responsive to the work of the companies but which was also a provocation for the way they would work during their two-week residence. Hannah's method for developing the space was based on professional working practices which involved discussion with her collaborators via the medium of sketches and virtual models. But unlike most professional practice this was conceived as an experiment where the outcomes could not be predicted and 'failure is productive' and where, from time to time, moments of 'great beauty, insight and communality' emerged from the confusion (ibid.: 143).

To evaluate this experiment, Hannah used observation and reflection. Over the course of the installation, Hannah noted the capacity of the space to both 'contain' or frame performance and also allow it to 'contaminate' and permeate the boundaries between performer and spectator, and between one set of performers and another. The most contained tower within the hall came about through Canadian company Recto-Verso requiring greater isolation to install a 'smoke-filled vitrine of sound, light and moving images viewed from platforms on either side' (ibid.: 139). Other towers explored more porous boundaries, especially the 'tower of taste' occupied by the Akhe Group from Russia, who created an anarchic kitchen, leaving pungent traces of cooking and rotting food to permeate the whole hall and potentially upset more controlled and subtle performances. For participants and witnesses, it was an imposing yet fluid space. The stairs and walkways provided a variety of spaces for performance to be rehearsed or take place with multiple positions for viewing. With simultaneous rehearsals, participatory workshops and casual visitors to the space, it was hard to tell performers and audience apart; the space tended to frame any human presence as potentially significant. It provoked reflections on the ways space frames performance and structures relationships between performers and audience members.

Methodologically, Hannah's observations arise from a tacit knowledge of manipulating space in the process of designing for performance and these may be shared by others who have a similar experience. The evaluation of the research relies principally on the event itself and the witnessing of the event by peers as the means of disseminating new knowledge. PQ provides a unique context in which to show work which tests the boundaries of scenography. It attracts international and highly regarded practitioners as well as researchers. OISTAT's History and Theory commission and the IFTR's scenography working group now run events alongside or as part of PQ and practitioner-researchers are exploring ways to present scenographic research and engender discussion with their peers. The testimony of witnesses or 'experiencers' (Nelson 2006: 113) forms a key part of the evidence of scenographic practice as research. But the validation of these testimonies and the wider dissemination

of the research (beyond the event itself) requires the embodied knowledge of practice to be brought into dynamic dialogue with other forms of knowledge which arise from critical reflection on the practice and the conceptual framework of the practice (Nelson 2006: 114). For scenographic research appropriate and effective methods of capturing and recording the observations of the practitioner-researcher and the testimonies of witnesses or participants need to be considered alongside methods of developing the practice in the light of ongoing reflection.

Melissa Trimingham's PhD practice-led investigation of the principles of Oskar Schlemmer's work (Trimingham 2001) adopted a more conscious method and a more systematic approach to developing and evaluating understanding gained through the 'disorderly creative process' (Trimingham 2002: 55). Trimingham's aim was to move beyond the surface detail of the remaining records of the work and Schlemmer's own explanations in order to discover unifying principles (Trimingham 2001: 18). She rejected a historically based reconstruction approach in favour of a more personal engagement drawing on her own experience as a scenographer (ibid.: 35), and used workshops to develop performances while audience members took part in post-performance discussion. Trimingham used light, plasticity, the body, motion and sound, and proposed that the principles which governed the practice were as follows:

1. The working space should be tightly controlled.
2. The whole stage space is articulated.
3. Costume is treated as plastic form.
4. Movement begins as simple actions.
5. Sound is used for its physical properties.

(Ibid.: 17-34)

Drawing on principles of Action Research (ibid.: 40) she adopted a method of formulating questions arising from her reading to frame and drive practical investigations, adopting cycles of doing and reflecting so that a 'spiral' of knowledge was developed. Written notes and drawings made by Trimingham and her student collaborators formed the basis of ongoing reflection throughout the devising process. Audience response was also used as evidence and compared and contrasted with notes from the devising process. This material was then, through the written thesis, considered in relation to Schlemmer's writing and the theoretical frame which Trimingham had constructed. Trimingham conceived the project as a hermeneutic spiral of developing understanding:

The process of keeping as open a mind as possible is crucial to this methodology and related to this is the awareness that whatever question (s) is asked determines or at least limits the kind of answer ultimately

received. This is the hermeneutic circle, which drawn out in time into a three-dimensional model creates the spiral of progress. (Ibid.: 42)

The cumulative effect of cycles of doing and thinking is also shown in Yvon Bonenfant and Ali Maclaurin's and collaborative research. Their project investigated the way costume and the vocal body might inform each other. They devised a method of reflective commentary on their improvisatory workshops which allowed embodied understanding of their two separate practices to be exchanged. The resulting performance, *Acoustic/Electric*, featured an electric sonic wig and a large piece of silk and 'attempted to integrate the design of costuming materials as a full partner in the generation of a piece of extended voice performance in a sound art environment' (Bonenfant and Maclaurin 2006). Reflective commentary on the workshops charted the 'dynamics of lived relationship in performance' (ibid.). Sometimes the reflection represented their individual points of view. Here Bonenfant responds to an enormous piece of silk that Maclaurin contributes to a workshop:

I look at it and see a kind of silence – no – not silence, touch . . . the silk streams like light brushings and sweepings of a second skin . . . there is a sensation of streaming into my hands, gentle, light, gorgeous streaming, streaming that is somehow bright but not loud. (Ibid.)

At other times the nature of their work seemed to require them to 'see, feel, and hear from a kind of (temporarily) shared body' and their writing reflects how costume, sound and body interact, for example thinking of 'costuming as a flowing, improvisatory soundscape' (ibid.). Their studio-based practice has much in common with research in the creative arts which uses studio-based practice and reflexivity to bring about 'materialising practices' (Barrett and Bolt 2007: 5). Rather than set out a method with clearly defined outcomes, reflection on practice sets up iterative cycles of practice and reflection which incorporates reflection on the methods and allows for adjustments as the project develops. Iterative processes such as these lead to methodologies which are necessarily emergent to allow for creative discoveries (ibid.: 6). The precise methods used may need to be developed in response to the creative project as it progresses.

Both of these last two projects are influenced by phenomenological thinking and the experience of theatre 'as it is given to consciousness in direct experience' (Garner 1994: 2). Indeed, phenomenological perspectives influence most of the projects in this chapter. Of particular value for the study of scenography is the connection between seeing and the sensing body where there is 'an immediate equivalence between the orientation of the visual field and the awareness of one's own body as the potentiality of that field' (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 206). Stanton B. Garner claims a particular connection between the

performing body and the bodies of each of the spectators and says that whereas the presence of performers will set in train a phenomenological appreciation on the part of the audience, the scenic space is an objectified and detached spectacle (Garner 1994: 3). Objects on stage might be pulled into the phenomenological field, for they are always more than that which they sign, but for Garner this only happens through the actor, who is 'a site of agency within a field of things' (ibid.: 88). Trimmingham's research, however, shows that on the non-mimetic stage, objects themselves are fully part of the phenomenological field. Her findings correspond to Bert O. States' claim that theatre is a field of sound, space and shape 'in which meanings parasitically swarm' (States 1985: 27). Theories of the embodied and phenomenological experience of artworks is also pertinent to scenographic research of the kind that Bonenfant and Maclaurin have engaged with. Paul Crowther claims that the materiality of artworks offer a distinct mode of embodied understanding. 'Colour, shape, sound, mass, and weight are not just the means to the meaning generated. They are an essential dimension in its full definition' (Crowther 1993: 172).

The implications for scenographic research methodology are that the constituent elements of scenographic practice might be considered as a phenomenological field out of which experience and understanding emerges. A phenomenological account of the way scenography works emphasises the complex network of spatial and temporal elements and the sensing body of the scenographer and, ultimately, the spectator. Here embodied understanding is central to the process of meaning. In the projects described above, scenographic research draws upon embodied knowledge about scenographic operation to produce environments and events. These, in turn, become a focus for collaborative exploration through participation, opening channels between the tacit knowledge possessed by each of those involved. In such circumstances, embodied knowledge is firmly in the foreground, both to the making of the event and to the engagement it elicits. Post-hoc reflection on the shared experience helps explicate tacit understanding and feeds back into further iterations of the practice, contributing to developing insights about knowledge which is embodied.

SPATIAL THINKING

Where researchers are examining their own practice, scenographic processes are often central to the researchers' methods. Processes of drawing and constructing scale models are processes of evaluating and developing ideas, of thinking visually and spatially. Rudolf Arnheim has written about the intelligence of visual perception in order to assert that cognitive operations are not exclusive to mental processes, but also arise in 'active perceiving' (Arnheim 1969: 14). Shapes, forms and colours in the natural world and in art take on meaning as

we actively engage with them. Understanding of the visual world comes about gradually through 'continued confirmation, reappraisal, change, completion, correction, deepening of understanding' (ibid.: 15). Making a drawing is an active engagement with the visual and spatial and in scenographic practice storyboards are used to develop design ideas. Robert Wilson's storyboards describe the spatial compositions and architectonic arrangements for each scene and his 'visual book' serves as the framework for his productions (Bly 1996: 70). Talking about the design for his production of *King Lear*, he says:

I am a visual artist, I think spatially . . . I have no sense of direction until I have a sense of space. Architectural structure is crucial in my work. If I don't know where I'm going, I can't get there. The crown was the visual key that unlocked the play for me. It became a tiny wall in this enormous space, and I started thinking of the stage as a dialog between empty space and walls that fly in from time to time to change the space. (Wilson, in Holmberg 1996: 77)

The processes of drawing and of working through different kinds of visualisation (rough sketches, technical drawings, 3D or computer models, renderings and samples) allow mental projections to be made. Luigi Prestinenza Puglisi's concept of projection as a means of developing ideas in art and architecture can also be applied to scenography. Developing ideas through successive iterations of making, of working through different graphic media and from two into three dimensions is a process of thinking through materials, each iteration subtly transformed and extended by translation into another medium (Prestinenza Puglisi 1999: 30–8).

Anna Birch developed a method of using visual analysis as a way to examine representational strategies in live and mediated performance. Her performance kit, originally developed as part of the methodology for her PhD, reflects storyboarding processes (<http://www.theperformancekit.com>). Video recording of rehearsal and performance allows 'strips' of work to be isolated and examined from a visual perspective. For Birch 'the power of scenography' lies in the way it frames 'ideas and images as well as bodies and words in space' and this she utilises as a means of exploring the dramaturgy of her work as a feminist director (Birch 2004: 84). The value of these strips is that they provide a means to make the work strange, to reappraise work in progress and to activate her 'outside eye':

The theatre director takes the role of the outside eye, the one who looks and watches from the spectators' point of view. The process of looking activates a series of frames through which the process of looking takes place. These frames shape the process of looking and making to such an

extent that their existence for the feminist director becomes the reason for making theatre. The feminist director addresses these normative frames through her practice in an attempt to cite alternative gendered readings. (Ibid.: 11)

The strips created from Birch's performances offer a way to freeze-frame the creative process in order to analyse it and generate new possibilities through 'the making and tagging of social meanings in both dramaturgical and scenographic languages' (ibid.: 189).

Representation and recontextualisation is a central theme in Birch's work and she draws on theories of social semiotics to explore the way meanings of cultural objects transmute and transform through the processes of creation and consumption. In the course of her study she explores through practice the implications for moving from proscenium theatre to site-based performance, from script to devised work, and from live performance to projected filmed performance. By bringing the exterior space into relationship with the interior space, the conventional context of meaning-making is subverted and questioned. For example, a film of a live performance, *Di's Midsummer Night Party*, staged inside Clissold House in Stoke Newington, London, was projected on to the exterior of the same space a year later offering a new perspective on space and gender. In this 'strip analysis', Birch considers the blurring and /or clarifying of boundaries that occurs between interior and exterior and between domestic and public space:

Reframed by the house, with the house used as a screen, the audience looks through the façade, seeing into, and through to the other side of the house. Tolulu, framed and spotlit in the window, shows the route through the house to its 'other' side, showing how to look through her female gaze. The audience look with Tolulu out of the house, bringing the back of the house to the front to discover the ontology of the house revealed from behind the façade by the camera. The surface of the house is made porous, questioned, mutable – no longer the resistant monument of the past. (Ibid.: 180)

The transformation from one medium to another, such as Birch adopts, is 'a throwing forward, projecting in order to place the concept outside ourselves where it can be elaborated' (Prestinenza Puglisi 1999: 79). Projecting from one medium to another creates a kind of spatial *Verfremdungseffekt*. The multiple viewpoints of a phenomenological account of the experience are in evidence here, but they are bracketed off, through the strips, in a way which gives room for a reconsideration of theatrical and social space.

A notion of spatial thinking embraces the phenomenal and the material

dimension of scenography and the multi-sensory nature of the scenographic environment, including the aural dimension of scenography. Ross Brown considers the 'phenomenal potency' of theatre sound and advocates consideration of all noise as part of that phenomenal field in order to establish 'a more suitable field for meaningful soundings' in a postmodern world (Brown 2005: 119). In a conference paper at TaPRA in 2007, Brown considered how attendance to sound in performance hovers between the designed 'object of attention' (listening) and the field of 'noise' (hearing) in which it exists. In his AHRC project 'Noise, Memory, Gesture: The Theatre in a Minute's Silence', he concludes that attending performance places the 'audient body' in a 'subject theatre' where everyday background noise demands attention. Before any noise may be dismissed as an insignificant or annoying local incident, it must be inspected to check that it is not a deliberate part of the dramaturgy. Listening (the auditory gaze) is thus effected by hearing (unfocused aurality). The object of auditory attention may only ever be experienced vaguely through the fog of theatre noise that hangs between the object of attention and the receptive subject. Brown's modelling of attendance to sound underlines the spatial dimension of perception which applies to all aspects of scenography. It also places the audience member at the centre of the process of meaning-making (or the avoidance of it) which is activated by spatial concerns. The body in space is at the root of perception and understanding because 'the body organizes and gives structure to the phenomenal field through its positioning' (Crowther 1993: 104).

The interchange between the auditory gaze and unfocused aurality that Brown describes reflects Henri Lefebvre's notion of space as a means of thinking, imagining and mediating. Lefebvre's account of the dual nature of social space is that it is at once both an actual location, a means of seeing oneself in a particular position and in relation to others (people, objects), and, at the same time, a space of mediation, where one seeks to apprehend something else beyond the plane surface, behind each opaque form. For Lefebvre, our perception, conception and actual experience of spaces interpenetrate each other and superimpose themselves (Lefebvre 1991: 86). Where scenography has been conceived as a practice of creating spaces of mediation, or spaces of change and transformation (Aronson 2005: 1), a spatial approach to researching scenography refers not only to performance-based methods of research but also to the consideration of the way audiences and/or participants engage with scenographic material.

IMPLICATING AND INTERACTING WITH AUDIENCES

Several of the practice-led projects we have already discussed implicate audiences as part of their research method. As we indicated in the introduction, a

focus on the audience and the ways they might experience of scenography has become an important strand in new definitions of scenography and therefore research into scenography. This way of thinking about scenography pays attention to the role of the audience in meaning-making, and therefore suggests that investigating audience response is integral to scenographic research methodologies. A common approach is to use post-performance discussion, sometimes supplemented by written tasks or questionnaires. Joslin McKinney developed methods of eliciting audience response to scenography which were themselves scenographic (McKinney 2008). McKinney's practice-based PhD used scenographic performances to investigate the nature of communication between scenography and audience. The aim was to uncover the ways in which audiences take note of scenography during a performance and what kinds of sense they make of what they experience. Structured using iterative cycles of action and reflection, the trajectory of the three performances begins by drawing on recognisably mainstream professional practice (*The General's Daughter*), through a scenographic installation where the audience were placed physically in the centre of the performance (*Homesick*) to engaging and involving the audience through scenography and creating a form of participatory scenographic performance (*Forest Floor*). Discussion in small groups directly after *The General's Daughter* was recorded, transcribed and then analysed for types of responses – the way they described what they had seen, the meaning they ascribed and the feelings and emotions they experienced. This yielded some valuable and articulate response, but it tended to prioritise cognitively decoding of the scenography. The invited audience of theatre and arts practitioners and scholars tended to use a broadly semiotic approach to assigning meaning to what they had seen and to say much less about their personal feelings and embodied responses (McKinney 2008: 16–18). Using image-making as a means of investigating responses provided a quite different kind of response. After *Homesick* audience members each made drawings which were then used as the basis of interviews with research assistants. As Patrice Pavis points out, drawing as a means of analysing performance conveys a more immediate response as it can retain 'a gestural and kinesic quality' (2003: 33). The explanations that participants gave for their drawings provided insight into the way scenography worked on them at a phenomenological level and the act of drawing seemed to encourage them to express their response to the scenography in terms of subjective feelings and memories (McKinney 2008: 22–5).

Collectively the drawings also worked for McKinney as a means of reflection on her own work in *Homesick* as they appeared to reflect and extend the original scenography by projecting and transforming the performance into significant images of the audience members' own. McKinney figured this as a conversation or exchange, through images, about the material and themes of

the performance and the notion of the 'scenographic exchange' became a key concept in attempting to model the complex relationship between the scenographer and audience members (ibid.: 25). The next step was to see whether a notion of scenographic exchange could be made to operate within and as a constituent part of a performance. *Forest Floor* was only partially predetermined by the team of performers and designers. The material that was initially presented offered repetitions on traditional fairy stories (Hansel and Gretel, Red Riding Hood and Bluebeard), varying the emphasis of each version through the use of costumes and scenographic objects. Audience members were encouraged to respond by joining in or intervening in the scenographic environment. Participants could use light, costume, objects, puppets and graphic materials to augment images others had created or develop their own. The structure of the performance event allowed the roles of audience, performers and designers to merge and switch, and opened up the possibility of a site for exchange where the process of experiencing and making sense of scenography became a mutual imaginative construction (ibid.: 86–7). McKinney used Lefebvre's notion of spatial thinking to prompt consideration of the action of scenography on the audience. Lefebvre, and Edward Soja after him, have used the idea of a 'third' space to conceptualise a spatial imagination which is potentially transformative. 'Thirdspace', as Soja has coined it (Soja 1996: 68), is characterised by being '... simultaneously material-and-metaphorical, real-and-imagined, concretely grounded in spatial practices yet also represented in literary and aesthetic imagery' (Soja 2000: 24). The 'non-verbal subliminality' of this 'third' space foregrounds the 'potential insightfulness of art' and offers a different way of thinking and a terrain of social struggle and potential emancipation (Soja 1996: 67). The simultaneously material and metaphorical milieu of Thirdspace makes it a potentially rich site for collective cultural exchange and individual experience and discovery, and McKinney proposes that scenography might provide a theatrical and performing Thirdspace (McKinney 2005: 136–7).

McKinney observes that 'scenography is a process of thinking which oscillates between the visual, the haptic and the cognitive' (McKinney 2008: 34) and that no single method of gathering response was sufficient. Discussion and post-performance reflection remained important in clarifying and contextualising what could be observed in the visual images and scenographic interventions. She also recognises that her reflection on audience response could not be truly objective, inevitably coloured as it was by the intentions and artistic sensibilities that informed the performances in the first place (ibid.: 32, 40). The process of making and the reflecting on a performance through the material generated by audience participants was fed back into the next performance and created a spiral of deepening understanding about her work as a scenographer in parallel to and in dialogue with the larger purpose of the research.

SCENOGRAPHIC WRITING

For around a decade, and with the influence of performance studies, pockets of performative writing have begun to flourish, perhaps most particularly in the UK journal *Performance Research*. Peggy Phelan describes performative writing as 'enacting the affective force of the performance event again' (1997: 11). It is, she proposes, 'solicitous of affect even while it is nervous and tentative about the consequences of that solicitation', writing that 'points both to itself and to the "scenes" that motivate it' (ibid.: 12). Performative writing that focuses on the scenographic draws on the researcher's responses to the multiple dimensions of the event and to the constituent parts of the performance environment. Ventures into scenographic research of this kind aim to describe the event – or, rather, the author's recall of the experience – by reflective and evocative means. The centrality of spectators' experience to research in scenography is a motivating factor in the particular subjectivity expressed by writing that might be described as 'scenographic'.

Stephen Di Benedetto, in several articles (2000, 2003, 2007) informed by Arnheim's work on sensory perception (Arnheim 1969), proposes that 'we can think with our senses' through the medium of theatre (Di Benedetto 2003: 101). Di Benedetto perceives and seeks to record theatre as 'a form of mediated sensory stimulation' (2003: 101). In considering *Il teatro della Societas Raffaello Sanzio* (SRS), he holds that the perceiving body collages actual and represented experiences, bringing to 'the lived experience of theatre' a fusing of 'non-verbal cultural memory with present experience' and thus is keen to 'explore the ways in which the use of culture can be made visceral to the active attendant of a theatrical event' (ibid.: 102). Recognising such a visceral invocation of cultural resonance in the *Wrestling School* production of Howard Barker's *Dead Hands*, close analysis is the chosen method in a chapter by Helen Iball that focuses upon one aspect of the performance text: a pair of stiletto-heeled shoes (2006). Here, the shoes are explored as a metonym for the distinctive aesthetic of Barker's drama. This analysis is undertaken in a writing style that self-consciously seeks out the sensual and playful. The desired effect is to express the impact of the shoes upon the player's body in space, its temporality, its impact on the spectator and the socio-culturally gendered resonances that it evokes:

[P]oise here is a kind of teetering, an anticipatory space balanced precariously between liberation and constraint, power and vulnerability: a potent ambiguity recognised in the stiletto as symbol [...] in theatrical terms, this presents as a heightening: of the sexual allure of the legs through tension, of the way the body presents as prone. (Ibid.: 80)

Iball aims to express heightened sensory experience through her writing, an aim echoed in Di Benedetto's call for the development of 'a more poetic or sensual language' (2007: 126) to express theatre image and sensation. This comes from an acknowledgment that, to express the operations of the non-verbal in performative acts, the impact of the pre-linguistic on the sensing body needs recognition. In an echo of Phelan's assertions of the tentativity of performative writing, Di Benedetto, in attempting to suspend conventional approaches to interpretation and instead to chart moments of performance and their effect upon him, concludes that 'many of the reactions to SRS can be best understood through a highly personal view of the event. And this language always seems inadequate' (2003: 106). Investigating Robert Wilson's theatre, he observes that 'before interpreting, one needs to have a vocabulary to understand the ways in which an object or experience exists in space' (2000: 62). In this essay, he draws on the language of art composition to identify the essential components of theatre images: 'line, weight, colour, movement, and sound' (ibid.: 63). Later, he draws upon his personal experiences of performances, registering carefully the effects of light, colour, texture, space, smell, movement and sound on his own body. His methods are expressed as a series of research questions:

What are the ways in which spectators can become aware of the full range of sensations offered from performance or live art events? To what extent do artists consciously use sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste as expressive forms? What are the possible ways in which the senses influence one's experience of art work? What means do we, as bodies attendant to these events, have to chart and describe these experiences? (2007: 125)

These questions arose from the recognition that this is a live art event representative of a trend since the 1990s, and demanding that he activates his 'awareness of the performance sensorium', adjusting his expectations of what a performance event is so that he might take an active role in attending to the performance (ibid.: 124). The word attendant is preferable to the common terminology audience or spectator, given that it 'suggests presence and can be thought of in the Catholic sense of being "attendant to mass," implying presence and participation' (ibid.: 126). Although there has been a general move towards the 'emancipation' of the spectator (Bennett 1997: 213), Di Benedetto concentrates on the spatial and the sensory aspects of performance. These invite an openness and sensitivity to the effects of spatial manipulation, qualities of objects and shifts in light and sound.

Martin Welton's article 'Once More With Feeling' (2005) is another useful example here. Seeking to 'reposition or re-imagine the theatre in terms of

sensory modalities beyond vision itself' (ibid.: 101), Welton is a practitioner writing scenographically in order to particularise a theatre event through personal account. Welton's initial modes of reference to Sound and Fury's production *The Watery Part of the World* are descriptive and contextual (ibid.: 103). This facilitates the reader's understanding of the staging configuration before Welton goes on to consider the experience of performing in the dark – which he describes as 'an act of co-perception of self and environment' because 'how we imagine the world to be has an effect on how it actually is and vice versa'. Thus 'the actor's imagination becomes a particularly practical kind of knowledge, occupying, rather than abstracted from, the here and now' (ibid.: 108). Welton's approach is phenomenological:

Entering the dark theatre space at the beginning of *The Watery Part of the World*, we led each other by the hand feeling with our feet along a guide rope on the floor, reaching out in the darkness for the rope overhead. One after the other, we would guide one another's hands towards the rope as we arrived in the space. This marked the start of a flurry of touches of reassurance, affirmation, urgency . . . Although we created and occupied a world apparent [to the audience] through sound, at a professional, practical level, it was the shared experience of touch that allowed us to act together. (Ibid.)

By describing his embodied knowledge as an actor in the playing space, Welton provides a very different perspective on this production than the one experienced by the audience; he notes that audiences may have been surprised to see a credit for a set designer in the programme of a production that took place in the dark. Indeed, as an inverse case for the intra- and trans-disciplinarity of research methods that have been identified here with scenography, the material for Welton's scenographic writing is contingent upon his role as performer.

CONCLUSIONS

Research methods in scenography demonstrate particular affinities with visualisation, projection and improvisation. It is fitting that these distinctive methods have their roots in theatre design techniques such as drawing, storyboarding and modelling. As a significant proportion of researchers have design experience, and many are experienced designers, such tools are commonplace. Indeed, in this developing field there has been debate concerning the extent to which scenography might be recognised as an inherently research-based practice. National and international fora such as TaPRA, IFTR and OISTAT have helped to establish research communities which play an important role

in discussion and dissemination of research methods in scenography. Indeed, networking itself may be viewed as a significant step toward research methods, facilitating context and underpinning future directions. Assumptions and hierarchies within the field are brought into question through discussion, practice-led workshops and papers from participants with a wide range of interests but working from scenographic perspectives. This is of particular value given that scenography often becomes synonymous with theatre's visual components – risking the demotion or even exclusion of the aural, olfactory and tactile, an imbalance recognised but also reflected to some extent in the current chapter.

There is also a recognised danger that enduring visual records of the theatre event present a limited perspective. In scenographic historiography, design artefacts have been explored with a caution to remember the distinction they represent between intention and production, but also recognising a generative energy in positing an alternative focus to historical narratives. In practice-led research selectivity is also generative – storyboarding is utilised as an imaginative site of reappraisal for work in progress, situated as it is between thinking and making, representing an opportunity to communicate and clarify. Scenographic practice is characterised by willingness to adapt new methods during the creative process, to collaborate, to rework.

Virtual environments and other interfaces between scenography and new technologies are now increasing the range of tools available for research – adding further dimensions to the visualisation of proposed theatre events. The implication is that projective methods are fundamental to scenographic research by historians and for contemporary makers. Such methods depend upon tacit knowledge as a key to unlocking the potential of researched or created materials. In the areas of the field concerned with audience experience of a seen event, the impulse is in description rather than projection. This description is retrospective and refers to an event substantially vanished. Scenographic writing aims to evoke moments that have passed, styling the writing to 'do' things performatively. In a few instances, drawing has been used as a means of expressing and sharing audience response, but the expectation that concluding observations will be in written form has yet to be shifted.

Underpinning most research methods in scenography are phenomenological perspectives, prioritising embodied understanding. The bracketing of assumptions to take a fresh look is a method that has been used across scenographic historiography, practice and reception studies. In describing embodied experience, the language adopted by scenography is often trans-disciplinary, looking to fields such as art, philosophy and cognition – and perhaps the efficacy of this strategy rests partly in its location beyond the established hierarchical perspectives of theatre research. Though, equally, as an emergent field, scenographic researchers have been enabled by established

approaches to theatre research, scholarship around the postdramatic and also by a cultural shift towards site-specific participatory theatre events. These lend further credence to scenography as an integral (and often instigative) component of performance, to the extent that scenographic research is by no means only practised by and of interest to scenographers. The increasing centrality of audience (participant) experience – often blurring distinctions between performer and audience and sometimes removing the performer entirely, in configurations that also involve spatial and environmental shifts in staging dynamics – has become a fundamental concern. Here key areas of theatre praxis overlap with scenographic methods and these developing strategies suit a climate where forms of visceral performance and immersive theatre find inspiration in the theatre as bodied (third)space. It can be difficult to determine where the boundaries of the field are drawn and invigorating to question if they need to be drawn at all. Indeed, trans-disciplinarity is a crucial and fascinating aspect of the area, as this chapter has identified. What is clear, however, is that as research in scenography develops, it will be important to keep returning to definitions and to the identification of research methods that are informed by scenography.

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CHAPTER 6

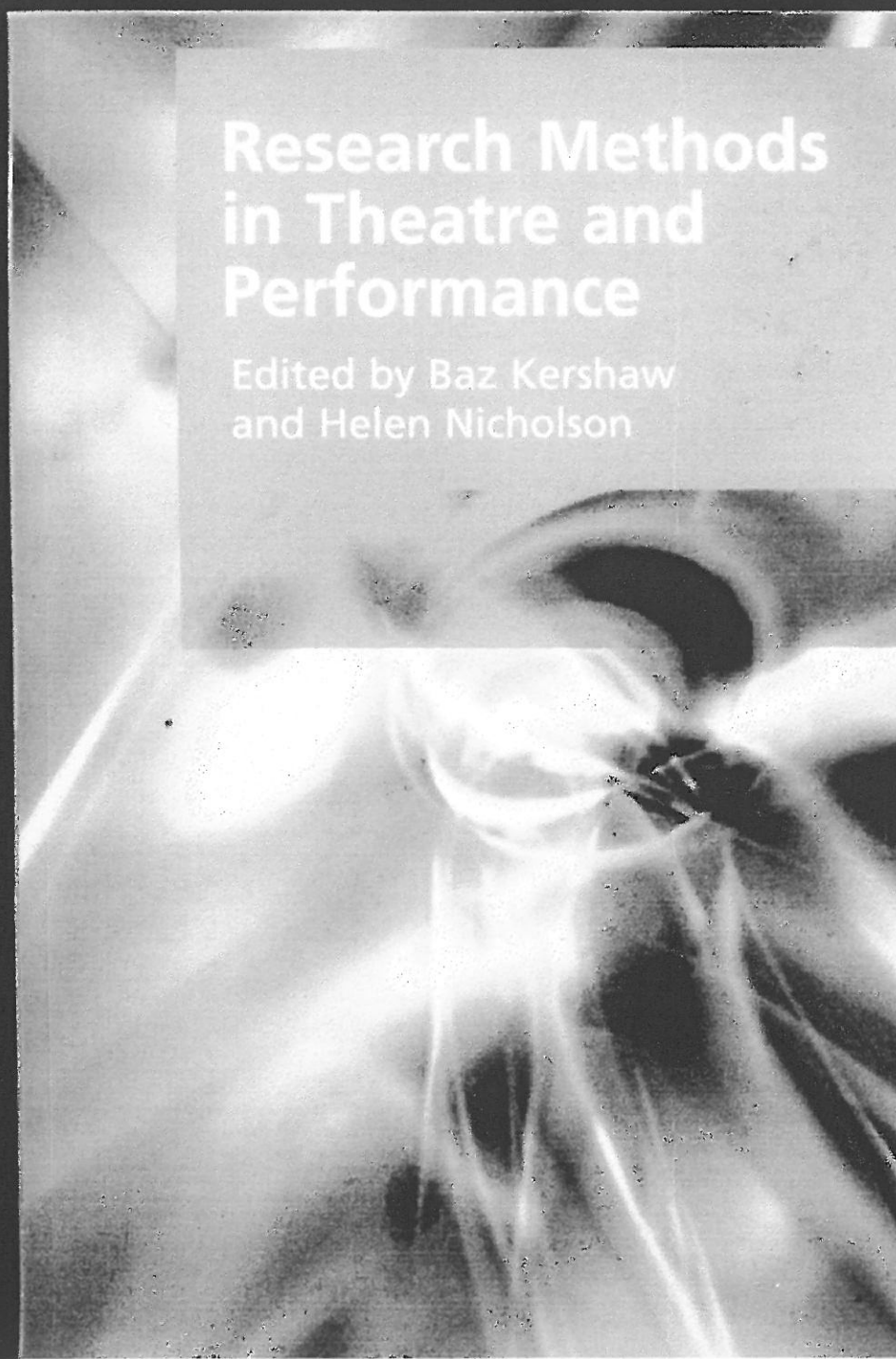
Performer Training: Researching Practice in the Theatre Laboratory

Jonathan Pitches, Simon Murray, Helen Poynor,
Libby Worth, David Richmond and Jules Dorey Richmond

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

Jonathan Pitches

Research into the processes of performer training has enjoyed an explosion of activity in recent years. This is partly due to the advent of practice as research as a methodology and the particular dimension of that activity which Robin Nelson calls 'Practitioner Knowledge' (2006: 11). This renewed interest is almost certainly caused by the growth in numbers of practitioner-researchers in higher education, a development related to the ever-shortening distance between creative industries and the academy. It may also be a manifestation of the growth of training outlets in the UK and beyond. As Murray and Keefe point out in *Physical Theatres: A Critical Introduction* (2007), in the UK venues for training and courses can now be found far beyond the nineteen accredited acting conservatoires included in the National Council of Drama Training listings. Extensive numbers of undergraduate theatre and performance programmes develop 'practitioner knowledges' in their students, experienced theatre directors not only make work but lead their own training laboratories, and there has been a connected development in what could be called the 'workshop industry': short courses led by an array of international professionals and pedagogues transmitting their training methods to a varied audience of actors, artists, academics and researchers. All these manifestations of 'training as cultural production' (Murray and Keefe 2007: 121) have added considerably to the complexity and popularity of the field. Developments in the academic journal market, particularly the introduction of the Routledge journal *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* in 2010, recent publications such as the second edition of *Actor Training* edited by Alison Hodge (2010) and



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