

TOWARDS A DEMONSTRATION/DEFENCE MODEL FOR THE EXAMINATION OF RESEARCH IN PERFORMANCE.

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PREAMBLE

What is being proposed here is the adaption of the *viva voce* mode of examination to the process of the examination of research done, wholly or partly, through performance. Despite decades of theorisation surrounding the dynamic relationship between the reader/audience and the read/performed, the tomes devoted to analysis of the body as subject and as metaphor, and the slow ingress of the performed and the performative as valid subject for/as research, we continue to deny the value of embodied knowledge, to demand of candidates for examination in areas of performance that they undergo the academic equivalent of the Dictation Test, and to adhere to the spurious belief that the 'objectivity' of the examiner is achievable, necessary, and guaranteed by their anonymity. In this session, we aim to explore this proposed mode of examination through the performed unpacking of a compositional method used in the making of *Levad*.

BACKGROUND

Levad is a solo performance devised by Barrie Kosky and myself in 1993, which constituted the final part of *The Exile Trilogy*, a series of works investigating notions of 20th century European Jewish history and culture through the metaphor of the history of the Yiddish theatre. The thesis I am in the process of constructing is a description and analysis of the process of composing *Levad*, with a particular focus on the means by which historical material, and a particular perspective on Jewish history, is converted or translated into performance. In the making of these works, a particular theatrical style evolved through the process of converting sources such as texts and music from the Yiddish Theatre repertoire, Biblical texts, historical references, folk myth, biographical material, photographic and filmed documentation of the Yiddish Theatre tradition, and the Kabbalistic mystic tradition, into a series of meditations of the nature of history and memory. As distinct from works initiated for formal research purposes, the work was made for a Gilgul/Playbox Theatre co-production, and my task as a researcher since it's making and performance has been the identification of research components within the work, and the reframing of research carried out as part of the performance-making process, or knowledge gained through that process in a scholarly context.

THEMES AND SOURCES

The central, and only visible character in *Levad*, is the actress, Eva Askenfeld - a fictional character created partly through the syncretisation of biographical fragments from the lives of actresses from the Yiddish Theatre, and first created

for the 1991 production of Gilgul Theatre's *The Dybbuk*. These fragments were excised from published accounts of the Yiddish Theatre, from anecdotal material absorbed in the several years which I spent working in the Israeli theatre, and from extended interviews with actors from the pre-war European Yiddish Theatre, gathered in a visit to Israel in 1992. They were augmented, ramified and fused at certain points, through improvisation and the co-option of events and currents present in the rehearsal room as we worked on the piece. The compositional process was, in part, one of amplifying the frame of the character to allow her to embody the several narrative strands we were attempting to produce and interweave :

- of a spirit caught between the fact of death and the extinction of consciousness, compelled to submit to a series of reiterations of fragments of her life,
- of a Jew subject to the shocks and displacements of the history of that culture, and those particular to the events of the twentieth century,
- of an actress executing the repetitious and rigorous activity of her work inside that culture and that history.
- of a mother endeavouring to raise her sons and maintain some form of home in the face of professional and historical forces which drive her from city to city,
- of the role of *Mireleh Efros* , which she is sentenced to repeat interminably , a sentence to which she consents since it provides the only stability in an otherwise fractured life,
- of the story of *Mireleh Efros*, the matriarch exiled from her domain because she cannot yield to the torrent of change,
- of European Jewish culture, and its expression through the Yiddish language, exploded by the Holocaust, and rejected by post-war Zionism,
- of Sisera's mother from *The Song Of Deborah*, waiting in vain for her slaughtered sons to return from the battlefield
- of Lot's Wife, re-bodied as a pillar of salt for daring to look back down the path she has travelled.

THE SHAPE/ING OF THE WORK

Although the range of source material explored was extremely wide, and the ultimate performance product, for better or worse, extremely dense, the process of composition was an extremely systematic one. The necessary limitations of time and space in the rehearsal process demanded a systematic approach, the shape of which emerged as a structural text in the final work itself. Barrie and I, confined in the rehearsal room with our stories, our ghosts, and an opening night looming, were cast back upon ourselves, and an increasingly reflexive process developed. We were, after all, rehearsing a piece about rehearsal - making a piece of theatre about theatre. The absent author/God who is constantly being summoned in *The Dybbuk*, was replaced by the invisible presence of a malign director/God figure who appears to have the power, via a series of theatrical conceits, to call cues to action which the actress cannot resist. The initial idea for the frame of the piece

was that the catalyst for action should emanate from her - that moments of memory should trigger associations with moments from roles she had played, episodes from her history, and fragments of other histories and other roles. Once we had begun work on scenes using the text of *Mireleh Efros* and the framework of scenes from rehearsal, the extension of the world we were creating to include more elements of the theatrical metaphor became inevitable. The notion of memory was theatricalised and the metaphor expanded to include other elements as catalytic agents for summoning memory - agents which emanated from the space - instructions from the director, lighting changes, musical cues and the movement of objects in the space such as the intermittent flows of fluid through the pipes which trisected the space.

What the audience for *Levad* saw was the figure of an actress propelled from life-fragment to life-fragment by a series of lighting and musical cues, these fragments being, on the whole, either moments from rehearsals, from performances, or from waiting in queues. Repetition was a key idea from the outset - an expression of our particular perspective on the shape and flow of Jewish history, and a discernible motif embedded at some level in each of the narrative strands. Interposed between these larger fragments were slivers of scenes from her 'real life', slivers of poetry, and chunks of song. While the notion of rehearsal as a metaphorical construct was not central in the original conception, its neatness and flexibility as such became apparent fairly rapidly, and drew us down a path where one of the fundamental elements of the notion of rehearsal - that of repetition - became the most essential pillar in the structuring of the piece.

Our search, then, was for 'the resonant image' - or 'the resonant frame' - structures or conceits which could, of themselves, conjure a number of meanings, but which would also be amenable to recontextualisation in such a way as to 'aggregate' meaning - to carry all previous meanings with it, and collect meaning with each new context. Additionally, these images needed to function as metaphors for the patterns and forces which we had identified as impacting upon the body of this character who is, herself, a metaphor.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

In this analytic phase of the work, I am engaged in an archaeological dig to disembed the fundamental skeletal structures of the work in order to clarify points of choice, and points of resonance - a reversal, in fact, of the process by which the piece was made. For a number of reasons, I could not submit *Levad*, the performance work, as my thesis. Given that the work was made in collaboration with another artist, and that it was impossible to establish any clear division of authorship, I could not claim the entire work as my own. Given that the work was made and performed in 1993, before I had embarked on the formal course of study for a Masters degree, and was impossible to restage, I could not ask that the live performance be examined. Since I had entered the process with the intention of using the work as the basis for a thesis, I had most of the rehearsals and several of

the performances recorded on videotape - documentation which will, I hope, provide testament to, and illustration of the process and the product.

For it is the process - the journey towards the performance, the search for source materials, the effort of manipulating them to fit inside my body and inside the set, the acts of choice, the serendipitous discoveries, the negotiations between the collaborators, the shifts in position, the experience of the attempts, the tributaries tested and retreated from, the inclusions and the exclusions, the way the piece was made that I am attempting to map. A parallel strand has emerged in this process of reflection in which I attempt to identify elements in current theoretical positions on performance which could be described as generative, as pointing towards acts of conception rather than of post-mortem. In the written account, by leaping between the descriptive and analytical, between the remembered and the recorded, between the subjective and the objective, and between forms, I may achieve some of the above. It will remain, however, a partial and fragmentary testimony to a process which is difficult to frame within the linear limitations of the word on the page. It will also, inevitably, be a translation of a process which, in effect, took place in another language and there are a number of crucial aspects of the process which cannot be adequately addressed either through the written word, through still images, or through 'moving pictures' for the simple reason that they are ideas written, and dependent for their meaning/s, on a present body in a present space with a present witness.

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Evaluating Performance as Research - the Assessor's Perspective

A Briefing Paper Prepared by Alison Richards for Deakin University

Conference with a Difference: Double Dialogues Nov 15-16 1996, as background to the practical 'performance assessment demonstration' by Alison Richards and Yoni Prior

Introduction

I would like to propose some basic principles and guidelines for assessors asked to evaluate research based performance work in an academic context. This proposal extends issues discussed in my 1995 paper *Performance as Research/ Research By Means of Performance* commissioned by the Australasian Drama Studies Association, and published on the UWS Nepean theatre page. it is available for downloading on <http://www.nepean.uws.edu.au/theatre>.

Institutional resistance to the recognition of practical performance work as all or part of a substantive research project, as all or part of a thesis or its equivalent in defending a higher degree submission, and/or as equivalent to scholarly publication, centres on questions of whether or not a 'creative work' is susceptible to evaluation and assessment. It is clear that this is not the case; critical judgements are accepted as part of most creative processes. The real issue is the range of critical contexts, and the confusion that is often caused by the importation of assumptions and vocabularies from one context of criticism to another.

The position of the assessor depends first of all on the degree to which the performance offered for assessment has been framed within the discourse of scholarly research. The era of amalgamations has resulted in a situation in which every major performing arts degree or diploma award course is located within, or at least affiliated to, a larger educational institution. There are of course some programs within TAFE, and private courses without academic affiliation. However, all nationally recognised dramatic arts academies are now officially incorporated as part of a university, and many universities are host to two or more programs, often with quite distinct histories, client and reference groups, different views of the discipline(s) they are engaged in, and divergent aims and methods of teaching it.

A great deal of confusion is still caused by the difference between an 'industry' and an 'academic' orientation, based on an insufficiently critical analysis of the cultural assumptions being mediated in each case. Those opposed to validating performance practice assume that practical work can be the object but not the means of research - such an orientation privileges criticism, which is seen as

somehow being at odds with practice. On the other hand, practitioners operating within educational institutions claim the dignity of research for what they see as 'excellent' work, despite its tangential relation to the criteria of clarity and rigour of *argument*, and substantive contribution to *knowledge*, that is at the heart of scholarly exchange.

There is a need to clarify the relationship between performance work initiated for research purposes, and performance work initiated for other purposes, within which a research component might be identified. This question is in many ways separate from issues about the style and kind of work encouraged, and the position staff and students adopt in relation to the aesthetic and socioculturally determined descriptions of performance practice with which the particular educational or training program has allied itself. A discourse analysis produces a clearer picture, in terms of the values espoused by the program, the place of performance skills and the skill levels expected of students.

It is my contention that performance work *is* constantly being framed and assessed, from a variety of points of view. It *can* be framed and assessed as scholarly research; however, the latter depends on the former. In other words, it is not possible to assess performance as research unless it has been clearly so constructed by the researcher.

A series of questions, however, need to be asked before the assessor can be confident that this is the case. It is also important to sort out what *kind* of a review is being undertaken, and for what scholarly or professional purposes.

The Reviewer's Dilemma

I have been asked to appear here as a reviewer or examiner. The move of performance work into the university has raised the question of how to establish processes of peer review of performance, in order to ensure the status of creative work as equivalent to other scholarly publication. Another linked question is of the examinable status of works of performance as research statements for higher degree awards. 'The landscape', as Glenn D'cruz has pointed out (D'cruz 1995) 'is criss-crossed with territorial clashes of discourse, power/knowledge'. Leaving aside for the moment the distinction between peer review and examination, I wish to pursue the question of how to go about making an assessment of a performance in a scholarly context. There is I suspect still a fuzzy understanding of the difference between

- Σ a request to assess a production (or a practitioner) as having attained a respectable standard from an intellectual point of view,
- Σ an invitation to provide what one might call an 'intelligent generalist's' response to a particular aspect of a production, and
- Σ the call to make a scholarly judgement based on having a clear notion of how goodness of fit between the production outcome and the research question might be assessed.

All these reviewing positions are valid, and I suspect are commonly confused when speaking about the role of the reviewer in performance assessment. The distinction between a general review and criticism in an academic context has been well rehearsed in literary circles, but is so far at least much less clear in other forms of creative art activity. The DEETYA publication guidelines don't help much on this score either, as the emphasis is still on a performance as a complete artwork and therefore on the notion of it having been 'professionally reviewed' as a guarantee of professional equivalence. The usual kind of professional review is a personal response by what Rod Wissler has described as 'expert readers of the performance text'. It is certainly always interesting to discover the extent to which one's own intentions or readings of an artwork are mirrored by observers who can lay claim to a level of expertise. However, I would argue that a scholarly review of research requires more than this of both the researcher and the reviewer.

The classic requirement is for the statement of a specific research question or hypothesis. This may not always be appropriate, given that performance research will generally be directed towards providing possible exploratory approaches, towards illumination rather than proof. The reviewer does however need to be party to a clear statement not only of the general issues being played out in the production, but of *how* the researcher planned to deal with them.

A subsidiary question is the degree to which the performance is to be treated as the entire thesis, as an illustration of a thesis, as a substantially independent process from which the thread of the research question(s) is to be disentangled, and so on. Given that people in the middle of a production process can seldom lay claim to a Zen-like calm and clarity, and given that the performance process itself neither is nor should be conducted with a clinical objectivity, it is nevertheless important to know, not simply that a reflective process is under way, but what the aims and the content of that process of reflection are.

The Background to this Demonstration

When negotiating the ground rules for an assessment of a performance, the specifics of the process are crucial, and are likely to vary considerably from one occasion to another. I have argued (Richards 1995) that it is therefore important to dispense with the time-honoured anonymity of the reviewer, in the interests of mustering as much clarity as possible. In the context of this 'rehearsal for an examination' Yoni and I have met on several occasions to discuss her work, and the place of this performance demonstration within it. I have not attempted to rehearse with her precisely what she will present, although I probably have more information than is perfectly proper for an examiner to have, in terms of spontaneous demonstrations of ways she possibly *might* illustrate the points she wishes to make.

In the process, I have also attempted to clarify what I need to know as an examiner, and what information about my knowledge needs ought to be passed on

to the researcher in advance, to assist in structuring the presentation. It is clear that what you will see today is by no means a 'raw' performance; there has been a long process of reflection, abstraction and editorial judgement acting upon the material since its original framing as a creative work for a theatre audience. Some of the material you will see has been lifted out to such an extent that the original context is only tangentially relevant. However, I have tried to frame my requests in a way that would be generally appropriate for the review of performance demonstration in whatever integral relation to 'the work of art'. It is my aim to define questions that would work just as well if I were attending the premier public season of a play. The questions are designed to provide the platform of information upon which it will be possible for me as reviewer to distinguish material relevant to the research question from the polysemic horizon and dense perceptual field of performance, at the time of observation.

The Reviewer's Questions

As the assessor in this case, I need to be able to determine prior to the occasion of observation, not only what the researcher's scholarly intentions are, but what other discourses, traditions of knowledge/practice, and perceptual material are likely to be simultaneously or serially present in the performance space. I need to be briefed on this in order to arrive at an observational strategy which will allow me to attend or disattend appropriately within the polysemy of performance. I need to know:

Why am I watching this as a performance?

I need a clear statement from the researcher as to why they have decided that a demonstration by performance is important. How far have they considered other means and modalities of demonstration or documentation? What aspect or aspects of the timespace and modalities of performance is crucial to their project outcomes?

What am I watching?

I need the researcher to give me an outline of the background to their research.

This should include

- Σ a clear statement of the issues being pursued, and as clear a statement as possible of the specific research question and/or research focus followed in the performance demonstration.
- Σ the object or objects the researcher has in obtaining an assessment. Is this project a submission for a degree or other award? Is it an assessment of skill or professional capacity? Is it designed to stand as the equivalent of a refereed scholarly publication?
- Σ information about the context of the performance making process, including an indication of the resources available and the skill level claimed (i.e. the degree to which the researcher claims technical and expressive confidence in their medium).

- Σ the sources of the researcher's approach, both in terms of theoretical background and aesthetic goals.

What is the status of this demonstration?

- Σ as performance. Has it been mounted specifically for this examination, is it a special performance of a work produced for another context, is it part of a season currently underway for a general or target audience?
- Σ in relation to the 'original' or 'originary' work, if any i.e. is it a new work, a full work, an interpretation, an illustration, an example, an exercise, a rehearsal, a version, an excerpt, etc.
- Σ within the overall structure of the research project. At what phase of the project is this demonstration taking place? Is it planned to present any other material in any other medium as part of the publication or assessment process? What is the proposed relation of this demonstration to that material, if any?
- Σ in relation to the theoretical framework
- Σ in relation to the argument being presented, or the research question. What is it designed to demonstrate?

What is it you want to show?

I need the researcher to give me a clear indication of which aspects of the performance I am required to attend to, including:

- Σ a clear statement of what the researcher thinks ought to be available for observation.
- Σ a clear statement of the ways in which the issues and modalities presented for assessment are mediated within the performance. Is the research focus foregrounded in the performance, either through narrative, medium or performance technique? If not, what observational strategies are appropriate?
- Σ are other issues and/or other modalities being mediated in the performance space in a significant way, in addition to those addressed through the articulated research question?
- Σ does other information present in the performance require bracketing out, in order to attend specifically to the research question? Or should I attend to all of it?

Clarification of these issues through written briefing notes and/or face to face conversation should materially assist the assessor or reviewer in establishing appropriate criteria, on the basis of which an informed critical judgement may be made.