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In which the scene is set, a personal history of practice is sketched and a particular context of performance making is delineated.

This is a book about site-specific performance. It is regional in aspect and does not pretend to completeness in its consideration of this elusive but enduring subject.


I avoid defining a type, be it site-determined, site-oriented, site-referenced, site-conscious, site-responsive, site-related. And the risk of being ‘uncritically adopted as another genre category by mainstream art institutions and discourses’ (Kwon, 2004, p. 1). According to Kwon, site-specific performance remains ‘a problem idea, as a particular cipher of art and spatial politics’ (ibid., p. 2). In this book I attempt to distinguish practices whose definition often begins with a negative, as performance using ‘non-theatre locations’ (Wilkie, 2002a, p. 149).

I prefer ‘performance’: to embrace the fullest range of practices originating in theatre and visual art, and to demonstrate affiliations with the academic field of performance studies.

I outline a series of creative approaches that attend equally to all terms under consideration – site, specificity and performance – and to their various articulations.

I do not propose an overarching model within which exemplars are positioned to illustrate or prove a thesis. Rather, I build upon a series of exemplary practices. The book is therefore partial and exclusionary, but I commend the benefits accruing from close inspection of specific experiences in a specific region.

I suggest that the conventions and techniques of the auditorium may be inappropriate or inadequate to the task of addressing ‘site’. And that site-specific performance is other than a transposition and modification of stage practices. If the stage is essentially synecdochic – in which limited resources stand in for a complete picture, as when a table and chairs suggests a domestic scene – site is frequently a scene of plenitude, its inherent characteristics, manifold effects and unruly elements always liable to leak, spill and diffuse into performance: ‘site-specific work has to deal with, embrace and cohabit with existing factors of scale, architecture, chance, accident, incident’ (Persighetti, 2000, p. 12). In the auditorium, the audience is, we might assume, already orientated and paying
attention. What is operational, what under control, what an intended feature of intelligibility, what to be actively disattended, and what clearly apparent in a situation of excess – these then become key concerns at site. Although the stage is a site of imagination and site always inescapably itself, site may be transformed by the disruptive presence of performance seeking a relationship other than that of a ready-made scenic backdrop against which to place its figures.

This book tends towards theory of practice rather than adopting a position of critical spectatorship. It is descriptive, discursive and programmatic as much as analytical. It includes ideas, examples, evocations, speculations and exercises. It is citational, quoting at length, though much that is now part of the lingua franca of practice may pass unreferenced. In quoting documents from the 1980s and 1990s, it recalls the polemical trust of texts making often heated and exaggerated claims for regional practices outside the conventions of academic discourse.

My ambitions are pedagogical: I aim to encourage further initiatives in performance: there is then a tendency to overuse ‘may’ and ‘might’.

I take up and extend positions expounded jointly with Michael Shanks in *Theatre/Archaeology* (2001) and in my *In Comes I: Performance, Memory and Landscape* (2006a). There is inevitably then an amount of reiteration and citation of personal work.

The book is informed by an experience of making performances in a particular set of artistic and cultural circumstances: in several companies – Cardiff Laboratory Theatre (1973–80), Brith Gof (1981–97) and Pearson/Brookes (1997–present) – and as a solo artist, primarily in Wales. There is then a tendency to overuse ‘I’, though this individual attempts to speak from within an experience of practice, as in both my previous volumes; after geographer Nigel Swift, ‘I want to keep hold of a humanist ledge on the machinic cliff face. I hold to a sense of personal authorship’ (Thrift, 2008, p. 13).

### Cardiff Laboratory Theatre

In the 1970s Cardiff Laboratory Theatre created a number of *special events* under the direction of Richard Gough. The accent was upon *occasion* and *audience*: ‘They are events for special times and places ... disused churches, deserted beaches, abandoned country houses ... They may celebrate particular dates ... draw attention to a specific building ... the life of a famous person’ and take the form of a feast, a procession, a guided tour, a mystery outing in which ‘each part of the journey is celebrated by music and action – the arrival at the theatre, the embarking, the trip, the disembarking’ (Pearson, 1980, p. 32). The avowed intention was ‘to relax the tension between performer and spectator’, with new relationships only deemed feasible in other locations: ‘In certain rooms, the spectators take up their own arrangement to see the action; in others they are seated ... In a Special Event everyone is a participant’ (ibid.).
In this period there is no mention of site-specificity, though there is a clear appreciation of site and its potentials. Of the events:

They are inspired by, and responsive to, non-theatrical environments. Each particular location conditions the work which takes place there. For instance, on a beach it is possible to use fire and natural sounds. The geography of a large building might suggest a guided tour … occasionally we change the building, but in sympathy with it. (ibid.)

In 1979 the company mounted a special event at Plasteg, an unoccupied stately home near Mold in north Wales:

A coach trip to a place made ready. The house was derelict, empty of furniture. But each room contained a strange inhabitant. In one there was a butler, who lived in a barrel, with his goat; in another, there was a man obsessed by birds. In a third, a woman in a feathered jacket was planting flowers in her garden. There was warm wine to drink and the sound of recorders drifted from closed rooms. It was a frightening experience, touring the crumbling house by the light of candles. Was it a mental asylum or just a museum for eccentrics? It was certainly a guided tour, reminiscent of those organised everyday in the great houses of Britain. Was this the night-time equivalent? Perhaps it was just a lament for a dying house. (ibid., p. 46)

These performances were usually created over periods of not more than a week, often conceived away from site, and semi-improvised in their public manifestation. In form, they were influenced not only by the celebratory works of Welfare State (see Coult and Kershaw, 1983) and IOU, but also by a series of residencies at Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff in the mid-1970s in which companies including The People Show, the Pip Simmons Group and Waste of Time created peripatetic performances in the building, moving from room to room and staging scenes and sequences of differing atmospheres in each.

**Brith Gof**

On leaving Cardiff Laboratory Theatre, Lis Hughes Jones and I founded Brith Gof in Aberystwyth in 1981. In the initial period the emphasis shifted to ‘events devised for special locations and occasions’ (Pearson, 1985, p. 2). There was a sense of expediency about the choice of location, but also an increasing appreciation of cultural specificities and social congregation: ‘we are working within a widely distributed population living in communities remote from the circuit of municipal theatres. Our performances often occur within the context of a local cultural, social, or even religious gathering. This may take place in a village school or in a barn’ (ibid., p. 3).
The term ‘site-specificity’ has still yet to appear, but performance for special locations is cast as ‘a celebration of the architecture within which a society works, plays and worships’ (ibid.). Significantly:

Such locations free from rules of decorum and prudence, allow us to use techniques unthinkable in a theatre. Theatre need not be signified as a distinct mode of expression. In *Rhydcymerau* two carpenters worked throughout the performance, their sawing and hammering counterpointing the pattern of poems and stories concerning rural decay, blurring the distinction between work and performance. (ibid., pp. 3–4)

Engagement with site had here a political and proselytizing aspect, challenging the ‘withdrawal to the proscenium arch and the creation of stage illusion’ (ibid., p. 3) and the hushed and darkened rows of the auditorium: in the development of a ‘new, vibrant and distinctive theatre tradition in Wales’ (ibid., p. 2).

From the outset the *fit* between location and performance was not always one of perfect congruence. The first Brith Gof performance, *Branwen* (1981), was staged with students from Aberystwyth in an inner bailey of Harlech Castle. From this spot the eponymous heroine, in a story from the collection of Welsh myths known as *The Mabinogi*, looks out towards Ireland. As the flocks of cackling jackdaws swooped in the gathering dusk and flaming torches, the audience was reminded of Branwen’s lost brother Bran (‘Crow’). But the enclosing walls of the castle were inescapably redolent of the occupation of Edward I.

Throughout the 1980s Brith Gof was resident in the Barn Centre in Aberystwyth, a range of historic buildings, originally an iron foundry and later converted by the university. Other occupants included artist Cliff McLucas who began to design elements of performance, such as the saw-horse used in *Rhydcymerau* (1984) (see p. 116). Subsequently, as a full-time member of the company, his training as an architect proved instrumental in helping instigate and elaborate new approaches to site, beginning with large-scale works such as *Gododdin* (1988–89) (see pp. 112–15), *PAX* (1990–91) (see pp. 69–70) and *Haearn* (1992) (see pp. 142–3). This led to operational definitions of ‘site-specific performance’, the term finally being applied to the work and the theorization that forms substantial parts of this volume.

Site specific performances are conceived for, and conditioned by, the particulars of found spaces, (former) sites of work, play and worship. They make manifest, celebrate, confound or criticize location, history, function, architecture, microclimate. They are an interpenetration of the found and the fabricated. They are inseparable from their sites, the only contexts within which they are ‘readable’. (Pearson and McLucas, no date, p. 2)

At this juncture, the company espoused site as a place of both artistic and cultural invention and innovation: ‘a theatrical as well as a social enquiry’
(Wilkie, 2008, p. 95). ‘The site of Brith Gof’s performances might then be understood not just as a geographical location, but as a place in which cultural identities and social relationships can be productively examined’ (ibid., p. 93). Later, in relation to Prydain (1996) (see pp. 73–4), Heike Roms observes that ““being Welsh” must no longer be defined in reference to an originary pedagogical object (such as culture, language), but by the very performance of “Welsh citizenship”’ (Roms, 2004, p. 189).

Such was the scale of Brith Gof site-specific performances that it became increasingly difficult for performers to monitor the immediate effect of their activities and accordingly to react directly to audiences. In response therefore I devised personal and autobiographical works of smaller scale, more intimate and ultimately dialogic in nature, including From Memory (1991) staged at the open-air Welsh Folk Museum and Bubbling Tom (2000) (see pp. 54–7) on the streets of the village where I was raised.

**Pearson/Brookes**

The performances of Pearson/Brookes, an ongoing, irregular collaboration with artist and scenographer Mike Brookes, reflect a shift away from architectural concerns with enclosure and modelling within bound spaces, to performance as place-making; and through the use of media, from taking audiences to unusual sites to bringing unusual sites to them.

Companies such as Volcano Theatre (2009) and Earthfall (2009) continue to make group performances at site in Wales, but in recent years a group of solo artists has also emerged, through changes in funding regime, whose advances in the field are considered here: Eddie Ladd, Marc Rees, John Rowley and Simon Whitehead.

That such developments should occur in Wales is not entirely surprising. With a relative paucity of indigenous dramatic traditions, with no mainstream tradition setting what theatre should and ought to look like, with, until recently, no National Theatre prescribing orthodoxy of theatrical convention, performance has had options. Alternative practices have not been marginalized, and since the early 1970s they have been substantially subsidized. With only a limited range of auditoria, such practices have sought other sites.

Wales is a country of uneven demography, of scattered rural communities and small towns in the north and west, and heavily populated post-industrial conurbations in the south. Its languages are equally unevenly distributed, though the renaissance in Welsh has been in urban areas. It has a recent history of civil disobedience and a longer tradition of nonconformism, with an innate suspicion of ostentation. It has the most highly subsidized television service in the world. And it has a tradition of imagining itself, of reinventing itself, most recently by statute in a new nationhood.

In Wales, there are places that resemble Pierre Nora’s lieux de mémoire: ‘any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by
dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community’ (Nora, 1992, p. xvii). Places such as Tryweryn where Liverpool Corporation constructed a reservoir, or Aberfan where a sliding coal tip engulfed the village school. At the time such events inspired protest movements and changed perceptions of industrialization. They continue to resonate as ever-present sites of claim and counter-claim. As sites of performance, they offer dense accretions of conflicting opinion. Whilst Nora’s formulation is open to critique as being overly instrumental, it does help illuminate the role of the memorialization of place in a small, stateless nation: ‘the goal was to exhume significant sites, to identify the most obvious and crucial centres of national memory’ (ibid.).

And there are, too, particular Welsh expressions of place, that help orientate both its practical engagement and critical apprehension: y filltir sgwar (see p. 110), y fro (see p. 111) and cynefin (see pp. 101–3).

All of which sets particular conditions for the location, presentation, form and content of site-specific performance.
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