

# Truths and lies: exploring the ethics of performance applications

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This paper examines the ethics of the contract between the performer and client group in applied theatre practice. The paper examines the problematics of the conventional drama framework as a fictional space of pretence. What are the ethics of activities carried out in a context of disbelief? How can the contradictions between the agreement to ‘pretend’ and the encounter with real lives be addressed?

The work featured is undertaken within a self-reflexive framework wherein the concept of being ‘in role’ is not allied with deception. All the companies and practitioners featured use modes of participatory theatre in which the collaboration between the performer/animateur and the spect/actor or client is negotiated in a space between the ‘real’ and the ‘not real’ so that the participants are conscious that the situations played out, although ‘live’ are both real and not real while the performers are more explicit about their roles than in more conventional theatre frameworks. This space between performance and ordinary life, as I will demonstrate, is a space for intervention and change.

## The problem of the ‘real’

I want to begin by considering an event at the ‘Interventionist Theatre Conference’ (Bretton Hall, University of Leeds, UK, July 2004). In his discussion of the use of drama with perpetrators of domestic violence, one of the presenters paused to play a tape which he warned the audience they may find ‘disturbing’. We were told that we would have a few moments for reflection at the end of the tape. What ensued was a harrowing recording of an emergency call out in which a young girl struggles to communicate with a telephonist whilst her mother is being beaten in a furious physical and verbal assault. The girl is extremely distressed as she speaks to the telephonist about her situation; some of the details aren’t clear but she refers to her baby sister, ‘still’ in her cot, and describes her mother as being on the floor. The background noise of screaming and thumping obscures the girl’s voice as the telephonist endeavours to calm her down and tries to secure her safety until help arrives. During this recording a few audience members left the room, returning when it had finished. After the tape finished, a silence ensued. The presenter invited a response and an angry voice shouted at him, ‘why did you do that?’. The presenter

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leaned back calmly in his chair (as if this were the response he had anticipated) and said 'because it's real'. He explained that he uses this tape with the men he works with to confront them with the 'reality' of their behaviour and it often reduces them to tears.

There are a number of ethical issues raised by this episode. The justification for playing the tape in the first place was controversial for the rest of the conference, and the audience was divided on this question. Was it right to make the private public in this way? Is it appropriate to use such sensitive, confidential material in therapeutic and academic contexts? What interested me was the way in which the concept of the 'real' became such a provocative topic. Isn't there an irony here that most of the audience members who witnessed and objected to the use of this tape are practitioners of applied theatre, whose work with people in non-theatrical settings uses methodologies based on fiction, pretence and illusion?

Part of the power and efficacy of this micro-event lay in its negotiation between presence, absence and implication. The domestic drama was fought out in our imaginations; it was harrowing in its detail and our knowledge that we were witness to such a violent episode that was 'real', albeit retrospectively, enhanced its impact. I am not surprised that those convicted of domestic abuse were moved by this. The tape forces them to witness a scene that they have themselves provoked, but asks them to consider the experience from the perspective of an innocent child. How might drama offer an alternative to this? The acting out of a scene where the offender plays his victim? Perhaps. But would it change his behaviour? The drama work which apparently accompanies the tape involves activities which help perpetrators to identify the triggers for their violent episodes, and to develop strategies to avoid an assault. After confronting the consequences of violent behaviour via the tape, the expectation is that offenders will be positively motivated to find ways of addressing their problems. The moment in which people change is a key factor in this approach. This was something which I recognised but which I have previously identified with particular kinds of *theatre* events. What struck me as an audience member at this conference presentation was the atmosphere generated by this episode. Whether we agree with the presenter's strategies or not, something had happened; something had shifted and the audience was visibly moved. This is that elusive concept of 'liveness' in performance where the audience become self-consciously aware of themselves as participants in, or witnesses to, an event, a happening, a moment in which something changes. This experience of liveness is achieved by contemporary performance methodologies which draw attention to the ways in which theatrical products are constructed. It is rarely, if ever, found in black box theatres which attempt to imitate life, nor is it evident in illusionist theatres where the 'willing suspension of disbelief' prevails. It is an approach to performance-making which is not, therefore, associated with quasi-realist modes of performance. So here is a further irony: the actor is a master of pretence, mimicry and artifice. What are the ethics of using these methodologies when we are working with real lives?

Research I have recently undertaken explores how the application of contemporary performance techniques and methodologies enables practitioners and participants to

work within a redefined ethical framework, one in which it is not necessary to 'lie' in order to perform. In this I am questioning a model of theatre based on pretence, a model which is the basis of drama therapy as well as many other applications of theatre to community or educational settings. In the opening pages of *Introduction to Dramatherapy: Person and Threshold*, Salvo Pitruzzella refers to Bruce Wilshire's work (Wilshire, 1982), saying that:

in [Wilshire's] seminal book *Role Playing and Identity* ... the connections are explored between the theatrical metaphor used to describe human reality, and the essence of theatre itself as a mirror of the processes involved in the creation of individual and human identity. (Pitruzzella, 2004, p. 1)

It is this popular notion of theatre acting 'as a mirror' that I want to question in relation to current applied theatre practices. Inextricably related to this is the convention of the actor 'in role': i.e. pretending to be something s/he is not within the drama framework. Whilst this paradigm has certainly played an important and valuable role in applied theatre practices, the concept has shifted as those involved have become more media literate and the mirror of realism most familiar to participants is more likely to be a screen than a stage. Drawing upon two examples of contemporary practice which in different ways depart from this model, the Midlands-based group C&T, and London-based Oily Cart, I want to look at how belief may be problematised and reviewed from different perspectives. Firstly, I shall consider an example of C&T's work which takes place in a context of *dis*belief, whereby the participants are pretending to pretend. Secondly, I shall examine work in a radically different situation where client-participants may or may not be aware that they are engaged in 'performance'.

### **To be or not to be: C&T's *Living Newspaper***

My hypothesis about how educational drama frameworks are responding to ways in which new technologies re-construct notions of 'reality' in performance and the significance of the actor in role was usefully endorsed by some research I did in conjunction with the Worcester based company C&T. Founded in 1988, C&T began work as a Theatre in Education Company: Collar and Tie. Committed to 'participatory theatre' and 'process drama', the company worked in schools and community settings using the workshop based approaches of Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton. The concept of the 'actor in role' was fundamental to their methodology. Target audiences for the company were young people, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, those in rural areas and the economically disadvantaged. In seeking to access these 'new' audiences, the company became known for its pioneering use of new technology, including mass and popular media forms. One of the company's most successful early projects, for example, was *The Dark Theatre* which involved various schools using drama to create a comic book. Another project *Cambat* explored young people's perceptions of and anxieties about a surveillance

society; through the use of live performance, video and a website, the project was designed to turn CCTV cameras back on the individuals operating them. One of the company's objectives was to cross reference different forms of performance in its work, creating 'dramatic products that ... can continue to explore and develop through other dramatising media' (C&T Business Plan, April 1988–March 2001, p. 1). This led to the development of the concept of the 'dramatic property' as one of the defining characteristics of the company's work. This term is used to indicate the company's intention that the effects of the projects would have a life beyond the performance. As the company's work with new technologies developed, they found that many of the traditional forms of TIE employed in their projects were redefined in relation to postmodern performance strategies. The company continued to draw upon and to develop aspects of TIE practice (and continues to refer, for example, to Heathcote and Bolton in its training programmes), but changed its title to reflect its orientation towards a different model of applied theatre. The acronym 'C&T' now encompasses a range of functions:

- Computers and Theatre
- Community and Training
- Creativity and Technology
- Culture and Theory

In C&T's most recent 'dramatic property', *The Living Newspaper.com*, the ethics of performance based on the conventions of pretence and illusion are radically undermined. *The Living Newspaper* project is a reinvention of the 1930s' form of documentary theatre, using the Internet. There is a certain irony contained in the title if we pause to reflect upon the first part of the project's name. Why *Living Newspaper*? A newspaper that is 'living' (as, presumably, opposed to one that is 'dead') is one that is animated, participatory, immediate, intended to be 'truthful', and perhaps under popular and democratic ownership. The idea of a 'living' newspaper, like that of the Living Theatre, seeks to relate the practice to a way of life beyond performance. This is both rhetorically and temperamentally affiliated to what Philip Auslander has identified as a humane ethic of liveness which continues to be prized as the *raison d'être* of performance itself. In particular, Auslander notes, live performance is valued for 'its putative ability to create community (if not communion) among its participants, including performers and spectators' (Auslander, 1999, p. 4).

In the current context, however, the notion of a performance community which is constituted through processes of presence and participation uncontaminated by the surveillance, recording, relay and replay technologies of a mediatised society is, to say the least, open to doubt. As Baz Kershaw notes:

[T]he issues surrounding the idea of 'community' are intensified by the globalising processes set in train by the late twentieth-century internationalisation of capital and communication networks, brought about particularly by the spread of new digital technologies, such as the World Wide Web and the Internet. (Kershaw, 1999, p. 193)

Community theatre traditionally aimed to specifically promote localised and immediate practices of participation, so that both process and performance were seen as actively creating and sustaining the networks of community in the here and now.<sup>1</sup> Equally importantly, the subject matter frequently operated within a quasi-documentary form, with the resources of local memory and history providing material. One of the key considerations here is that the means and ends of performance were governed by negotiations between theatre professionals and local non-professionals, a process in which there were a range of theatre skills and vocabularies, and a variety of understandings of who and what this kind of theatre is for. The challenge now, however, is not only that the terminology of 'community' has been problematised, but there is also an increasing marginalisation of the discourses and practices of drama and theatre that were previously imagined to be a viable means of comprehending it. In what Auslander describes as 'a culture for which mediatization is a vehicle of the general code in a way that live performance is not (or is no longer)' (Auslander, 1999, p. 5), the personal camcorder is widely-owned and it is digital media culture which provides a ubiquitous medium for non-professional self-documentation and self-dramatisation. Such then, are the grounds upon which C&T's twenty-first century *living newspaper.com* began its work.

The dynamic relationship between process and product which characterises the Living Newspaper form is different from traditional TIE practices as Paul Sutton, the project's director recognised.

The project's attempt to mix two classic theatrical forms: Living Newspapers and Theatre-in-Education, invited contradiction from the outset. Living Newspapers, like TIE were an inherently educational theatre form. However, whilst Living Newspapers taught through an audience's consumption of an essentially didactic theatre product, TIE taught through a predominantly child-centred approach to learning with an emphasis on process and participation. (Paul Sutton, interview with the author, December 2003)

Sutton reconciles this apparent contradiction between different modes of performance by referring to Gavin Bolton, who recognised that the process and product is not a division but a continuum (Bolton, 1986, p. 53).

What became clear was that for the project to embrace both genres' pedagogic approaches *the livingnewspaper.com* needed to dramatise and encode the making of Living newspapers as well as the finished products themselves. (Sutton & Shaughnessy, 2002)

From the outset, the participants (generally school pupils) operate in a controlling authoring role; they decide on an issue they want to explore (examples have included the use of CCTV, school closures and asylum seekers) and use the resources supplied by the company (CD-Rom of ICT materials, website and online learning tools, video as well as theatre workshops) to document their work and to share it with other audiences through the Internet. Teachers and young people work alongside the company, learning a range of techniques for documentation and production. These

include Real Player Video Streaming (e.g. for staged CCTV footage), Flash animation (for creating animated political cartoons) and chat rooms (for online improvisation of scripts). Participants are able to create material by using a series of template tools (labelled Still Image, Camera Voice, Video etc.) which enable them to upload video clips, photos and to add vocals and music. The website also contains a number of resources to facilitate these Living Newspaper Journalists, including a newswire, a library and a gallery.

The participants' autonomy is, however, illusory; what really controls the process and product is what the company refers to as a 'secret network'. When the project was initially devised and presented, its director, Paul Sutton developed an elaborate version of the actor in role. His idea proved to be very controversial with members of his company. What he proposed was a fictional newsroom whereby the actors would pretend to be characters, establishing Internet identities to create the illusion of a 'real' media team and network. Members of C&T, however, expressed concern about this methodology; they felt it was ethically problematic because it involved deception. Paul Sutton explains the problem as follows:

It was that the newsroom/secret network which young people were being invited to join, set itself up as being real, (which it is—real kids in schools doing real drama about real issues) when in fact a key component of it—the six characters—were fictional. The concern was that we were lying to them about these characters. (Sutton & Shaughnessy, 2002)

Sutton argued that the very fact of being in a drama lesson meant that pupils would be alert to 'things not being what they may seem'. He also argued that the construction of new identities on the Internet is an accepted convention and that this could be regarded as another form of being 'in role'.

So in the first instance, *the livingnewspaper.com* operates in the mode of dramatic playing, as what O'Toole would describe as a Fictional Context (1992). Participants are invited to 'sign-up' to a covert network called *thelivingnewspaper.com*. This covert network comprises of a number of 'Cells' of documentary drama activists. This role of 'Drama Activists' gives participants a frame through which to participate in the Fictional Context. Activists are first inducted into the network, its rules, regulations, membership structure, techniques and operations through a Membership Pack—a CD-Rom, which includes historical materials on Living Newspapers, advice on techniques, and background information on the covert network itself. Once inducted, these Cells (effectively a school ...) are charged with researching, investigating and dramatising topical news stories ... The Command and Control functions of the covert network are led by a small, anonymous and highly secretive team, who issue instructions and advice to participants through the website. (Sutton & Shaughnessy, 2002)

This is a complex and sophisticated dramatic frame. The actor/teacher pretends that the CD-Rom has just arrived in the post and feigns curiosity about its contents. S/he asks the class if they want to see what is on it. At this juncture the actor/teacher has crossed the threshold into the familiar world of working in role and Heathcote's concept of the Frame (1984). But the role is an uneasy one; when the CD-Rom is

loaded an announcement frames the fiction in ways which invite participants' to reflect on how their roles have been constructed.

### **Manifesto**

The Living Newspaper does not exist.

The Living Newspaper.net does not exist.

The idea of a covert organisation committed to uncovering the truth behind the drama of world events is ridiculous.

To believe that the world's news media at best ignore young people, at worst twist and distort what they say, do, think and feel, is self delusion.

The notion that young people across the world could forge a network of Docu-Dramatist cells committed to challenging those distortions through theatre, is fantasy.

And that drama and the Internet could be the tools to challenge those deceptions, lies and mistruths is plainly laughable.

And that this network, through its strength in creativity, might actually change the world for the better is the biggest joke of all.

The idea is pure theatre.

Face facts. (Sutton, 2004)

What then, are the ethics of this exchange? The manifesto is clearly designed to provoke the young people to want to challenge the text through participation in the 'theatre' of the living newspaper. In so doing, they are conscious of themselves as journalists/theatre makers. The CD-Rom provides a series of instructions for the class but it also punctuates these activities with a regular series of bulletins which flash across the screen, interrupting the work in progress and functioning as reminders that the pupils are operating within a mediated context. The frame is reinforced by an apparently 'authentic' version of Google which appears on screen as an ordinary search engine. However, as Sutton explains:

It is in fact not Google at all but a secret mechanism for logging users into the covert messaging system of the living newspaper command and control network ... This is the heart of the Drama. You have now triggered a sequence of pre-programmed messages to be launched in real-time on your computer screen ... They operate on two levels. Firstly, as dialogue between the fictional characters in our cover network—discussing issues, exchanging news, gossip and insults—and as a device for issuing instructions to participants ... as to how to develop their Living Newspaper drama live in the classroom. In effect it provides through the drama frame a kind of virtual Teacher-in-Role. (Sutton, interview with the author, December 2003)

The actor/teacher follows the instructions on the CD-Rom and the pupils discuss their ideas for their version of a Living Newspaper. When the project was piloted, however, the company discovered that the role play had been a mutual exchange. At the end of the session, the director turned to the class and confessed that the CD-Rom wasn't 'real', and that the characters were the actors and the Living Newspaper newsroom was the company's invention. The pupils were nonplussed; they revealed that they hadn't been fooled but had been aware that they were playing a game from the start. The drama operated within a complex self-reflexive framework: it is a meta-media narrative. The actors were *pretending* to discover the contents of the CD-Rom and created the fantasy of the Living Newspaper network. The fact that it is a

pretence is advertised in the opening announcement but it is made clear that the rules of the game are to contest this. In turn, the pupils involved are aware of themselves as 'actors'. Because they are familiar with the concept of assumed identity through e-mail, passwords and Internet personas, they are able to move in and out of the media framework easily and clearly. As well as the demonstration of the Brechtian concept of *Verfremdung* (estrangement), Sutton acknowledges the influence of a pop culture model, the band Gorillaz.

Formed by Blur's Damon Albarn, the band was originally launched anonymously, fronted by some cartoon Gorilla characters, who appeared in the videos, on websites, posters, etc.—even performing live through animated projections at the Brit Awards. No mention of Albarn, just mediated hype. But everyone knew they were Albarn's brainchild. You could recognise his voice on lead vocals. No public admittance, no public denial. However, fans were not duped or psychologically warped by this 'estrangement' from their 'real' pop heroes. They just got on with entering the fiction of Gorillaz and enjoying it for what it was: good music, jazzy graphics, and a new sense of identity and cultural validity for a slightly ageing pop star. What was important was the credibility and endorsement of the execution not the identity of the executioner under the mask. My thinking was if this can work in a pop music context, why not in a process drama? (Sutton, interview with the author, December 2003)

For many of us familiar with Theatre in Education and the methodologies of devised performance, the influence of other media forms can be problematic leading to wooden, unimaginative naturalistic scenarios as participants draw upon the vocabulary of television and particularly soap opera to stage their representation of 'real' life. In trying to simulate the 'real', these participants are doomed to failure as their performance can only ever be an inadequate imitation of the verisimilitude of film and television. C&T's work involves a different use of mediated culture. As Paul Sutton explains,

If young people's dramatic vocabulary is so profoundly informed by the media texts of our dramatised society, then why should not theatre, the dramatic form from which all others derive, not appropriate the conventions, techniques and technologies of these media to construct new and original theatre texts designed to engage these media literate audiences? (Sutton, interview with the author, December 2003)

This is precisely what the Living Newspaper project aims to achieve.

### **Beyond the viewing place: Oily Cart's installations**

In his 'Musings on applied theatre: towards a new theatron', Philip Taylor begins to interrogate the term 'applied theatre'. He identifies three characteristics of applied theatre: 'the intention to transformation, the participation of the audience and the centrality of the theatre form in achieving its objectives' (Taylor, 2003, p. 37). Moreover,

Applied Theatre moves beyond the viewing space to encompass the audience and the actor. In the applied theatre, actors and audience are one and engage with each other. The theatre is 'applied' because it moves beyond the conventional space to render

support; it is not a deadly theatre in Peter Brook's (1968) eyes, it is a transformative theatre which has applications within a variety of settings for a variety of pedagogical purposes. (Taylor, 2003, p. 38)

For Taylor, however, applied theatre is rather too readily allied with therapy. He asks: 'how might we apply theatre forms to help young people and their elders interrogate the various traumas they are experiencing?' (Taylor, 2003, p. 38). The notion of 'transformation' risks being evangelical: the participants in applied theatre become objects who are asked to 'do' something to and this becomes ethically contentious. Taylor's concern with the 'viewing place which moves beyond its conventional location, and requires more than viewing' is a defining feature of his version of applied theatre. Indeed, given that most applied theatre takes place outside of conventional theatre buildings, it is curious that acting (particularly in role play) continues to prevail as the dominant methodology. What happens when the 'viewing place' in applied theatre becomes integral to the process of theatre making? Can applied theatre use some of the artistic processes developed in site-specific performance to create interactive, participatory theatre spaces? Does this clarify some of the ethical issues which surround the aims of some applied theatre practices?

Nick Kaye's work on site specific performance provides a useful starting point for this discussion.

If one accepts the proposition that the meanings of utterances, actions and events are affected by their 'local position', by the *situation* of which they are a part, then a work of art, too, will be defined in relation to its place and position ... One can go on from this to argue that the location, in reading, of an image, object, or event, its positioning in relation to political, aesthetic, geographical, institutional, or other discourses, all inform what 'it' can be said to *be*. (Kaye, 2000, p. 1)

A company who have engaged in dialogue with this aspect of contemporary performance practice in conjunction with their work in applied theatre is Oily Cart. One of the policies of this company is to challenge conventional definitions of theatre and audience, whilst another is to engage with new audiences, particularly those which other forms of theatre have found hard to reach. The company specialises in making theatre for two such audiences: the very young (under four years of age) and young people with severe and profound learning difficulties (PMLD). Oily Cart's installations draw upon performance art as an offspring of a visual art. Words are generally minimal and the emphasis is on a total sensory theatre experience as performers play with audience/participants, engaging in a dialogue and exchange through predominantly non-verbal means, using materials and bodies to create multiple 'meanings'. Oily Cart's use of the term 'transformation' is in relation to space: 'we aim to transform the everyday school environment, be it a hall, classroom or hydro pool'.<sup>2</sup> As the theatre journalist, Lyn Gardner puts it in an unattributed statement on the Company's website:

One of the things that is extraordinary about these performances, whether they take place on dry land, or, like ... *Big Splash*, in a swimming pool, is how close they come to being the kind of theatre that you dream about but rarely actually see. A theatre as much

about smell as it is about words, about touch as much as action and where ideas and narratives are conveyed through sensory experience.

The installations Oily Cart produce develop specific relationships between the individuals they work with, and the environment the company creates to work within. The installation creates the fictional framework within which the theatre event takes place and the company develop characters appropriate to the theatrical environment. In *Boing*, for example, there are two installations: the *Dome of Delights* is a tent wherein a variety of sensory encounters are offered: aromas, massage and balloons with artefacts attached. The second installation, *The Flying Carpet*, is a trampoline with a veil above it which takes children on an exotic flight to the accompaniment of a personalised song and an Egyptian dance. While the children are waiting for their turn in the dome or on the carpet, they are treated to an aromatherapy massage in the 'chill out' zone. Sensory stimuli are introduced individually and carefully; the children are given the opportunity to explore different aspects of the environment (e.g. feeling the carpet, smelling the aromas) and have an element of control in shaping their experience. Here, the principle of autonomy comes into play. For example, the aroma is sprayed around the tent and offered to the children to smell. If the child indicates that they don't like it the spray isn't directed at them. The performers try things out on the children and then develop them further if they get a positive response: tickling feet first then other parts of the body. Throughout the event, the performers react to the children's responses and extend these wherever possible. One of the characters (Bop), copies individual children's reactions and frequently encourages the other participants to observe each other's responses. There is commentary to reinforce this: 'he's laughing', 'she likes it'. The rhythms of the piece are adjusted to suit individual children and, as participants in this interactive experience, the children function as audience and performer, subject and object. Thus in Oily Cart's installations there is a dynamic relationship between the space, materials and the participants/spectators who continually redefine the work.

The company's most recent production, *Conference of the Birds* (2004), has been developed, in part, to appeal to children with autistic spectrum disorders and offers an insight into the sensory, tactile and visually detailed world that the autistic child inhabits. Oily Cart's artistic director, Tim Webb, takes as his source a well known myth. The central narrative is recognisable: the crisis of the bird kingdom after the departure of its King, Simorgh (who is a Queen in Webb's revision). The birds try various strategies to appeal to her to return through tactile and sensual stimuli: water, seeds and perfume but realise that fulfilment lies within themselves rather than being dependent upon an outside source. In Oily Cart's version of this epic quest, the children, rather than the birds are the focus. Autism is generally defined in terms of three areas, referred to as the 'triad': social interaction, communication and imagination. In Oily Cart's theatrical environment, these elements are actively and spontaneously engaged: the regular eye contact between performer and participant as the tactile exchanges take place is one indication of the benefits of this experience. The children involved engage in turn taking and communicate through their bodies

and voices in ways which are not typical for neuro-divergent individuals. As the birds search for the ultimate sensory experience the children are tickled with feathers, play with aromatic water in the form of sponges which they are invited to squeeze and dabble their fingers in enticing illuminated seed bowls to experience what Webb describes as 'gratuitous pleasure' (Webb, interview with the author, November 2003). There is an emotive moment as each child is filmed and has their still image projected onto a screen as the cast of birds sing a song using each child's name as the focus of the improvised lyric.

The emphasis upon the sensuous and experiential dimensions of the event, rather than upon mimesis or narrative, has prompted one witness of the piece in action to ask whether it can be defined as art, as therapy, or as a hybrid of the two. For this production, Oily Cart took the unusual step of inviting the *Guardian's* theatre critic, Michael Billington, to a performance which he subsequently reported upon in the newspaper's arts pages. For Billington, the status of the piece as performance is ambiguous: registering that the work is compelling (even to a non-participant), he observes that even though 'in a sense one must abandon the normal reviewing criteria', the production 'reduces theatre to its simplest ingredients: a story, a message, a succession of physical sensations' (Billington, 2004). Invoking the 'curative' function of art, Billington dismisses the theatre-versus-therapy debate as 'academic', while recognising that the nature of the children's participation in the show was, according to the conventional terms of theatre reviewing, unreadable.

It is impossible to know precisely what the children feel; all one can say is that they reacted with visible curiosity to a succession of sensory stimuli. (Billington, 2004)

*Conference of the Birds* has a production history which, of course, many will be aware of. Here we have an example of a palimpsest with a text which has been erased and written over. Peter Brook's version of Farid Uddin Attar's twelfth century Persian poem is a central reference. Webb's production draws upon methodologies and an aesthetic we associate more with live art than text based theatre. There is an emphasis on process rather than product, the interrogation of the 'authority' of authorship, the questioning of art as commodity, the focus on the 'everyday' and the interrogation of representation.

Live art has involved a dialogue between different disciplines, particularly other visual arts and film as well as drawing upon influences and practices from non-western cultures. Artists have explored their bodies as material, experimented with found objects and sound as stimuli for or focuses of performance. The work produced is characterised by hybridity, it is difficult to define (as reviewers have indicated), it uses a variety of artists and practices: video and film makers, artists, sculptors, architects and composers to produce installations, site specific and multi-media interactive pieces. Whilst C&T appropriate the idioms of mass and popular culture, and explore the performative possibilities of cyberspace, Oily Cart's work plays with ideas of presence, place and the body. Both examples suggest new and exciting ways of engaging audiences and performers, drawing upon contemporary

forms of performance making and in so doing, produce work which does not pretend to be something it isn't.

### Notes

1. In the UK the activities of Ann Jellicoe in the 1970s and 1980s are particularly well documented.
2. Oily Cart publicity document, see [www.oilycart.org.uk/specialneedsshow](http://www.oilycart.org.uk/specialneedsshow).

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