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Paperless and penless: headphone performance, audio-scripting and new approaches to writing for performance

Abstract:

This paper investigates new approaches to writing, devising and viewing contemporary performance, all of which revolve around the use of headphones. It will explore recent works of ‘headphone performance’ – performances augmented through the strategic use of headphones and digital audio technology – recently seen in Australia. These performances include *Stories of Love & Hate* (Roslyn Oades: Urban Theatre Projects 2008), *Wondermart* (Rotozaza 2009) and *small metal objects* (Back-to-Back Theatre 2005 - restaged 2010). This paper will argue that the innovative use of new technology, as employed in these diverse performances, challenges traditional perspectives on writing and viewing performance. In particular, the concept of ‘audio-scripting’ as used by Roslyn Oades, a paperless form of writing for performance based on recorded interviews, offers new opportunities for rethinking approaches to devising, teaching, and writing for performance.

Biographical note:

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In a 2008 report entitled *Don't panic; The Impact of Digital Technology on the Major Performing Arts Industry* the Australia Council for the Arts reviewed the ramifications of an increasing use of digital technology in the creation, reproduction and transmission of live performance. Though directed at major performing arts companies, the report clearly anticipates that the entire Australian performing arts sector must adapt to an environment where new technology plays a key part: 'The way in which people want and are prepared to view live performance is changing' (2008:np). Partly in response to the findings of the Australia Council report, but with an emphasis on the work of several smaller cutting-edge companies, the purpose of this paper is to discuss a number of ways in which the innovative use of new technology challenges traditional approaches to devising, writing and viewing performance. What questions do contemporary live performances raise for creative writing programs and the teaching of scriptwriting as a critical and creative practice?

The paper will explore three contemporary Australian examples of live performance¹ each of which, I suggest, can be grouped together under the title of 'Headphone Performance' as they are works that are augmented through the strategic use of headphones and digital audio technology². The works are: *Stories of Love & Hate* (Roslyn Oades: Urban Theatre Projects 2008), *Wondermart* (Rotozaza 2009) and *small metal objects* (Back-to-Back Theatre 2005 - restaged 2010). I am interested in the ways these Headphone Performances offer new opportunities for rethinking approaches to the teaching of scriptwriting as a dramaturgical, rather than traditionally 'authored', process³. In particular, the paper will investigate three different examples of 'writing' for performance: collaborative, devised scripting in the case of Back-to-Back; script as downloadable and interactive as employed by Rotozaza; and the concept of 'audio-scripting', as used by Roslyn Oades, which is a paperless form of writing for performance based on recorded interviews. If the ways in which people want, and are prepared, to view live performance is changing, does our approach to teaching, devising and writing for live performance also need to adjust?

small metal objects

Premiering in 2005, *small metal objects* is an award winning work by Geelong based theatre company Back-to-Back Theatre. It has toured widely and internationally, and recently returned home to be restaged in the *Westfield* shopping mall in the centre of Geelong in 2010. *small metal objects* is the story of a failed drug deal that is performed in a live public space. Its premiere in Melbourne took place on the Flinders Street Station concourse and it has subsequently been performed in diverse locations such as a Town Hall Square (Copenhagen), Ferry Terminal (New York) and seedy subway station (Hamburg). Back-to-Back Theatre is also somewhat unique in that the company's acting ensemble is made up of persons with, or perceived to have, intellectual disabilities (2010: Company Website). *Small metal objects*, under the artistic direction of Bruce Gladwin,

uses a combination of two performers from the ensemble as the main characters, and two (non-disabled) guest actors from outside the company (Gill 2010:np).

For the latest restaging in the *Westfield* shopping centre a modest bank of seating is placed in the middle of the mall, directly across from an Information Centre. As they take their seats each audience member puts on a set of headphones and looks out across a thoroughfare punctuated by jewellery stores, surf clothing shops, cafes, menswear shops and homewares outlets. The space is alive with people completing their Friday night shopping with kids or partner in tow. Through the headphones, the audience eavesdrop on conversations between the performers speaking into radio mikes. The audience also hear a live sound-mix that adds another layer to the conversation as it builds and changes. The performers move around the concourse, sometimes disappearing in the crowd, but more often walking and standing a short distance away from the seating bank. *Small metal objects* challenges traditional ways of viewing performance because, from its beginning, the ‘performance’ itself is difficult to locate. We hear it before we see it. Moreover, the process of viewing is also interesting for the ways in which the audience themselves are far more visible than the actors. Passersby regard the audience on the seating bank with surprise; they often turn around to look into the mall trying to locate the ‘real performance’, without luck, before returning to watch the audience – sitting silently wearing headphones – pointing them out to friends and children. The use of headphones in *small metal objects* thus supports an unusual juxtaposition: the audience hear in intimate detail the conversations between the characters in almost cinematic precision with the audio technology creating a kind of close-up effect drawing the viewer in, yet all the while the space in which the performance takes place and the audience is embedded is ‘live’, public, unregulated and to continue the metaphor, wide-angle.

Watching *small metal objects* can be an overwhelming experience, because of the abundance of choice the viewer is given. Yes, there is a ‘performance’ to follow, but there are also the families, couples, children, teenagers who become unknowing performers too. As theatre critic Alison Croggon suggests, the ‘slight alienation’ of the headphones provokes a ‘radical’ change of perceptions raising the question of who is watching whom? (2005:np). This has an obvious voyeuristic dimension, but also brings to the fore one of the central ideas behind Back-to-Back’s work, namely the question of visibility and an ethics of viewing. The key performers in *small metal objects* are disabled, they are subjects often unseen, kept out of the frame of normative society, and viewing the performance makes one acutely aware of the choice to see what is often overlooked (Croggon 2005:np).

Back-to-Back’s work is group-devised and developed by Gladwin in collaboration with the cast members and company, as such this approach encourages consideration of the difference between this process of devised scripting to the writing of a traditional sole authored work. According to Croggon, one wonders ‘how much more powerful the show would have been if it had employed a writer who could pull together a really strong text from the material offered by the Back to Back performers’ (2005:np). Croggon’s observation is a critical one as it questions the role of the writer in the devising process.

The collaborative approach to *small metal objects* contributes to a text that is deceptively simple, even mundane. The performance begins with a sequence of laconic exchanges between Steve (Simon Laherty) and Gary (Sonia Teuben):

Steve: I really want a girlfriend and I can't find the right girl.

Gary: You been going out?

Steve: I've been out with a few girls ... but it doesn't last very long.

Gary: Grab some books and videos. On love. Learn some stuff.

Steve: I've got a couple of DVDs on love. I watched them. It hasn't worked out (2005: DVD).

This text allows the audience access to small intimacies and vernacular, but also highlights that in contemporary Australian society the very real voices of marginalised subjects often remain unheard. Moreover, in *small metal objects*, the sophisticated use of audio technology positions the 'scripted/spoken' text within this innovative, multi-layered work as an integral yet 'alienated' element. The script of *small metal objects*, thus questions the process of speaking and listening because the relationship of the audience to the text, and to the performers of the text, is always being mediated through radio microphones, mixing board and headphones. Back-to-Back's approach to script and performance is innovative in the sense that the performance and technology combine within the dramaturgy, in new and startling ways.

Wondermart

Wondermart is an interactive audio performance by British company Rotozaza, touring to Australia as part of the first season of 2010 at North Melbourne's Arts House. The performance is available as an mp3, which 'you' the audience member downloads onto an audio player and, at the time of your choosing, listens too while in a supermarket. The supermarket has to be sufficiently large, but otherwise there are no other stipulations on the performance. Similar to *small metal objects* the performance takes place in a 'live' public space and uses headphones to impart the text, except that this time there are no 'performers' to watch and you – now simultaneously the sole performer – remain anonymous. The audience are not set apart from the supermarket environment on a seating bank for example.

The performance begins as, headphones on, you press play and enter the supermarket. The audio guide, a female voice with soft accented English, conducts a sound-test and says:

You are about to journey through a high-density retail environment. There will be things to see, things to do and people to meet. If anyone you know approaches you to greet you, don't let them stop you. Keep following my instructions (2010:Audio file).

What follows is a thirty-minute tour of the supermarket in which you look closely at the aisles, the objects, the specials, the popular brands, the brands to the very right of the popular brands and the CCTV cameras. You are instructed to spend two minutes

wandering and familiarising yourself with the space and choosing items which might 'represent you'. Later, you are instructed to stand in front of the milk fridge and consider the process of production – here the female voice is replaced by a male Yorkshire voice – from farm to carton and you pick up and shake the carton before replacing it and moving on. *Wondermart* encourages interaction as the listener/performer follows the instructions and directions of the performance. This is also particular to some extent as you do so in your own way and mostly at your own pace. This is a solo interaction: a secret performance for one.

Occasionally the instructions become specific as when you are told to follow a person who looks 'a little more powerful than you' and spy on their shopping habits. What do they buy? What do you buy? What do our buying habits say about us? I followed a lady wearing a smart black suit and overcoat. Her handbag was in her trolley and though she paused for a long time in front of the spice section, a single mixed bag of frozen corn and peas was all she chose to buy. In this way *Wondermart* is gently anthropological and sociological, sometimes anti-consumerist, in its content. At one point the guide playfully instructs you to briefly consider stealing a popular product. How would you go about hiding this item, in my case a box of aloe vera scented Kleenex tissues, on your person? You are told to check to see if you are being observed, either by staff members or fellow shoppers. You are asked to count the number of security cameras currently visible to you. Do you feel your heartbeat getting faster? At the end of the performance you are given one minute to return all of the items which you may have collected during the performance, leave your trolley tucked neatly out-of-the-way and exit the supermarket. As a final instruction the voice tells you to observe the supermarket from outside, the people walking quickly towards the entrance, and then tells you to leave it all and walk away.

Wondermart, as with *small metal objects*, uses headphones as a major strategic element of the performance. The text, by Silvia Mercuriali, is part of Rotozaza's 'Autoteatro' series in which participants are given instructions, often through headphones, and move from being a spectator of performance to an active performer (2010:Company Website). This audio tour format combines spoken word instructions, sound effects – the ringing of cash registers is used selectively, along with the chatter of check-out chicks and the mooing of cows while you consider the carton of milk – and muzac. The spoken text of *Wondermart* also draws attention other elements of the space, the lighting, the arrangement of shelves, the entrance and exists. Once again, the headphones work to slightly alienate you from both the text and the/your performance, you hear the voice intimately but this remains in stark contrast to the live space.

Moreover, the 'script' and 'performance' of *Wondermart* is eminently transferable: it could be downloaded and listened to, having almost equal relevance, in much of the Western world. Indeed, whilst 'performing' in the supermarket you can't help wondering at the many millions of supermarkets *just like this one*. The work encourages you to reconsider the now ubiquity of the 'high-density retail environment' but, in doing so, you may also reflect on the now ubiquity of shoppers listening to music on their ipods and

mp3players as they shop. It is this element that offers the greatest challenge to traditional notions of writing for performance, as in *Wondermart* the use of digital audio technology acts as a catalyst for a work where the ‘written’ script may exist *only* as an audio file. Where is the written script? Does it need to exist anymore? For the moment, I will leave these questions unanswered as the potential for ‘paperless scripting’ is further explored in the work of Roslyn Oades.

Stories of Love and Hate

Devised by theatre maker/performer and voice artist Roslyn Oades, in collaboration with Sydney’s Urban Theatre Projects, *Stories of Love and Hate* (2008) is a performance based on the events and aftermath of the Cronulla riots in 2005. Over a two-year period Oades recorded a collection of interviews with subjects from Western Sydney, all of which were intimately connected with the riots, and developed a performance text from the edited extracts of these verbatim recordings. Oades has been developing this ‘Headphone-verbatim’ process since 2001 when she began interviewing London boxers and trying to replicate not only their words, but their exact speech patterns in performance (Oades 2010: Lecture & Conversation).

Stories of Love and Hate begins with four performers: Mohammed Ahmad, Roderic Byrnes, Janie Gibson and Katia Molino; all placing headphones on their heads and completing a sound check on their audio devices. We hear the voice of the interviewer, Oades, asking for a sound check before Mohammed begins to recite the voice of a young Lebanese/Australian male. He confesses to hating the sound of his own voice. It continues:

Interviewer: ‘I’m recording now. Alright, ok, um so how do you know when you’re in love?’

Young Man: ‘How do you know? ...Alright, you think about them a lot...Umm...You want to be with them, most of the day and the night. And when you’re with them, you don’t wanna let go of them. Is that right? *(laughs)*...Do you agree? It hurts, love it hurts, love is a bastard. (2008:DVD).

Stories of Love and Hate belongs to the tradition of documentary or verbatim theatre, theatre that aims to document real world events and stage transcripts of eyewitness accounts and official reports. Such theatre, which relies on ‘authenticity’ and is often based within a particular community or vernacular, has recently seen widespread popularity due partly to a perceived lack of diversity in the media and the increasing encroachment of tabloid formats on the reporting of current affairs and politics (Anderson & Wilkinson 2007; Hammond & Steward (eds.) 2008; Irmer 2006; Lipovetsky & Beumers 2008; Martin 2010). However, where Oades’ work departs from the traditional approach to documentary material is her emphasis on using the audio recording, what Oades’ terms the ‘vocal print’, as the sole script document and that the

actors – wearing headphones – listen to this recording as they perform. There is no transcript for the actors to learn, they are instead given the recording, which they listen to throughout rehearsal and during performance and try to replicate exactly. At no point is a paper script produced.

In *Stories of Love and Hate*, soon to be restaged by the Sydney Theatre Company, Oades explores race relations, ethnic tension, and social conflict in the context of the overwhelming reaction to the riots in the media, particularly towards the ‘muslim other’ (Quayle & Sonn 2009), and subsequently around the nation. Yet her innovative use of an audio script allows for the potential for casting, for example, a young Lebanese/Australian male to replicate the exact accent, idioms and voice of an Anglo-Saxon/Australian surfer. Similarly, a white male in a ‘bluey’ singlet speaks the words of: an older Lebanese man; a young woman discussing Australian flag tattoos with her friends; a young Lebanese man; a radio DJ; and a chilled-out surfer. Broad physical gestures that are suggested by the vocal print are also part of the performance. Each performer takes on the role of multiple characters, switching their voice and physicality in each case. The juxtapositions between the vocal print and the actor’s body, with its evident signs of gender and ethnicity, create fruitful tensions between what is being said/heard, the performer’s body, and the reception of the work by the audience who may carry their own memory and preconceptions of the riots. As Carolyn Wake contends:

[T]hrough its distinctive performance mode *Stories of Love & Hate* succeeds in shifting the emphasis from speaking to listening. In doing so the work shifts the language of multiculturalism itself, returning responsibility to mainstream subjects and asking ‘How do you listen?’ To whom and in what context? And when was the last time you really listened?’ (2009:39).

Thus, *Stories of Love and Hate* lays bare the underlying social conflict present within the Bankstown area and Southerland Shire where Cronulla lies. It is telling that, once more, headphones are used as a means of augmenting the text and are a pivotal part of the dramaturgy. Indeed, performances such as *Stories of Love and Hate*, *Wondermart* and *small metal objects* offer insights into how the strategic use of technology may suggest interesting opportunities for devising and teaching scriptwriting.

New possibilities:

Scriptwriting for performance and theatre, as with film and television, are traditionally taught as solo-enterprises. Yet, the risk of *only* observing this traditional approach – which is of course still valid and should continue to be taught – belies the collaborative, devised and interactive approaches that characterises much contemporary performance work of which *Stories of Love and Hate*, *Wondermart* and *small metal objects* are exemplary case studies. Of course, these are not traditional works of theatre, but performances that increasingly resemble works of live art or documentary. Nevertheless, innovative approaches to scripting, such as those used in these three examples, are also

increasingly commonplace. As recently detailed in *The Age*, the days of the sole authored commission are increasingly giving way to collaborative and group-devised creations. According to Lyn Wallis, director of the theatre board of the Australia Council for the Arts, the last five years have seen a transformation in theatre making:

The straight commission – with a writer going into a dark room ... – there's less of that. There are still companies that are commissioning work like that, but it tends to be a mix of ways of getting new work onto the stage. Now you are seeing groups of people getting together in a room and there might be writers among them. They may be working with text, but the making of it is entirely different from the traditional commissioning model (Morgan 2010:np).

Wallis' comments and the evident success of work such as Back-to-Back's, Rotozaza's and Roslyn Oades', provides a significant challenge to those working to teach scriptwriting and performance making in the academy and elsewhere, as new approaches to writing and devising performance require different consideration of the writing process and its intersections with technology. These contemporary examples locate the script – as a collaborative text, a set of instructions to be downloaded, and as documentary – within a more dramaturgically aware approach to making and structuring performance. This suggests, finally, that writing courses may also need to extend their own parameters by incorporating further dramaturgical elements and technological innovation in the future.

Endnotes

1. Throughout this paper I refer to 'performance' and scriptwriting for performance, rather than 'theatre', as the term takes into account a range of contemporary work (such as live art, performance art and video art), all of which contains theatrical elements, that does not sit comfortably under the rather more limiting definition of theatre.
2. The innovative integration of headphones and audio technology into performance, while increasingly popular, has been used by a number of contemporary performance groups, perhaps most notably by UK based Blast Theory (<http://www.blasttheory.co.uk>), since the 1990s. There is also an obvious connection between the modes of video art present in the 90s, such as the work of Gillian Wearing (Ferguson 1999), and the recent taking up of audio technology in performance and live art. In 2001 British director Mark Wing-Davey was influential in introducing the concept of 'headphone-verbatim' – using headphones in 'documentary' performance – to artists such as Roslyn Oades and Alecky Blythe (Oades 2010: Conversation).
3. Dramaturgy refers here to the strategic awareness, use and sequencing of the elements of performance. It also, importantly, assists in the enunciation of an idea towards its represented form. In this way a dramaturgical approach is continually monitoring the movement from idea to process to final performance and the interrelationship of these elements.

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