

The Reinvention Centre Interim Report

Title: *Performance, Geography, History: Intersections and Traces*

Director: Dr. Susan Haedicke

Keywords:

Practice-as-research (theatre studies, performance studies, literature,)

Performance installation (theatre studies, performance studies, art history)

Site-specific art (theatre studies, performance studies, art history, cultural geography)

Summary:

Performance, Geography, History: Intersections and Traces is a fifteen-month long street theatre project spanning two academic years in the second-year European Street Theatre module in the School of Theatre, Performance, and Cultural Policy Studies (October 2007-December 2008). The over-arching objective of this project was to provide students with the opportunity to learn about street theatre through practice-based research: as performers, as practitioners, as archivists, as community activists, and as spectators. Central to that objective was researching and devising *The Tocil Wood Project*, a site-specific performance installation that resulted in a public performance on April 23, 2008. While researching and devising the performance in Tocil Wood formed the core of the module for students in the 2007/2008 academic year, being audience members at the performance marked the starting point for students registered for the module the next year. The hands-on teaching strategies in each of the many stages of the entire project, *Performance, Geography, History: Intersections and Traces*, use the technique of practice-as-research as the essential pedagogical tool and challenge students to learn outside the traditional classroom setting in terms of materials, location, and experiential understanding. The benefits of this cultural, theoretical, and practical engagement with the processes of street theatre performance gave the students an in-depth understanding of this unique performance form, offered them the opportunity to devise their own outdoor performances, and provided them with non-traditional research skills.

Responses to Questions raised by Reinvention Centre's Fellowship Assessment Panel (specific to the interim report):

- 1) Sustainability: how will this module look once the Reinvention Centre funding has expired?

The European Street Theatre module will look quite similar in its overall approach once the Reinvention Centre funding has expired since some of the costs were unique to this academic year (the first year that the module was run) and others have been incorporated in the departmental budget. Almost £2000 of the funding for *Performance, Geography, History: Intersections*

and Traces went toward preparatory acting workshops led by professional theatre artists in the European Street Theatre module during the 2007/2008 academic year. While these artists were in residence, they also led basic acting workshops in Aspects of Practice (the first-year practice-based module). These workshops were funded by the Department of Theatre Studies. Thus students registered for the Street Theatre module for 2008/2009 have already had this hands-on development of practical skills and will not need such extensive training as the students in the Street Theatre module this past year. In addition, the department has committed significant funds to Aspects of Practice on an annual basis to ensure that all the first-year students receive practical performance workshops to prepare them for all of the practice-based modules, so sustainability in terms of performance skills development has been worked into the departmental curriculum and budget. I do, however, plan to bring in one professional artist for workshops (approximately 10 hours) specific to street theatre performance. The cost for those workshops will be covered by the department if I am unable to find another external funding source.

As part of its increased focus on practice-based modules, the department has also committed funds to cover production costs (for all practice-based modules) equivalent to what was used for *The Tocil Wood Project* this past year. An additional significant production-related cost (£3000 for the guidance of a professional director) will be reduced next year since we found that we did not need as many hours with the director as anticipated. The students can accomplish much of the research and some of the devising of the performance on their own under my guidance. Funds for a visiting artist to guide this final project has been added to the departmental budget.

The students in both the 2007/2008 and 2008/2009 European Street Theatre modules will attend Viva Cité, the 2008 street theatre festival in Sotteville, near Rouen. Most of the cost for this trip comes out of the Reinvention Centre funding although each student pays an additional £100, but after this year only the students registered for the following year will attend, so the large cost (£3800) for the attendance this year will be cut in half. I will need to find external funding for this very special aspect of the module.

The European Street Theatre module will be organized differently next year, regardless of funding, based on what was learned this past year. One key change is that I will not bring in so many professional artists. That change is in part because of the altered focus in the first-year Aspects of Practice module (the addition of development of practical skills, both performance and technical), but more significantly, I found that I brought in

too many artists so I did not have enough time with the students alone. My plan for next year is to spend the autumn term studying and analyzing performances of professional companies. That approach is possible next year because the students will have attended the street theatre festival in June 2008, and so we will have a common starting point. It is also possible because of the extensive support I am getting from HorsLesMurs, the street theatre archive in Paris, that is providing me with video footage of many of the shows. This street theatre module is the only one of its kind in Europe and the United States, so HorsLesMurs is generously contributing to its success. I think this approach will provide a more solid grounding for the students' individual practice-as-research in the spring term. The spring term will be devoted to small student-devised performance projects and research for the larger project with the professional director to take place in summer term. During the beginning of summer term, the students will participate in intensive rehearsals using their research (collected under my guidance as dramaturg) to devise a performance under the guidance of the professional director.

- 2) If the module runs in a different way following the cessation of funding, could it be used to produce some kind of creative output? Could this year's funded module be used to produce some kind of creative resource for the use of future students?

This year's funded module has already had a major impact on the practice-based curriculum within the department. As mentioned above, funds are going to the development of practical skills in the first-year module, Aspects of Practice—training that will be an advantage for all practice-based modules. In addition, the quality of the performance project in Tocil Wood excited theatre students (as evidenced by their positive comments on Facebook), and one can only hope that that enthusiasm will carry over into creative projects in all modules next year.

Several of the students in the European Street Theatre module this past year have proposed practical options for their third year that further develop practice-based techniques that they explored in this module. For example, one proposal is for a site-specific performance installation that explores the history and geography of the pump rooms in Leamington Spa. What is very exciting about this Leamington Spa practical option is that it is not just composed of students from the European Street Theatre module, but includes several who want to have a similar kind of experience and who will bring techniques learned in other modules. So the European Street Theatre module forms part of the creative resource of future practice-based work through practice itself by handing down learned techniques that are

passed on through the body, voice, gesture, etc. (what we call the “repertoire” in performance studies).

In addition, the students are still in the process of collecting their research (factual information, drawings, etc.) for the blog on *The Tocil Wood Project*. That blog should be up and running by late June. Our goal is that the blog acts as an inspiration for other groups of students to explore other sites on campus through the lens of their disciplines and so act as a “creative history/geography” of the campus.

3) Address the ethical dimension of the project.

All the student researchers were briefed on the ethical implications of their research in terms of videotaping, interviewing, and interacting with the public. We had one challenging experience when students videotaped a role playing session of LARPS in Tocil Wood in late November 2007. One of the members of LARPS asked that the tapes not be used publicly, and we agreed. In addition, we invited an executive member of LARPS to visit the class and discuss the goals and practices of the Society. We explored the incorporation of some of the LARPS members in the actual performance (and LARPS enthusiastically agreed), but logistically it was too difficult in the end. We also invited one of the officers, Eddie Asberry, from the Woodland Trust to give us a tour of Tocil Wood. One of the first things he did was to go over Health and Safety issues in relations to the wood (for the researchers in our case, but we did incorporate many of those issues in the opening interaction by our woodland officer, played by Yann Allsopp). We asked permission to videotape Eddie that he granted, quite excitedly. He was very clear that April was the time of the blooming of the bluebells in the wood and indicated their fragility. At that point, we altered the original plan for the performance space that would require the actors to walk through the bluebells and instead stayed on the paths except where there were no bluebells. In addition, Eddie said that late April was the nesting time for the birds that would be disturbed by loud noises. Again, we altered original plans of loud music and used six motion-activated sound boxes that used music and texts recorded by the students. These recordings were all played quite softly and not continuously. We ran out of time and so did not conduct additional formal interviews. In terms of the other “informal” interviews that we conducted, we followed the guidelines listed in the “Research in public contexts and with groups” section of the “Ethical Conduct of Research at Warwick.” Our interviews consisted of asking people who were walking through the wood some questions about their thoughts on Tocil Wood. We asked if they minded being recorded and told them that their voices might be used in the performance. We did not interview those who objected to either of those requests. We actually did use a

very small portion of the interviews in the recordings in the sound boxes, but primarily they were used as inspiration during the devising process.

We felt that a key “ethical” dimension of our work was an obvious respect for the wood, so our self-imposed performance restrictions included that we would make no permanent alteration to the wood and that there would be no sign of a performance at all once the show ended. We accomplished those goals.

Finally, in terms of interaction with the public during the performance itself, we discussed what would be acceptable and actually censored some of our performance choices because we were not sure how far we could push audience members. We decided just to encourage people to leave the path, but not guide them ourselves, for example. In some cases, we did want the audience to feel uncomfortable with the actor for important aesthetic reasons, but we do not feel that we pushed that too far. Two of our goals in the performance were to suggest echoes (aural and visual) of the legendary murder that happened in or near the Wood in the 18th century and to explore ordinary people’s fears and apprehensions about walking a wood. We wanted the audience to experience these in their bodies, not just as passive observers, so some level of confrontation was necessary. We did warn people about the mud in Tocil Wood and suggested that they wear boots. We decided that another key goal of the performance was to let the Wood act as a character, so we hoped that spectators would actually enjoy being in the Wood and would see it either for the first time or with different eyes. Comments that we have received since the performance indicate that we accomplished that goal.

Activities (preliminary draft to be expanded in the final project report):
Performance, Geography, History: Intersections and Traces is a project lasting from 1 October 2007 to 31 December 2008 that consisted of several stages and components. It introduced nine students in the second-year module, European Street Theatre, to site-specific outdoor performance through a range of innovative pedagogical approaches using practice-as-research from October 2007 to June 2008. In June 2008, the students from the 2007/2008 academic year are joined by fourteen students registered for the 2008/2009 academic year to attend a street theatre festival in France. For the final stage of the project in autumn term 2008, only the students registered for the module in 2008/2009 are involved. The over-arching objective of this project was to provide students with the opportunity to learn about street theatre through practice-based research in a variety of forms: as performers participating in workshops on acting skills needed for outdoor performance and thus using their bodies as research; as practitioners researching and devising a performance event; as archivists documenting their creative process as they develop the performance; as community activists researching

a particular site in order to arouse public interest in its historical traces, cultural significances, and myths; and as spectators attending an international street theatre festival in France to experience first-hand the cutting-edge performance forms presented by professional companies from around the world.

The central component of the project from October 2007 to April 2008 that tied several of the various aspects together was a creative collaboration in devising a site-specific outdoor performance installation, *The Tocil Wood Project* (with its “quoting” of the famous *Blair Witch Project*). The goals of this part of the project were to use skills practiced in the range of workshops; to develop research strategies of observation, informal interviewing, and mapping; and to dramaturg and write a non-linear performance text in order to engage in an aesthetic exploration of a specific geographical place. Tocil Wood on the University of Warwick campus has historical traces and cultural significances that the students sought to reflect upon performatively, not to recreate, as they deliberately interwove facts from the past, ancient legends and hearsay, geographical details, cultural memory, and chance encounters with passers-by. With the public performance, the students tried to arouse public interest in the place by encouraging dialogue and creating myths or stories about the site.

The key success of the project to date is related to the performance of *The Tocil Wood Project*. The students’ use of non-traditional research strategies and their reworking of the information they discovered; the enthusiasm, dedication, and hard work they put in at the end to bring the performance to fruition; their Artist’s Journals documenting the aesthetic process and responses that are works of art in their own right; and their choices for modules for next year (both practical and dissertation) that are inspired by the project attest to the impact that practice-as-research has on the learning process. The main difficulty with the project as conceived for this academic year is that it was too ambitious, so we did not have enough time to do all that we wanted to do. Even though the module is completed, the students are still working on the blog, and they are very excited about attending the street theatre festival near Rouen.

Milestones to date:
(this section will be expanded and developed into Outcomes in the final report)

The students have accomplished all the outcomes listed under milestones and targets in the Reinvention Centre application form. They participated in performance workshops with Emily Wilson and Jos Houben in October 2007 and Alexander technique workshops with Leslie Felbain in December 2007. They devised a small project on the deconstruction of a theatrical image with Hilary Westlake in January 2008 (this project was assessed). They created extensive and in many cases quite beautiful and informative Artist’s Journals on the development of *The Tocil Wood Project*. Some of that work will appear on the blog. They created, under the direction of Sarah Harper, the performance installation, *The Tocil Wood Project*, that had a public

performance on April 23, 2008. The other possible part of the project, the “walk” along Gibbet Hill Road, has been abandoned mainly because the site of Gibbet Hill and the road leading to it is very difficult in terms of a safe performance space and a minimal disruption to ordinary daily activities. The amount of time needed to create one-on-one performances (i.e. sound recordings that provide a “tour” of the area listened to by one spectator on a tape recorder) was just not available given the complexity of *The Tocil Wood Project*. However, the students understand the goals of that part of the project and hopefully will try to accomplish something like that on their own.

The students registered in the module in 2007/2008 and students registered for 2008/2009 will attend Viva Cité, near Rouen, France, the last weekend of June, 2008. And arrangements are being made for a December 2008 workshop in preparation for the performance project in April 2009 with the professional director.

Implications:

(to be completed for final report)

Resources:

(to be completed for final report)

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Supplementary Information:

Items to be included in final report:

- 1) excerpts from the students' Artist's Journals (includes research done by the students, creative writing and responses, drawings and sketches, etc)
- 2) photographs of *The Tocil Wood Project*
- 3) video of *The Tocil Wood Project*
- 4) address of the European Street Theatre blog