

Can the 'landscape' theatre aesthetics proposed by Gertrude Stein find a home within the context of a narrative-based theatre form?

Final performance title: *The Iron Crown*

Student as Producer (Performance) Project Report

Matthew Bent

July 2013

The basis of this project was:

- To attempt an innovative aesthetic leap in applying the principles of the 'landscape' theatre proposed by Gertrude Stein in her essay *Plays* to a piece of narrative-driven performance
- To develop and implement new methodologies for actor training (inspired largely by the Japanese Noh (which would also provide the story for the piece) and the physical performance styles of western directors Robert Wilson and Ariane Mouchkine), as well as new approaches to performance writing

In the following report I will describe the conception of this project, its development, and an evaluation of its outcomes.

Landscape theatre and narrative

Gertrude Stein's 'landscape' theatre is one of repetition – or, to use her words, of 'beginning again and again'. The reader (on the page, spectator in the hypothesised theatre) is permitted a relaxed state of attention in engaging with words, phrases, themes by their continuous repetition – the mind freed to wander imaginatively and draw associations at will. What is sacrificed in this formal innovation though is the focussed narrative drive of the storytelling theatre. This problem was to provide the initial impetus of the project.

Could the landscape theatre tell a story? Could this hypothesised form, where the audience member was not required to progressively re-evaluate character intentions through a psychological engagement with the work, where images, words or actions were continuously repeated over extended time to permit this relaxed form of spectatorship, function whilst simultaneously developing a single narrative line?

As a way of clarifying my thoughts on how this new form of landscape performance might take shape, I drew out a table identifying the key differences between this new form and the traditional, naturalist, narrative theatre:

Naturalist theatre	Landscape theatre
Progressive familiarity	Continuous present
Observance	Experience
Psychological characterisation	Physical characterisation
Communication of self	Communion of ideas and stories
Text-dominated	Non-hierarchical
Aural	Aural and Visual
Everyday	Theatrical

So, this new form had to engage spectators in the present moment: create scenes in which the piece reaches out to the audience to engage them in an experiential way so that the piece was not something observed passively from the comfort of the darkened auditorium. Rather than being dominated by text, actor psychology and the dialogue form of the naturalist theatre characters should have clear motivations, expressed both physically and vocally. There should be no hierarchy of elements to the production: all aspects, from the lighting and sound design to the set and the costume should be theatrical and engaging. There should be a direct relationship between the stage and auditorium, creating an atmosphere of communion, as with any efficacious religious or spiritual ritual.

Each scene would be an experiential event. The performance would have many languages: of gesture, colour, sound, light, space, as well as spoken texts filled with repetitions of themes and ideas.

Experience

In my mind this idea of an experiential aesthetic, appealing to all of the senses, was closely linked to religious or spiritual ritual. The performance should, to use the words of Robert Lepage, be 'in contact with the Gods'. To achieve these ends I wanted to choose a story which had strong religious or spiritual themes, and not such a dense plot as would distract from our formal experimentations. (and of text) is restricted with the greater focus on physical performance and gesture, and so struck me as an ideal place to look for a story. What I found, the play *kanawa*, would provide our inspiration for the piece.

In order to create this work, with its re-negotiated hierarchy of elements, we needed to create several performance 'texts', rather than the traditional single written script. These different texts/ stimuli would be:

- A breakdown of the story, Kanawa (The Iron Crown) in to scenes
- A series of sketches, for each scene, showing the images and the use of space/light for each scene
- A series of written texts, developed collaboratively between the whole group based upon the story breakdown and the sketches, with drafts created by our writer, Cat, for her use in rehearsals
- A shared set of physical performance ideas and techniques, work-shopped at the beginning of the rehearsal process through improvisation sessions

Brief example of working process

'Scene 5: A man wakes up in bed next to his lover having had a nightmare involving his wife.'



Photograph copyright Peter Marsh 2013

This brief synopsis of the action of the scene, and a sketch of what became this image (simply showing the positions the two performers would be in and how they would be lit), were the initial stimuli for the scene. I also gave some indication of what I wanted the scene to achieve: for the audience to feel the confusion and sporadic thoughts going through the character's mind, but also

the mechanical, unfurling nature of the adulterous relationship. After an initial writing workshop, where members of the cast created their own 'versions' of the scene in pairs, a first draft of the script was prepared. I read over this and came up with ideas for its development. When performed, the words would be accompanied by a choreography, with the image as above remaining exactly the same but with the man (Jack) simply moving his head through three different positions and the woman (Laura) changing the focus of her eyes. The image here, of the man reaching up to something above as he wakes up, was also a reference to a similar gesture struck by the priest character in the previous scene.

After seeing the scene in the final performance, with an audience, I feel as though we began to create the atmosphere that I wanted. However, the effect could have been heightened by extending its duration. This will certainly be something to build on in the future.

The final script for this scene can be found as an appendix.

Physical performance, gesture, precision

The main challenge at the beginning of the rehearsal process was acclimatising the performers with the type of acting which would be required for the production. As I was to be an image-maker with my use of light and stage composition, so the actors would be with their usage of their bodies. What is needed, as noted above, is a shift from the psychologically driven demands of naturalism many performers are most accustomed to, to a performance style which involves an intense bodily awareness, and an ability to mine the body for its expressive possibilities. Many hours on physicality, and to discovering a precision in gesture and action. What this meant was an eradication of the mundane: every movement being measured and exact.

We certainly put in the work in the early stages of the project to lay the foundations for this kind of stylised precision, and in certain scenes of the final performance this was very clearly evident. However, regrettably the last two scenes of the piece were rehearsed a little too hurriedly to reach the same level of execution as others. That said, I feel as though the most important thing was that this language of performance, which all members of the cast understood and had in common, was created effectively, and is something which can be built upon in the future.

List of people involved

Production Team

Director/Lighting Designer – Matt Bent

Assistant Director – Laura Kurlansky

Set/Costume/Make-up Designer – Cordelia Keston

Writer – Cat Turhan (with the ensemble)

Publicity Designer – David Levesley

Performers

Laura Bennett (2nd Woman/Spirit)

Gaya Chanrai (Narrator)

Phoebe McIndoe (Priest)

Jack Perkins (Man)

Zoe Templeman-Young (Oracle)

Charlotte Thomas (Woman)

Production photographs: http://darklingimages.com/gallery/2013-productions/iron_crown/

(Copyright Peter Marsh)

Appendix

Scene 5 – Nightmare

Lights on. Sudden intake of breath – Man sits up, Woman’s eyes open.

W: What’s the matter?

M: Bad dream.

W: What dream?

M: Not sure.

W: Can you remember?

M: Vague.

W: Can you tell me?

M: Yes.

W: What happened?

Breath – Man.

M: My wife.

W: Your wife?

M: Not exactly.

W: What do you mean?

M: Hard to describe.

W: What did she do?

M: She stared.

W: What did she say?

M: I hate you.

W: She was angry?

M: I hate you.

Breath – Woman.

W: Then what?

M: She was angry.

W: With who?

M: With me.

W: With me?

M: No.

W: It was just a dream.

M: Just a dream.

W: Just a dream?

M: She was transformed.

W: It was just –

M: her face.

W: It was –

M: Scarlet.

W: Just a –

M: Her eyes piercing.

W: Did she hurt you?

M: Not. No.

W: So, it was just a dream?

M: Just a dream.

W: A dream?

M: Just a dream.

Sharp intake of breath. Lights out. Lie down.

Lights on. Sudden intake of breath – Man sits up, Woman's eyes open.

W: What's the matter?

M: Bad dream.

W: What dream.

M: Not sure.

W: Can you remember?

M: Vague.

W: Can you tell me?

M: Yes.

W: What happened?

M: My wife.

W: Your wife?

M: Not exactly.

W: What?

M: Hard to describe.

W: What did she do?

M: She stated.

W: What did she say?

M: I hate you.

W: She was angry?

M: I hate you.

W: Then?

M: She was angry.

W: Who?

M: With me.

W: Me?

M: No.

W: Just a dream.

M: Just a dream.

W: Just a dream?

M: Transformed.

W: Just a –

M: Her face.

W: Just –

M: Scarlet.

W: Just –

M: Eyes piercing.

W: Did she hurt you?

M: No.

W: Just a dream?

M: Just a dream.

W: A dream?

M: A dream.

Sharp intake of breath. Lights out. Lie down.

Lights on. Sudden intake of breath – Man sits up, Woman's eyes open.

W: Whats?

M: Dream.

W: What?

M: Not.

W: Remember?

M: Vague.

W: Tell?

M: Yes.

W: What?

M: Wife.

W: Your wife?

M: Not.

W: What?

M: Hard.

W: What do?

M: Stared.

W: Say?

M: I hate you.

W: Angry?

M: I hate you.

W: Then?

M: Angry.

W: Who?

M: With me.

W: Me?

M: No.

W: Just a dream.

M: Dream.

W: Just a dream?

M: Transformed.

W: Just a –

M: Face.

W: Just-

M: Scarlet.

W: Just –

M: Eyes.

W: Hurt?

M: No.

W: Dream?

M: Dream.

W: Dream?

M: Dream.

Sharp intake of breath. Lights out. Lie down.