

Performing Venice: Questions of a Sinking City

Reinvention Centre Academic Fellowship interim report, December 2009

Dr Nicolas Whybrow
Department of Theatre and Performance Studies
University of Warwick

Introduction

The proposed project commenced for the students involved – 24 of them, taking my 3rd Year *Performance and the Contemporary City* module – with the beginning of the academic year 2009/10. For me, as the academic fellow, the project had already commenced implicitly in May 2009 when, coincidentally, my department held a two-day away day at Warwick University's Palazzo Papafava in Venice, to which I added an extra 'scouting day' in preparation for the Reinvention project. This was followed by a two-day visit early in September, specifically to pave the way for the students' November visit, but also to cement my own developing research interests into the city, in particular its relationship with the Art Biennale (which ran this year). In fact, there is a whole seam of Venice-related research that has opened up for me personally on account of the fellowship being awarded, including the development of a collaborative funding bid in conjunction with Warwick colleagues from a range of departments and Monash University towards setting up an interdisciplinary conference at the Palazzo in Sep/Oct 2010 to coincide with the Venice Architecture Biennale (entitled 'Space and Image: the Impact of Location on Visual Culture').

The Venice visit with the students between 6-9th November proved exceptionally successful. Working in six groups of four the students had worked out a detailed plan of action for the two and half days available to them. All of the projects had an element of risk to them, since they were premised on soliciting responses from the populace of the city (tourist and resident alike) and so it was important to have alternative possibilities lined up, as well as to be prepared to change tack in situ. This is where the resource of the Palazzo proved invaluable. Being a weekend the Palazzo was not strictly open for business, but a special arrangement permitted the students to regroup, feed back, plan and use computer facilities at the end of both the main days in Venice. These sessions are, I think, the most animated and engaged I have ever witnessed a group of students to be, and my colleague from the department, Dr Tim White, who accompanied the group, had to agree. Not everything that was being tried by the students in the way of practical exercises and 'tactics' on the streets was working by any means, but clearly as much could be learned from failures as from successes. The students' capacities of endurance in what became quite testing circumstances on the second and third days when the rain came streaming down from above and the lagoon began to flood the city from below, were admirable. It was also intriguing to witness how this city is not only utterly dependent on a form of tired, ritualised tourism but is also utterly at the mercy of the elements. The students saw how the city tangibly withdrew and 'closed ranks' as the water came.

Project realisation

Marco Polo: 'You take delight not in a city's seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours'.

Kublai Khan: 'Or the question it asks you'.

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

The project overall involved the interrogation of the city of Venice using performance-based methods. The aim, then, was to replicate the implied premise of Calvino's 'reciprocal questioning' encompassed in the brief exchange above. Whilst Marco Polo alludes to a multitude of cities in the accounts of his global travels, ultimately it is always Venice that serves as the 'invisible' point of reference and measurement. The students used Venice as the common location for an investigation that produced 'performative mappings' of the city. These took various forms and were influenced by a range of practices – from the Situationists (with their psychogeographical techniques of *dérive*/drift and *détournement*/creative hijacking), the figure of the *flâneur*, Lefebvre's rhythm analysis, Sophie Calle, lone twin, Blast Theory, graffiti writing – but, in combination, they are intended to form a collective 'explanation' (*ex planere* = to unfold a map) of a long weekend spent encountering a strange sunny, rain-soaked, flooded labyrinthine city.

The troubling paradox of Venice is that it is 'a city that provokes curiosity whilst at the same time threatening to permit only repetitions of experience'. The cultural historian Mary McCarthy famously observed of Venice: 'Nothing can be said here (including this statement) that has not been said before' (*Venice Observed*). This is an indictment (perhaps) of the 'tourist experience' on which the city is utterly dependent, but it also throws down a challenge to the visitor: not so much to discover 'another Venice' (which may amount simply to another repetition of the cliché), but rather to take the city and its mythology 'for granted' in a sense, even, as Marco Polo also seems to suggest, to 'ignore' the sheer weight of the city's specificity (as 'exotic', historic place) and go about your business as if you were 'no-where in particular'.

Students were offered a list of 25 possible 'actions' towards gathering material in Venice. These did not have to be followed but were issued as prompts. The six groups chose the following courses of action.

1. *Couch-surfing/Re-mapping Venice*: Exploiting the global online phenomenon of couch-surfing as a means to gain contact with Venice residents. A range of 'assignments with strangers' would lead to being shown round sites off the tourist track with the aim of collecting anecdotes and memories. It offered a very immediate way in to 'another Venice' in the informal, but structured, contact it promised with the city's inhabitants. Naturally part of the risk involved is the extent to which matters are inevitably subject to chance: there are no guarantees that

connections will be made, that meetings will be honoured, nor indeed that willing participants will provide interesting material in the way of associative anecdotes or memories based on Venice 'sites'. In the event, the 'hit and miss' aspect is precisely how things played out, including the introduction of further hurdles not anticipated as possible factors: the weather and flooding for one, the emotional effect of, for instance, being 'stood up' for another – to say nothing of the guilt felt at pretending to a certain role in the relationships sought with those who had signed up as willing co-operators.

2. *Gender in Venice/ Gendering Venice*: This was a very high risk venture in its conception in the sense that it would require a considerable degree of improvised performing and interaction, not only in a public place but also in a 'strange', unknown one (at least for the majority of the group). Not only that but it would also entail 'counter-gender performing' in the adoption of male personas by females, who, furthermore, would be attempting genuinely to pass themselves off as men, both so as to see what it was like and so as to plant an ambiguous seed of 'gender doubt' in any potential interlocutors' minds. The exciting prospect of such an experiment is that it contains so many possible layers of exploration for its participants. The interrogation of gender difference is one multitudinous line of enquiry; here, though, it had a particular application to place: to the way in which gender operates, or is permitted to operate, in a city accustomed to presenting 'staged faces' to the itinerant 'population' that would constantly churn through its streets in the form of tourists. Doubtless one of the most startling discoveries made by the group, in their guises of performing 'glamour girls' on the first day, was the way they – themselves visitors – momentarily *became* or *embodied* Venice, as passing tourists clamoured to take photographs of antics they obviously perceived must somehow typify the exoticism of the place.
3. *Wake Up, Italy*: The work was premised on ghosting or drifting through a labyrinthine city, following light, following sound, allowing incidental gestures or attributes to determine paths. It yielded encounters and events that were both exciting, in the sense of stimulating desire, and illuminating, in a more rational sense to do with the life in this city. The response to this experience, a montage of observation fragments, textual snapshots hacked out by the hand of a 'ghost writer' on an obsolete manual typewriter, owed a clear debt to Claudia Wegner's spontaneous dispatches from the front line of South American cities, but also developed its own literary 'persona'. Once you started reading the texts, a place began to emerge, but the portrayal of it, with its myriad gestures and 'moments', is as if spoken into the wind: gone before it is even heard.
4. *Venice Leads*: The group had an inkling that the rather complicated mobile phone dropping scheme it had devised for the Venice visit, involving strangers picking up 'lost phones' in the city, may not quite work out in the way it had intended it to. Whilst this hunch proved true (taking in an encounter with Venice police on the way), there is no doubt that it also produced its 'moments' and also underscored the notion that 'failing to execute as planned' can not only yield insightful material in itself but also requires a swift reappraisal and adaptation of intentions. Group

members were led off on solo paths of exploration as a result (which included attempting to construct a map of graffiti trails and orientating oneself in the streets by looking only through the lens of a camcorder). However, there was still a collectiveness in evidence since there was a core premise of following your impulse in accordance with a particular brief to see what kind of (alternative) Venice emerged (through the rain and floods). That all came together, moreover, in the subsequent Studio mapping and the presentation, and revealed a quite startling common experience of loneliness, boredom and a form of anguish. The insight there appeared to be that Venice almost forces you to have the 'tourist experience', that seeking to 'subvert tourism' or the tourist gaze, or to locate an 'alternative Venice', is actually rather a soul-destroying past-time. The 'true Venice' may well be the Venice you get rammed down your throat.

5. *Postcards from Italy*: This group engaged with postcard culture as an aspect of tourism. Effectively it created a piece of 'relational art' that had several interactive stages to it, beginning with the request to passers-by on the streets of Venice to write something on a postcard, which was subsequently dispatched to the UK, to asking visitors to the installation/exhibition at Millburn to do a similar thing but on blank 'Venice cards'. The Venice segment of the exercise naturally drew the group into conversations with strangers but also solicited a varied range of impressions and observations which, collectively, formed a patchwork portrait of the city. Above all the question of what role a postcard fulfils – arguably anachronistic in its form, yet evidently still of central significance in producing or confirming a sense of both exoticism and 'awayness', to say nothing of attesting to a 'conquest' – proved intriguing. Submitting the cards to the lottery of the Italian postal system (and the UK one for that matter) was also an interesting exercise: like the group itself going to Venice, the postcards were sent out on a particular journey with a destination in mind, but anything might happen on the way. Their arrival, dropping from heaven as it were, represented a 'minor miracle' perhaps, as well as a small rectangular segment of 'Venice in Warwick'. As a performed counterpoint to the touristic 'whole world in Venice' (as expressed by Jan Morris), that proved highly resonant, as did the group's own ordinary photographic replications of tourist sites as seen on postcards.
6. *Tre Topi Ciechi (see how they run)*: This group began with a very powerful and, indeed, provocative central idea that just seemed to get richer and richer as it went through its various stages. The canny mechanism of denying sight – three of its members chose to blindfold themselves on arrival in Venice and remained so for the next 24 hours - and, therefore, site-seeing in the most sight-seen of places on the planet, not only implemented the notion of 'seeing more by seeing less' but also issued a challenge to the primary narrative of visuality upon which Venice is dependent. Having a seeing tour guide, moreover, was not merely a pragmatic move but contributed a further dimension to the engagement with tourist culture, introducing questions around manipulation and ritual. It also afforded the possibility of an engagement with a quizzical public, curious to know what was going on and happy to comment in quite polarised ways. As such it automatically raised questions about Venice as a place, its beauty, its visitors – in short, its culture: what *is* this city?

Exhibition/performative presentations

The end of the Autumn term saw the culmination of this part of the fellowship and the students' immediate involvement, with the presentation of a one-day collective installation/exhibition of the groups' work at Millburn House. This passed off successfully, with good attendance and the effective performance-presentations of the material gathered in Venice. The exhibition material is now being held in the department and represents the first contribution towards what it is hoped will be an ongoing city and performance archive to be added to in subsequent years. The presentations were attended by Sarah Smith, a third year History undergraduate doing in situ research on the 'Venice experience' (through Reinvention) and with whom we had met up in Venice in November. She had witnessed one of the feedback sessions and talked to a couple of the groups about their work.

And next...

The next stage of the fellowship is to analyse and write up the Venice project and it is expected this will be completed by May. A proposal for an article entitled "Approaching Venice: strategies of performance in the 'explanation' of a city" has been submitted to and commissioned by *Research in Drama Education* journal, which, as it happens, has recently put out a call for a special issue themed 'Drama and Theatre in Urban Contexts'. If eventually accepted this would appear late in 2010. A further two Venice articles are planned as part of my own individual research (one already submitted as a proposal to the journal *Performance Research*).