



REBECCA JS NICE EISP

Exploring Immersive Theatre in Performance and Practice



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Introduction.

The performance *How Do You Take It?* is a culmination of ways of working with intimacy on different performative ideas. Working with how the audience and performers interact and how a piece might be interactive developed from the theme of intimacy, and became a primary concern when making choreographic choices. In working with intimacy through interaction, the work demonstrates an investigation into immersive theatre, exploring its implications on choreographic choices and the experience of the audience. The sections of the work; the beginning speech, the measuring, the tea ceremony and the thinking spot, demonstrate aspects of immersive theatre to varying degrees which I seek to define using Josephine Machons' *Immersive Theatres*. (2013) The following characteristics are commonly used to define immersive theatre; one on one performance, the re-invention of performer/audience boundaries, the sensory environment (the physical senses and geographic environment). (Machon, 2013) The extent to which these aspects are applied in the piece allows for varying levels of immersiveness to be defined and therefore the shifts between these levels in process and performance can be explored and their impact on choreographic choices and decisions analysed.

One on One Performance.

Karen Zaiontz (2014) and Machon (2013), explore the implications of one on one performance on the audience's reception of work. Pieces made entirely for individual audience members or with moments for one on one interaction can create a greater level of intimacy. The selection of a limited number of audience members to experience the one on one interaction draws on the idea of a unique experience. Audience feedback from previous performances of *How Do You Take It?* identified a need or longing to be chosen for the measuring section. Zaiontz discusses a "narcissistic spectatorship". (2014:407) This is a combination of "centrality of the spectator", a sense of uniqueness and of the opportunity to interact as the sole focus of the performer or piece. This becomes a consumption with a sense of ownership or entitlement for the audience member. Punchdrunk for example, frame "reception as a thing that participants not only consume, but own". (Zaiontz, 2014:424) In *How Do You Take It?* the idea of wanting more is created by the uneven distribution of participatory activity which Adam Alston notes, "may well be part of the attraction and it is precisely this attraction that is easily capitalised upon". (Alston, 2013:133)

One on One Performance and the Choreographic Process.

In the process of making, particularly after trying it with individual audience members who were familiar with the concepts, the whole piece was considered for one audience member only. Practitioner Adrian Howells for example, made a piece for one person where he washed the audience member's feet in a ritual. (Zaiontz, 2014) I wanted to take this idea of the ritual in the tea ceremony and the interactive exchange of touch whilst maintaining the concept of a shared community. This was because audiences that were less familiar with immersive theatre were harder to control and intimidation or not knowing what to do overcame the enjoyment and reception of the piece. This was a result of the disruption of the traditional rules by taking it out of a theatre and discarding theatre etiquette. These rules were replaced by new ambiguous ones. I wanted people to feel comfortable in my piece; therefore I explored a small group audience where they were able to communicate with each other during the performance which felt safer; particularly in the thinking spot where audiences are eventually left to their own devices.

The shifting levels of one on one interaction and the contribution to a transformative effect.

At an early stage of the process, the idea of measuring the audience and giving them the gift of the coiled string, mimicking the coiled candles offered by Saints was the stimulus for one on one interaction. The choice to develop the idea of measuring was made in order to transform the string into something that is altered by the identity of the recipient. Personally giving a gift through one on one interaction is often used in Shelia Ghelani's work which heightens and almost seals the relationship established with the artist. *Covet Me Care For Me* takes the audience through varying degrees of intimacy in order to receive a gift that has been broken from a glass heart and wrapped up to be presented at the end.



Fig.1 (Ghelani, 2011)

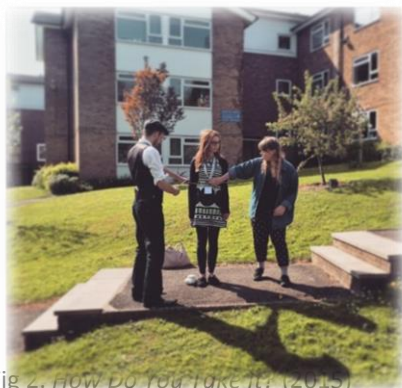


Fig 2. *How Do You Take It?* (2015)

(Ghelani, 2011) (See fig 1) In Ghelani's case, the shifting of audience from a distant position, to one on one interaction, to private one on one interaction without fellow audience members contributes to a transformative aspect of her piece. It enhances the meaning placed on the object and the notion of gift giving, emphasising its importance at the end compared to the beginning. In *How Do You Take It?* the interaction moves from speaking and touching, to one on one at close

proximity (see fig 2), to behind a table to observe at a small distance, to comfortably being in each other's presence but with a wider focus. This has the potential to transform the spectator's experience of the thinking spot and of the gift giving by coming to it as a result of the process. Moving on from Ghelani's piece, my work is not solely based around the transformation of the object into a gift, the journey through and experience of the site moves onto notions of site and its sensory experience discussed below. The shifting in and out of one on one interaction that remains in the work not only contributes to the possibility of a transformative nature of the work but also has significant implications on the relationship between the audience and performer. These relationships are constantly in a state of flux and are addressed by Machon as the re-invention of performer/audience boundaries. (2013:40)

Re-inventing Performer/Audience Boundaries.

Machon interprets the audience as evolving in immersive theatre; "evolving through involving". (2013:73) Fusing the "spectator-watcher" with the "protagonist-participant". (Machon, 2013:73) She quotes Bill Mitchell, identifying that the audience member transforms:

[Becoming] more alert, looking for clues. They are insecure, unsure of what might happen next. Their senses are heightened. They are more aware of each other and become a temporary community experiencing something new together (Machon, 2013:73).

The notion of an increased sense of agency and a shared community outlined above are explored in the process.

Audience agency

By determining levels of agency for an audience, the immersive piece transforms them into a "spectator participant". (White, 2012:222) The experience opens up "the capacity for action of the spectator participant within immersive performance". (White, 2012:222) The shifting levels of agency are determined by the audience roles. They walk and travel and choose where to stand within a boundary or set of instructions given to them by the performers. They experience one on one interaction and can speak to the performers answering questions if they are selected to be measured. They choose a cup of tea, when offered by the performers and drink it at their leisure, in a specified place. Zaiontz categorises this level of audience agency as the "sensation of agency", which alters the role of the audience member but not to the extent where they define or change the outcome of the work. (Zaiontz, 2014:411)

Audience Boundaries and the Process.

By looking at intimacy and interaction in the making of the piece, the role of the audience and what each element felt like for an audience member became a primary concern in the process. Originally the piece was being made as a solo performance on myself. The choice was made to bring in another performer which allowed for experimentation on bodies and shifting roles between choreographer and participant. The next shift in the role of choreographer was to make the piece on two performers without performing in it myself. This allowed choreographic choices to be made from both inside and outside of the piece, taking into account the position of the audience member. This flexibility in rehearsal for the choreographer and performer now alternated between “creator-audience-performer” roles. (Ness, 2003:173) These three roles in the process, identified by Valerie Preston Dunlop as the “triadic perspective”, also reflect the changing boundaries of the audience in the performance. (Preston-Dunlop *et al.*, 2002:chpt2.2) Their levels of agency contributing to the creator role, spectatorship defining the audience role and interaction denoting the performer roles. Decisions in the process concerning vocabulary altered as consideration from the audience’s perspective grew. Because I could feel from the inside what it was like to be measured, and watch from the outside, I chose to make the choreography more complex in order to make it more visually interesting for the viewer whilst maximising tactile aspects for the person being measured. In the measuring section for example, closer attention was made to the pressure of touch, the rhythm of the finger presses, moments to make eye contact, how close you can peer through a loop of string. They are interacting and contributing to the performance however they relinquish control, manipulated like a puppet, demonstrating the “sensation of agency”. (Zaiontz, 2014:411) In Punchdrunk’s *The Drowned Man*, (2014) audience agency is taken to the extreme where they are given three hours to explore the set, follow characters or search for clues led by their individual choices. (Zaiontz, 2014:408) This creates the idea that you are buying a unique experience, reversing the performer/audience roles. Allowing the audience complete agency puts at risk, parts of the performance which rely on certain behaviours. As the roles of the audience began to shift, new rules needed to be developed. In a work-in-progress showing, the audience was not directly instructed to follow the performers when they changed location; it was assumed that they would make the decision to follow themselves. As Lyn Gardner points out however, the “fear of doing the wrong thing-of behaving in a way that potentially destroys the intended performance-remains very strong”. (Gardner, 2014) In giving the audience agency, you risk them making the wrong decision or not making one at all. Clear new boundaries and instructions were worked into the piece after every showing, building on the intimate relationship already formed with the audience.

In order to increase the sense of intimacy established at the beginning, I wanted the audience to stand closer together. The choice was made to manipulate how and where the audience stand in order to place them in a group that allowed for the performers to weave in between people at closer proximity. String boundaries were used not to separate the audience and performer but to pen them together, bringing them closer. Having released the audience from a traditional theatre setting and given them agency, being more specific about their path might contradict this. Therefore the audience are used to make these boundaries, by interacting with the performers, holding string and teapots. Decisions like this are based on the existing relationship established with audience and performer in previous performances. Feedback from the British Conference of Undergraduate Research showed that people were more eager and willing to get involved and interact, it was also discovered that the audience, particularly a small one would not stand how you expect them and would feel safer with some boundaries and guidelines established.

The Sensory Environment.

Machon discusses the relationship of the sensory environment to the audience experience. (2013:75) Allowing the audience to become aware of responses in the body; heightens the awareness of being in the moment and accentuates or activates the audience/performer relationship. (Machon, 2013:75-85) By “addressing multiple senses simultaneously”, Machon fuses the two meanings of sense, that of feeling and sensation with that of meaning making. She goes further to “place the site of response throughout the body”, in defining visceral performance as “(Syn)aesthetic”. (J. Machon in White, 2012:228) This relates to the emphasis on the body of the audience member in the interaction, proximity and placement in the space. White discusses this theory of the work happening to the body and therefore invites a “more direct address to that body by performance and performance-makers” and its implication on the meaning of immersion. (White, 2012:229) *How Do You Take It?* offers varying ways of bodily readings of the work: The use of touch throughout but particularly in the measuring section, the use of smell, taste and visual surprises during the tea ceremony and the aural environment throughout. The geography of site is an extension of the sensory environment and will also be discussed.

Practice and the Senses.

The idea of the external environment and the internal bodily one is discussed by Victoria Hunter who identifies that by evoking the senses such as touch during performance “the implication is external” whilst its reception is also internal. (Hunter, 2009:405) Therefore an external and internal reading of space is combined. This notion is applied to the reading of space but the interpretation of both internal and external readings through the physical senses could be applied to the perception of the

performance, performers, and the events occurring within the context of space also. The implication for *How Do You Take It?* is that bodily readings therefore increase the level of immersion in the piece through the internal space of the audience member.

Choices to massage the arm in the measuring section came out of the feeling responses one experiencing the tactile sensations. By hiding one performer behind whilst the other created a focus with the pegs, the physical feeling of being massaged on one side and wound tightly with string on the other was heightened. This choice was made due to the close proximity between audience and performer in order to make the process of being measured as physical as it was visual. Like the preparing of a gift in Ghelani's work, I wanted to prepare the audience members for the next section as well as knotting and tying their string, which influenced the physical act of measuring the individual person.

The experimentation with more complex choreography in the tea ceremony (and some of the speaking sections in the thinking spot) by adding gestures was influenced by Philippe Decoufle (2010), Matt Luck (2013), Johnathan Burrows (2002) and Akram Khan (Zero Degrees, 2008).

However, after trying different styles and versions of gestural movements the choice was made to shift away from this type of choreography. The added movements cluttered it, and distracted from the beauty of the water, clinking lids and humour. This bought my work closer to Ghelani's whose methodical use of gesture maintains a function with the objects. I moved in a different direction to Ghelani as I chose to move towards the humour and characterisation that came out of the natural noises and movements of the ceremony itself. This happened because, whilst choreographing and polishing speed and tempo and laying out the table, characters and motivations had to be given in order for drama trained performers to interpret the material (a distinct difference from dance based performers). This opened up new avenues to work with the humour that came out of their natural characters, which increased the sense of intimacy of the relationships established earlier on in the piece. It became a natural progression to employ the humour and characters subtly rather than to isolate the audience by suddenly employing complex movements and choreographies which, in rehearsal took



Fig 3. *How Do You Take It?* (2015)

away from the methodical and careful ritual of the ceremony. The choices in the process then became focused on enhancing the sensory experience. From organising combinations of teapots, to working out how to surprise an audience with coloured water for example. The choreography of pouring water from vessel to vessel became a mathematical equation to be worked out. The priority

shifted from the movement of the ceremony to the way the teapots were manipulated in order to frame the transformation of water into tea or bubbles. (See fig 3)

Part of the decision to play on the natural humour that came out of the ceremony was to also play on the idea of making a mess. Taking delight in the mess and celebrating the fail is employed in Sean Ghandini's *Smashed* (2011). This piece is based around the ruining of complex juggling sequences, the jugglers breaking crockery and distracting and interrupting each other. I use the fail to cash in on the humour of the work and minimise the opportunities for it to go wrong, whilst still creating tea or bubbles at the end rather than digressing into a scene of complete chaos and destruction. During the process, Jemima delighted in the mess and Anthony delighted in the order of things. It was harder to get him to overcome this barrier. However, making the earlier choice to let the emergence of character lead the choreography in the setting up of the tea ceremony, the choice was made to highlight and play with the mess that Jemima makes in contrast to or in competition with Anthony, who therefore makes the normal tea as a result.

Practice and the Aural Environment.

Aural stimulus used to create a sensory environment contributes to the intimacy of the piece by establishing a new relationship with the performer at the beginning. This prepares them for further acts to happen in close

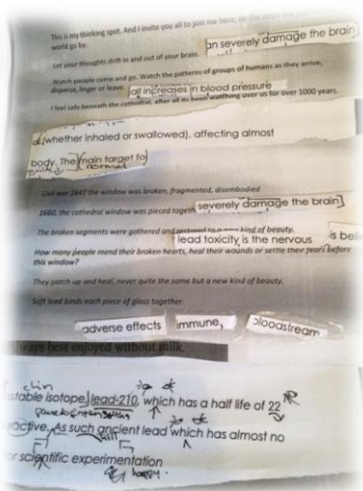


Fig 4.

intentions built on Laban's "Effort Actions" also used during the making of the tea ceremony).

(Preston, 1963:71) By removing text the audience is encouraged to question what might go in its place, finish sentences themselves, read narratives into ambiguity and become involved in the reception of the text in a more active way. On putting the text onto two people, the options for

proximity in the measuring section.

The connection with the

audience in a way that alters their experience and interpretation of the text was affected by the cut and paste technique and the introduction of two performers, one male and one female. (See figs 4 & 5) By changing the physical appearance of the text, the order in which it was read, the beginnings and endings of phrases were disrupted. Experiments were made with reading from one side to another, within each section of torn paper, questioning, whispering, demanding or arguing. (Changing speeds, dynamics and

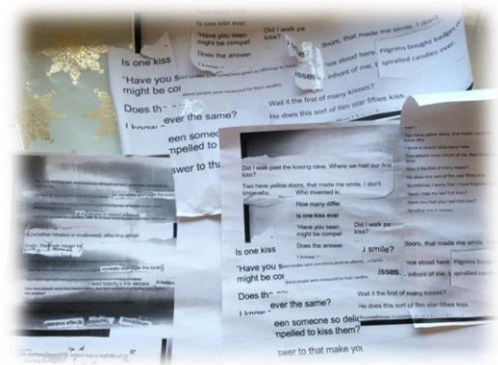


Fig 5.

emotive readings and a relationship between the two performers were all possible. The resultant ambiguity allowed for the text to be read in a variety of ways. Audience feedback has described an arguing couple, the devil on your shoulder, two sides of one brain or two people in the same place but from different times. There are moments when one performer talks directly to the audience, maybe even taking their arm to guide them in a certain direction. This disrupts the audiences' expectations and begins the process of building a more intimate relationship with the performers. Like Karla Sacklock's *Happiness*, (2015) I wanted to use semi-autobiographical speech to evoke personal images and memories. Rather than mirroring these with tableaux and objects that create a set, I use an existing unusual site to frame the performance and provide a backdrop to allow the ambiguity of the speech to come to the fore.

The Geography of Site and the Sensory Environment.

In discussing the senses and the perception of space, Hunter draws on the notion of internal and external space, paralleling it to mental vs. real space. (Hunter, 2009:405) The choice of my geographic location depends on its adaptability to shift between the real and mental idea of space. References to the thinking spot and the kissing caves are not specific locations for the performance. They are perceptions of these places in spaces that function as something similar, for example the space used as the thinking spot in the piece acts as an intercessor for the perception of the original place. Alternatively, evoking the behaviour normally undertaken in the thinking spot, a new duality is created in the performance space giving it a new function.



Fig 6. *How Do You Take It?* (2015)

Site in Practice



Fig 7. *How Do You Take It?* (2015)

The key elements of the perception of space have been prioritised as: “Verticality, symmetry, colour, number, [e.g. numbers of windows], Meanings, [functions], context, [where the body is placed within it]”. (Lawson in Hunter, 2009:402) The first four aspects are referred to as aesthetic perceptions that an audience might identify with and enjoy. These were priorities in choosing a space for the piece, whilst meaning and context were aspects that can and would be altered by the performance in their location. The

functions are changing by putting performance elements outside in a public space. (See figs 6 & 7) They are also more subtly altered for example, the idea of sitting on a bench watching the river is acknowledged but the function is relabelled as sitting in the thinking spot where strangers form a community by their shared experience of the piece. The perception of space is further muddled by recalling the functions of other places, disparate in time and location relocating them in the moment whilst acknowledging the actual function of the space in which the performance is taking place. In using the enclosed garden to frame the tea ceremony, the performance cashes in on the existing function of the architecture with walls, benches, and views. The flow of traffic would not disrupt the focus on the table and the performers. Reinterpreting the function of the space entirely exposes the piece to too many elements that compete with the performance, (as found when performing in large open areas for example). The aesthetic aspects of the space and their implication on the flow of traffic allow the performance to be safely framed whilst opening possibilities of altering function, meaning and playing with the context of the body in space. This choice of site where the existing piece can be blocked in different places or toured is not site-specific in the sense that it evolved from and is intrinsically attached to it, however site has been a consideration throughout. (Hunter, 2009) Hunter uses the term “site adaptive”, which applies to *How Do You Take It?* it is performed in alternative and varying spaces but the work “remains constant between locations”. (Hunter, 2009:408) This maximises the potential of individual sites’ “psychogeography” (Tompkins, 2011:228), the personal responses or memories located within a site and its social or historical functions which are changeable from location to location. In terms of site: *Covet Me. Care for Me*, was staged in the atmospheric cold vaults at Shunt, under Tower Bridge (2011) and New Movement Collective’s *Casting Traces*, staged beneath Winchester’s Guild Hall in a paper maze with a promenading audience, (2014). The use of an outside space for *How Do You Take It?* places it somewhere between these works and street theatre such as Wet Picnic’s *The Birthday*

Party (2012), or Marc Brew Company's *(i)land* (2014). Wet Picnic's work uses mobile sets such as a lift or a large portable table with a lamp which provides an inward focus for the performance. I wanted to make subtle shifts in focus between set or objects, the interactivity with the performers and the sensory aspects of the site in order to create a breadth of immersiveness in the piece.

Current Practitioners

Punchdrunk create large scale immersive theatre, and *You Me Bum Bum Train* (2012), for example creates scenarios where individual audience members become the star of their own show through improvising the characters thrust upon them. Volcano Theatre's *147 Questions About Love* (2014), guides the audience member to the centre of the stage, improvising movement and sharing experiences. My piece falls closer to this and Ghelani's work where a smaller scale use of one on one interaction and controlled audience agency allows for greater intimacy through personal exchange and gift giving. Theo Clinkard's *Of Land and Tongue*, uses object play with string for example and offers drinks to the audience. (2015) The moments of dialogue between performer and audience, break up formal dance scenes. The use of immersion and intimacy juxtapose with and heighten the chaos or confusion apparent in the dance sections. Clinkard uses the senses, object play and interaction to build on the theme of language barriers and words that are lost in translation. The interaction creates a false intimacy that is sporadic in order to serve a thematic or meaning making purpose. The intimacy and immersiveness in *How Do You Take It?* are a central to the work as opposed to a framing device as in Clinkard's.

Conclusion

In defining the shifting levels of immersiveness throughout the piece, the possibility of a transformative effect is apparent. The sensory process; heightening the audience's awareness first of their own physicality, then of the elements of the tea ceremony, then wider in the space takes the audience through varying levels of sensory awareness and gradually back to the world around them. This parallels the journey of shifting levels of intimacy, audience roles and experience of site throughout the piece. Framing the audiences views through placement in the space (Pearson, 2010:156), altering their focus from bodily reception to external meaning making (in discussion of the senses), shifting through levels of one on one interaction with different levels of agency in audience roles (discussed earlier) all parallel each other in a journey towards the end of the piece and the reception of the thinking spot and gift giving. If coiled string was received without being measured, tea without the ceremony and sitting in the thinking spot listening to performers without the intimate relationship established prior, then their reception would be entirely different.

[Word Count 4024 excluding headings and references]

List of Illustrations

Fig 1: Own Photograph of: Ghelani, S. (2011) *Covet Me, Care For Me*. Choreographed by Sheila Ghelani. The Wellcome Collection. [2011].

Fig 2: Own Photograph of: *Nice, R* (2015) *How Do You Take It?* Performed at The British Conference of Undergraduate Research [20th April 2015]. (Measuring Section).

Fig 3: Own Photograph of: As above (Tea Ceremony).

Figs 4 & 5: Own Photograph of text cut-ups used in the process.

Figs 6 & 7: Own Photograph of *Nice, R* (2015) *How Do You Take It?* Performed at The British Conference of Undergraduate Research [20th April 2015].

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