

Case Study  
Brian Woolland  
15<sup>th</sup> January 2004

Mini Disc 1.

AP

It's the fifteenth of January 2004, about half past ten in the morning and we're at the University of Reading speaking to Brian Woolland about practice research and this is our first video case study for the PARIP Project so, THANK YOU for agreeing to participate in this. I know that we have done an interview recorded onto mini disc last year, this new stage in the case study project is really based on our experiences and some experiences I had with a couple of other practitioner-researchers to try to develop a useful series of about twenty case studies of .....

As you know you have received questions beforehand that I asked you to structure in a way that made sense to you, because what we are interested in looking at is how people think of their own work within different institutional contexts, so if I just run through. You gave me useful keywords on Sejanus - Johnson, renaissance theatre and authority, and you wanted the questions that I sent you headed under Questions, Contexts, methods and outcomes.

I suppose the first question really to ask you is: Why did you want to organise the 27 questions that I sent, along with those headings in mind?

BW

I thought the.....I mean you gave those headings didn't you, were they your headings?

AP

No, No..They weren't, we gave an unstruc.... Well fairly unstructured list of questions!

BW

There were the questions, but I thought they were sort of proposals or tentative proposals for headings... I certainly ordered the questions into the headings. I mean I think I mean contexts to an extent is arbitrary as I think there is a sense in which contexts inform contexts and contexts inform questions, there is a lot of this which is interactive, which is why I found it difficult to think in terms of outcomes but specifically I do talk in terms of outcomes but, but the questions are not formulated out of thin air so that it might well be that the contexts is where you start, but the kind of questions that I've formulated for this, you've gotta start somewhere it's chicken and egg and, if this project was formulated as an AHRB project so it draws on contexts in order to that, but the questions are what initiates I think the AHRB project, so it's arbitrary to an extent...

AP

Right that's a good point to move onto the actual... did you want to give just a very brief overview of what we're going to be talking about in terms of your project, and then we can move into the specific questions that I have yeah I mean we can structure it as what were your research questions, what were you interested in? Explore!

BW

Well, I mean maybe to start with it doesn't need context first..(laughs). The context is I work in a department in which there is a very strong research: culture and culture is not exclusively orientated towards PARIP, but we value practice as research very highly, and so there is a slot in which there is a staff directed research production and that happens, has happened annually even before the department merged this dep. was part of a college of HE and even before we merged with the university, there was a slot there and so that sense of practise as research in the department is very important, I've been interested in Ben Johnson theatre for a long time and I'm very interested in renaissance theatre in production and the very particular problems that throws up, which is where I come to the research question. So should I move on to talk about them specifically, well as I framed them for the AHRB the project was sort of two fold, and I think we are predominately talking about the *Sejanus* as part of it, so my research questions proposal for the AHRB are what might constitute an appropriate performance style for Ben Johnson's *Sejanus Fall* a play which was very rarely performed and which was extremely controversial at the time of it's first performance. and controversial not only in the sense that it very nearly got Johnson sent to prison, but also control in the sense that there is still a lot of dispute about how well received or not it was. Because he was undoubtedly, the very first performance had fairly few, but there is quite a lot of evidence that it was revived very successfully but there is very little descriptive work about that production the controversy surrounds not only the play but it's reception in it's own time.

The second question is 'to what extent is it possible to negotiate contemporary meanings with actors and with audiences in a play that has been labelled unperformable, and again to slightly elaborate on that I think that Johnson's plays are far more interesting than they are commonly thought to be but then the same is true for a lot of renaissance theatre other than Shakespeare. Um but this play has actually been characterised as 'unperformable' on a number of occasions, and I was fairly er I found that on the page it presents a lot of problems, but it struck me as highly theatrical. So I was very interested in that.

Thirdly how might discoveries made about performance style and theatrical focus in my research production of Johnson's comedies and an earlier workshop of *Sejanus* be exploited in the production for realisation. Which again draws on a context that I will talk about later. How might the discoveries made about *Sejanus* as a performance text illuminate early 21<sup>st</sup> century concerns about authority acquiescence and self-annihilation? and those questions are the questions that relate to the *Sejanus* project. But then the other half of my AHRB proposal was to do with writing a single author, er a monograph about Peter Barnes the contemporary playwright, and Peter Barnes is very interested in Johnson, he he constantly cites Johnson as his single most significant influence and so the final 2 questions: how might my research on Peter Barnes draw productively on my research in Johnsonian theatre practice and to what extent can the theatre of PB be seen as driven by obsessive examinations of authority, acquiescence and the annihilation of the self?

AP

And how did you go about devising the questions and choosing and developing those particular questions? To use to structure the project?

BW

I'm, I – my interest in renaissance theatre is not primarily historical, my interest in it is rooted, or at least it starts from a sort of cultural materialist perspective in how can you negotiate meaning in these texts today through an awareness of the cultural contexts in which they're produced and received, and simultaneous awareness of the cultural conditions in which it was originally produced. And so that overriding interest leads to several of those questions um so I'm primarily my interest in it is not that sense of unearthing a historical document, but actually ultimately exploring the meanings of that, how that text can become a new text whilst honouring as far as possible the cultural conditions in which the original production and reception. Um I am also very interested in theatre of Myerhold the soviet director, um and that interest has arisen almost paradoxically out of a fascination of renaissance theatre and production and it came and we can maybe talk about that later, but the context of that is that this is the fourth Johnson play I've directed almost in these kind of conditions although this is the first time I have had an AHRB award to do it. Um and the fascination with Myerhold came in an earlier production particularly of *Epicene* about four years ago I think. Um well it seemed that some of Myerhold ideas really liberated that text and I was fascinated by that and that leads into issues of performance style, which again I think is a crucial question in its negotiating meanings. Um performance – finding an appropriate performance style seems a really key question, so the questions are partly devised in order to fulfil AHRB requirements but they are partly pragmatic but it is also a sense that they generally do drive the research and they are phrased in such a way that I think they allow other things to be generated. One of the things that was generated by the workshop production that preceded this was an interest in the work of Georges Batailles and how that theoretical approach might inform the work of Johnson and that has proved very rich, um, and I am still working on that so, and that in its turn will throw up other things so there is a sense in which you can't really distinguish between questions and contexts, because the context feeds the question and the question broadens the context.

AP

Right. Would you like to, I mean your mention of the AHRB leads into that 3<sup>rd</sup> question about how you found that institutional demand for research questions in order to generate research funding how you feel that impacted on the research structure of the project?

BW

Um I actually found it very useful, surprisingly useful, your immediate reaction is: Oh no, yet another document to fill in! It's you know you know one level its really irritating as it forces you to think about things before you're ready to think about them the questions though I think I found very useful I think some of the other things really difficult, I think trying to frame outcomes before you've even embarked on the initial research for a project, that I think is very difficult. It might be productive. In some ways I think it was very unhelpful but framing the questions was very useful.

AP

It sounds as though there is quite a useful relationship between that, AHRB process of devising questions and your own specific research interests. (BW: Yes) (AP) there was a tie between the two?

BW

Yes I think in the nature of this project it worked very well. Um I think there are other projects, or those I've been involved in where it has proved more difficult. I will just briefly move off, I did a research production which was a devised piece based on Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard* the name is called *Breaking Strings*, it used the Cherry Orchard as a starting point to explore I mean in one sense in a narrative sense it was what will happen after to the Cherry Orchard in another sense it was exploring theatrical form I think would have found it extremely difficult to formulate research questions beforehand. very very difficult and I'm not even sure had I done so that the project would have been so interesting because I think it would have constrained me in ways that...in order to work on that kind of project I needed to know who the cast was and the nature of the cast which we are going to talk about later under resources ...it is something you just don't know until about 9 weeks before the production. So which with devising work, the people who are making the project of the cast with you, and the same is true to an extent realising a renaissance play, you are much more governed by the text much clearer sense of context and much clearer sense of what it is you are trying to do.

AP

Of course that has really clear implications for the kind of work that can be successfully funded through these councils

BW

Exactly, exactly and I think that you know I also work as a playwright, and it is very difficult to conceive of getting an AHRB award, another project I've been involved with recently, which again I'll talk about later, very difficult to conceive of how that play could possibly have been funded given the need to formulate these kinds of questions and talk about these kinds of outcomes. because the whole thing develops in a much more intuitive way.

AP

OK... I think we'll move on to context, I think we've largely covered sort of how and where the research impulse is located do you tend to agree?

BW

Gosh you don't mind me referring to notes do you..... Forgive me.....

AP

Oh gosh no no.....I think you covered the context of your research contexts at the beginning.....

BW

I think we have answered that yes.

AP

Moving on to how is your current practice research, positioned as research? Um is it inflection although it seems as if it is the same question you have done it for the AHRB I was just wondering if you had any further contextualising comments to make around that, in terms of how you position your work with *Sejanus* as research to a wider community I suppose?

BW

I'm at risk of repeating myself, and going over ground that we have just talked about, there is a tradition, a really fascinating tradition with renaissance theatre in particular in which amateurs have made some of the biggest discoveries if you like, I mean William Pole at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century early 20<sup>th</sup> century was an amateur, he was working with professional casts they were semi professional productions and they undoubtedly sort of paved the way for sort of a massive revival of interest in renaissance theatre in the broadest possible way he indeed staged Sejanus, it was the only professional staging of Sejanus since it's original production, and er he staged a lot of other things. And again Edward Gordon Craig working in a similar way you know again, he is sort of semi-professional who has a strong interest in theatre and I think there are a lot of developments and not least in the universities I think Universities have always been university groups student groups long before the t practice as research was coined, I think a fascination with renaissance theatre in particular which I think has undoubtedly influenced the professional theatre in a very big way. Not least by the fact that people like Simon Russell Beale get very involved in theatrical production at Uni in uni in which theatre isn't talked and yet they go out and those discoveries go out and inform professional theatre very significantly. so in that sense as I've already said I'm very interested in staging the unstageable and then challenging those accepted conventional wisdoms about plays about plays because there are now plays in the repertoire which not long ago were regarded as unstag..., you know they break it in the repertoire because not long ago they were unstageable. You know I see that as an analogy in a sense that here we are in a university you know exploring ideas, playing around with ideas at the same time as doing something that professionals do. I think that the analogy is with scientists working in a university what the scientists do is open the way for engineers and technicians to make use of those development and of course the engineers and technicians are also researching in their own way because they draw on the research that is the focus of scientists in universities and I think that there is a similar sort of relationship, I think that we can break new ground in all kinds of ways and I think that what the ground that we break can be picked up.

AP

And of course that relates to the following two questions in that how does your research engage with research of epistemologies in that i.e. how does this research generate some idea of knowledges and also that issue of professionalism which you touched on very briefly...

BW

Can I talk about the issue of professionalism to start with? (looks at his notes!) We work with amateur casts and I know that there are a number of people in PARIP who have managed to work with professional casts. In this particular prod. You know you could say that I was working professionally because I had research leave for it, I wasn't, I mean that is what I was engaged with for a t. Students doing productions in this department don't get any academic credit for taking part in research productions. cos we try to separate teaching and research and I think there has been a lot of problems with that in universities where you know coarse productions are then claimed as research productions as well, and whilst that is not an issue that I want to get involved in discussing cos that is an issue that I think is very thorny. And you know I'm not sure that we are doing the right thing. You know I often want to give credit to student s that give an enormous amount to the process, so there is a real pleasure in working with students

that are giving up their time but there are also incredible frustrations you know in terms of you know in this kind of production you have to spend an awful incredible amount of time working on language, you know whereas a professional actor would come with the ability to get the tongue around the language, you would be able to go much further in much more quickly. The same time I think a production like this demands an ensemble you know it's very easy when working with a group of students who are giving up their own time, you know they love coming in, they love doing the work. So there are enormous pleasure and frustrations about it and also the pedagogical implications, which I am sure we are going to come onto later. You know students are giving up their time you owe it to them to give them a good experience I think in this particular production I think the musician who composed and performed all the music, is a professional musician who is doing a AHRB funded PHD. In this dept. it was something in the music and soundscape that he produced was something that was also very much to do with his own research around memory and perception. Um and we'll hear a clip from that which I can show you on the DVD at an appropriate moment, so we have technicians one of whom is a theatre technician and film technician he sort of works on the production on an adhoc basis he has a lot of other things to do the theatre technician during that time is the main focus of her work and probably still the number of hours she devotes to it are still in single figures. So there is a stance that is very well supported in the department I think the ethos is professional but there are real frustrations around it and I would love to work with a professional cast and again I am going to pre-empt a later question one of the things I said I was going to do in the AHRB proposal was to run workshops with professional actors, extracts from the texts in the time that followed the production and I wasn't able to do that and I regret that because I really would like to do some work on the production with professional cast.

AP

And that in itself that contrasting experience could raise all sorts of issues and questions...

BW

Oh yes, yes indeed yes. It's also a very pragmatic thing, you have a question coming up about resources haven't you?

AP

We can expand human resources perhaps in a little bit, I guess the next question from sort of drawing on this issue of professionalism is sort of how you see your research relating to a variety of different contexts, that is with a professional context and a pedagogic one and a research one but also sort of an institutional one of working within higher education and I guess if we could expand a bit more on how you see the Sejanus project.

No it is really how you positioned it, but I suppose more specifically in terms of pedagogy, because I think we've dealt a little bit with the professional issue and all sorts xxx it is quite a bit of a research issue... (BW: Yes)...but in terms of pedagogy, I suppose within the institution as a whole, not so much within your department, as we'll deal with those questions, - I think-, in a moment.

BW

So, so issues of pedagogy? (AP: Yes). in some way this is really quite basic, but there is this real need to keep the students engaged, they're working on a voluntary basis, ...I mean they have... they do all their own courses, many of them still have to go out to

work, - as you know-, most of our students have to have part time paid employment in order to be here, so there is a very strong lead to keep them engaged, which sounds a little bit trivial, but actually if you're doing a course production they know that if they don't pull their weight they're going to get a bad mark, they don't have any of that, know that's,... and I know visiting academics come to see these productions and they're always really shocked and I'm quite surprised because I think that's not the norm. certainly most the people who have been to see them find that unusual, and I think in a way it puts a lot of pressure on us, but I'd rather work like that because if you know that you've got to keep their good will, I think you get far more xxx insights coming from them. So there's that, and the further implication is that students have to perceive the work not just as enjoyable, but also as really stimulating. They have to perceive it as something, which they find useful. You know, I'm not just arguing for a utilitarian view of it, but they have to perceive how it impacts on the studies, and although there's only renaissance theatre, - within the degree structure we have here -, and is only a critical option that only runs every other year. So... there are only few students who are going to see that relationship. There are many students who were involved in theatre practice who see the rehearsal process and the teasing act of meaning, as central to their work. So... that's important. For many students the participation feeds directly into their own practice, and again and again we find that students who do really well in the third year independent projects, where they either make a short film or they create or realise a piece of theatre. many of them tend to have been involved in a number of research productions because they see that as a golden opportunity. And another way is the way it feeds into my own teaching, because there is a sense in which, if you are involved in that kind of practice, the exploration of a play at...you know, that sort of nitty-gritty level... it really opens up those plays in ways that you just cannot..., I mean, I xxx say to students when I'm working with them..., when they're involved in their own practise, the rehearsal process should reveal things to you that cannot be revealed to you in any other way. You can sit down at a desk and work it all out, don't do it in a rehearsal. You know, the rehearsal should be an exploration, so there is a sense in which it has fed in very, very positively... not only into my research, but into my teaching, and not just in the teaching of renaissance theatre, but also either in twentieth century theatre... in all kinds of ways.

AP

It is so interesting because of the fact that it is unassessed for the students (BW: Yes) and how that relates to pedagogy is unxxx ...and

BWs

Yes, it is unxxx , but I'm sure if you... we don't evaluate it either, where as every other taught module is evaluated, you know, written evaluations and sometimes discussions. The discussions are very informal and they're very positive. Very, very positive, and you know very well that they would not stay...they would not be doing it. You don't have any sanctions if they drop out, and it's very unusual for them to drop out.

AP

So, that actually raises the issue of how...or, are there formal avenues thy which these research productions feed into ,- I suppose -, a research culture within the university, if in terms of the student... in ts of some of the outcomes of the work are within that area of pedagogy, but because it's unassessed, it's unxxx, so undocumented in some kind of way, and so in terms of the department dealing with the university,...saying we have done this: it means that. How does that relationship work out?.

BW

I'd like to say , very well... it's a little bit more thorny than that. Over the years,- I think -, the university has accepted that... well, it definitely has accepted that the practise of research in this department is very highly rated,- nationally and internationally -, and it's almost like the university has been the last body to accept it. We've been accepted by funding bodies, we've been accepted by the RAE, and within the department we've put a high importance on it in RAE submissions, and we've gone from being in a relatively short space of time... I mean, it's just under ten years ago, that the department actually became part of the university. ,... am I right?. No-no, no, it's fifteen years ago. So, we went from not even being in the RAE, to a three, to a four, to a five, and the significant part of the RAE submission has been practice it's research. So, in that sense it has been very highly rated outside, and quite a lot... I mean, I can talk later about the outcomes... there are quite a lot of published outcomes as well as the productions themselves, but we do feel,- I think -, within the university, that there's a sense in which there are more academics to come from the outside to see our productions, than from the inside. You know,... everybody in the department comes, so it's very, very well supported within the department; not so well supported within the university. And so it's been a big issue which I have been xxx the heart off around promotion, and although nobody has said as such, I think there ... all kinds of levels, because my own promotion was delayed, and there was a sense in which I certainly was being told that the battles were still being fought, as to well this practise of research counted as research, and... you know how can you weight it against a single author book or an edited book contributions and there is a battle or skirmishes still being fought within the university, outside the university I think that that is not an issue any longer does that answer the question?

AP

-26m18s

Yes it does.

[rest remains untranscribed]