

Performance, Practice & Research

21st and 22nd February 2003 University of Kent

Report

It has become increasingly common to integrate performance practice with conceptual and theoretical reflection at university. Kent's MA by Practice as Research is one example: postgraduate students want time to reflect, to make work in a supportive context, and to utilise academic expertise. But how easy is this integration and what are the implications for both processes, the reflective and the creative? This symposium sets out to investigate issues of documentation, creation, analysis and reflection.

Friday 21st February 2003

Aphra Theatre

Workshop with Patrice Pavis on Brecht's *gestus* – 11 am

Eliot Lecture Theatre

"Documenting Practice" 2pm

Peter Hulton of Arts Archives, Arts Documentation Unit,

Lumley Studio

"The Non-Existent Knight" 6pm

A free adaptation, based on a tale by Italo Calvino composed and performed by Cesario, a Brazilian practice-based PhD student at Exeter University.

Saturday 22nd February 2003

Aphra Theatre

"The Ultimate Torture" by Andre de Lorde and Eugene Morel

"Chop-Chop" by Eugene Heros and Leon Abrie 11am

Performances based on the Grand-Guignol by students at the University of Glamorgan, directed by Richard Hand with Mike Wilson, principal lecturers.

Lumley Studio

"Playing With Myself" 2pm

Solo performance by Robert Jude Daniels, MA student UKC.

Response from Patrice Pavis, Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Paris 8.

The symposium began with an open workshop led by Patrice Pavis on Brecht's *gestus* with 4th year and MA Practice-as-Research students from Kent. *Gestus* is one of those terms which is frequently uttered but which is elusive both theoretically and concretely in practice. Patrice's workshop was a brief attempt to inculcate more understanding around the term, on which he has published several articles.

In the afternoon there was very fertile discussion following Peter Hulton's talk with screened examples of his Arts Archives work. This was the first time Peter had spoken in public about his extensive experience. He emphasised the range of approaches necessary and possible, and articulated the likelihood that all PAR students in 10 years

time would be utilising CD and DVD Rom technology for documenting their own practice as he does today. There was a lot of interest from student participants in the availability of the technology and software and its ease of use. In the evening Cesario gave a performance of his solo piece, one central part of his practice-based doctorate at Exeter University. This was followed by questions, mostly on the piece itself, its process of creation, and what the researcher felt to be its central research objectives, rather than more generic issues. This centred on defining the difference between role and character. There was consensus about the great value in seeing more examples of PAR, encouraging understanding of the diversity of approaches and research going on.

Notes from the Saturday session are compiled with the assistance of Angela Piccini, PARIP.

Paul Allain welcomed all symposium participants to UKC and framed some questions about the day's event and its purpose. He described the MA by PAR at Kent, the first of its kind in the country, and referred to the need for substantial resources to realise PAR, as indicated by the complexity of bringing 14 people from Glamorgan to present their research. He also briefly suggested why there was currently renewed interest in practice within Performance Studies, giving some background to this expansion. Allain suggested that as the objects of study have diversified as the subject has moved from theatre to performance, so has the need for examination of the actual event of performance itself become all the more important. He referred to several articles published in America, where the growth of Performance Studies has been more rapid and influential than in the UK as indicators of this 'return to practice'.

This was followed by Richard Hands' introduction to the Grand Guignol and two performances with student/performers as well as researcher Mike Wilson. Discussion following Mike Wilson and Richard Hand's Grand Guignol performance focussed on whether their pieces were an 'archaeological' reconstruction of the Grand Guignol or not. Allain, Martin Welton and others asked how the work might advance knowledge about performance practices both in relation to and outside of specific reference to the Grand Guignol ? How might the work be applied elsewhere and used by others ? Welton asked what is the language that arises out of this practice and how do you describe the practice beyond general terms of naturalism ? Piccini saw the piece as embodied critical discourse around the Grand Guignol, just as Hands' and Wilson's book is a textual document of such. She considers that research lies in the new critical engagement with both form and play but that the choices made, based on archival and other research materials, shape the meaning of performing this material in a contemporary setting.

Melissa Trimmingham expressed her interest in the applicability of the research to contemporary questions surrounding practices. She argued that Wilson and Hand must

recognise the problematic inherent in claims to reconstruction, therefore begging the question how is this research'. Mike Wilson responded by referring to the need to grapple with performance questions of melodrama without descending into hysterics. He placed their work on a continuum that shifts between naturalism and melodrama, and explained how they were interrogating where this work might lie along this line.

Discussion following Robert Jude Daniels' performance. RJD was keen to explain that his performance is not an illustration of phenomenological theory, rather it is an utterance alongside theories of phenomenology. His practice works with lived bodies without working with ideas of meaning. It is about a present presence and he is interested in the academic potential of balancing the phenomenological and significative eyes.

Martin Welton raised the issue of problematising this continued Cartesian dualism evident in the works of Merleau-Ponty and Husserl. He argued that we need to look at Lacroff and Johnson's approach to embodied realism, whereby the body constructs itself as metaphor for mind.

RJD in conversation with Patrice Pavis focused on the critique of mapping philosophies onto performance. With reference to Garner's *Embodied Spaces*, RJD and PP opened out the area of exploring how practice as research is not about translating philosophy into action or translating performance into textual description. The activities must complement each other, must represent a speaking alongside, rather than either being descriptive of the other. The description of a process emerged whereby a 'feedback loop' occurs in which one's performative practices further theoretical practices which in turn advance future performative practices. Pavis stated that such an approach was unusual in French universities. He concluded with a salutary invitation to forget the criteria and bureaucratizing tendencies of the UK academy 'to look at what's going on and to ask whether it was worth the effort'.

Summary

There were a range of people in attendance at the symposium, from 4th year students at UKC, seasoned researchers and academics and those just starting on practice-based doctoral research. This was seen as a positive mix and range of interests. Overall, there were some 50-60 people in attendance over the two days, showing the interest in this area of work and the need for ongoing discussions. Much more vitally, the presentation of actual practical research demonstrated that these discussions cannot happen in isolation from the debates but are integral to them. The contributing participants all testified to the benefits of presenting their work and getting feedback gave to them. There was no attempt in the plenary to try to summarise or define singular conclusions – rather it was deemed important to reiterate the diversity of approaches. It was also stressed how important it is to give space to the researchers themselves to articulate their approach verbally as well as through their

practice, whilst offering this up for wider interrogation. The perspective of Pavis from outside the UK was a refreshing reminder of how advanced some of the practices and discussions are in the Britain

The day ended with a short and inconclusive SE PARIP meeting with Chris Baugh, Paul Allain, Martin Welton and Angela Piccini in attendance. It was agreed that Paul would write up a report of the event using Angela's notes from the Saturday which she attended.

Thanks to PARIP, UKC's SDFUA research committee and Sophie Metro. Basic video documentation of some of the events can be made available on request.

Paul Allain 7.4.03